

## The Question of a Poem Called “Before the Fire on Church Street”

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When I first wrote the poem, it had no title. I had just attended my third and final poetry night at a cafe called “Java Monkey” in Decatur, Georgia. People would sign up to read poetry and stories, even sing or play instruments. I always signed up, reading some poem I had written a few weeks or days or hours earlier, and almost always instantly regretted it, realizing the stupidity and uselessness of my own writing in a moment of stark self-reflection best summed up by the mental utterance of the word “shit.” But they would always clap politely, and I got to hear such powerful rhythm and skill with the English language, the kind could only be spoken between the hours of nine p.m. and one-thirty a.m. Sunday night in a small cafe on Church Street.

A couple months later, it was burned to the ground. The man behind it, oddly, was no religious extremist, angry at our often derogatory, even heathenist opinions. He was not, as might make sense for Georgia, a white nationalist or homophobe angered by the gathering of such a diverse and outspoken group of people. No, it wasn’t the provocative things we said, or that spirit of unity that caused hate to lash out like a toddler with a knife. Instead, that night in November 2018, a disgruntled ex-employee appeared on the recovered footage behind the store, carrying what seemed to be a broom handle, and walking in the direction of a window later found broken. All the buildings on that block of Church Street touched one another, and as Java Monkey burned, several nearby buildings caught fire as well. But only the walls of the cafe, once covered in hand-drawn, original art, and the floors, stained with the coffee and tea drunk by our latest philosophers, were blackened and turned to ash.

For nine months, there was hope and a promise of repair. Then the owner finally gave up.

There aren’t any churches on Church Street. At least not any more. I wonder if we drove them off, or if they left to make room for us; sitting so loud, every Sunday night, half-inside, half-outside, preaching from the foot-high stage. But they’re gone now, and so are we. And the remnant, called Java Monkey Speaks, wanders like a nomadic tribe from coffee shop to coffee

shop; three hundred and sixty-five days may as well be forty years deserted, but still praying, every Sunday night. They haven't come back to Church Street since. And I haven't stopped working on the poem that I started that night, because it relies no small part on hope; And I think that I may never again have the hope I did before, when all the pent up anger, and all the power, and all the love in the universe lived Sunday night, once a week, in that tiny shop on Church Street. And I hope I can always live by what are now the last words I had written there, my final thoughts before the fire;

do not forget us,  
we, the fringe, unbidden people,  
hidden beneath the cracks  
living between the moments,  
breathing life.