

Lar of the Pompeii

Senior, Second Place

Inspiration: This poem was inspired by the Model of Pompeii and the Statuette of a Lar. I had the Lar as a conscious narrator, observing the final day of Pompeii. The poem draws concepts of helplessness and devotion to guardianship.

They set me on the shelf
beside the olive jar —
a household guardian carved
no taller than a child's hand,
Against the dim Pompeian walls.

Each dawn, a thumb brushed dust
From my bronze tunic,
Crumbs laid at my feet —
Rites that keep
a Lar awake.

The mother's palm would linger,
the children's feet wrote runes
across the worn stone: clap, clap, clap —
the house answered in small sounds.
the kettle's cough, the cradle's sigh,
the boy's laugh that struck the tiles
and scattered sunlight into rooms.
I cupped those noises like coals,
kept a tiny heat for winter.

When the earth first roared,
the clay beneath us cracked.
Roofs shuddered
the mother's breath
Frayed into quick threads

They lifted me once — twice —
their palms trembling like leaves —

a child clutched my base, thumb pressed
into the bronze tunic.

Still I stood,
Arms lifted, praying —
a blessing fixed mid-air

Ash began to cover
hot enough to blister paint.
House leaned,
beams split open,
The air thickened to suffocation.

Their hands, even as they fled,
kept reaching back toward me
As if a small god
could shoulder a sky.

But Lar are bound to thresholds,
To four fragile walls.
Heat found the mouth of the house;
light became a second sun.
They set me down at last, hands full
of last gestures. Their faces were carved
into one small gasp.

Now I stand behind glass.
Visitors hover with the soft clicking of cameras,
leaning to read my name.
They see the glaze, the painted robe;
they do not bend to the smell of ash
still layered where the seam meets arm.
They do not know how light used to pool
on the shelf like water.

I stand in the same way

arms up, a blessing that no longer reaches.
A child's thumbnail has worn the paint away —
a trace that says we existed here, briefly.

Yet I keep the imprint
Of that last reaching thumb.
A trace of a city,
a family,
a world buried under the ashes
All held in a guardian
Carved to stand
not save.

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