

CHANDELIER BLAZING

Summer 2025



LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

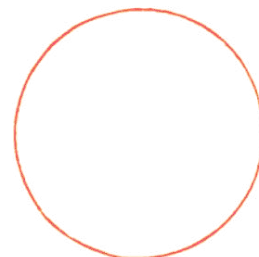
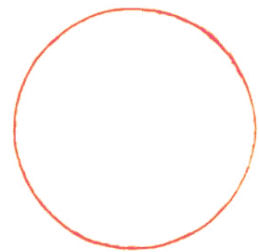
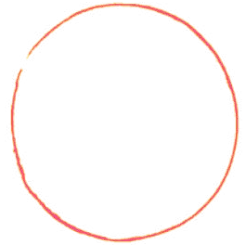
Beloved Readers,

When we first conceptualized this e-zine, we wanted the writing included to express the spirit of summer. We called for heat, for simmering tensions, for glorious blazes. For incandescence in its many forms.

We knew we wanted to explore the multifaceted nature of heat: as, yes, an essential element of destruction—oppression—but also as a driving and creative force. A connective force. Heat is necessary to life, after all. Rage can run hot, but so can love. The summer sun can sear a field brown, but without the sun, nothing would grow.

It's no secret that this summer has been scorching. Global temperatures keep rising, A.I. data centers are wasting millions of liters of water a day, ocean levels are continually ascending as the polar ice caps melt, and the rich and powerful simply don't care about the fate of the boiling planet our children, and their children, are going to be occupying together.

All of this.



We asked our talented and skilled writers to try to capture all of these complicated and complex feelings in their prose and poetry, and they definitely succeeded. We couldn't be happier.

We hope you enjoy these radiant stories and poems. They're written with such propulsive power. Such nuanced and emotional heft. These pieces, without question, delve into the rich bounties of summer sunshine while never ignoring the sweltering reality of a world on fire.

As summer fizzles out and we welcome the cool tones of fall back into our lives, we call on you to revel in the rays for just a little longer. Chandelier: Blazing is a gift from ten exceptional writers to you.

L.M. and Jared

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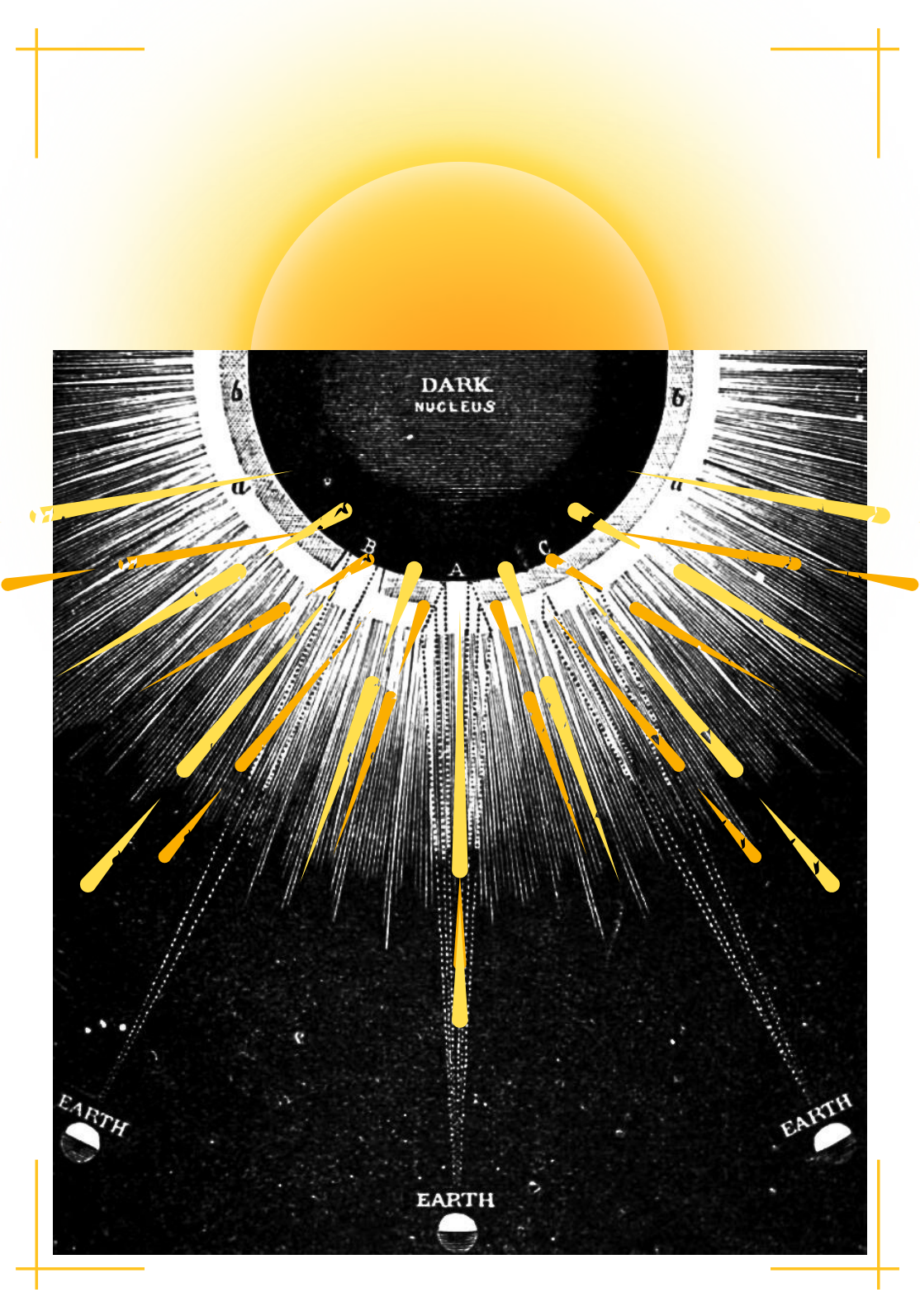
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Fire Prevention

Once, I fell asleep in a fire. It was OK. I'm inflammable. Marguerite says that, like eleven fingers, I have an unusual condition. Sometimes, I talk backwards to the bathroom mirror. Like igniting a kerosene blaze with a rain-damp match, what's hard for some is easier for others. Just when you think you've got your chemicals perfectly mixed, you begin to hear voices in your head again. Mine are whispers about sparks. Yesterday, Marguerite texted me. She said, *Don't forget, you're out on your own recognizance.* Later, as I was carrying my gas can up Lake St., the police stopped me. I told them, *I look a lot like my identical twin.* They didn't crack a smile, but they let me go. I went home and locked myself in. Eventually, every fire burns itself out. I felt much better after I listened to the flames.

Brad Rose





Fired Up

Today was the day.

Every faerie looked forward to their fifth birthday, and Kerria was no exception. In fact, as she sat up in bed and threw aside her fluffy pink comforter, she knew she was more excited than any other Fae could possibly be; after all, she'd been waiting years since her older sister got her gift, and it proved to be a gift fit for a Spring Court princess: she could talk to animals!

Kerria would sit at her bay window, watching her sister roam the gardens, interacting with every animal she crossed paths with: offering handfuls of nuts to squirrels, laughing as birds chattered. But after today, Kerria wouldn't have to yearn for any longer; no, she would finally have her own gift, and make her parents proud.

As Kerria dressed in her favorite lavender dress, the skirt of which brushed across the tops of her bare feet as she walked the corridors of the palace, she thought about what she had been hearing from her parents for the last five years.

Gifts were incredibly important in the Spring Court. Well, they were important everywhere, but her parents had made it known that they mattered even more in the Spring Court, because of a tradition that had spanned for centuries. Fae were never guaranteed that their powers would match their Court, but the Spring Court's royal family always had gifts relating to their home: the Queen could revive wilted plants with a brush of her fingers, while the King could bring on sunshine or a thunderstorm with a wave of his hand. And, of course, the eldest princess could communicate with animals.


And now, it was Kerria's turn.

She bunched her dress in her fists as she sped-walked the corridors, only releasing the fabric and slowing down once she realized what she was doing. The Queen was constantly reminding her — *slow* down, *calm* down, *quiet* down — but it was hard to remember to act like a proper princess when she was so full of energy, which she often was.

Kerria touched every bouquet that she passed, in case something were to happen.

Nothing did.

As Kerria passed the dining hall, rich scents of bacon and porridge filled her nose, but she couldn't stop. She was on a mission to discover her gift, and she wouldn't stop until she'd done so. It would have to be something incredible, she just knew it. Maybe she would be able to grow flowers at will!



With a very un-princess-like growl of frustration, Kerria whirled around and started back inside, that fluttering disappointment beginning to harden into frustration.

She made her way around the palace, running when there weren't any servants looking. She willed anything — from books to oranges to the tiles under her feet — to react to her presence.

But nothing did.

Kerria felt anger building deep inside her, wilting the excitement she'd woken up with, her cheeks burning — something she was always chastised for by her mother.

Calm down, Kerria, she'd always say. No princess allows herself to become so upset so quickly by such little things. Patience is a virtue.

But what if it never came? What if, somehow, she was the only Fae without a gift? People would most certainly whisper about it: *Did you hear about the Spring princess who has no gift? What went wrong there? What a disgrace to her family.*

Kerria's eyes burned with tears, her face hot, as she stormed back to her room, her hands bunched into the grass-stained fabric of her dress. She had to have a gift. She *had* to. This is what she was *born* for.

She imagined the look on her parents' faces once they realized they could do away with seeds, that their youngest daughter could touch her fingers to the soil, and there would sprout a daisy. Oh! Or, even, a bush of those fiery red roses that Kerria loved. The King would sweep her up into his arms, the sun shining overhead with his joy and pride. She would make her Court the best and most beautiful it could be, just as her family had done for generations.

Her next stop was outside. She scurried down the marble steps and veered right, into one of the gardens. She smiled as she knelt down, not even thinking about the grass staining the skirt of her dress or the dirt caking under her nails as she dug her fingers into the soft soil, shutting her eyes and focusing on it, pursing her lips in concentration.

Nothing happened.

Disappointment fluttering in her stomach, Kerria pushed herself up off the ground. Maybe her gift would be weather related, like the King.

