After the Fact

WILMER MILLS

A lightning bolt had spiraled down an oak.
Its fire both tapped the wind
And wrapped a die of threaded smoke
Around the bark it skinned.
I hadn’t seen it; I’d come after the fact,
And tried to wrap my head
Around the tree that lightning wracked.
I tried because, instead
Of knowing second-hand, or even less,
I had to find the place
And get the story straight, I guess,
To see it face to face.
But in the ashes of the fire I found
What used to be our horses
Bloating on the smoking ground
With buzzards on their corpses.
Guts and eyes had boiled instantly
Then just as quickly cooled;
Their hooves and manes had blasted free
Around where blood had pooled.

Desire compelled me, and it made me go
To see without a doubt,
Desire that’s just a need to know,
To rule the mystery out.
But at the tree I had to shut my eyes,
And when I did, I swear
That something let me visualize
A world that wasn’t there:
I saw the way those horses might have seen
Before the fire fell—
No longer color blind between
The poles of heaven and hell—
The colors of the stars, all night and day,
Weldigger’s only view,
Or chimneysweeper’s dream, astray,
Released, in the chimney flue.
Louisiana whistled into me
A song of rotted pines,
The logs that fell a century
Ago and left no signs
Of bark or branch, but Daddy, as a boy,
Explored the woods at night
And saw what dirt did not destroy:
A poltergeist of light
Where phosphorous inside the rotted wood
Still burned a shape of trees.
So I remembered it for good,
As if his memories
Were mine, his telling me the proof I prize,
Though after the fact, in trust,
What I believe without my eyes,
Believing because I must.