

Homage to Sebastian Stenzel

- by Bruce Bond -

After the cedar died in the great fire,
it stood for eighty years. A testament
to what the long neglected can endure
if the roots go deep, the heartwood dense,
grain woven, limbs upholding nothing
like a nervous system of the sky.

No need to clear the lion's share of damage,
the land the blaze blackened for a season,
though naturally they razed the crumpled home.
What the fire began, men completed,
and there were those who were buried here
and there, and those who never reappeared.

What remained was the flame of soot
that climbed the tower, our useless miracle,
guardian of those who stood in its shadows
and suffered without record, passing through
the stories and nightmares of a few
friends, neighbors, until they too passed on.

Nights, the long and stubborn musculature
swung its axe in the wind, laying low
a silence in the branches, and in the stars
that slept there, that burned for eighty years.
It took a luthier to bring them down,
to see in the tone-wood a slow growth

the winters made stiff and tight, ideal
in its resistance and yield, its open voice.

So yes, he destroyed it, quarter sawn so
the monument might fall again, and again,
over and over as song in the startled
braces of the instrument. Or so he hoped.

It takes a little faith to flex the final
cut, to tap it listening for some pitch
to draw breath in the unspoken, to say
I am out there somewhere, as music is
in the reticence of things. It takes
an ember's patience to plane the wood just so,

to fit it over the casket, over the memory
of one note dying into the next,
into some solitary conversation,
the still bodies of those who listen, those
who, for the moment they are listening,
stand in the fire, made tall, and have no name.

Bruce Bond is the author of twenty-six books including, most recently, *Blackout Starlight: New and Selected Poems 1997-2015* (L.E. Phillabaum Award, LSU, 2017), *Rise and Fall of the Lesser Sun Gods* (Elixir Book Prize, Elixir Press, 2018), *Dear Reader* (Parlor Press, 2018), *Frankenstein's Children* (Lost Horse, 2018), *Plurality and the Poetics of Self* (Palgrave, 2019), *Words Written Against the Walls of the City* (LSU, 2019), and *The Calling* (Parlor Press, 2020). He has four books forthcoming including *Patmos* (winner of the Juniper Prize, University of Massachusetts Press) and *Behemoth* (winner of the New Criterion Poetry Award, Criterion Books). Presently he is a Regents Professor of English at the University of North Texas. And he is also a guitarist with great appreciation of the crafts.