

ROBERT THOMAS

Burning the Library

Lift your arm, *cara*, as if steadying
a water jug on your head. Imagine
what you must feel: rushing toward

a fire, dreading to find a child's
frail skin curling and separating
like pages in a manuscript held

too close to a candle, and then
the whole library in flames—
imagine your hysterical poise,

knowing not one drop must be
allowed to spill from the jug's lip.
Now, lift your arm. If Buonarroti

can make stone breathe, I can make
flesh stone, and then make that stone
shiver as night falls and frost shrouds

the arbor's grape leaves one by one.
They say he was nursed by a stone-
mason's wife, her milk cold as marble,

while I had my fill of my own mother.
She'd laugh that she had so much milk
she could have fed me and still cooked

custard for the girls. She died when I
was eight, what the priests call the age
of reason, old enough to appreciate all

the *Corpus Christi* folderol. That thin
wafer of God-pap would never smell
like Mama's arms. I'd never even seen

a robin die! Papa was showing me
how to make a woodcut of a jester,
carving every shape that was *not* him,

both negative and mirror of the joker
and his bauble. I was working so hard
and then Maria flew in the studio door

and by the time we got to the kitchen,
Mama was on the floor, a broken egg
in her hand. For a moment I thought

it was a game she'd made up for me.
For one week I sat alone in my room
with Papa's knife and a block of oak,

carving every shape that was not her.