


World on Fire



Charles Bernstein



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024

World on Fire



Charles Bernstein

Nomados
Vancouver

2004

ISBN 0-9731521-9-2

World on Fire copyright © 2004 Charles Bernstein.

Cover image, copyright © 2004 Susan Bee. The painting by Susan Bee is *Escape* (12" X 10", 1982, oil on linen).

Nomados Literary Publishers

P.O. Box 4031

349 West Georgia Street

Vancouver, B.C. CANADA V6B 3Z4

nomadosnomados@yahoo.com

Didn't We

Inch by inch, the paths breaking
into patches of blue and green

then black and brown, then
over the pass to the top of the

remotest interior, accustomed as
we are to torrential indifference

and beatific familiarity. "Look
up in the sky" – another ad for

vinyl tubing, pillow talk of
Whosits & Whatsits of Nob &

Kebob, Insley & Ufragious,
Ackabag & Boodalip. Bump right

along, pondering your song, while
roasting toast or grinding sand

or polishing the fabric softener
that stands between you and your

self. It was in 1943 and then again
one more time. Beat bird without a

feather to call its own, a miser who
lives on a pile of mylar, the studio

with the view of the studio, my
electric blinker maker, strapped

in for take off. NO FLOATING
ALLOWED. As quiet as

the steps to indelible vanishing.

The Folks Who Live on the Hill

It's still the same old lorry.

Astronaut
meets Mini-Me in a test tube in Rome,
Regis spurns Veronica, Merv buys casino,
goes to another season, but in the
previous year.

The crab cakes were never
as fresh again but it continued to
pour even after the flood expired.

Anyhow, spoilage is never as bad
as outright chicanery.

Follow the
rules then go straight to the linen closet
for folding.

For example, the cedar
chest on Pine street, or the thumb wrestle of
a misplaced mid-afternoon, competi-
tively anchored in java applets for
the price of a used backhoe.

Hey!

What's the
use in a clothespin when you haven't got
even the idea of a line?

“And Darby
and Joe, who used to be Jack and Jill ...”

One More for the Road

Like comedy never strikes the same place
More than a couple of times unless you
Change costumes and dance with me, dance

Till the furniture turns to props and
All the mops are a chorus of never
Before heard improbabilities, honeyed alibis

For working too hard, mowing the Astroturf,
Cranking the permafrost, watering the microprocessors
On the kids' conveyor belts. *The bird never*

Flies as high as an old-fashioned kick
In the carbonization. – They gave me till
Friday to let them know if the job would

Ever be complete. We're getting there, just
Fall a little further behind by day
And after dark it's a mule's paradise.

In a Restless World Like This Is

Not long ago, or maybe I dreamt it
Or made it up, or have suddenly lost
Track of its train in the hocus pocus
Of the dissolving days; no, if I bend
The turn around the corner, come at it
From all three sides at once, or bounce the ball
Against all manner of bleary-eyed fortune
Tellers – well, you can see for yourselves there's
Nothing up my sleeves, or notice even
Rocks occasionally break if enough
Pressure is applied. As far as you go
In one direction, all the further you'll
Have to go on before the way back has
Become totally indivisible.

Ghost of a Chance

The silent ending came as fast as the cold click of a Berreta. In those years, before the war, it was the custom. An entry point could always be found – a ways down the road, hidden by the side of a steel-gray tool shed, or in warehouses near the waterfront. The days always went like that. And if the money was in the wrong horse race at least it would be kept quiet, for a while. The perfume smell was all but unendurable, when the door opened and the room flooded with neon and ice-cold air. Behind the camera the men joked about the almost bitter coffee.

before going on to part four.

Rubber replacements
are available on the third consecutive level.

Gel

before warp speed.

Overcome fears of cloning
by using patent leather shoes.

Don't sail boat
without buckets of water.

And in the shank
of the evening, gather all available stems
but refute closure.

Stranger in Paradise

“Call them clamdiggers if you like, but I’d
Say her pants shrunk or she just got real tall
All of a sudden.” The bus came late, left

Early – when all our cares were theirs. Linger-
ing by the gate of another fly swat,
Possum fry, lateral dodge. “My balloon

Is stuck and I need someone to get it
Down.” As if the trees torched the sky and the
Boiler ran on lost facts. Depend upon

It, lest it depend on you, whom the sun
Has never touched nor the mist betrayed.
Turning tales into tokens the moment

The fire hydrant slides in safe at left
Field. Drunk with promiselessness, fat on tears.
Capris? Isn’t that when whimsy gets lucky?

Broken English

What are you fighting for? The men move

decisively toward the execution chamber.
Joey takes aim but muffles his fire.

