

## FICTION

# Energy

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A stillborn electricity hung in the pressurized grey sky; it found its expression visually in the radiance of the bright orange leaves. The pressure system imbued the air with a crisp stillness that belied the unease it carved in Stanley's breast. His heart thumped in skippy unison with his long strides as if near-running in expectation towards some oncoming event, the certainty of which was not at all certain, but which amidst the electricity of the October afternoon sky seemed imminent. Pure red and naval orange leaves buzzed tenuously on shuddering branches which shook ominously, as if in fear of losing their contents, blurring each quivering leaf into a blur of autumnal intensity.

The day before had been balmy, as the hurricanes battering the southern edges of the continent had swept warm air to up the coast to the northern reaches of the landmass. A dewy mist obscured periodic gesticulations of sun; the warmth had flooded Stanley with eerie pangs of summer-lost. He had momentarily escaped the angst brought on by the pressure system; the system pounded tenderly at his sense of comfort and shook the leaves off their trees with its each gust of wind. What struck Stanley's nerves into a frenzy was the clarity with which the coming coldsnap propelled his attention unavoidably towards care for all the necessities required to survive winter. His cheeks glowed warmly, pressing up from his jowls, with the excited joy of fulfilling the challenge ahead.

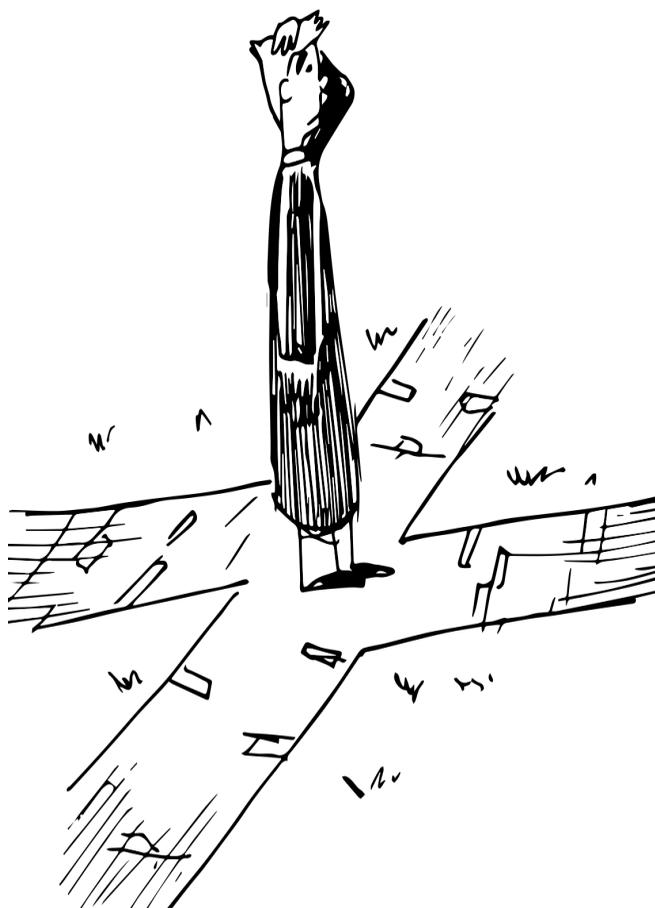
The challenge confined itself to the realm of labor—the harvest needed to be reaped; the early spring crop needed to be sowed, but not before the soil of the fallow quadrant had been turned over; a percentage of the late autumn harvest needed to be bundled for exchange and carefully discharged on the market; another percentage of the harvest needed to

be treated and packaged for storage and later consumption in the cold months; the four trees struck dead by lightning amidst that August's downpours needed to be felled and cut into firewood; his finances had to be calculated so that, in relation to the cost of his children's school tuition, he would know how much to charge for his grain on the market.

The sense of survival gripping Stanley blew the leaves around him, and ruffled his green wool coat as he strode determinedly away from his farm. The stone wall that his grandfather had laid disappeared slowly behind him with each passing step; the picket fence that his father had built dissipated into the distant eastern sky to his back as he strode westward. A dull orange sun melted into the tops of the trees ahead of him, struggling with the obscurant haze of the grey sky for prominence in the skyline. The anticipation of

the difficulty ahead pushed his cheeks joyfully into the squinty folds of his eyes and pulled his lips upward into a radiant smile. Blood surged through his veins and elevated his motion to a continuous sway of tingly looseness. His mind was enflamed by his sense of place and self, of his sense of the connection between the life within him and the life within the leaves falling from the trees about him. His eyes blurred with the heartfelt intensity of a life lived fully and his hips loosened reflexively with each stride as he separated himself from his farm.