With the soft grass tickling her bare feet, she looked up into the blue sky, filled with puffy white clouds. She tilted her head back and, the breeze blowing her unbrushed blonde hair back from her face, squeezed her eyes shut, lifted her hands, and willed something to happen.

Nothing did.



She made it back to her room, but stopped in front of her open bedroom door, her gaze falling on the little table that sat next to the door, holding a vase of blue hydrangeas. Kerria would try one last time, and then she would take a break, calm herself down, and try again later. That's what her mother would tell her to do, after all.

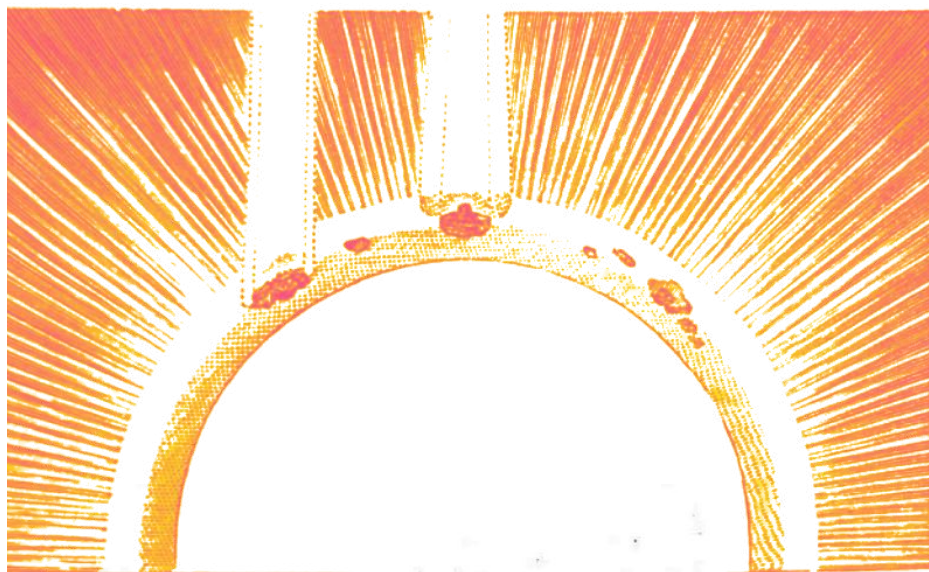
Kerria reached out to touch the soft, delicate petals, her other hand still clenched in her skirt. She braced for disappointment.

Kerria's fingers brushed the petal. She willed something to happen, and when nothing did, she felt that volcano of fury — at herself for never seeming to be able to be the perfect princess like her sister, at the other Fae's perfect gifts, at the Queen's voice in her head telling her to *calm down* — erupt.

And the bouquet of hydrangeas burst into flames.



Avery Timmons





Bone Swing

We skinned the thing that killed you,
boiled its flesh for soup. The bones we lugged
high on the hillside, set up in the shape
of the great beast's skeleton. Inside
the wide ribcage we laid your corpse,
still mostly fresh, and packed the brazier
with fragrant leaves and branches.

When night came we lit the pyre. The flames
blazed brighter than the moon, fanned by winds
and crackling loud as gunfire. The stink
of sacrifice fogged the air, a beach barbecue for
Gods at play. The hot winds rocked the cradle
till it broke. Blackened bones cracked and cooled.
The ash fell into the sea like snow.

Clare O'Brien

High Heat

How could she have forgotten her shirt? The question nagged as she surveyed the desert-like expanse. In the wasteland of her nightmares, resembling the landscape of the old Westerns Jay fell asleep to, she anticipated her uncovered skin boiling, her skeleton picked clean by buzzards. The pain would be protracted and horrific.

She plucked at the lightweight fabric covering her sweaty legs. Wearing shorts was no longer an option. A blast of wind rattled the rickety stall. Her skin crept, as she envisioned her shelter collapsing and the bumps spreading over her bare arms. Evilily, the sun found any spot sunscreen missed.

She scooted her chair farther back, could barely make out the words of her book, and removed her sunglasses. If only she could find the underground sorority of vampires described in its pages. She must've dozed then awoke when a head popped up at the edge of the table and just as quickly was gone. She'd had a distinct impression of white cloth atop a head as small as a child's.

Maybe the turbaned being had the bumps too. Rumors about children having sun-sickness were new and she'd noticed mothers carrying swaddled infants, their tiny faces shielded with visors. When her own mother had forced her outside to roam their unshaded back yard, she'd taken a book with her, playacting she was the poor Little Match Girl, or Little Nell fleeing her hideous predator. Whomever she pretended to be, it was someone small and death was in the air.

The face she'd glimpsed was the color and texture of a shelled pecan. Her own olive-toned face, protected under yellow-tinted foundation for years, had escaped the itchy eruptions that plagued the rest of her. The skin clinic said the bumps had developed because she—and her mother, she accused silently—had never screened the rest of her.

She picked up her water bottle. Across the wide span of concrete, where a few customers shimmered in the heat and moved as slowly as the sun, was the restroom. Reluctantly she lowered the bottle. The IBS clinic told her walking and drinking lots of water was the best remedy for the syndromes they treated. By the time she got home from post-sunset walks and rehydrated, it was bedtime. Kept awake by irritation throughout her pelvic organs, she warred with the sheets between bathroom trips. When the pale sun peeked through the blinds, she fell asleep from exhaustion, dreaming of the frigid streets the Little Match Girl died in.

Now she daydreamed of dark clouds covering the sun, a burst of rain, making it home safely before the clouds parted and the sun beat down again. It hadn't rained during the day in a long time. Dangerous rainfall occurred at night, thwarting many of her planned walks. Summer was difficult and it seemed to be summer all the time. When it was technically still winter, a meteorologist on another edge of the country wondered if the people on her edge lived on Jupiter. His joke sounded like blame.

Shifting her chair again, she glimpsed a hazy movement and looked toward the table: nothing except the sunlit emptiness. Her heart beat fast. Had the sun-sickness affected her eyes? She'd not heard of that being a symptom, or a consequence. But the government, pushing for permanent DST, suppressed information, dismissing the bumps as a fairy tale, saying the condition didn't formerly exist, so how could it now. Doctors who championed the cause were no longer practicing.

She sprinkled water on the eggplant, as if that would perk up its wrinkly hide. This season their garden hadn't yielded the coveted tomatoes and she wondered if it would again. Satsumas came like a blessing every third year and this was not the year. When Jay was home, he weeded the plants in the back yard. He cut the grass in the front, trimmed the trees, and painted the exterior of the house for the absentee landlord. When he could no longer see a hand in front of his face, he showered and went to bed, sleeping the sleep of the well-exercised.

If the cloth-topped creature was a child, maybe it would play with her. She reprimanded herself for calling a person an it; that was a government trick. She ripped a page from her receipts book, drew a tic-tac-toe grid on the back and an X in one of the squares. She pushed the page to the far corner of the table, the pen on top. She took up her book and waited. The relentless sun pounded the flimsy roof covering.

Her head snapped up. The piece of paper had moved. Not wanting to scare them away, she froze. An O wobbled in the center of the grid. She slid her fingers to the edge of the table, pulled the paper and pen toward her, marked another X, shuffled it all back.

She sipped her water without averting her eyes. They felt heavy and her mind was overwhelmed with snow and ice. In the space of a blink, a ball rolled across the table and into her lap. It shone like a gemstone, though it wasn't hard or rough to her touch but smooth as silk. She twirled the ball and it changed colors, blue in the shade, pink in the light.

An infectious giggle rang out. Smiling, she ventured into the sunlight, shaded her eyes with her hand, shouted to the nearest table. "Did you see someone?" The vendor, sitting in a quiet daze, a flask in his hand, glanced her way and said nothing. She retreated.

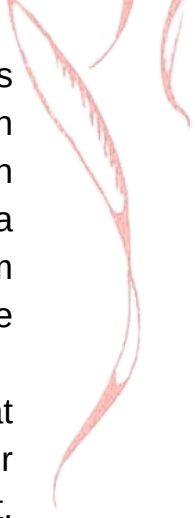
Forget them, she thought; her more pressing concern was walking home without long sleeves. Other hawkers were packing up. Facilitators had arrived to break down the stalls. Even if she could convince them to leave hers intact, it was dangerous to wait for sunset alone. She bit into a banana pepper; it tasted of nothing.

She scrutinized the ball. It wasn't shimmering; it was a dull, ugly purple. Made of rubber, it likely had been rolled and bounced by the wind. And the wobbly O in the center of the tic-tac-toe grid must be a condensation ring from her water bottle. Gloom descended upon her, like a black cloud blocking the sun, though that would've made her happy.

She was tempted to throw the ball, to see what would happen. Perhaps they would jump out from their hiding place to claim it. But she knew she wouldn't. She'd be reported and the proof would be on someone's phone. She packed her withered produce into the wagon Jay had freshened with red paint. The vegetables would make a lonely dinner; they wouldn't keep.

Dust swirled in the intensifying gale. Her sunhat was ripped from her head. The hat ran away, somersaulting like tumbleweed. She dashed through the sun's destructive rays and, during a lapse in the wind's fury, pounced. She slapped the hat back on her head, kept her hand atop as the wind picked up again. The sun beat down on the exposed hand. Before she could swap hands or return to her stand, the wind blew off its roof. She stood in the middle of the market square: a target.

She ran to her stall and finished packing. After donning her sun-gloves and glasses, she took up the wagon's handle. It'd be quicker to go straight across, but she decided to skirt the perimeter, hoping for bits of shade, sporadic relief. She stopped in the shadow of the neighboring stall to secure her possessions.




“What are you doing?” The man glared at her. His words were slurred and suspicious, as if she were a thief, or a spy.

“Staying out of the sun.”

He turned to dismantle the temporary edifice and the shade was gone. He was probably one of those who believed the sun-sickness wasn't real. Jay must've thought that, too, when she was first given her diagnosis. Unspoken words had floated in Jay's silence, echoing the ones blasted on the government-friendly news programs on his phone. She walked as fast as she could, but each structure fell as she approached, as if a godlike finger had launched a colossal domino line.

