

The Cooler
by Eric Cecil

Nothing could extinguish the fire in the cooler, so we just watched it burn. Stark yellows and reds, offset by the cerulean walls, jumped and tangled upward, tickling the ductwork above. The fans whirred unabated. We looked on as they pulled in gasps of black smoke, stared silently as the fire consumed plastic barrels, boxes, ten and twenty pound bags of feed, gallon drums of drink. The smell was chemical and impersonal, just as the cooler had always been. But the fire had danced a liveliness into its confines.

It was hard to say how it started. Why it had worked so quickly. But of greater concern was the fight between the smoke and fans. It seemed endless, interminable, the exhaust pulling the smoke like so much hair, the fire yielding it with determined violence. I began laughing when Sharon rolled a bucket of dough into its middle, tears blurring the periphery as I watched the heat fold the bucket, which surrendered its dough in the shape of an arcane puddle: the floor and the fire griddling it all into boils, abscesses, suppurating wounds of burnt pastry.

Eventually, one of us spoke: We should really put this thing out.

Yeah, said the other. But we can't.

It didn't matter who said what. All that mattered was the life of the fire. Its pathway, however unnatural in the brittle air of the cooler, needed to see itself through. All the way through. If that meant that deli, the supermarket, the block, the town, so be it. As we stood there, keeping guard, I knew we both felt the same way. Then one of us began laughing again. It was Sharon.

It's taking, she said between breaths, it's taking everything we made last week.

Good, I said.

The fire didn't say anything. It just grew its smoke like hair. And the fan ate the hair, and I ate Sharon's laughter. And she, in turn, ate mine.