

Burning Bush at the Psychiatric Hospital

Sitting,
perched atop this tiny chair,
making small talk while
the physiotherapist flexes
my finger back to normal—
I see it.

Thick, mushroom heavy of
white,
cottonballing the air,
clouding the view from the
clinic window.

“What is that?” I say,
and she stops, turns
toward the window, looks long
and hard before answering:
“Oh my. That doesn’t look
good.”

On cue, the smell drifts into
our air,
fresh, fragrant, campfire
full—
wood burning.

Then:

Code Red—Cafeteria

Code Red--Cafeteria

Code Red--Cafeteria

before the alarm begins to sound
steady chirping beep monitoring
the building’s heart rate
at almost a little too slow.

The physiotherapist leaves to see what’s
going on;
I sit and watch the crowd
gather outside around the
burning—small alcove
surrounded by building on three sides.
Shoulder to shoulder
the crowd loiters

while smoke continues weaving
in and about them.

Inside, we are told to leave but get as far
as the front door, assorted rehab patients
with walkers and canes and wheelchairs and braces
flanked by therapists all talking protocol for
evacuation,
professionals complaining already about the ventilation
sucking smoke inside, effectively sharing
it throughout the building.

No firetruck—just a security guard and someone
evident in a fluorescent vest
amidst the burning crowd:
there to supervise, we figure, until we sight
a fire extinguisher.

Code Red—Evergreen Hall outdoors

Code Red—Evergreen Hall outdoors

Code Red—Evergreen Hall outdoors

The heartbeat continues along,
audible squawk telling us yes,
this is an emergency and yes,
we know about it and yes,
someone is working to fix it.

“It’s a burning bush,” someone announces
coming back in from outside.

On cue, firetrucks arrive, fighters likely
more alarmed to see so many people
standing by the scene of the crime
than the dwindling smoke
signal.

“This is nuts,” my physiotherapist says
looking at me. “C’mon, let’s go back.”

We turn and make our way
back down the hall, back to the
room where the
burning bush started.

Opening the door, she offers,
as if to explain it all,

“We have a lot of psychiatric patients here.”

“Yes, I know,” I reply
not really knowing what else to say,
still watching smoke drift,
further and further from the
scene of the disaster.

Maybe burning bushes
only appear when you are crazy—
whatever crazy is—because people
expect you are crazy to see the future
or to listen to the voice of God.

With this, another memory rises
from the rubble of my psychiatric phase—
when I was one of the crazy ones:
watching the woman fling free the fire hose on our ward,
untoggle the nozzle and fire water full force at
every crazy nurse on the floor.

in the memory of that wet mayhem that
woman burns in my mind,
ferocious and triumphant,
laughing in celebration even after they
lock her down in padded isolation.

Now, here I am,
leaving this building as an outpatient of the
OK kind, head smoky with reflection
of yesterdays and prophets and the price
of being thought of as “crazy.”

And as God presented Moses
the burning bush
I see now that this is my gift
this clarity of fog-past,
this wet and wonderful learning
handed to me in moments just as this.

I AM WHO I AM. It is
what God said to Moses,
and finally, at the age of
forty-four, it is what I can
say to me.