The pavement sizzled upward, waves of heat hitting the backs of her arms, her elbows. Even through her glove, the wagon handle was hot. Her skin wouldn't erupt into clustered fiery pinpoints until hours later, but she thought she already felt an intense itch on her forearms. She removed her gloves and slathered more sunscreen on her arms and upper chest, knowing the sun would melt it before she could apply more. It was impossible to keep in the race; the sun always won. She tugged the short sleeves of her t-shirt downward, slipped her gloves back on, and resettled her hat. She threw her rucksack on top of the wagon and took the fastest route, across the unshaded concrete.



HIGH HEAT - TUMMINELLO BRADER

The sun showed no mercy, beating down and reflecting up. She could last ten minutes without acquiring any bad effects and it took that long to maneuver around the other departing vendors and their makeshift carts. She glimpsed a man putting away a sign touting Creole tomatoes. She longed to stop and ask if he had any to barter, but time was of the essence. The longer she stayed out, the worse it would be and the longer the healing. Once, during her first bewilderment, oozing blisters had materialized; if they reoccurred, the clinic insisted she return for a biopsy. She was determined to not let that happen.

Away from the market, sprawling oak trees lined the sidewalks, but she couldn't get her wagon over the buckles and slopes created by their snaky roots. She stayed in the street.

"Hey, chickee," shouted a voice from the opposite sidewalk. She waved with her free hand and kept walking. Jerry, the neighborhood chatterbox, was ready at any moment to indulge in whatever gossip he could find. He was as harmless as a house spider, but once he entrapped her it'd be hard to get away. "Slow down, chickee, where's the fire?" Jerry used the endearment, stretching the word to its utmost, on everyone.

She halted as he drew near. "Me. I'm on fire."

"Sure, sure, I know your deal." A finger tapping his upper lip, he appraised her. "Your skin's a little red, but it's so clear. You got great skin. Come to Molly's. Have a beer." That meant buy him a beer. "I can't. I made nothing today. Absolutely nothing." Now go away, she thought.

"That's okay, chickee. Come anyway, at least it's cooler inside."

"Is Max working? You know he doesn't allow that."

"C'mon," The last syllable was stressed as if it were two, the O elongated, the N a mere breath. "Someone'll buy you a drink."

HIGH HEAT - TUMMINELLO BRADER

Too tired to disagree, she followed Jerry as he swayed across the street. She removed her dark glasses and nodded to the regulars who'd turned at the sun's brief passage through the opened door. Jerry tucked her wagon in a corner, next to a huge backpack and a child's bike. The place smelled of mold and mildew; the floors were slick. But it was dim and cool, a balm to her body if not her soul. Her hot skin relaxed.

The patrons returned to their drinks and, behind Max's back, she slunk to the restroom. She splashed water on her face, gave up trying to see it in the glazed mirror high above the sink, and patted it dry with the bottom of her sweaty shirt. All the paper towels lay trampled on the floor. She yearned for home, the shower Jay had tiled and to nurse her wounds in front of a streaming baseball game.

Jerry spotted her before she could regain her possessions and sneak out. "Hey, chickee, come meet Bruce." Sitting sideways at the bar, an empty mug in front of him, Jerry tossed a ball back and forth between his cupped hands. As the ball swung under the neon light, its color shifted from blue to pink and back again.

She grabbed Jerry's wrist. "Where'd you get that?" She glanced toward her wagon.

"From chickee, I mean, Bruce." He nodded to the man sitting next to him. "Chickee got it from a little old lady. Isn't it beautiful?"

She turned to Bruce. "What did she look like?" The two men, Jerry in his thrift-store gaudiness and Bruce in his old-fashioned three-piece suit, stared at her. She must've sounded desperate. "I have a reason for asking." And that sounded defensive, she thought.

“Well, she was short, shorter than you even. But older.” Bruce spoke as if he were examining each word before letting it leave his mouth. “Much older. Or at least I think so. Hard to tell. Dark complexion, from the sun, or born that way, not sure, hard to tell.”

“Was she wearing a white something or other on her head?”

“Why, yes. Yes, she was. How did you know that?”

She took the ball from Jerry’s stilled hands. It looked exactly like hers. She handed it back and went to the wagon. She rummaged in her bag, in the wagon bed. She strode back to the men. “I had one just like it. It’s gone.” She wondered if that sounded accusatory; maybe it was.

Jerry cozied up to Bruce and whispered in his ear. Bruce signaled to the bartender and cocked his head at her. “You want something?” She wanted the ball, but she knew how unreasonable that would sound, like a pouting child. She felt bereft, as if that same child had lost her favorite stuffed animal.

“No thanks. I got to go.” She couldn’t buy a round and, even if Max would’ve let her, she had no desire to stay until sunset, still several hours away. She turned to leave.

“Hey,” Bruce called to her. She waited impatiently, wishing for a string to pull the words out of his mouth. “You want it?” He bounced the ball toward her—as slow as he talked was as fast as he’d thrown it. She flailed and missed. It rolled under a high-top table and into a corner.

“Sorry.” Bruce laughed. He didn’t sound sorry and she wasn’t going to crawl under the table while he watched.



Retrieving her wagon, she glanced toward the corner. No light penetrated it; the ball had become one with the dust. She exited into the hot street and moved slower this time, what did it matter, what did anything matter.

At a white, green-trimmed house, set back from the avenue and its shade trees, she stowed the wagon under the wide front steps and gathered her belongings. At the door to their flat she juggled her bags and fished the key from her pocket. Inside, on the floor of the threshold, lay a crisp linen shirt, its long sleeves splayed like a drunkard.

She pressed the button on the window unit, relished the initial blast of refrigerated air. She clicked on the TV and found the network. When she passed through the front room again, after stripping off her sweaty clothes, she saw the ominous, joking words on the silent screen stating nothing was wrong, but the network didn't have permission to broadcast the game. The league wanted her to take a five-hour drive, wasting fuel in a car she didn't own, to watch a game in the flesh.

She clicked it off. She'd use the electricity to run the washer. So much for anticipating the start of the season. So much for thinking it shouldn't be this hot in April. The month of hope and expectation had turned into August, the month of monotony and inertness—a month that'd last through eternity, or at least January. She might as well live on Jupiter.

As she heaped dirty towels into the machine's running water, her mind flitted from Jupiter to possible life in other parts of the universe to the little brown-faced woman. If any intelligent life arrived one day, by the time they got here, it would be too hot for them. She wondered where the woman was from: the Sahara; Latin America; Treme—the old Treme. The past.

HIGH HEAT - TUMMINELLO BRADER

Slamming down the lid, she remembered a painting of a young woman in a collection on Royal Street, the stark white of the Creole's off-the-shoulder blouse in sharp contrast to her brown arms. One dark curl peeked out of her vivid-red headdress and a caption explained the law decreeing free women of color wear tignon. Before her sun issues, when she was much younger, she'd resembled the woman of the painting.

She finished unpacking, upended her rucksack—one last time, she thought. Out bounced a ball. The ball. On the next bounce she corralled it, tensing her fingers, willing it to not disappear. She looked around the room as if searching for the stranger.

Sitting in front of the disappointing TV, she closed her eyes. So-called stress balls never worked for her, but this firmer ball was comforting, and cool. With her eyes still closed, she rolled the ball over her arms, across her upper chest. With the ball in her hand, she slumbered. When she awoke, unlike after her usual fitful sleep, she felt refreshed. Her skin had calmed. She opened her eyes.





“Hey, chickee, hear about our neighbor? No, not him. Wren. Kinda quiet, snobby even, works in the market. Chickee went outside in a tank top and shorts—c’mon, she has that sun thing no one believes in, she used to talk about it enough. Anyway, she went outside, dressed in practically nothing, to the back of the house, where no one could see her. Her boyfriend, you know him, right, chickee? Jay’s his name. I think she changed hers a long time ago to match his. Creepy, huh? He works offshore or something, he’s hardly around, maybe he’s got another girlfriend, I don’t know. Yeah, him, rides his bike all over, nice-looking chickee, older for sure, but tan and fit. Anyway, he found her in the back yard, who knows how long she’d been there, blistered all over, holding that damned ball Bruce gave her. You know Bruce, chickee, he’s the one—”

Teresa Tumminello Brader

What's Your Poison?

It's Halloween and California is on fire. My husband and I at the local hofbrau, escaping the smoke and hiding from trick or treaters. Other than the bartender and us, no one has come in costume. My husband is Marc Antony. I am Cleopatra. He can pass as a motorcyclist. But I am stuck with my black pageboy and Barbra Streisand eyes.

Our table smells of wet rags. Fat men in fan jerseys line the bar. A Tom Petty song, Zombie Zoo, seeps through their banter and shouts at the onscreen action. My husband fumes good-naturedly at the price of my craft cider; returns to watching the game.

I drink my cider quickly for the burn in the back of my throat, the warmth spreading down. I arrange and photograph squeeze bottles of mustard – Sweet/Hot, American Picnic, Dijon. My baby sister sends me a series of texts from Denver.

unable to leave apartmnt 4 2 wks

lost temp job

roommate brings food



I feel a deep green echo of dread. I text that she should contact me any time at all. That I'm up for talking any time at all. I know from experience she will not answer. Tonight, I will find a flight to Denver. It's a delicate matter. I can't say I am coming. Can't risk tipping the balance scale it has taken all she's got to keep plumb. But once I am there, she will let me in.

Need facility

Ins will cover in CA but cannot brd a plane

Shrink'ss involved

Because I am three years older, I was always assigned to bring my sister trick-or-treating each year. Ours was an overwhelming Halloween zone, with teeming sidewalks, creeping traffic, and neighbors out-goring one another. Every year, one set out entrails on platters, rats in birdcages. Creepy characters who left their posts to follow us.

This time of year, the veil between worlds is thinnest. We glide between. Connected. Unconnected. Stable. Unstable. Masked. Passing.



The busboy bangs his cart into our table; I emit a cry. Marc Antony sidehugs me; kisses my temple. “Did you think it was an earthquake, Boo?”

“Yeah.”

