

Flammable Matter

Jacob Victorine

For Kyi, Malachi, Zarmina,
and too many others

Contents

Set Fire to Yourself or Don't	5
Flammable Matter	6
Morocco	7
Sherab Tsedor	8
Everywhere People Move into Darkness— Alleyways That Run Arms Between Them	9
It's Like There's Ash Everywhere	10
Undressing the Wound	11
The Only Brave People Are Medical Professionals	12
The Mind Is Hardwired for Narrative	13
Tsering Kyi	14
Examine the Vertebrae	15
He Undertook the Practice of Giving by Abandoning His Body	16
Waist Deep	17
Giving It Publicity Just Inspires Copycats	18
Everything I See Says Fire	19
Two Lines of Prayer	20
Malachi Ritscher	21
The Crowds Are Saying	22
Sita Enters the Fires of Vietnam	23
This Goes Beyond Turning the Other Cheek	24
The Helicopter Concerto Makes One Sound	25
People Who Soak Themselves in Petrol Are Not Martyrs	32
I Know Why My Father Says Spontaneous Combustion	33
We Were the Ones Who Told Her to Write	34
Operators at Crematoriums Heat Corpses to 1,750 Degrees	35
He Tried Washing It From His Clothes	36
Zarina	37

They Hold Their Prayer Beads in Their Right Hand— Every Tibetan Knows to Hold Them in Their Left	38
The Dalai Lama Will Not Speak	39
I Wouldn't Be Surprised if Most of These People Are Coerced	40
Conjuring	41
Announcement	42
There Were a Lot of Suicides That Year	43
Richard Pryor	44
Respect for Fire Is a Respect That's Been Taught	45
Gail Victorine	46
Here Is the Raw Material	47
Of Course, It's Not Easy	48
Secondhand	49
Sarah	50
The Image Combusting	51
Hu Jintao	52
Thousands Gather to Pray	53
The Body Underground Is the Same Reaction as Paper When It Burns	54
Notes	55
Charities	60
Acknowledgements	61

This is what my body teaches me: first of all, be wary of names; they are nothing but social tools, rigid concepts, little cages of meaning assigned, as you know, to keep us from getting mixed up with each other...

—Hélène Cixous

: Set fire to yourself or don't. Either way, nobody will remember your cause twenty-four hours later. All they'll remember is thinking, *Strange that his hair didn't burn off first.*

: I think I can say with certainty: *Yes, the world is listening.*

Flammable Matter

I pluck their ripe names.
Hold them on my tongue til they redden.

How many fires can I fit in my mouth
before I burn, too?

Last week my father told me
spontaneous combustion.

*A body's bones can become
sets of stones rubbing against each other in sparks.*

I didn't believe him.

Is this how reporters feel?

I don't know what a man on fire looks like
sprinting down the street or standing calmly

as his t-shirt melts with skin.

Richard Pryor once set himself ablaze
freebasing cocaine and drinking 151-proof rum.

Dressed in a bright red suit
in front of a microphone and an audience of thousands

he lit a match inches from his face
bounced it back and forth, and joked:

What's that? Richard Pryor running down the street.

Morocco

All I see is cheap horror flick:
the camera's shaky frame bordered by screams

until they burst—buckshot from the lens.
Streams of colored shirts

scattered men and women
who have struggled to find work. And there—

a wisp of light in the screen's corner.
An old garbage can set ablaze? No.

A man dancing through a six-foot flame
his head and limbs flailing against the authorities

who douse him in darkness. The camera cuts
to the man silhouetted by a white wall.

Shirtless and dazed, flanks of skin fall
from his face and body. Congealed blood

dangles in thin strips of leather as he raises his arm.
The crowd's muffled blare.

Sherab Tshedor

He put a statement on Facebook. Carried a Tibetan flag he forgot to wave. A lighter. Press releases. A bottle of paint thinner. There will always be scars, of course. He still has dressings on one leg. Not until the hospital. He doesn't remember shouting as they flew through him. The police know he has protested in Delhi's diplomatic quarter before. The Chinese embassy where he got off the bus. *I was sure he would understand.* His father, a refugee at four. *Sorry for all my mistakes.* He turned off his phone. *If only I lit more than my legs.* Had time to pour the thinner. Brothers and sisters burned awake with the world's attention. Because he is still alive it was a failure. *I've seen the news.*

**Everywhere People Move into Darkness—
Alleyways That Run Arms Between Them**

Bruno received a package including a will,
keys, and instructions on what should be done.

All evidence pointed to the body being his friend.

He hasn't shown up, said Malachi's sister

but police were still confirming dental records—
his car found nearby.

Bruno began making calls:

the jazz locals were certain
it was the man best known for documenting

Paul Rutherford, Gold Sparkle, Isotope 217:
those were other people's bands.

Malachi was fiercely modest—
for at least the last decade he was an empty bottle

with a familiar face.

An eyewitness said turning vehicles didn't stop
to watch a man become voltage on the highway.

The *Sun-Times* once tried to do a piece
but he declined

saying he wanted to write his own obituary.

In Chicago, Malachi is not a crown or a halo

but a small item set on fire
during rush hour Friday morning.

It's Like There's Ash Everywhere

Not the way you think, but when you walk outside
you can feel its fingers tap your lungs.

My parents tell me they used the building
for triage, but it looks the same.

All the little old women wear surgical masks
in the street, and we wonder why

men with bleating wands
move mute throughout our classrooms.

I'm just happy to be back from Brooklyn.
Basketball season has started. Sometimes I cough

when we run suicides during practice.
No one talks about what happened

but I've heard some kids are in therapy
some kids saw the planes

and bodies
and think they're still falling.