

MARCUS WICKER

**The Message, or Public Service Announcement Trailing
a Meth Lab Explosion**

The edge I'm at is eleven feet high and safer than
the dirt lot below, where shattered glass doubles

as ground. Three rusted-out pickup trucks
have been outfitted with yellow steel boots

and stuffed with flames, igniting steady gusts
of ammonia—bodily and actual—a smell

inextricably related to the tear ducts that also
combusted here, and why I'm standing atop

a single-wide eyeing punched-in mobile home
darkness. I'm thinking

about Grandmaster Flash. "The Message":
an open row of a freshly set chessboard, bleak

beneath a pink, umbrella-donned table. And
the two rats, fat as badgers, schlepping around

a dog's charred carcass is the move I will make
to hurt you. It's 3 AM. I just pulled off a Nowhere,

Indiana road to watch a trailer park smoke. A fist
of ash like nail polish scorched with salt blasts

me to my knees. Everything disintegrates
from this angle. Bit by bit. Like blacktop

sweating off layers in sun. Like police tape
singed with flame. From this point of view

soot cloaks stars. Even a white, grinning moon
finds its cheekbones eliminated here. I'm talking

about real lives and white rock rubble. Eyelids,
pocked with reddening cinder. Noses, eroded

and raw. I'm wondering if a face on fire
looks the same in any city. In any hue.

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A phone rings an answering machine awake.
The trailing silence harkens to a boarded-up

project building. And in one great big empty
alleyway after another, people are boxed in

or burning up. Vanishing into thin air. Here
I am again, sketch pad in hand, glued to this spot

watching smoke stifle everything—white
and black chess pieces melting in slow mo.