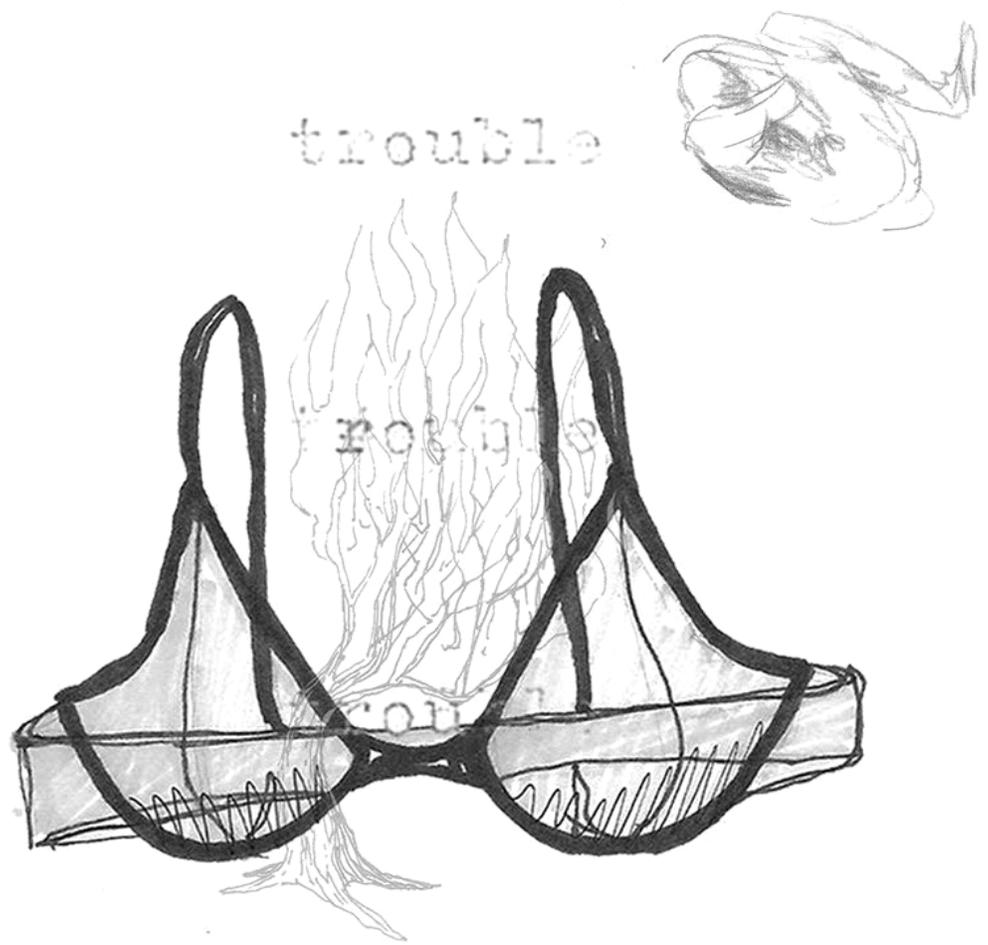


From Fierce Wounded Things:

BECOMING BURNING

By Eric Bennett



LILY VOWS, "THIS YEAR THE WINTER WILL NOT BREAK ME."

She buys full-spectrum light bulbs, and twists them into the fixtures. She buys chunky sweaters and woolen mittens. She stocks oversized cans of chili and packages of hot chocolate with little freeze dried marshmallows. She prays for heaven's floor to break and the summer sun to fall sooner rather than later.

Her mother phones saying words like "seasonal affective disorder" and "psychiatrist." Lily agrees, "Yes, mom. I've got wounds that won't heal."

But Lily is losing this war and the losing looks like this: Monday morning, faded rays through the window don't wake Lily. She sleeps through the snooze, through the staff meeting, through lunch hour, through customers thinking they're always right. Eventually, she wakes shivering.

Lily lounges in her bed sheets, imagining herself a sun. Who wouldn't want to be a luminary, controlling the oceans, the tides, time?

She wears three sweaters to the mailbox, her feet melting the snow. The barren trees black with birds heckling her. She puts a letter of resignation in the mailbox, lifts the little flag, and then goes back to bed. Something like sadness seeps into her bones, and she sobs.

Lily's unlatching her life, severing ties. Cable canceled, library fines paid, subscriptions stopped, last letters mailed, Lily is finishing – everything.

Quiet hands strike a match, lighting her last cigarette. Inhaling. Exhaling. She relaxes, contemplating the shrinking distance between the glowing ember and the comforter.

FIERCE WOUNDED THINGS: BECOMING BURNING

The bed ignites. And just before the fringe of her bathrobe blossoms orange, Lily is happy, she is warm.

Lily lays in the blaze, becoming a genuine burning bush. Only it's her.

Trying to interpret Lily's charred home to the firemen, the landlord uses dramatic gestures and widening eyes. The neighbors adored her for her tiny shoes neatly aligned at the edge of her welcome mat. It must have been an accident – not the tidy line of shoes, the fire.