

Fire on Sixth Avenue

A miner's semi not yet Delhified,
Firemen up ladders axeing the sink
The domestic in a shrunken shift trying to hide
Her burning backyard bully in their candlewick,

While the Madam and her maan on the one-armed bandits
To Sun City are gone to reschedule their debts,
Should've rather, say my neighbour pandits,
Stayed home for once to hedge better their bets.

The fault's electrical, the sparks and spangles,
Burn of cordite and anthracite and corks,
From a brandbestryder's proud glove dangles
A cross-eyed kitten rescued from Guy Fawkes.

More smoke billows now from the radiator
Of the new red Brixton fire-engine, choked up,
Than from the wreck, the pump's more air than water,
A dog stands on the hose and the hose's all blocked up.

In groups we relish the scene, not yet new South Africans—
Areas of whites, of blacks, of Indians, of others.
Thank God we feel, as usual, the horror-stricken
Are someone else . . . we still prefer guns to brothers.

Consider that cat's view in this transition: it's not too late,
For rats the hotplate of pressed steel's the only solution,
Beneath the ozone layer's still air enough not to asphyxiate,
Some fires are just fire, not the full-scale revolution.

Otherwise curl up the better to sleep it off, folks,
The decoder's stolen, insurance will just fork out,
With sirens Lakshmi's taken and the smoke's
Held in from stompie, this time really crushed out.

This is a suburb of Cinderellas stuck in the ash,
Instead of chandeliers the well-wrought burglar-bars,
A Lubners three-piece showing its guts through the gash,
Look away, look up . . . the geyser steam rises to the stars.

STEPHEN GRAY