



RIVER CITY FIRES

by
Derek Annis

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RIVER CITY FIRES

DEREK ANNIS

In this stunning collection, Derek Annis travels through surreal geographies that are equal parts terrestrial and intimate.

"River City Fires is beautiful, elemental, and oracular... These poems will haunt you with the most gorgeous aching."

—Traci Brimhall, author of *our lady of the ruins*

Derek Annis (they/he) is a neurodivergent poet from the Inland Northwest. He is the author of *Neighborhood of Gray Houses* (Lost Horse Press) and an editor for *Lynx House Press*. Their poems have appeared in *The Account*, *Colorado Review*, *Epiphany*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Missouri Review Online*, *Spillway*, *Third Coast*, and many other journals.





LETTER TO THE READER

Dear Readers,

River City Fires takes place in the city where I was born and raised, and where I still live today. It's a city of contradictions. Of skyscrapers rising out of pine forest. A city with neighborhoods of million-dollar homes butting up against slums. An urban blue dot lost on a rural red sea. A city that took its name from the tribe it displaced, and which is now the sixth whitest city in the United States.

Spokane, Washington is home to the Spokane Falls, which is the largest urban waterfall in the United States. It runs through the heart of downtown and has earned Spokane the nickname "River City." It's a spectacular sight, especially in early spring when snowmelt from the surrounding mountains flows through. The river was once an important source of salmon for the people of the Spokane Tribe, who lived along its banks before my ancestors stole their land and forced them onto reservations. Now, the river is home to six thriving hydroelectric dams, which provide ever-increasing profits to Avista Utilities. There are no salmon.

Much of my childhood in Spokane was spent exploring the forests on the outskirts of town with my neighborhood friends. Largely unsupervised, we rode bikes and built treehouses. We caught snakes and swam in the river. Later, when large portions of the forest were bulldozed to make way for housing developments, we played in the active construction sites. We climbed scrap piles and got nails stuck in our feet. We built bike ramps from scrap wood and made rope swings from lengths of hose. We tried to sabotage construction vehicles by filling the gas tanks with rocks. The construction continued.

When I was fourteen, I ran away from home for the first time. I wanted to escape the trauma of my upbringing in the Catholic Church. I wanted to escape my grandparents, who had adopted me and raised me as their son, and whose parenting style was typical for people of their generation: equal parts loving and controlling, supportive and critical, nurturing and oppressive. In stark contrast to my childhood playing in the forest, I spent most of my adolescence living on the streets in downtown Spokane. I begged for change and got drunk under bridges. I sold drugs and ate food from dumpsters. I was cold and scared and free. In addition to escaping, I also accumulated more trauma. After years of heavy drug use and on-and-off homelessness, I got my GED and enrolled in college.



LETTER TO THE READER

Today, I live in a cozy little house in a quiet neighborhood. I have a loving relationship with my spouse and our two children. I have an advanced degree, and I work for the same Community College system where I first enrolled in classes years ago. In the summers, I explore the remaining forests of Spokane on my bike. I hike and camp with my family. For a few weeks each year, summer gives way to wildfire season. Smoke chokes the sun out and forces us indoors. This is a new phenomenon of the past decade or so. A result of ever-accelerating climate change.

Living in the same city for a lifetime has been a strange experience. I've been many different people in this space. Every area of town, every landmark, has multiple contradictory memories and emotions attached to it. The absurd and surreal poems in *River City Fires* attempt to inhabit those contradictions. The poems contain no facts. The story told by the poems is true.

— Derek Annis



ADVANCED PRAISE



"To make of bewilderment itself a world serviceable enough to live in—to imagine a way through: this seems the chief imperative of *River City Fires*, whose astonishing poems hover around fires both actual and metaphorical in a landscape/riverscape/forestscape both recognizable and surreal. These are poems whose meanings I can't always parse—and I don't feel I'm supposed to; instead, they seem like slant confessions, not of trauma, but from trauma; they articulate the triumph of survival, they fragment what's whole and, instead of restoring it, reimagine the possibilities for wholeness. 'Blessed are the burned. The blistered/inherit the earth.' A terrific collection."

—Carl Phillips, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry

"*River City Fires* is beautiful, elemental, and oracular. It's as steeped in threat as any fable or holy book, and the darkness is forever manifesting into fears and friends. Like the book of Proverbs armed with a rifle, every poem transforms themselves at each line break's dire revelations. Surreal and archetypal, this city and its fires speak (as many fires do) to god, asking 'make death/turn away.' These poems will haunt you with the most gorgeous aching."

—Traci Brimhall, author of *our lady of the ruins*





EXCERPTS

MANIFEST

The fathers forced open the mouth of the forest, made it shout a city across the valley. An orchestra of sparks and shining steel frightened the sky, which waited for nightfall and snuck to the hills. Great storms of birds flew into the fields reflected on picture windows, clapped against the asphalt with bone-pierced throats. The people of the city took up shovels, went back to the forest and extracted a wealth of symbols, which they organized according to brightness. The symbols were cold. For fear of the dark, the city kept its eyes open at all times. The dark receded into the trees. The orchestra played through the night.

INDEPENDENCE DAY

The dog lies in cool grass
and chews her scrap of hide.
Fireworks shimmer
your fingers away
forever. Watch them
squirm in the dirt like worms
regurgitated from a robin's
eye socket. A sky
red as your childhood
lake, descends like autumn's
last apple; the sound of gravity
stuck in its own raw throat.
Your head swells like seared
corn seed. The dog hacks up
her scrap of hide, snaps
her braided tail like a whip.
From atop their towers of salt
blonde children sing
bullets into existence. Pay the fee
or suffer a season of embers.
You're in god's mouth now.

DESCENT

I'm on a fully booked flight from Texas to Earth. The passenger next to me, a priest with crucifix burns on his face, was hired by the airline to maintain the safety of the plane through the power of prayer. He separates woodpeckers from their wings and discards the latter into the aisle. His carry-on is full of woodpeckers. The pile of wings is knee-high. I ask him to stop, as the woodpecker dander aggravates my hanging eardrum, which is already swollen with altitude. Undeterred, he draws a red pentagram on the air between us, mumbles a catholic spell in Latin, and continues his work. My hanging eardrum, instantly healed, turns white as a baby's bones. In a fit of turbulence, the plane shakes free of its wings, born again as a bomb.



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