

John Blair

Burning

All things, O you priests, are burning.
Ādittapariyāya Sutta (The Fire Sermon)

We watch the smoke that sniffs its way
through this ever-burning world
dogged as a hound because where
there's us we know there's fire.

It smells of moles and turtles
and fallen angels (every last one
charred & then forgotten)
& grinds itself against the thin-
skinned groves through which
our wasting wanders.

Like smudge pots chuffing throaty
catarrh or like engines as they burn
old lucre into smog it coats
the world like smokers' lungs
with compromise.

We turn away from what we can
our hands dark as char with taking
but all of life is burning
and the ash doesn't know or care
that it was oil or tree or any one of us.

Agni (the hidden fire kindled inside
the insensate womb of matter) was freed
by Matarisvan breath of the world
so as to comfort and consume us all
from beginning to risen end.

So we take the flint (devoted
as we are to the fires) that begot
that first freed flame & hold it
on our tongues like the sacred host it is
(*behold the lamb of God*) so that we
can taste dead suns.

Day by day we feed the flames
flesh and bones and heartwood & wait
for the heavens to break the earth
into sizzle and lament because
only then will the smoke decline at last
to mist.

And the mist will shimmer dewy
with grief on the backs of carrion birds
heavy on their branches who will
neither notice its touch nor care
unstirred as the leaves that blaze
without ambition in the autumn trees.