How frazzled I always was, waiting for a car to jump the sidewalk, or my little sister to trip on the dark sidewalk, or recede into darkness. But she loved being out at night, done up like a princess, marching up to doors she’d never dream of knocking upon in the light of day. Accepting her measure of fear and rising to greet it. To overcome and in so doing, become stronger.

She moved a thousand miles away for college. I stayed home. The place where my baby sister held my hand and checked my eyes for the go ahead to approach a closed door. Back then, the air was always crisp. The smell of fire signaled homey hearths and bowls of treats. Now, it is hot in November. Fire eats the air and drives people inside into darkness.

Patricia Q. Bidar



Do What You Desire

I saw the stars and I cried. I'd never seen them before.

Centered on a canvas bordered with branches and leaves, they shone like bullet holes in black paper, too numerous and bright to be real.

I'm used to the city. The mega-cities that once were states. I was born and raised in the city of California, one of the largest in the world. The mountains to the east and the water to the west buffer the city; a burn-mark across half the coast, dark as scorched earth during the day, alive as a sparkling disco-ball at night.

My parents always warned me against leaving the city. "Daniel," they'd say, "stay away from the country, it'll swallow you up. There's nothing there. Blank space between here and somewhere else." They never said anything about the stars. They had no idea.

Try to see the stars in the city and all you'll get in return is the piss-color-yellow of light pollution. Look up. There's nothing there. An absence. An absence of stars. The light of the city negates them, scares them away. Maybe that's why cities feel so lonely.

DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

Back in the country, the everywhere-stars embraced me in their warm, white, everywhere-light. Like holy light but without the holes.

I could see my reflection up there. Connect-the-dots: It's me. It's me walking, alone. Then other figures, other shapes, quivered into life as if out of nothing. I recalled their names like long lost friends. The figures moved, danced, played, slowly, as methodical and mechanical as an automaton. An archer pulled back his bow. A knight-on-his-steed galloped forward. Orion grabbed the Big Dipper into his hand, scooped up the brightest star, and ate it.

Then he looked down at me.

And I shivered.

Words appeared now, formed from the negative space, bright stars next to not so bright stars. Letters and nonsensical sentences, random and strange like fortune-cookie-fortunes or high-school-paper horoscopes.

Do what you desire.

This is a glorious beginning.

GET OUT OF THE CITY.

The stars spoke and I obeyed.



DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

First, I went to Canada. I figured north = closer to the stars. There was still wilderness in Canada.

I bought supplies. Suitcases full of books; a telescope maps of the universe, I taped them to the ceiling of my car. Hilltops work best, I've discovered. Not mountains. Mountains are like the Tower of Babylon; sacred, dangerous. Too close. The stars would not approve.

Down at the bottom of the hill, I could see my car, silent, enjoying a well-earned sleep while I sat in a hard-backed chair with loud Scottish music playing on headphones, my telescope set up beside me, scattered books at my feet like dirty clothes on a dorm room floor. A woolen fleece and, of course, strong coffee.

The stars woke then, as if they felt the caffeine coursing through me, and began to percolate. I tossed the coffee aside, scorching some nearby grass, and stood. Staring straight up, I twirled about like a child in a House-of-Mirrors. No images this time, but long slashes of white against the darkness. Words coming slowly like someone just learning how to spell.

The stars said, **Go East.**



So I did.

Toronto: the size of a province, where I had to drive for five hours just to get to a decent lookout-point. Cities were the only places I could find jobs. And it wasn't just me.

Urbanization had spread like The Plague. Highways went from congested to deserted, as more and more millions of people escaped the heat and pollution of the "wide open spaces" to huddle together for warmth and comfort in the shade. Cities now resembled a floor full of upright dominos, tall building after tall building, at roughly the same height, pushed up right next to each other. The city, more so now than ever, had become pure shadow.

New York City: like the open eye of a whale, the brightest and largest of the dots of light, a city the size of pre-secession-Texas. I stayed at the edges of it, worked temp jobs in downtown office buildings (all of them covered with massive black UV-protection sheets), and drove out to what once was the Midwest to see my stars.

I kept my nights free, always. I made no friends and those I once had, I lost contact with; or they lost contact with me, I can't remember. I stared at the stars every night (weather permitting), yet they denied me.

I told myself I stayed in the cities for the jobs, for the money: for batteries, for food. But I'm a liar. I'm a cityboy, accustomed to nameless strangers shoving me, getting in my way, waiting in line behind, being afraid of. Bothered by. Cuddled by (every once in a while).

The stars had singled me out, separated me from the multitude, chosen me. But now... were they upset? Angry at me?

DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

The thought strangled me in my sleep.

So. One shadowy afternoon, I packed as much of my belongings into my car as I could and drove out of the city, heading south.

To the coast of Florida and a sailboat.

As the sun set in a marriage of blues and oranges and fire reds, I set out, on a boat as white as a tooth, with a single sail and a tiny motor. It took me far enough.

The stars were unshackled above the ocean. They posed and pranced about just to see their reflections.

Hopeful, I reached out like an infant, trying to touch the untouchable, but they never let me have them. The stars were chaste.

And silent. For years!

Rejected, I felt like a broken button, or a light switch connected to nothing: useless.

I almost gave it up.

Burning inside, I told myself, if they've denied me, I will deny them. I won't be their bitch-puppy, muzzled and house-broken, playing nice in hopes of getting a treat. I stood up on the rocking-chair-like-boat and shouted my rage at them.

"Fuck me? No, fuck you!"

Grief-stricken, I immediately apologized and begged for their forgiveness.

DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

I went away again.

I smuggled myself, hidden like the Trojan horse in a crate, from Atlanta to the European Coast.

I had a thousand dollars and a backpack.

I left most of myself in America. Novels I had loved since childhood, worn photographs of my family, my car/best friend, favorite TV shows, favorite foods. Things that had, somehow, glued themselves to me as I crisscrossed the continent for the past two decades.

I'd become an old man without my consent. Years of little sleep and minimum-wage-labor had carved lines and crevices in my skin. A cragged cigar-smoker's face at thirty, a sunken-eyed cancer patient's at thirty-five, a bum's grime and grub-filled skin at forty.

I was not as timeless as my stars. I showed my age.

Crouching, hidden and freezing, in the bowels of the ship, I told myself, This is going to be good for me. A new beginning. Just what I needed.

Then I went up a deck and scavenged the trash for food.

Lisbon, Portugal.

Immediately, I got as far away from the Eastern European Metropolises as I could, hopped trains, northwards, till I hit water and chilly Norway.

Snow settled on every inch of ground, house, tree, and bush. Sometimes the temperature dipped below twenty, Celsius.



DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

I longed for my car and its sunroof. I learned hiking and cross-country skiing. But the travels were tough and slow-going. It took half the night to trek up a nearby mountain just to sit and stare for less than an hour and then rush back before frostbite had me bedridden.

I took up drinking. Just for the warmth (really). I went out with my books, my maps, and a thermos full of Vodka: The Russian-Blood-Warmer.

And it worked. No more biweekly colds and bedrest. I could keep up a consistent vigil, stay out for whole nights if I wanted too. At work, the next day, answering phones and gophering from desk to desk, my movements and reaction times were sluggish. My mind was distant, heaven-bound. Occasionally, gentle coworkers would ask me out to join them for dinner or dancing or drinking, but I'd decline. I was always, always, busy.

I spent a year and a half in Northern Europe without a word or gesture from *them*. Maybe it was a language problem?

I left again. I continued east, towards the Middle East, by way of Turkey.

Some desert-heat would be a welcome change of pace, I told myself.

I settled, this time, in Israel, on a Kibbutz in The Negev: a wide, triangle-shaped slab of desert separating Israel from Saudi-Jordan to the east, and Cairo to the west. The Kibbutz was a self-sufficient community, every resident was expected to work for their food and lodgings.

DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

It was perfect for me. I no longer worried about my dwindling cash or finding sheds or abandoned farms to sleep in. I had a small apartment with no kitchen and two rooms. A job tilling and seeding. Three meals a day. I even kicked my vodka-habit.

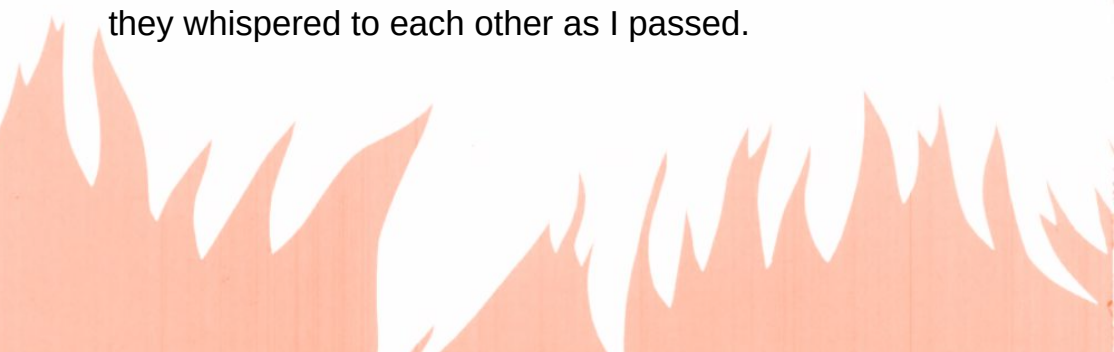
To see the stars, I only had to walk for ten, fifteen minutes, into the shrub-farms surrounding the Kibbutz.

Look up. There they are: calm and peaceful in the wilderness, in the joyous lack of humanity. No one for them to be afraid of here, so they smiled at me. Forms of light, resembling a woman, then a man, embraced, spilled milk merging on black linoleum, and twirled across the night sky, like Beauty and the Beast.

I dreamed up an imaginary woman to sit with me.

Unfortunately, it wasn't long before I drew attention in the small community. In a city, you'd be fortunate (or unfortunate) to know everyone's name in your building. Even that was unheard of. But here my strange sleeping patterns and distant and anti-social personality drew me out into the open: a news-item. A topic of conversation.

The people were polite in their concern. They never spoke to me directly, and since I never initiated conversations, I never spoke. They secretly peeked out their windows at night and watched me tiptoe through the thin cobbled streets. In daylight, they whispered to each other as I passed.



DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

I saw them, some nights, stepping out of their homes in the dark, looking up, straight up, just like I do. Hoping to see something unique instead of just the stars. (They took them for granted.) Maybe they were hoping for a comet or a spaceship, but they weren't patient enough.

Stay out there for a few hours, a few days, then, maybe, if you're lucky, you'll get something to talk about. Or keep to yourself like the comfort of a secret.

The stars, maybe sensing the increased eyes, remained silent.

Finally, the people of the Kibbutz, politely, but en masse, asked me to leave. When I asked "why," because I knew they would be honest, they said, "You're scaring us."

Your parents probably told you, "Don't stare at the sun, you'll go blind."

They never said, "Don't stare at the stars, you'll go crazy."
But they should have.

I wandered Asia for an indecipherable amount of time. Cloudy time. Hazy time.

The people I met were mostly country folk, kind to an old raveler, not prodding with endless questions. They didn't want to know all the sad stories of all the sad wanderers in this sad world.

Sometimes, though, they would ask me. Badger me with parental-sounding questions, like: "Who are you?" "What are you doing?" "Where did you come from?"

They could see the mark of the stars on me. I indulged them. I whispered things about a “quest,” a “mission,” a “destiny” and a life-long-adventure.

Lies, of course.

But adventures were so rare these days.


Once, I tried telling the truth.

I was a little drunk and a little curious. Would they believe me? Pity me? Or just laugh?

I was in Thailand at the time. A village of mud-colored wood huts and dark, warm, people. They were used to strangers. People came to this country to get away from everything else. The mainland was sparsely civilized while the coast was dotted with a long trail of lonely dots, like a sleeping serpent's tail.

The people were warm and friendly. They took me in. When they first saw me, trudging up the beach from some rundown train station a few miles away, I had my backpack slung over my thin shoulders, my clothes ripped, grayed, and filthy and I reeked of garbage, oil, and sand.

The villagers lent me a small hut. It had a real mattress, child-sized, with embroidered blankets and pillows, with American hotel insignia. I slept, curled in a fetal position, for thirty- six hours straight. Then they fed me: jasmine rice and little strips of chicken, seasoned with peanuts. They gave me American-brand razors and a bottle of shaving cream. I used them gladly. They were the kindest people I'd met in the whole world.



DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

Later, sitting with them around a campfire, drinking mug after mug of a strong beer-like- brew, lulled by the heat and hospitality, I began to talk. My voice was hoarse and rough, dust growing like mold in my mouth over the years. But I gave it my best shot and spoke slowly. One of the teenagers, a boy of eighteen or nineteen who worked as a waiter at one of the hotels, was my translator.

“One night, I saw the stars, for the first time in my life, and I cried.” The boy whispered the translation, the language shooting forth extremely fast like machine-gun-bursts. “I was just... happy to be witness to something huge, bigger and better than me. But then, as if they knew, they woke from their astronomical sleep. They spoke to me.”

Whispers from the audience; shared looks of doubt. I answered their looks with a steady stream of truth. “No loud, booming voice. No burning bush. But simple words. They told me to go, to leave my life, and to follow them.

“I don’t know why. I don’t know why they chose me. All I know is I... I had to listen. My purpose in life became clear, perfectly clear like water, and there was no more doubt. There was no more questioning who I am. I knew exactly what I had to do.”

I paused for a few long minutes. The boy, and the crowd, looked up.

“I’ve sacrificed everything I had. I have nothing left to give up. I’ve wandered in search of answers for a lifetime. Sometimes, though, I wish it would stop.”

Night-silence. The crackling of the campfire.

One of the old men in the audience, face and body shadowed in rags, whispered some machine-gun-words to the boy, who looked at me with a smile.

He spoke in a very accented, floral, English. "You can stay here."

I didn't know what to say.

"You can stop."

"I... I would be honored."

I looked up then, at the static stars. It had been so long since they spoke to me, I had forgotten their voice. They didn't move. They didn't talk. They didn't inspire.

"Yes. Yes, I accept."

I was so happy, I cried.

Later that night, I went out to say goodbye to my stars.

(I know. I shouldn't have. But I did.)

They blazed as if burning. Phosphorescent brilliance. Faces appeared, scratched onto the night sky as if in chalk.

Appearing, then disappearing, quick, like an Etch-a-Sketch. Me. And me. And me again.

My faces. Me at twenty; at thirty; at forty; at fifty, progressively darker and scarier. Like a ripple in a lake, the images shimmered and were replaced by a sentence. Wide columns of lights for each letter: a boldface.

It's not over yet.



DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

I stayed in the village another day, enjoying the food, the warmth, and the shy smiles from the women. The next night, I sneaked out while they slept, heading north, to find a plane or a boat to take me eastward.

Back home.

To America, and the massive California Colony, recently seceded from The States.

The city was darker than I remembered.

No traffic whizzed past on the streets. No cars lined up beside the pavement. No overflowing restaurants, bars, or clubs. There were darkened windows showing empty businesses. I looked in, hopeful for even a hint of other humans, but saw nothing. Starless-sky- nothing.

Look up. To see a dull sheen of blue behind semi-transparent black. The city, fed up with blocking out the night, now focused on the day. Cancelled it out.

I wandered the empty city like a character in a science fiction nightmare. I shouted, but it only echoed back at me, again and again, bouncing off the buildings, like clothes trapped in a dryer.

What happened? I wondered. Where is everybody? Even lost in the global mess of time- zones, I would have heard of something like this. A nuclear scare? A mass exodus? A war?



DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

I walked down streets with recognizable names. Sutter. Rodeo. San Francisco. Streets that stretched like highways, from the border of Mexico-City to what-once-was Oregon (now part of the city of Sealand). I walked and walked. The dim day became black night. And, above, shining now, my stars.

I stopped, and stood, dumbfounded. The stars were moving, racing, actually. More images than my eye could see on a canvas the size of the Heavens.

Charged, I ran into one of the abandoned buildings. Leaped three-stairs-at-a-time, until I reached the door to the roof. There I hesitated. My body was tingling, an incoming rush. Like when you're about to get too drunk but you're well, well, on your way and there's nothing you can do to stop. So you close your eyes and hope for the best.

I opened the door, stepped out into the chilled night air. The stars wrestled with each other. A laser-light-show complete with distant music. I glanced around...

And that's when I saw them, the others. Congregations of stargazers, fifty to a hundred per pack, standing on every other rooftop for as far as I could see. A few of the rooftops whispered music. The people stood as if in rapt attention, their necks craned all the way back (it hurt to even see), eyes and mouth wide open, inhaling the stars. They looked like zombies at a car-less drive-in.



And that's when I noticed the words. At a close level to the rooftops, a snaking river of words, like a news-ticker at the bottom of a television screen. The phrases were similar to the general, but seeming personal, fortunes and inspirational phrases the stars had first greeted me with. But upgraded. The phrases had names attached, like songs dedications over the radio.

Dennis, You will find happiness soon.

Kelly, You are right. He is wrong.

Rachel, Caring comes before passion. Be patient.

It took me a few minutes to process. The names were like graffiti painted on the walls inside my brain.

The stars were not just talking to me.

And that's when my reality went supernova.

I fell to my knees, beaten. Clutched my heart in case it fell and broke, like everything else. Like my childhood, my past, and my future.

I closed my eyes, but they wouldn't stay closed. The city continued its silent worship. Something about the ease of the others as they watched the stars had a gasoline-like effect on my anger. The way they just stood there! They didn't need to discover anything, adventure anywhere. Like sheep!

I felt, in the tumult of conflicting emotions inside me, cuckolded.



DO WHAT YOU DESIRE - HABER

I took off my overstuffed backpack, huge and ugly and over fifty years old, and let it drop like a stone onto the rooftop. It broke, ripped, and spilled. Decaying books and coffee-stained- maps of the solar system, obsolete now. DVD-discs: Archaic pieces of technology. Souvenirs of a wasted life. I picked up everything I could and threw it over the side, rushing about like a love- crazed teenager, or a man possessed, until there was nothing left. People in nearby rooftops watched me from the corner of their eyes.

I thought about suicide.

But then, a familiar image, not a face or a horse or an archer, but a name, a name as lost as my youth: My name, another fragment of the past from someone else's life. The name was connected to a phrase, caught in the river, circling about me like a stubborn mote of dust.

Daniel, you are special. You were the first.

My mind raced.

"Did I fail you? Why did you abandon me?"

The stars sounded remorseful. **We didn't. We were protecting you.**

"From what?" I shouted.

From this.

I looked away, then. Down below, I saw darkly-dressed men and women streaming out of buildings and scattering, a dreary, wasted, look to their movements. Faint sounds of car engines and distant vendors. That ting of a bell from an old door, in an old Mom-&-Pop. The smell of hotdogs. Cigarettes. Dogshit.

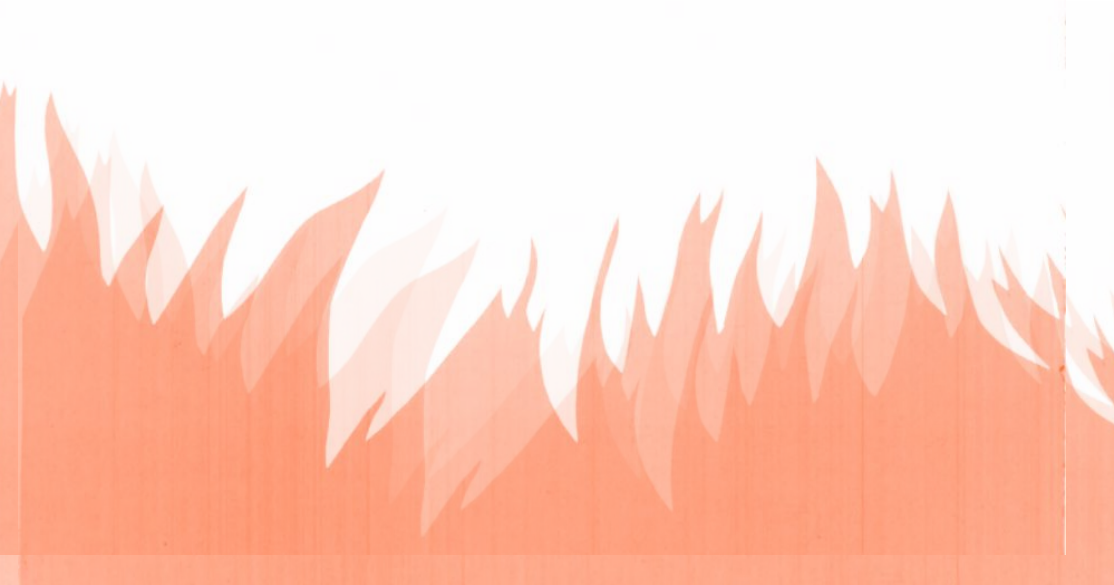
City sounds. City smells. They all came flooding back as if, somewhere, a dam broke.

