

What Burned, What Might Be Left Untouched

-Because my memory is so bad, I don't remember much. I'm not sure there's much to remember. There was a fire, not far from where I lived. It burned and then it didn't stop burning, for a long time after that. It was sensuous. I remember the smell of tarmac. I remember a tangerine sun and freezing nights. watered eyes. And how the air just sat there, festering. It was so sensuous that it approached abstraction, appended along with the other things that could burn so passionately and without regard for nuance, like love or youth.

-But we were there and it was not an abstraction, although I'd like to think about it as such. It was a smoke so thick that it blocked out the sun.

- What I wanted to write, and what I kept trying to write was this: A story that would end in the middle of the street. That last day, we all walked outside, still wearing pajamas and clutching mugs of tea or coffee. Everyone had gone by then, mostly because they had no reason to stay. We stood outside and gazed in wonder that morning, at how the ash—as it built up on trees, in the street—reminded us of snow. What I wanted to write would end just like that. It had to—as if that small, unnoticed beauty could be enough.

-Within the first few days of the fire, the power began to wane, but there was never any immediate danger. The truth is that the fire did not happen to us, nor did it happen because of us. The city—and, by extension, we—just happened to be downstream: a sub-event of something larger and more real happening several miles away. Had the wind blown the smoke in any other

direction, had there been no Pacific breeze at all, life would have gone on. We did not lose our homes in the smoke, and it would be wrong to pretend like we did.

- And yet, we still felt fear as the forest continued to burn. As you can imagine, I have been trying, without success, to reconcile this.

- Perhaps I have been struggling to write about the fire because it does not leave anything to the imagination. Nothing lies below the surface because a fire consumes itself: it can't do anything *but* burn. By definition, the chemical reaction is a reduction: you can feed it almost anything, and it will continue to spew out ash and soot and shit. I have not yet tried to feed it what I have written.

- One night, a window was left open, and everyone woke unable to speak, our throats tender from the cold smoke.

- Time slowed and distended. We waited for it to all be over because nothing else could be done, those seconds, minutes, and hours spent checking our phones for updates. The electricity in the air hummed a mixture of crisis and boredom. We told jokes, stories, and shared photos that we had taken of the sun, but even then, as we took comfort in each other's presence, that pearlescent sense of *This-Is-Real*, and *This-Is-Happening* had already found its way through the cracks; in the silence, behind our tired eyes, an incessantly glaucomic and straining heartbeat of *Now. Now. Now.*

And the smell of smoke continued to seep into the pores of the skin, making it difficult to wash off for days on end, like the smell of barbecue, or a campfire, lingering long after the party has ended.

-In the end, the school sent us home. *Be with your families*, they said, which fit because it was almost the holidays and because we had the privilege to be able to do so. The following day, the town grew quiet, as if giving up. I hung around for a few days after, not for any particular reason except that I had nowhere to go. I wandered around in a daze, not talking to anyone, since the roads had emptied, except for a couple of masked figures walking in the grayness. Then, I left.

- I have been taught to assign depth to the past. To analyze and fit events within a larger contextual zeitgeist. It should be easy to do the same for a fire because all I had to do was fit it into a long history of fires. at the time, it was the largest wildfire in California history. The number associated—acres burned—grown so large that it slipped out of grasp like a boulder rolling down a hill, taking with it any sense of the superficial. At least this, however morbid, we could claim for ourselves, that superlative bringing the weeks into dreary focus.

- But that record would not last even a year, and again, we realized with hubris that that too, had been nothing but a number.

- Last summer, they dug up a teenager's body from the debris, a little over three years and six months to the date.

- When, a couple of years later, the flames crested the ridge once more, we climbed my house's roof as the sun set. sat on its tiled peak and watched the wind carry the smoke south towards los angeles. That fire did not break records or destroy many homes, but it left an ugly black scar on the mountainside, until that too, grew over. Still, in the moment, the fire burned through the darkness, pulsing blends of oranges and reds; like a kaleidoscope; like a jewel in the night.

As the wind picked up, I remember thinking, *who would have thought the apocalypse would be so beautiful?*

- But during that first time, before I had looked a wildfire in the eyes, it seemed as if life would not go on. It could not: that steadfast sense of continuity—of a future where the fire did not happen—shattered into a million pieces. The world had, in an instant, dichotomized itself between things that could burn and things that could not, thick, white space of arbitrary granularity dividing the two. Try as I might, I could not bridge the gap. Maybe we would never recover. Maybe all we could do was refer to events as *before* or *after*, without needing to say what the *before* or the *after* referred to.

- After. Life did go on. I went home, and then it was Christmas. I dreamt of things burning, and of suicide. And somewhere in there, the firefighters quietly put out the last embers. When I returned, I remember stepping out of the airport taxi. The day before, it had rained heavy and bulbous droplets that had brought all the soot and shit still hanging around in the air back down to earth. All had been forgiven and the sky was full blue. In a couple of days, school would begin again. I breathed, and the freezing air stung my throat. I breathed.

- And what? So what. *So what?* I keep asking myself this, only to come up blank. I want to believe with conviction that this question can be answered. I want to believe that things must have meaning to burn. But a smaller, quiet part of me wonders if—sometimes—things do just *burn*. That it burned that year because it hadn't burned the year before. It burned because of a thunderstorm without rain. It burned because the brush was dried-out and overgrown and combustible. There was no mystery to it, and, in the end, nothing could be said about it but this: *that a fire was a fire was a fire was a fire was a fire.*

Oh, and that we might never be beautiful again.

- We don't talk about it, but you and I remember walking outside that morning into what looked like the first snow of the season; flurries of nothingness, drifting down in soft layers from a grey and windless sky. It was a quiet morning; almost Christmas. The sky looked infinite. It could have been infinite. And how the snowflakes—for that's what we pretended they were—would come to rest on our outstretched palms and sit there, refusing to melt.