

ANTHONY ETHERIN

Great Fire of London

a chronogram-sonnet

These triple sixes strive for beastly night.
Their toxic fever rises. Where the spire
of Paul exalts its visions, ghosts of white
explore their living sores — before the fire.

The sphinx of revolution split us prior;
then, waxen sickness bit our riven skins.
Here, lifeless grievers weave a thriving pyre;
grotesques with holy texts relive their sins....

The exorcist arrives. The rite begins.
One furtive verse ignites the taverns' wicks,
to nix the sickness born in savage inns.
Flux, vex this hex of Sixteen Sixty-Six!

The blaze invites a sprite to blitz the pox.
A phoenix heaves its wings through burning rocks.

Note: This poem, a Spenserian sonnet in iambic pentameter, is a chronogram. In a chronogram, the letters of the alphabet are assigned their Roman numeral values: I = 1, V = 5, X = 10, L=50, C=100, D=500, and M=1000, with all other letters equal to zero. The purpose of a chronogram is to commemorate an event by composing a text whose total Roman numeral value adds up to the year of the event. In this sonnet, each line adds up to 119. The total Roman numeral count is thus 119 x 14 = 1666, the year of the Great Fire of London.