And that's when I realized the city was not dead or abandoned, just sleeping. The city had actually stopped. For the stars. For my stars.

It's like, when you were a child, coming home smelling like alcohol or cigarettes, and your parents berated you with cliché after cliché after cliché; like, "If everyone else jumped off a bridge, would you, too?"

Yes, Mom, I would. I'd jump first.

Elad Haber





Doomsday Rock (Three Minutes to Midnight)

The day after JFK's Berlin speech, Dawson put an ad for Peace-O-Mind Shelters in Newsday, and that first week got 500 inquiries. Some wanted to do-it-themselves, and Dawson was happy to sell them the tools, and supplies recommended by the Office of Civil Defense: cinder blocks, vents, piping, barrels for piss and shit, etc. They didn't know a cold chisel from a cold cut.

Dawson sold also that his crew could do the work, either in somebody's basement or yard. For one package he took a basic swimming pool design and turned it upside down. He had no idea if any plans he'd gotten from the government or made up himself would protect against a bath of radioactive debris when the bombs went off in a blaze of a million suns. But if it ever happened who was going to ask for a refund? This was going to be sweet.

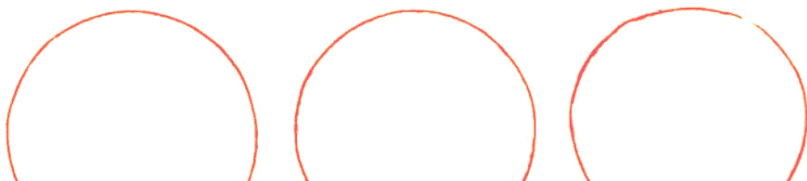
In the coming months, as the Cold War threatened to get Hot, demand kept re-pinnacling. He found more than one bank that saw the potential of customer borrowing needs, and in exchange for that Dawson got multiple loans and lines of credit. He needed more salesmen and more laborers, because he and his original group couldn't keep up.

Liz, his wife, insisted he give one of the sales jobs to her nephew Paul, a recent Navy washout with a bad haircut, lazy attitude and dubious future. Dawson, convinced they were looking at a guaranteed bonanza, said why not. So long as that bald prick Khrushchev didn't actually drop the Big One, not even that loser could screw it up.

Paul sat in his mother's car and snorted the ground-up Benzedrine—the last of what had been a pair of her diet pills. Halfway through his first day, he knew the asshole who had married his Aunt Elizabeth had lied about how easy it was going to be. He should have been working on his music.

He'd spent the first two hours with a crazy old couple in Commack, who, after he asked, "How much are you willing to spend?" fought about whether they should get a fallout shelter or a new 18" Admiral Color TV. Twitchy from habituation, he drove to Jericho. When the man at a stucco ranch asked if he was there on behalf of the federal government, Paul told him no, and was told to leave.

As he got out of the Fairlane for the next one, the crank kicked in. Paul couldn't shake the lyrics from a song on the radio that he wished he'd thought up... *Who put the bump in the bump ah bump ah bump / Who put the spam in the spama lama ding dong...* Genius!



He sprinted up the brick walk to the big house's front door, rang the bell, slapped the brass knocker a quick half dozen. A dog started yapping. He took in the big columns framing the wide porch, the wicker chairs, the potted plants, and the door opened.

"I'm here on behalf of the federal government!"

A little white dog, barking, bouncing, fainted toward him, then scuttled back to the pink- dressed, vinegar-douched, high-coiffed matron of the manor.

"Barney! Barneeeey! You'll have to excuse us... it's his salon day!"

Paul launched his missiles. He talked optimal siting, melded fact, fiction and the music of the spheres, led with the \$495 model decided halfway into his pitch it was unsuitable due to the elevation of the property went for the \$2,500 upsell nine inches thick nine feet underground with 4,000% greater chance of survival and after a spewed foodwaterfirstaidbatteryradiocannedheatgamesforthe kids received a final "I said you'll have to talk with my husband!" he jerked and juked back down the porch steps, a new storm braining....

Who put the BOMB in the booma boom ka-BOMB boom / Who...

The little white dog shot out of the house, and chomped onto his left pants leg. Paul, dragging it, tried to shake it off, until at the sidewalk the dog let go and darted back for his wash, clip and groom.

Ed stared out at the giant hole and piles of dirt and rocks that had scarred his backyard for the past year. He looked at the prescription bottle in his hand, what his doctor had said would bring him out of his depression and anhedonia—lack of pleasure in acts that are normally pleasurable.

Would it bring back all the money his bank had loaned out to a thief?

It was Ed's own fault. He'd contacted them first. After the first salesman they'd sent scared and confused his wife, the owner of the fallout shelter business George Dawson, a contractor from Mineola, had come himself. Ed should have realized it was neither a grand opportunity for patriotic Americans to do their part, nor a sure thing for his bank to make a nice profit. His was one of four community banks in Nassau and Suffolk counties—along with hundreds of customers—that Dawson had variously and creatively fleeced before he disappeared. Worse, Ed had agreed to buy the “super-deluxe model”: one-half swimming pool, the other half a “cabana/fallout shelter combo” built into a man-made hill. Depending on what happened, you could spend your days watching swimmers... or a brilliant blast and then a mushroom cloud.

He hadn't gone into the bank for two days. He swallowed another pill, dry, and stared out at a fluff of white at the construction site. Throwing an appropriate rock at a certain moving target had brought a pleasurable result. Maybe the pill was finally working and if so, another couldn't hurt.

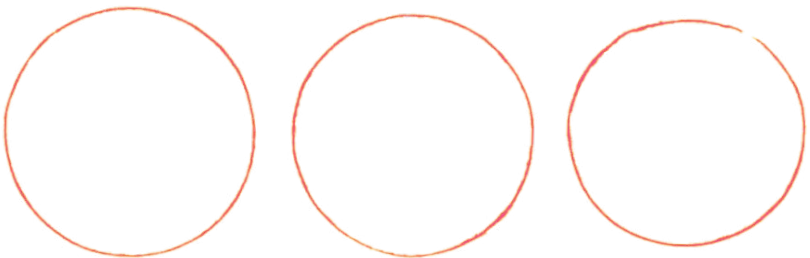


He was sitting in the den obsessing on financial ruin when he heard Miriam come back from her shopping. She called out for the dog. When she found Ed, she asked him where Barney was.

Ed watched his left leg, bouncing like he was stamping the pedal of hi-hat cymbals.

“The radiation got him!” he shouted, but he was the one feeling something like it.

Jon Fain



Rust Belt Triptych

I. Effect

Pierogi mother heaves groceries in the supermarket checkout line when her dress seam catches on the cart's rusty corner. Starchy potato breasts, a belly of melted cheese, and lardy legs flash the tabloid and crossword puzzle towers. Even the Big Red gum blushes. The employee chews her lip, informs pierogi mother the check bounced. Normal husbands leave surprises of new clothes, functioning bank accounts, tidied kitchens. Her husband was a nimbus cloud, raining down red and minus signs across town. Provide. Solve. Care. How many jobs can her half-naked shoulders bear? Pierogi mother abandons the Hamburger Helper™ ingredients on the conveyor belt and darts toward McDonald's across the highway. Ten dollars in quarters jangle in her purse.



II. Cause

Crow father is too busy tucking shiny garbage into the attic eaves to worry over errands, budgets, and bills. Instead, he flits about, weaving tunnels out of unsought commodities. Whitening toothpaste from a network marketing company, compilation jazz albums from midnight infomercials, diamond tennis bracelets too fragile for pierogi mother to wear to work. His black eyes shimmer, pride or fallen insulation tearing him up: not every father can predict a family's wants and needs. The repossession notice taped to the door he tosses into the backyard's burn pile. Over the phone, a bank representative is pleased to activate his new credit card.



III. Solution

Mouse child wiggles toward the cracked window, searching for a breeze. Sun rays tickle her eyelashes, bake the car seat plastic. She hums an invented tune, pigtails bopping and light-up sneakers keeping time on the middle console. If she behaves, pierogi mother promises, she can rent *Ghostbusters* at Video City again. Crow father promises the next bonus, the next paycheck, the next letter to Santa will deliver the fabled Universal Studios vacation. Year-round, mouse child plates cookies for Slimer. Her favorite ghost is green, hungry, and misunderstood — like her. She'd trade all the unasked-for princess dolls to ride the Spooktacular, wave to Slimer in real life. Pierogi mother crosses the parking lot with a Happy Meal® in hand. Molten air singses mouse child's lungs. She smiles. Today, she won't make a peep, won't whine, won't cry. For Slimer, she'd be a good girl and start hiding the coins she finds under her dresser.



Lauren Kardos

The Great Disappointment

‘OK guys and gals, let’s begin with the usual.’

The seven of them fidgeted a little more on their cushions, then settled into a well-rehearsed stillness. A breeze played with the net curtains at the window of Krish’s living room.

‘OK everyone,’ said Krish, exhaling dramatically with a self-congratulatory yogic air. ‘Find that still centre. Light your inner candle. Say hello to your soul.’

Others around him began their own deep breaths, some melodramatic, some more timid, others almost sighing. A drill began vibrating violently in the road outside.

‘Ssh, sshhh, that’s OK,’ smiled Krish. ‘These things are sent to try us! Literally.’ He elicited a few half-hearted smiles and chuckles. ‘Just acknowledge the distraction, bless it away, and return to your soul-flame.’

