

Meltdown
by Margaret Stawowy

When the reactor leaked
nobody told us from what or
to where we should run.
There were to be walls
and barriers for safety, but nobody
built fences in the air or water.
For centuries, we lived between
mountain and ocean, in houses
with smoke-stained ceilings,
in fields, with cabbages
and turnips. Naturally,
our children dreamt
of escaping. We never dreamt

that an atom could be split
like a bean in a fat metal pod.
If the moment were a camera,
first, the flash, followed by the thunder
of history's shutter. Only shadows were
spared, burned onto sidewalks.

When told that power meant
prosperity, they meant we should
forget that photo, to smile,
to make a 'v' with our fingers
for energy victory.

Fierce-faced demons watched
from shrine gates.. We gave them
money, though not to buy
favor. That could never be bought.
We still hung paper chains
on gnarled trees to signify sacredness.
In fields, crickets ate cucumbers
and paid generously in shade songs,
cool and elegant.

The fairness of these exchanges seem
obvious now, as a steam cloud looms,
extracting payments counted on
invisible beads fingered only by time.