

**Eric Howard**

**In the Shadows of the Atoms**

Not because I have given you every herb bearing seed, and every tree, the bristlecone and July gold, the many-flowered navarretia,

but because you have forgotten your goodbyes to the yellow-legged frog of the southern mountain and the evening primrose of the Antioch Dunes,

you will fly away with the marbled murrelet and great gray owl, and no limestone salamander will grant a stay pending further review.

When the trees are dying one by one you will be awakened by dreams of being late.

Because the court had no notice that the jury's findings ignored the laws of physics, the government took the raisins.

Because the broken window and bullet holes found in the squad car were caused by the ricocheting bullets fired from the officers' own guns, the Delhi Sands flower-loving fly and Kern County sphinx moth are leaving, and you shall return to the atoms that are slowly spinning away,

casting spectral shadows like prison bars even on the stars and their right to remain as silent as desert road signs at night.

## Add Fire to the Names

I want to see through your eyes and take yesterday from you  
because tomorrow burns more than today, gone Gabriel,  
and less than lunchtime chugging Mad Dog 20/20 down  
behind the handball courts with you before fifth period,  
because fuck college, let's ditch Beryl (her forbidden name,  
what was her surname?) and that sleeping pill, the *Iliad*:  
"As obliterating fire lights up a vast forest"  
she'd cackle, cigarette hoarse, epic wattles fluttering  
around her semi-precious broaches. What little shits we were  
to a random English teacher whose loneliness we mocked.  
Honey topaz, she would say, flattered every time we asked.  
Remember the slides of her Arizona vacations?  
Gem and mineral shows, tables crowned with heavy sparkle.  
If only we could live in amethyst. The smell that day  
every living thing dreads, the sky a school of ashes. One  
fell into your palm after floating from Cuyamaca  
and you smiled. For once, for eternity, the mascarad  
orange sun did not look down on two queer boys like Beryl did.  
The roll call of AIDS was forever in the future. Fire  
is a last name now. The sky is a schoolteacher: What comes  
after Horns Mountain? Stubblefield? What color were the wheels  
of God's car? Ezekiel said *They sparkled like topaz*.  
Maybe all you've got to read after some random motel  
date in North Eden or Broke Creek is Gideon's. Thumbnail  
finds Deborah's song: *Blessed among women* is Shawna Lynn Jones,  
who liked to skateboard and play pool. The first female inmate  
to die, fighting the Malibu Fire. Ask sad schoolteachers,  
the mean kids, all the Crystals who strip in fracking boomtowns,  
what's Big Grassy's last name? Put it in the upper-right-hand  
corner and repeat after me: "I could have been Jones. I could have been the stone  
one hundred feet above her head. Fire's come to paradise."  
Tomorrow's hard as crystal, harder than the Bible. Say  
Big Grassy Fire, Goshute Cave Fire, Burro Fire, Topaz Fire.  
Only the glitter is random. Ten million years of heat  
like a tent spike hammered through your head is the prophecy.

## Mandylion

*The Mandylion was a piece of cloth bearing an image of the face of Jesus. It brought miraculous aid in the defense of Edessa against the Persians in 544.*

It says in History of the Wars they believed their city would never be conquered as long as the Mandylion was within its walls. (Their city was conquered, and the cloth went to Constantinople, which also fell, then Paris, where it disappeared in the revolution.) As long as they waved white flags the cavalry would not open fire; if they had just believed enough, corpses would not be sold for food. Who would think a lieutenant would tell a captain you best get back in that chopper and mind your own business? They must have dishonored their prophets. If they were righteous their population would not have needed to be reduced from 25 thousand to less than 25 (Common we still will be if one in every 10 thousand survives. So far, the dandelions have been patient with us.). As long as carbon is mocked we lose our city and our children. So long as blue butterflies are drawn to common wormwood—fill your pillow with it to stop nightmares—which grows above the graves of Kosovo, can a Mandylion save us?