

Lehi Tries to Explain

“there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock”

How the liquid branches of that burning tree
whipped upward as if trying to shake
themselves free of the nothing
they consumed, as if they remembered
or anticipated spirits shucking
off bodies, finding a lighter form.

How when night came the pillar wound
tighter, wrapping itself in itself
against the desert dark, the deep chill
of wilderness, a place outside city
walls, a place without the borders born
of lamps assembled against the gloom.

I watched the fiery dance for days, he said,
and knew the flame dwelt there as I
too would one day dwell there, rock-
bound and burning to rise night and day
in a land not yet ready to be called home,
not yet settled, not yet promised.

— John Alba Cutler

This poem was a finalist in the 2024 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.