

Category 5, Brodie Herndon Memorial, 1st prize

Poet's note:

I wrote the poem, about Madame Curie, as a response to a workshop prompt which asked us to describe a person, their environment, and the objects around them. If I send a poem to a contest, and they choose it, they may have it; it's theirs. That's my personal policy to support the contests. Thank you to the judges and the sponsors for this award.

Marie

Her hair is tied back, unruly and curly
eyebrows thinning early;
hard-working hands are scarred.

Her lab coat is pulled unevenly,
an extra button by her chin,
empty buttonhole by her knee.

Breathless from retching, she sits
across from dusty mullioned windows,
woodstove cold, iron kettle unstirred.

Rejecting assumptions,
she had chased the invisible,
a wave rippling a wave.

Once she rose to seek a letter from her desk.
She wondered if she were delusional,
if all her experiments were ruined?

On old films she found faint etchings,
like anchovies flashing underwater,
lightning bugs, magnesium fireworks.

Receiving many times the Roentgen limit,
her soldiers have bullets removed, bones set.
I and millions survive, while she succumbs.

Crumbs of her last baguette
still rest in the cobwebbed drawer,
evidence of a radiant life.

Ruth Hill