His left hand held a bible and the book of hymnals and the journal in which he wrote sermons and took down his thoughts. The discourse he found most problematic was that which sought to separate the act of survival from the creative productivity and need to work with others that the sheer rawness of survival required. To Stanley, summer, so long as the air proved humid and the crop healthy, was to him the death of man's lifeblood. He had neither much energy to tend his plots nor to write; his sermons seemed whimsical and the yawns and wayward stares of members of his congregation on the hazy summer Sundays confirmed his sentiment that his actions lacked the vitality that they seemed to regain each fall. Rhetorically they were no different; spiritually, philosophically, they struck all the same chords. And on this account, and on account also of the fact that the heat itself could not be fully blamed for the disinterest of his parishioners, directed him to the conclusion toward the apparent relation between the conjuring of man's reaction to conquering the circumstances of survival on the one hand, and on the other, the conjuring of man's creative and philosophical capacity. In the summer months he fell into depressive fits; but as he was largely the clinician in town and that the Bible held no response to his doldrums besides work; that only the imminence of fall shook him from his psychological immobility, his temporary incapacity to farm or throw effort into his thinking or do anything but fake even a semblance of interest in the lives of his wife and children; it seemed more than apparent to him, af-



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# POETRY

## The Optimist

Brisk breezes expel late summer's oppressive air—  
God's change of spirit, I suppose. The days  
darken much sooner and lightened leaves of trees  
drift downward until they're met by fallen friends.

Bare birch branches reveal a single sparrow  
unfazed by the onset of winter's chill—his eyes  
fixed on the migrant flocks flying toward the light,  
chasing the comfort of God's eternal warmth.

No, not the sparrow, though. For he knows where  
to find the Lord's light even when it does not shine.

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## Old Pine

She stared at a pine tree long ago and heard  
him whisper tales of winter—a story that  
no one else was awake to see. The burdened boughs  
bent down to catch her ear—not able to hold  
the load that weighed on his hardened heart for years.

He remembered those who passed him by—the hunters  
the hunted—leaving footprints in the frost  
that formed the night before. The sun would rise  
and erase the trace of life on brittle ground,  
while wind broke the silence of the vacant woods.

Surrounded by those not fit to last, he finished  
his tale of winters past. The snow collapsed  
from atop the tree and needles fell amid  
the icy dust. The branches lifted—free—  
an exhale of relief that faded into stillness.

ter prolonged self-examination, that the threat  
of death threw his full energies into action,  
action of mind, of body, the attentiveness to  
need, summoned by need, overflowing into  
and energizing his faculties.

With his right hand he unlatched the  
locked door of his lean-to. Dropping his books  
on the desk, he struck a match and searched in  
the dark for the candle, which, within a bronze  
enclosure he suspended from the ceiling with  
a small fix of string. The candle blazed to life  
and illuminated the four walls of the space  
in which he felt most truly himself, and, in a  
way, still very much among others despite the  
solitude of his isolation. Within the walls of his  
congregation he did not feel the pulsing energy  
of what he deemed to be God; there seemed a  
dynamic interpersonal energy, a power, within  
the walls of the church, whose power he felt  
but which he did not believe, at its essence, to  
be a religiosity. That power seemed to him to  
be the essence of community, of people acting  
and speaking together. It was, on the other  
hand, within the walls of the lean-to, absorbing  
the fragrant warmth of the wood smoke,

his quill on the paper, his mind in the clouds  
yet intensely focused, that he felt the presence  
of what he could, in contrast to the highly  
mortal actuality of life at the congregation,  
describe as a spiritual experience.

The radiance of the problem shined  
brightest during harvest season when the de-  
mands of necessity ignited everyone's energies,  
filling them with lively angst. That the church  
community buzzed with the most livelihood  
on October and November Sabbaths—amidst  
the intensity of the harvest—and that the  
communal inclination of belonging had little  
chance to actualize itself beyond the literal  
act of convocation—and that the constructs  
of worship demanded the Sabbath be left to  
nothing at all beyond this literal convocation,  
bothered Stanley tremendously. Indeed, that  
he snuck away on the Sabbath to conduct his  
own exercises in thought stood out to him as  
not only sacrilegious but as a product of the  
boundless energy he possessed, mirrored in  
few of his fellows. What did it mean that he,  
believer par excellence, did not abide by the  
code of scripture, that he, leader of his flock,

seemed the only one possessed of the energy  
and ability to transform the excitement of im-  
minent death into the undeniable substance  
of achieved-life?

That he preached not the seedily-  
uncomfortable dimensions of this problem  
to his parishioners made him uneasy. He  
threw his pen down and stood suddenly  
from his desk—he licked his thumb and  
index finger and extinguished the candle  
above his head. He paced about the shack,  
exited the door and walked briskly through  
the wood to the pond. He lay by the bank,  
breathing long, deep breaths and attempt-  
ing to identify the variety of bird whose soft  
trill punctuated the cold, dewy autumn air.  
Another bird cawed sharply and gave sonic  
life to his unease. He fell asleep and woke  
at dawn, wiping the dew from his face as  
he rose and walked farmward to till his  
fallow plot. 

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