There was, despite his best efforts, a sullenness in the air that had never been there before.



‘Thank you, Source, for connecting us to the wellspring of your love,’ Krish intoned. ‘Thank you for connecting us to all things – for allowing us to find each other and meet here in the light of your love.’

Silence. Drilling. A fly buzzed a perfect enneagram.

It was Sandra who cracked first. She was an impetuous fifty-something divorcee who had just got her first tattoo.

‘I’m sorry, Krish,’ she exclaimed, shifting out of her meditation pose and sitting back on her haunches in an attitude that suggested righteous indignation rather than serene self-contemplation. ‘But is no one really going to mention it?’

‘What’s that?’ said Krish, innocently.

‘Well! I mean. Here we are all, meeting again, in your living room in Gerard’s Cross...’

‘That’s right!’ exclaimed Krish. ‘And isn’t it wonderful we can all be here to share one’s another company again?’



‘Only... we weren’t supposed to here at all by now, were we?’ It was Frank now, always ready to take up a fight once someone else had started it. ‘We were supposed to have ascended yesterday at dawn.’

Krish said nothing.

‘Krish, we love you, and we love the Soul Circle, you know that,’ said Sandra’s sister Louise, who could be relied on to say and think whatever Sandra did. ‘But I guess we just need to know where we stand.’

‘We stand here, now, in this moment,’ said Krish with maddening simplicity. ‘We are. Here. Together. Now.’

‘Yee-ees,’ persisted Frank. ‘But according to your predictions, we should have been ushered into celestial bliss by now. You promised us an ascension. You showed us all your calculations. We’ve been working up to The Dawn Awakening for months – years, some of us.’

‘That’s right,’ said Krish. ‘And we all stood on the top of Blackwell Hill yesterday. At 5am. Awaiting the great moment.’



‘Which didn’t happen,’ said Tony, who was normally the most mild-mannered of the group, but also the one with the most need for things to be spelled out to him. The fact that Tony was speaking up now brought the conversation, the group, to a whole new level of crisis.

‘Or perhaps it did happen,’ said Krish carefully.
‘Perhaps we have ascended?’

‘Right,’ said Sandra doubtfully. There were a few murmurs.

‘So we’ve ascended into... another level of reality that looks exactly like this one?’ said Frank.

‘But *is* it the same, though?’ asked Krish profoundly. ‘I don’t know about you guys, but I feel... subtly changed.’ At this he inhaled deeply, sat up straighter on his haunches, and arched his graceful back, accidentally accentuating the sleek perfection of his pectorals through his thin robe.

‘Do you?’ said Tony excitedly. He was unclear what was happening, but as the group’s newest member he was desperate to bear witness to a proper spiritual experience.



‘Absolutely, Tony,’ said Krish, staring right through him with those eyes of his. ‘I feel a deeper love for you all. As if I could see your souls as they truly are, naked and beautiful. For the very first time.’

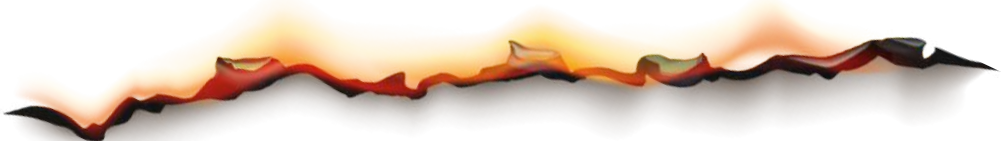
‘Actually, I sort of feel a bit fluttery too,’ said Sandra, who now found she couldn’t help focusing on the triangle of taut bare skin visible around Krish’s nut-brown navel.

‘Or perhaps Source simply wanted to test us,’ smiled Krish. ‘In which case our behaviour over the next few days and weeks is absolutely critical.’

‘No, no!’ said Tony, desperately. ‘I definitely think we’ve arrived somewhere. There’s a sort of... awakened atmosphere in this room.’

‘That’s all well and good,’ said Frank, doggedly. ‘But I jacked my job in.’

Krish smiled. He sighed warmly. ‘Bless you Frank!’ he said, looking directly into Frank’s eyes for a long, compassionate yet steely moment, until at last Frank gave a little cough and looked furtively away.



‘Or again...?’ Krish began solemnly. ‘Perhaps Source only granted the Ascension... to some of us? Perhaps some of us are here at one level, while others...’

The sentence hung unfinished in the summer heat. For a long moment, there was only the sound of a light breeze fluttering the net curtains.

Then Krish leant across to Frank, reached out and clasped that chubby, bearded, civil-servant face between his delicate piano hands. ‘What do you think, Frank?’

A sudden blast of sunshine lit up the room. A play of rainbow light, a sudden gust of warmth. There were gasps from some, knowing smiles from others.

‘Wow,’ said Tony reverently, a true initiate at last.

‘Blessed be Source. Blessed be Brother Krish,’ said Frank eventually.

‘Blessed be Source. Blessed be Brother Krish,’ the rest of the group repeated as one.



‘So here we are at last!’ said Krish expansively, stretching out his arms in welcome. ‘Now, I wonder: Will the wireless signal be any better in this new reality?’ He reached for his iPad and began connecting his payment-card reader.

The sun beat in through the window, roasting the air and setting the flies off once more. Outside, a lorry’s brakes whistled hard, and the drill started up again.

Dan Brotzel

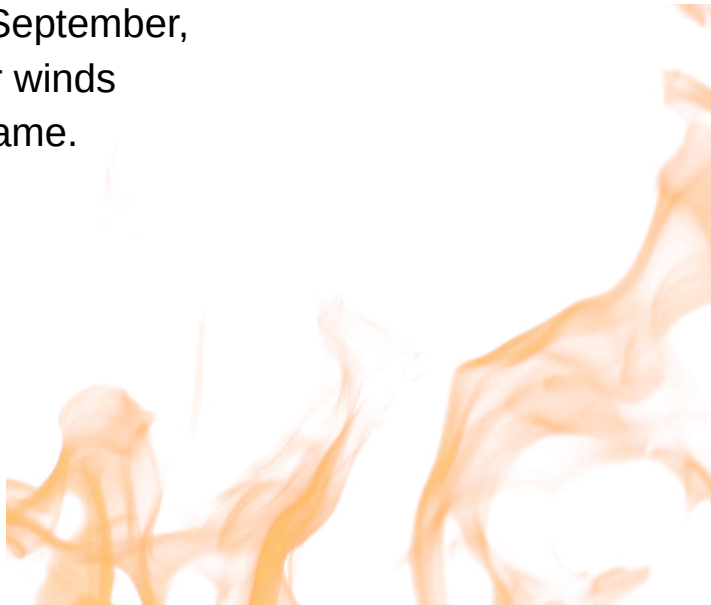


All Our Faults Are Fallen Leaves

In response to W. H. Auden's "As I Walked Out One Evening."

Again an annual angled auburn hand
announces advancing Autumn --
fingers aflame, the first fallen leaf,
As slow in its descent, and as red,
as flailing Lucifer.

Hell in our sylvan vision
begins with a single spark.
The sting of the prior winter
subsided in July,
eroded at August.
Now, as at every September,
let new and cooler winds
fan a temperate flame.



May this nascent season only
bring brick-tinted perdition
and carmine Abaddon.

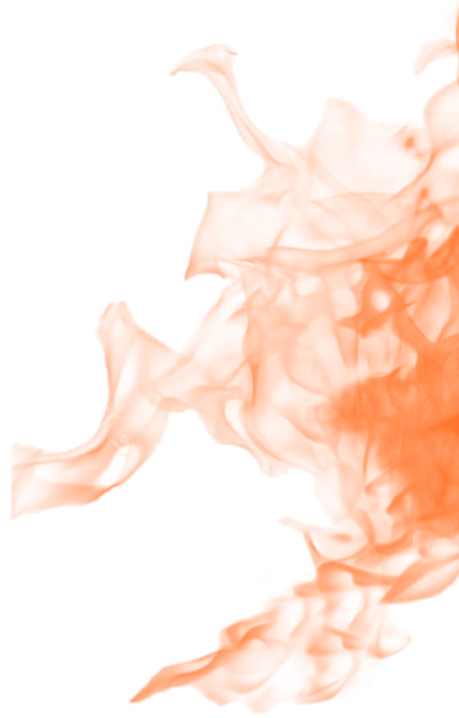
Where flames should burn, may there be
only rose tones on wide wine canvasses,
tormentless florid scarlets,
griefs eased in garnet trees.
What I hold in my heart to be true
is edict at every Autumn:
Magentas may not make
forgetful a distracted God,
unless we ourselves forget
or burn to overlook.

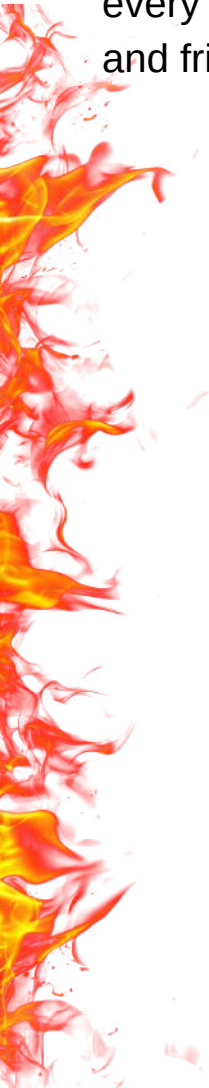
Auden told us "One Evening"
to "Stand, stand at the window,"
and that we would love our neighbor,
but he didn't counsel at all
about how we should smolder there.
Outside my window, and yours,
if the conflagration itself
acquits us all by claiming only
the trees upon the hill,
the Commonwealth a hearth,
Virginia an Inferno,
Then you and I
should burn in our hearts to absolve
ourselves and one another,
standing before the glass,
our curtains catching,
our beds combusting,
our bureaus each a pyre.



Take my hand, my friend, and smile,
there on the scorching floor,
beneath the searing ceiling and
beside the blackening mirror
that troubles us no longer,
for, about it, Auden was wrong.
God's wrathful eye
will find you and I
incandescent. The damned
are yet consigned to kindness.
All our faults are fallen leaves.
Forgive where God will not.