Overhead, the crescent moon cracks
the unbroken sky. A moth beats its wings
against the closed door – intransigence its

only lore. *What are you fighting for?* The sirens

cry wolf to the obedient masses who sway,
hysterical, in synch to the boys
on the back streets and the ladies of mourning.

Brushing up fate pixel by pixel, burnishing
dusk: the sum of entropy and elevation.

Tony takes it in his intestine, the sharp
pain in his body like ripples
in a sand dune, his face exquisitely detached

from any sign of the sensation. *What are
you fighting for?* The market plunges, savings

slip away like a greased pig in a taffy
pull. Sometimes the easiest thing is just to stop
thinking about it. Then it can just think you.

Depending on the angle of incline and the rate

of decomposition. Wives to each other, husbanding
the fear that feeds upon itself and its prey.
Doesn't that count for something, even

in these pitched accommodations?

What are you fighting for?

What are you fighting for?

Lost in Drowned Bliss

“Things are what they are, but we are never what we are,” she said as she wrapped the sandwich in plastic and tucked away the tears in a flute.

“No it’s things. They hourly change before our eyes while we stay stuck in who we are and where we have been.”

“Things are solid; we stumble, unglue, recombine.”

“Or what we see is no more a part of us than the baby who beckons from the forest: we splinter in the void to catch the light, then hail the sparks as paradise.”

Sunset at Quaquaversal Point

Intends by onset to skip over busted rhymes

Like a snail coats its belly with preconscious
Worm-envy on a plate engaging its met mat,
The gnat her pinky ring. One sting more

And the wave goes on periverbal autodeterrent

Chin by the tension fanner, two for five-
Fifty, *lend me a lip retractor*. Gosh, I'm
Gonna have to get you later, for now

Hold that thoughtlessness one more beat.

At the end of the day the pegs left standing
Form an arc around the moat till the rooster
Comes home with the mocking birds. Then

Fill the balloons with ludic runes and I will

Take her with mine left and lose her with mine
Right. Focus, then bend, the bear to the north
Wind, with sullen yet courageous élan. Surcease

Surcease – with a sneeze & a pleat & a pike, a

Spat & a spore, then no more. It's over &
Over & then it's not, as long as you never –
Well sometimes endeavor – as long as you

Never, as long as ever, say never nor ever again

Again.

A Flame in Your Heart

As slow as Methuselah and as old as

molasses, time passes but nobody ever
does anything about it – the soda water

at the club on Tuesday so much more fishy

than it used to be and the giant marmoset
in the bedroom wants more cookies and milk

before fading into memory's skipped disk.

Once you came to me in a shadow
and I don't know how to count the years

since, since counting is just the thing I

am learning not to do. Your bracelet
adorns your wrist like a knight in ardor

crying for a key to the tumbledown cabin

on the dunes. A bonnet repairs what
the billy-goat embargos – ocean of this

close and then again, until all the folds

are rounded into the bend. And we meet,
like actors in a made-for-TV mini-series,

at the end of a pier on a blind alley or

on a steamship or in a crowded piazza in
an unidentifiable Italian city that turns

out to be Bayonne. You're there in the final

scene and so am I but we don't recognize
each other because we've gone beyond

all that. Then the signal blasts with

unendurable music and we collapse into
the sound, into ourselves as make-believe

as any devout hugamug with a hankering

for infinite finitude: Just a walk down the street
of the imaginary enclosure that becomes real

when shared.

AVAILABLE TITLES BY CHARLES BERNSTEIN

The Sophist (rpt. Salt Publishing, 2004)

Let's Just Say (Chax Press, 2003)

A Conversation with David Antin (Granary Books, 2002)

Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984 (rpt. Northwestern
University Press, 2001)

With Strings (University of Chicago Press, 2001)

Republics of Reality: Poems 1975-1995 (Sun & Moon Press,
2000)

Disfrutes (rpt. Potes and Poets, 1999)

My Way: Speeches and Poems (University of Chicago Press,
1999)

Log Rhythms, with Susan Bee (Granary Books, 1998)

Islets/Irritations (rpt. Roof Books, 1992)

An audio recording of *World on Fire* is available at
[http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/
bernstein_kwh_9-25-03](http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/bernstein_kwh_9-25-03)

Charles Bernstein's home page is at epc.buffalo.edu



Of this edition of *World on Fire*, 26 copies have been lettered and signed by the author.

World on Fire looks at the possibilities for existence in a world where billboards fill the sky and household names rain down with torrential indifference; there is no escape from this “indelible vanishing.” The trick, Charles Bernstein shows us, is to meet the inferno with exhilarating wit and verve, humorous plays on familiar phrasing, and nifty substitutions (“It’s still the same old lorry”) as we fly our spaceships along the language tracks available to us, production/consumption’s conveyor belting our dreams of paradise. Comedy attending dark strata, refusing closure all the way, these poems are deadly serious. And linger.

