

Cinders

At the long day's end in a kitchen settled
down to feet-up gossip
while the clock ticks around the edge of time,
sometimes a door will creak, a sudden draught
start shadows bowing, and the silent woman comes
on dainty feet with cold and careful tread.
Tongues curl in question marks;
eyes glance then look away, hold their peace
and will not be unkind.
Cradling a bowl of beggar's broth
the mendicant will crouch ragged
beneath white canopies of laundry hoisted to dry.
She sighs beside the great, hot hearth
and curls her naked toes near cinders.

No-one addresses her. Only nervous mice
peek and squeak, then scuttle to wait
on shelves where golden firelit pumpkins bulge.
She is content to sip her supper, listening
to knitting needles and the brisk race
of women-talk of paramours and poultices,
births, baked dinners, aches and antidotes,
fashions in and lives gone out. The night spreads;
its edges overflow, travelling slowly. Voices grow dry
and fade to murmurs full of witches, ghosts and godmothers;
old, uneasy tales familiar as their souls.
At the stroke of midnight, when the embers wait
for raking and the logs fold softly into ash,
the woman goes away unnoticed as a curl of smoke.

In a gold and silver world
that bathes her, jewels and perfumes her,
smooth on warm pink feet she glides
to hide her tatters in a secret place
where true things lie between rememberings.
Now she is rich in rainbow silks
and comforted by furs as light as fantasy.
Here is a room that glows
like halls imagined among coals in winter grates.
Its walls are lined with shelves and shoes and mirrors;
and Charming waits. In his elegant hands
two crystal slippers catch at candle-light -
hard, unbending shoes, and she's outgrown them
but she will put them on and dance,
for happy-ever-after is a long, long time.