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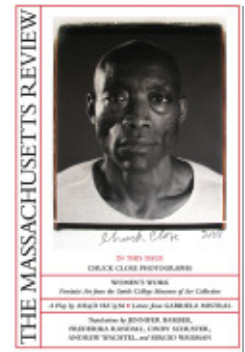
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Burnt Orange

IT WAS HOT, the night we burned Orange. Charlie held my hand as I stuck the flamethrower into the windows, and he recorded the screams. Above, helicopters equipped with military-grade sonar blasted stragglers with tightly focused beams of bone-destroying sound. Charlie's and my own soundtrack was Haydn, the Sun quartets, tight in our headphones. The Haydn set my hands to work, and Charlie's, spraying the flame-retardant now, and then the hallucinogens.

A man, burned over all of his body, now saw our God, the Mushroom God, and Charlie whispered into his ear while I photographed the burnt kitchen: Mexican tile floor covered in fine ash, and the 1960s-era avocado stove boasting a torched cat, melting into the grille, like a strange piece of modern art.

When I was seventeen Charlie had shown me the logic of the Tribe's choice of hallucinogen, and its African terror, holding me naked as I tripped balls with the synthetic mushroom on my tongue, and I remembered.

I remembered the Baobab and I remembered the Sun, like Haydn, torching my village . . .

"You've achieved a new level of consciousness," Charlie whispered to the burned, dying man, and I couldn't help but laugh, at the man's terror-stricken eyes and Charlie's slow grin.

Outside, as night fell over suburbia, other teams were moving in force into the fabled Last Gated Community of America. Where Your Children Can Live Safely.

I dragged Charlie back into the street and then we both held on to the flamethrower again, and I remembered the feel of the African sun, ancestrally, as we lit the house up in earnest.

It's easy to thrum low in the long night when you have the right mushroom, the right friend, the right equipment. The politics stop mattering and it's all about the experience, you become a connoisseur, of our managed death machines, and the screams of the natives, and the cries of the crows, moving in refined counterpoints, arpeggios of meat, gristle, and bone, crackling fires — almost like a John Cage piece, really. My musical education is mostly wasted now, but not during nights that we burn.

I LIVE IN A COMMUNITY almost identical to Orange; it even has a gate, one that no longer works. We wrecked it when we moved in. Salvaged our little piece of the old American Dream.

Sometimes Charlie still wants a woman, and gives one of my hot chocolate packets to Ruth down by the old manager's office of the compound. Those nights I wave goodbye and walk under our nuclear sunsets, the best sunsets Earth has ever witnessed, 1970s Pasadena on crack cocaine, the color of them — I don't even need a facemask. I was born to breathe this air.

It's contrapuntal, the dead river, and the living concrete, along my walk, through the dry estuary, through the pigeon colony, one rhythm and aesthetic flowing effortlessly into another. Nights like this I don't need any drugs at all, I just need the light.

We're building our own Watts Towers, made out of old Fords. Charlie's teaching me how to heat the car doors in just the right way so you can pucker the surfaces to look like human faces.

I sit under the bridge and then I see the girl Charlie likes, little Annabelle. I think she's fourteen or something but she looks older.

"Hey, I thought he was with you."

"He said to take this," she says, holding out a little synthetic mushroom. Shaped like a diamond.

"Charlie said?"

She nods. "Give me half of it, huh?"

I kneel down onto the blasted tarmac and stretch my faded shirt onto the black surface of the old bike bath, and the girl presses her thumbnail delicately against the crystal, slowly cutting it in two. She pops her half into her mouth, and then slips mine between my lips. I chew it and then swallow because I like the chemical aftertaste.

This part of California used to be very religious; Orange boasted two churches for every city block. God was always chemical but now He's Come Back For Good. Or so Charlie likes to joke.

Me, I just like the colors.

Orange floods the last light and it's the most beautiful symphony I ever saw, and I hold Annabelle's hand, just to have something to do, as the nuclear daylight floods over our hot bodies, tricked out with our metal headgear and curling tattoos, sons and daughters of the American night.