**Pompeii Redux**

Jeff McLaughlin

 “No one just lets a volcano kill them, Monty,” Mr. Craig clarified. Birdsongs drifted through the open classroom window.

 “Seriously? Then why did they just stay there?”

 “They thought their gods protected them. Perhaps they didn't know it would actually explode.”

 “It was smoking for days, though, right?”

 “Everything's clear in retrospect,” Mr. Craig said.

 “Twenty-twenty hindsight,” Jase mumbled.

 “Precisely.”

 “We're smarter than that now,” Monty said.

 “Are we?” Mr. Craig asked. “People go off to church thinking if they pray correctly, they'll be rich in this life and safe in the next.”

 “Are you even supposed to be showing us this book?” Monty asked. He pointed to faded but detailed photographs of frescos.

 Mr. Craig pursed his lips. “Well, to be honest, I'd forgotten about those. My point is,” he said, more loudly, “my purpose in bringing these books out is to demonstrate Jase's point. We study history to see patterns, to learn to recognize them, so when they reemerge in the present, we can make informed decisions.”

 “Huh,” Monty said, distracted.

 “Mr. Schofield,” Mr. Craig said. “Would you please assist me by turning Monty's page for him?”

 Several boys laughed.

 On the blackboard Mr. Craig wrote Jerusalem-Jewish, then Constantinople-Christian, Cusco-Animism, Hiroshima-Shinto and finally Pompeii-Polytheism. He tapped the board with the chalk. “Notice anything?”

 “Yeah, no Muslim city.”

 “Very interesting. I'm sure there's an example that's fallen from my memory. I want you to notice that cities fall no matter their location or religion.”

 Monty shut the book and handed it to Jase. “Good stuff in there, Mr. Craig.”

 Mr. Craig lowered his chin and rubbed his temples. Chalk dust streaked white across his pink forehead. “None of that will be on the test, Monty.”

 “It won't help us get jobs at the plant, neither,” someone said.

 In the car, parked beneath the trees overlooking the town, it was dark and quiet, and they were alone. “Julie,” Monty said, “Let's do it.”

 “Like the book, you mean?”

 “Yeah.”

 She arranged herself and they pressed awkwardly together. “Like this?”

 “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah. Like this. You like it?”

 “Whatever,” she said. “I guess. No better.”

 “No better,” he taunted. “No worse. The same. Fun. Good.”

 She giggled.

 “What?” he asked, preemptively wounded.

 “I keep thinking about Mr. Craig,” she said.

 “Right now?” He stopped moving. “Now?”

 “No, not like that,” she said. She craned her face back to kiss his cheek. “I just don't think he showed you that book expecting this.”

 He rested his face in her hair. “I bet not,” he said. “I bet not.”

 Afterwards she turned around and leaned against him and he fell into drifting thoughts as the sounds of the night swelled around them.

 The shriek from the manufacturing plant startled him awake, and he looked through wisps of her hair to where it lay, on the slope opposite their parked car, its smoke obscuring the stars, its bell signaling a shift change. In four years, it would be shuttered and the town ruined.