

The United Church of Cigarettes

by Michael Seidel

The building they got was the litter of the local diocese—abandoned as part of some settlement. Previously they'd been located in a strip mall, before that a closed bank with the drive-through teller's box re-imagined as a pulpit. They all pitched in with bottles of polish, moved brushes around. The Archbishop with a Polak slap of vowel at the end of his name had demanded to take the pews, so they brought folding chairs salvaged from alleys all over town.

It happens once a week. Sundays, 10 a.m., just west of here. They pause at the stoups set about the entrance to pick up a cigarette or more.

The church echoes as the leader strikes his lighter. The response is a hundred more, each parishioner taking their own. From there, it is an hour of sizzling, the backfire of more being lit. Most keep their eyes closed. Some look up at the cloud covering the kneeling ecclesiastical trash perched high. Others look around, overly warm.

Ashes are treated like almsgivings and the ushers stretch out with their collection baskets. Everyone taps at least twice, then returns to their lips.

There is quiet. And there is more quiet.

An hour or so later, the first person gets up. The leader this time around, Heck, the Indian from Longfeathers, is startled awake, his button-down grayed from the doze. He strains his face, butts out, then put his hands up, moves one over the other, like climbing a mountain or closing a curtain. There's volume, smiles. Everyone is

explaining their week, complaining, raving. They walk slowly to the exit, my family and my boss and my kid dog dinner and the electric company, the news the radio news the tv news. Heck meets them at the door.

The February air feels like a freezing hand placed upon their lungs. There's something rooting around inside them.

