

Lead

by Anna Kander

My world snapped like pencil lead, sliding from its wooden barrel during a must-pass test.

(probably, I push too hard)

The wood fell away, a useless shell. Left was a stub of graphite which I sheltered, cupping my hands and pressing them to the desk.

Panic.

A post-pencil apocalypse seemed a barren hellscape, littered with broken pencil sharpeners. There were no level surfaces—everything skewed.

The danger was acute. I imagined the sliver of silver rolling from the desk—falling—plummeting to an abyss of cracked floor tiles.

Bless the parentheses of my hands— until the test caught fire.

This wasn't a dream. This wasn't a drill.

Flames leapt from the instructions. Their white-orange tongues purpled, tasting potassium in the paper. As the desktop laminate grew hot and gluey, my answers blackened from edges to centers. They curled into ash.

I don't try to explain it anymore—the pencil snap or the fire. Some disasters have no predicting—and no avoiding.

Sometimes these things just happen.

After the fire, passion seized me. With more feeling for my puny, imperfect instrument than I'd ever expected, I plucked that sliver of graphite from the desk and held it

(softly)

between my forefinger and thumb.

I wrote with the nub and colored with the ash.

Everything became my canvas.

