13-P-30

DuPont Paint Factory

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Two officers have located the victim in the abandoned
building where the copper-thief says his friend is on fire.

He said they scaled the barbed wire fence topless,
one at a time, t-shirts wound around their hands for the spikes.
He said he doesn't remember trying to wrench his friend loose,
how he got the hole blasted in his hand,
or the twenty minutes it took him to limp two miles
to Saint Joe's Hospital.

We cut the sirens, leave the lights warbling
across the cracked red brick when we hiss to a stop.
Use bolt-cutters on the chained gate,
park Engine 11 at the rear of the building,
use the K-12 to slice the hinges of the heavy steel door
I help Jack slide from its jamb, and lay flat on the ground.

The officers are already inside,
have heaved themselves through the thieves' entrance,
the busted window. The cherry of Tate's cigarette
appears before he does in the dark doorway,
nodding in the direction where Bearden--
Samantha, a friend I call Sam-- waits with the victim,
crooning to him *it's gonna be alright, champ,*
help is coming, help is here.

Entering the cavernous room,
I can smell it for the first time the way I always will
(here on out forever and forever amen)
the first few moments of each time the tones drop
in the middle of the night--
rancid meat, bone's charred powder,
fear in a bundle of thick-wristed copper wires.

I'm close enough to count

how many breaths Jack takes in a minute,
close enough that if I reached out
I would brush the thick material of his turnouts,
but not nearly close enough to say aloud
that sometimes it is good to fear what isn't seen,
or what isn't understood.

Shattered windows crunch beneath our boots
as we move slowly forward, slicing the tight beams
of our LED flashlights
through thin layers of smoke and the voltaic dark
where first human-- then robot-- arms once stamped
lids onto one-gallon cans streaming by
on black conveyor belts.

Sweat is a cold layer of rubber coating my body.
I hear a whine like the yipping of a trapped coyote
and think an animal has made this place its home.
But then I realize in the center of the room, a substation,
inside it, whoever is stuck, still alive. Crying.

Sam, talking softly where she points her flashlight,
then turns to us. *Thirty minutes,* she says.
Thirty minutes electricity has been churning through him,
leaving a blackened trail like wildfire behind it.

Sam tells us do something, *please...*
then goes outside and props herself by one arm against a light pole,
pukes in the rain as Tate wicks another cigarette
into his lungs and pats her back, chuckling,
as he goes over the digital pictures he took for evidence.

The substation is boxed in sheetmetal
and an insulated column rises from it like a chimney to the ceiling.
I can see the panel which has been removed
at chest height and placed on the concrete floor.
The neon warning, stencilled on it in blue spray-paint:

DO NOT TOUCH!
ENERGIZED, MARCH 2010

Jack says relax, it's too late, his insides are blasted,
there's nothing we can do. Jack says go ahead and look,
go ahead, I've seen it all before.
Jack says...

But I don't feel whatever it is
that mutes the urgency in his blood so he can lean back
against a wall, one boot crossed over the other
waiting for the lucky guy who's next on the power company's OT list
to arrive and shut it off at the transformer,
then go home and back to bed.

Inching up to the opening,
I see the back of his head and the silver chain
which has blackened and sunk into his neck's flesh.
I can tell he is still alive by his moans
and by the hum of voltage and by the way smoke dances
above his body, naked and fetal.
His clothes have burnt away to only his collar and a thin strip
of denim around his waist.
As he climbed inside
he must have brushed the copper cable thick as my wrist
elbowing down from the shutoff switch,
that, without any room to get away, must have held him down
against the concrete floor, against the sheetmetal walls,
making him and the substation both part of the circuit
as it passed current through his body.

It's a blessing he's stopped moving.
Thank God, it's a blessing we're here to help.
It's a voiceover.
An act-out of a joke we don't laugh at,
and if we do it comes out bitter and mean

because I know we have done all that can be done
for a body that has been wracked by electricity--

how it enters and branches through
what is sixty percent water, cooking the blood and muscle
and bone as it arcs from cell to cell
until it blossoms out like a hollow-point round.

And what could we have done?
Not climb inside and pry him from the cable
with our fiberglass pike poles.
Not remove another panel because if he's leaning against one,
he's leaning against them all.

I feel burned out and hollow but can't look away.
It has been twenty minutes since he has moved,
at least fifty since being electrified.

There is not one, but two, exit holes.
Smoke ribbons from a hole in his stomach
and the blasted joint where his elbow should be.
His eyes drip from their pinched lids like egg white
and belly fat has melted and run in stringy
yellow-brown columns to the floor.

Then I see his shoulders rise and fall.
Hear a low-throated moan that sounds like rip-starting a chainsaw
and know it can only be a death rattle.
And though I don't know how he is still alive,
Jack and I give him what we can.
We say *we're right here buddy*
we're doing everything we can buddy
what's your name
we're gonna get you out of here real soon
can you say anything buddy?

Hard to accept that even when what you say is true

what they hear is the lie your heart hides behind.
Hard to accept when his breathing finally stops
and the end looks like a second chance,
that this is how some of us go--
naked, and black with boiled blood
while those supposed to save us only stand by,
always waiting for someone else.

What else can I do but look at the place
where the leather of my left glove has come unravelled
from hefting the axe too many times this year.
What can I do but fix my eyes on the unravelling seam
I swear to god I'll fix tomorrow,
though whether it will actually hold I can't say.
A lyric from a song ruins its way
through my head and I take my place next to Jack,
help him hold the wall up.
I ask him if he's heard the one about the methhead
who breaks into an abandoned paint factory.
He says yeah, but tell it to me again.