

Lettrism

One evening he goes onto a rooftop where he can see over the entire city as it bathes in firelight. He stays up there for hours to watch the spectacle, enjoying the crisp air. He will later remember the wind buffeting his face, feeling the rush of standing defiantly above the people running and screaming below him. Then he hears distant sirens rushing towards the blaze and feels his heart quicken, so he decides that he was no longer safe, and flees into the night.

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Years ago, he had been standing watch in the sand of a place he didn't know the name of, wearing army fatigues and wielding a rifle. He had gazed out into the darkness, and felt the boredom creeping into him, a numbing itch that assaulted his entire body. It was there he had heard those loud thuds in the distance, those bass drum rolls that reverberated through the landscape, tearing up the ground and sending balls of flame into the sky. When he had finished his watch, he mentioned them to a friend, who said, "Night echoes, man. You heard the night echoes."

Later he would return to the camp from a patrol in time to see the night echoes come there too, detonating on his tent and on the mess hall and on his friends before moving away in a diminuendo of death and suffering. He left those foreign sands the next day.

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Get away from the fire, ma'am!

No!, she shrieked, and tore through the crowd milling around the flames. Panting, she ran into the building. She cried out for her family, somewhere in the smoke that choked her lungs, but before she could hear a reply, a pair of strong hands yanked her out. Weeping, she tried to escape the fierce grip, but instead collapsed on the soot-stained ground, shaking uncontrollably.

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Years later, he stood on the altar, saying his wedding vows but not hearing them. They were married and he was happy, but his wife worried about him, complaining that he thrashed around in his sleep. She said that he should see a psychiatrist for help, but he would ignore her. It was nothing, he would say. Don't worry. I love you.

One night the nightmares visited him again, and he screamed, running from the invisible creature that stalked him in the night, turning around only to find that nothing was there. Then his wife appeared, crying for help, and he embraced her, telling her that he would never let her go, saying I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you until breath escaped him. She cried and squirmed, pleading for him to release her, but he only gripped her tighter, squeezing her body against his. She was his wife, and not even the death in his dreams would part them.

When he woke up, he found her body lifeless in his arms, suffocated. He called the ambulance, frantically praying that *this* was the nightmare, but when he saw that a police car had come instead, he hid in the attic until they had gone, after which he got into his car and drove and drove and drove, and when his petrol ran out he began to run.

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- *reports from officials state widespread destruction in the centre of the* –
- *emergency forces in the area are struggling to evacuate everyone in a sixteen block radius* –
- *the death count has just climbed above one hundred...* –

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The service station was ugly and weatherworn. Its paint was peeling in the dry sun. Largely forgotten, it had only a few customers and not one was regular. Rust crept across the metal water tanks as the weeks passed, but he still chose to work there, minding the till, waiting out his time.

As he sat behind the counter, he stared out through the window, where a lone tree stood in the desert plains. Surrounded only by low shrubbery, it looked imposing, but as he came to realise over the weeks, it was slowly dying, the drought draining it of life. He could not help but feel a sinking pang when he thought of it.

Excuse me.

Broken out of his reverie, he turned and faced the young man at the other end of the counter.

Just this, the customer said, passing over a bottle of water. After he had paid and left, the man glanced out at the tree again. Sighing, he stood up.

Dragging the heavy hose that connected to the water tanks was hard work, but he didn't mind. Gasping for breath, he deposited the mouth of the hose at the base of the tree, before striding back towards the tanks and opening the valve.

As water rushed to the grateful tree, soaking the dry roots, the man swore he could hear it singing.

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Are you all right? The little boy didn't respond.

Hey, the policeman said. Are you ok?

The boy said nothing, but turned to watch as two fire engines sped past them. The blue and red flashes of light illuminated his face, and the policeman saw an enormous burn scarring the boy's left cheek. Swearing, the man glanced around before turning back to him.

Where's your family, he urged. Where?

In there, the little boy murmured, and with dread, the policeman looked where the boy was pointing to see a building in ashes.

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Of course, it was only a matter of time before he was found, so when a police car cruised past the service station where he worked, he yet again took flight. Eventually, he found a city to hide in.

Without money, he was forced to live on the streets, begging by day. He came to hate the looks that people gave him, expressions of deepest disgust and condescension. Only several people ever bothered even to reach into their pockets, let alone toss him a coin. By night, as he sat by the fires he built, the echoes returned.

Dirty and tired, looking into the fire gave him strength. The tongues of flames whipped in the wind, a shining seraph in the darkness. It shielded him from the night echoes, absorbed his mind in its glaring warmth. It became his saviour.

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*Do you know what caused the fire?
One of the firefighters said it was arson.
Wait – arson? You're not serious, are you?
That's what he said.
...Christ.*

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So when the echoes assaulted him fiercely one night, haunting him to the verge of insanity, he hurled his metal drum of fire through a shop window, ignoring the scalding pain of his hands, and watched as the flames consumed the building. It became a blistering torch, and as it spread, he never felt more at peace.

The heat became too much, so he moved back, letting the blaze take the next building, and the next, until it had overridden an entire block. The firemen were too late. By the time they arrived, they couldn't control it, but that only made him all the happier. So he chose to climb onto a nearby roof and stand above the destruction that reigned below.

As the fire lit the sky, he smiled, and thought of the flames, and how they drove back the madness and the pain, and allowing owed him to think and to breathe with a peace that he had never known, releasing him into a world of life and strength as it flooded through him setting alight his nerves as it purged his anger and hate and letting only the pure energy remain in the heart and the soul of the lost man, the man who didn't know where he was or even who he was, but knew that at that moment that he was free, and that was all that mattered.

James Hogan, 10H