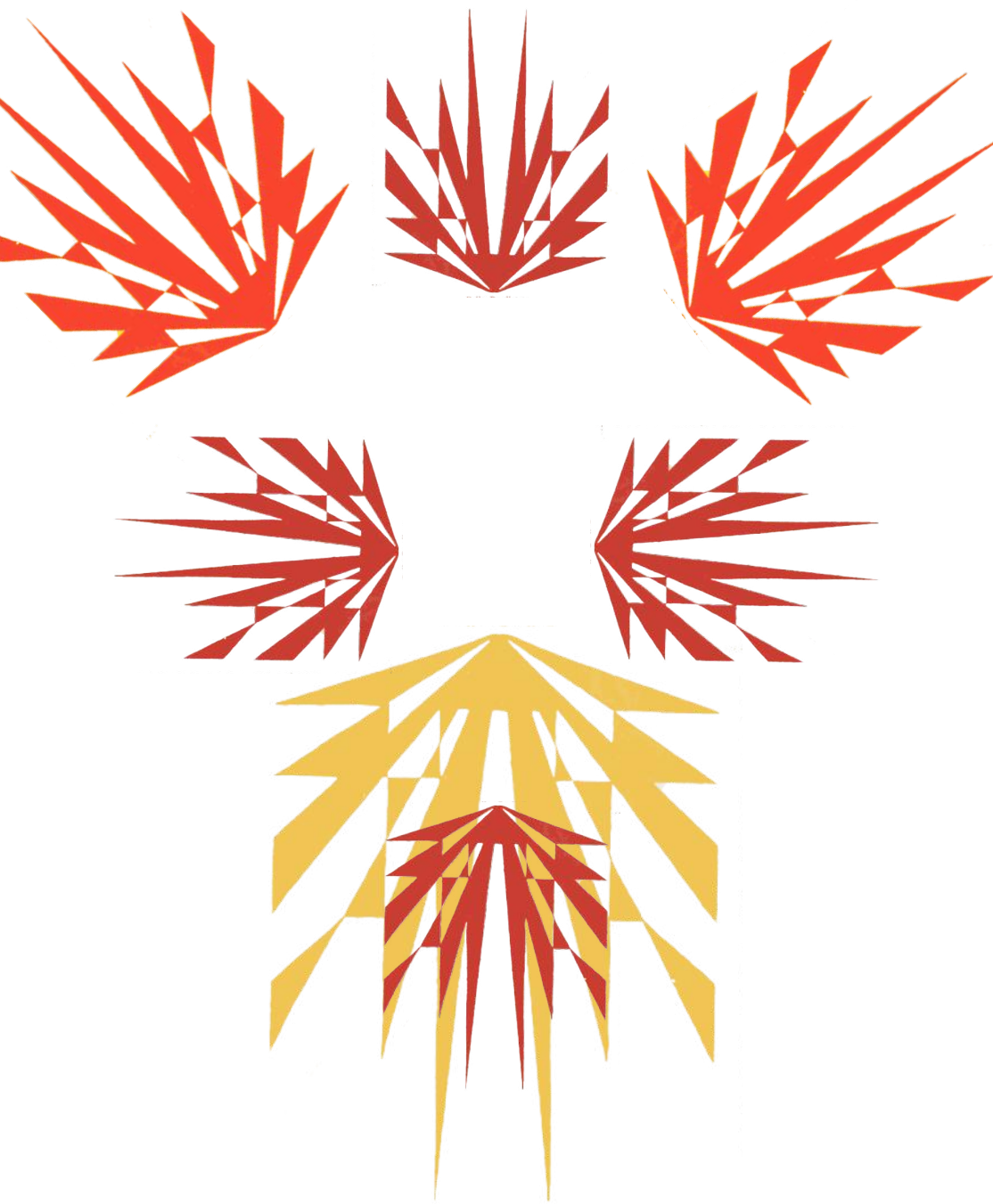
Out of our purgatory
of injury's daily indifference,
let our Lake of Fire
be but blush squadrons of oaks,
cerise seas of cedar, fed
running ruby by sycamore rivers,
their shores reassured
by calm copper sequoias,
all their banks ablaze
in yellowing eucalyptus.
Let the demons we hold
harden into bark
holding up Inferno.
All their hands are branches now;
all their palms are burning.



A decorative graphic on the left side of the page, consisting of stylized flames or smoke in shades of red, orange, and yellow, rising from the bottom left corner.

There, then, softly burning, you and I,
may our Autumn find
judgmentless russets,
vermilion for our sins,
dahlia forgiveness,
a red for every error,
every man a love,
every love infernal,
and friends where devils would reign.

Eric Robert Nolan



AUTHOR BIOS

Fire Prevention

Previously published by Into the Void 2019

Brad Rose was born and raised in Los Angeles, and lives in Boston. He is the author of seven collections of poetry and flash fiction: I Wouldn't Say That, Exactly., WordInEdgeWise, Lucky Animals, No. Wait. I Can Explain, Pink X-Ray, de/tonations, and Momentary Turbulence. His book of prose poems, Or Words to that Effect, is forthcoming. Eight times nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and three times nominated for the Best of the Net Anthology, Brad's poetry and fiction have appeared in: The American Journal of Poetry, The Los Angeles Times, Baltimore Review, New York Quarterly, Lunch Ticket, Puerto del Sol, Clockhouse, Folio, Best Microfiction (2019), Action Spectacle, Right Hand Pointing, and other journals and anthologies. His website is www.bradrosepoetry.com Selected audio readings: <http://bradrosepoetry.com/audio-readings/>

Fired Up

Previously published by Buzgaga Magazine 2023

Avery Timmons is an Illinois-based author holding a BA in creative writing from Columbia College Chicago. She has had numerous speculative fiction short stories and photographs published in literary magazines and anthologies. Her young adult fantasy novels *Thicker Than Water* (2025) and *Maimed* (2026) are to be published with Wild Ink Publishing.

Bone Swing

Originally published by Rhythm & Bones Press 2018

Clare O'Brien lives in Wester Ross, where she is Poet In Residence at The National Trust For Scotland's Inverewe Garden. Her speculative novelette 'AIRLOC' was published in 2024 with New York's *ELJ Editions*; her ekphrastic poetry pamphlet 'Who Am I Supposed To Be Driving?' responding to the music of David Bowie, came out in 2022 with *Hedgehog Poetry Press* in the UK. A second poetry pamphlet 'Breathing Out Becomes White And Snowfall' is due for publication with the UK's *Intergraphia Books* later this year, and her fiction and poetry has appeared in various British and American journals and anthologies.

Clare can be found on BlueSky at @clareobrien.bsky.social and at <https://clarevobrien.weebly.com>.

High Heat

Originally published by Landlocked 2021

Teresa Tumminello Brader, a native New Orleanian, gathers inspiration from the city, Lake Pontchartrain, and its denizens. Her books, *Letting in Air and Light* (2023), a work of hybrid memoir/fiction, and *Secret Keepers* (2025), a short-story collection, are from Belle Point Press. The former was honored as one of three nominees for the 2025 One Book One New Orleans citywide read and literary outreach. She has a bachelor of arts in English from Marquette University.

What's Your Poison?

Originally published by Flash Flood Journal 2020

Patricia Quintana Bidar is a western writer from the Port of Los Angeles area. She is an alum of the U.C. Davis Graduate Writing Program, where she taught creative writing and earned a M.A. in English. Patricia also holds a degree in filmmaking. Her work has been celebrated in *Wigleaf's* Top 50 and widely anthologized including in *The Red Mare Collection 2025*, *Flash Fiction America (Norton)*, *Best Microfiction 2023* and *Best Small Fictions 2023* and 2024. Patricia's collection of short works is forthcoming from *Unsolicited Press* in December 2025. She lives with her family and unusual dog outside Oakland, California.

Do What You Desire

Previously published in 2007 and by Strange Constellations 2016

Elad Haber is a husband, father to an adorable little girl, and IT guy by day, fiction writer by night. He has recent and forthcoming publications from the *Simultaneous Times Podcast*, *Silly Goose Press*, *Bulb Culture Collection* and *Does It Have Pockets?* His debut short story collection, "The World Outside" was published by *Underland Press* in July 2024. Visit eladhaber.com for links and news.

Doomsday Rock (Three Minutes to Midnight)

Originally published by Potato Soup Journal 2020

Jon Fain's publications include short stories in *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Feign*, and *King Ludd's Rag*; flash fictions in *Shooter*, *Punk Noir* and *Bottle Rocket*; micro fictions in *Blink-Ink* and *The Woolf*; and essays in *Lit Mag News* and *Sport Literate*. Other short stories of his are included in anthologies from *Running Wild Press*, *Murderous Ink Press*, and *Three Ravens Publishing*. His chapbook "Pass the Panpharmacon! (Five Fictions of Delusion)" is available from *Greying Ghost Press*. He lives in Massachusetts.

Rust Belt Triptych

Originally published by The Lumiere Review 2021, Best Microfiction 2022

Lauren Kardos (she/her) writes from Washington, DC, but she's still breaking up with her hometown in Western Pennsylvania. *The Molotov Cocktail*, *hex*, *Cold Signal*, *Bending Genres*, *Lost Balloon*, and *Best Microfiction 2022* are just a few of the fine publications that feature her stories and poems. You can find more of her work at www.laurenkardos.co.

The Great Disappointment

Originally published by Door is a Jar 2020

Dan Brotzel's latest novel is [Thank You For The Days](#) (*Bloodhound Books*)

All Our Faults Are Fallen Leaves

Originally published by Dead Snakes 2015, Illumen 2021

Eric Robert Nolan's award-nominated writing has appeared throughout over 60 periodicals in 11 countries across the Americas, Europe, Asia and Australia. His writing and photography were also included in 22 anthologies in the United States, Britain and Ireland, as well as three chapbooks in Germany.

Eric's 2013 novel *The Dogs Don't Bark in Brooklyn Any More* was published by Dagda Publishing in Great Britain. He is a past editor for the British and American science fiction journal, *The Bees Are Dead*.

**THANK YOU FOR
READING!**

