

Heat Value

“The heat value of a fuel is the amount of heat released during its combustion. Also referred to as energy or calorific value, heat value is a measure of a fuel's energy density, and is expressed in energy (joules) per specified amount (e.g. kilograms).”¹ – World Nuclear Association

Firewood (dry), 16 MJ/kg

The earth-worn light
a refraction
of worm-holed bark,
primal combustion
as mundane as time.
Mundane, from the Latin
-*mundus* or world. To be
of this world the root of
incandescent miracle,
woman and wood
a planetary match

Hard Black Coal (Australia & Canada), 25MJ/kg

The coal train tugs away at
the rusted strings of
retired pocketwatches.
Metal carved intricacies
of a timepiece that
followed the rudimentary
upheaval of sedimentary
heaven.

Who was to know that god
resided underground
if not the hand
that ticked
that gyrated
that germinated
that sprang back
and fell forward

¹ “Heat Values of Various Fuels - World Nuclear Association.”

until it's revolving parts
were the barrel of a revolver,
charcoal ensheathed in
a bullet train.

Petrol/gasoline, 44-46 MJ/kg

The girl child
spine-straight, arms akimbo tilts
the thumbprint of her chin upwards.
The knobs of her elbows
goose bump in the night, as she
experiences motion in stillness
on the back seat of her dad's ebike.
It is in the half-breath of a not fully
formed voice that the child looks
skyward—past 7-11 gas pumps,
and sighs, “ghost lights”.

Ghost lights. I wonder: is this what
the new generation calls stars
under the gaze of urban muck,
an ancestor trapped between dark matter,
ozone, and fluorescents?
Ghost lights, like the curse of the passerby,
a smudge of candlewick in the night.
Ghost lights, a technology of sight
to navigate smokestacks and smelters.

Only when I look back to see
the child of ghost lights
do I remember that it is late October,
the porch on 13th strung with bulbs
clothed in white linen dresses:
black, gaping mouths pondering
what it means to be the remains
of polluted sky.

Natural uranium, in FNR (Fast Nuclear Reactor), 28,000 GJ/kg

Let me tell you a trilogy of fission:
it begins in the womb of domesticity,
microwave meals and molten lava cakes,
exercise equipment and illuminated screens.
The nuclear family feigns centrifuge,
a preservation of proximity. But sift
between the stilettos, stags, and sordid
solitude to find the seam that shatters. If not a
closeness of kin, the two point five children
are ripped from intergenerational gestalt
and spit from the sprinkler system to water
a forever green patch of performance.

Once the home has been fenced and
the power lines plowed, the nucleus reproduces
its severance to fuel the family-friendly-fun.
An atomic scalpel, the tools of microscopic
surgery. The plant lacks phytochemicals
but devours heat with insatiable hunger.
Is it the cell or the cell phones that metabolize
the meat of nuclear power?

We end with war, unlike the plot arcs of most
fiction which starts with the action and ends
with reconciliation. Reality is friction, thus
battle lingers past conclusion in a
proliferation called deterrence. Manhattan no
longer a neighborhood if not a creation story,
the myth of heat as power, power as explosion,
explosion as technology, technology as
antidote.

Alas, the nuclear family drinks the news
of nuclear war like cough syrup with
minds incinerated in front of their
nuclear-powered television. And fission's
laugh radiates throughout the three story home,
tugging at the hands of the two point five children.

By Cait Quirk