

## THE FIRE ACADEMY

By Dana Roeser

I want to be a student  
    at the Fire Academy  
and not, as in  
    my dream last  
night, the gassing  
    practicum. Why  
did we all sit there,  
    obediently,  
in our detachable  
    desks, new carpet  
smell, gas seeping  
    in, in that  
sunken classroom,  
    instead of fleeing?  
It wasn't until the  
    very end that  
it occurred  
    to me to not  
wait for permission,  
    to go. To gather  
up the high school students  
    in the "gathering  
area" and whatever  
    *we* were, teachers  
in training—some  
    version of  
    grad students. One woman  
had already  
    escaped. She heard the  
lecture, she saw  
    the list, and she  
said, Excuse me,  
    uh, I just have to  
go do something.

Blue spruce.  
    Like a flash  
of fire. Very tall. I forgot  
    to look the  
one time I was  
    there since  
twenty-five years  
    ago, at the

side yard. There was  
so much  
to look at, my childhood  
house. Inhabited  
by a music professor—and  
his wife and  
the yipping schnauzers. He  
let me in! (His  
wife wasn't  
home!) He  
let me into the  
“elevator game”  
hallway back  
behind the  
kitchen, with its  
five doors.  
But not upstairs.  
Dreams take  
place all around  
there, even near  
the split rail  
fence (surely  
that's gone) near  
the spruce. A  
display of  
Christmas trees.  
We got them  
from the tree farm  
each year with a  
ball of dirt. Do they  
never die?

Here, there's a spruce  
tree back  
behind an  
abandoned  
furniture  
store—or is it not  
abandoned?  
I can't quite remember.  
I know more than  
half the retail “spaces”  
in that mall  
are empty—  
and there  
are cracks and  
exuberant  
bursts of weed in

the parking  
lots. Not universally. Just  
in places. My favorite  
is when a drive  
has been built,  
a feeder  
road to some  
prospective  
business, a “pain  
clinic,” a medical  
supply store,  
an advance-on-your-  
tax-return-  
loan-shark place,  
paved, organized,  
curved and then  
just stopped,  
cut off with  
a knife after  
five or twenty  
feet. Nix  
that project!  
I saw the fir  
tree, I mean the  
spruce,  
on a little slope  
leading down to  
a small ravine, cattails,  
a slope up the  
other side, separated by a  
chicken wire  
fence leading to  
nothing, leading  
to nature, trees.  
I was in  
the “loading area,”  
orange back  
doors  
for the mall  
stores. One  
lonely car. *Affair?*  
*Drug deal?*  
*Loading something?*  
The spruce  
was flaming  
though. Thriving. Screaming  
of Christmases  
past. I don’t think,

though, that some  
child and her  
father brought  
it out there  
one  
holiday-aftermath,  
in its ball  
of dirt.

The Fire  
Academy is  
the place for me. High  
school kids  
in the country,  
in lieu of  
“cosmetology” school,  
the Lafayette  
Beauty Academy,  
are training  
at the Fire Academy.  
And here  
they can practice  
on real fires,  
as the crews are  
all volunteer  
anyway. (If fire doesn’t  
suit them, they  
can become  
EMTs.)  
Where was  
it I lived  
that there was  
a special  
fire building  
on the  
outskirts  
of town, off  
of some four-lane  
semi-main-  
drag? Many of  
the places  
I have lived  
have been  
flyover standouts.  
A four-  
or five-story brick building  
sitting alone  
by the road

in some weeds. Used  
for staging  
fires, death,  
and destruction  
over and  
over, and the fire  
students would  
scramble  
up and down  
the faces the  
staircases  
looking for  
dummies, who  
were posing  
as smoke-stricken  
people or bodies.  
I used  
to look at that  
place. Death  
and destruction  
headquarters.  
Please let me  
not state  
the obvious: "If  
only it could  
be restricted to  
that, to that  
one building." The woman  
escaped, with  
a phony excuse,  
a lie. Shall I start  
with that? All the lies  
I hear all the time,  
every day. There are  
so many lies  
in the air, so much  
willful  
obfuscation, cheating,  
why bother  
looking for  
the breathable  
air? As a child, I loved  
people half-heartedly,  
already with a  
shield. Only  
person in the  
security tent  
was me. In the Fire

Academy  
all of that is  
burned off. You may  
not be able  
to be heard,  
but at least  
what interactions  
you have  
can be trusted  
to be genuine.  
Save me.  
Save him. Save her.  
Get the  
child. Get the cat.  
Crawl on your  
belly under the  
smoke. I can't  
breathe. I love  
you. I'm sorry.  
Something's  
strobing  
me, stroking me,  
basting me,  
some awful  
clean thing  
that'll strop  
me like  
a razor, right  
against  
my skin.