

i don't think of praying. Not when my mother quotes 2 Chronicles 7:14. Not when my friend texts me from San Francisco that she can't sleep, the syntax of fire a dark sliver in her side.

When i lied, my mother or father would take a wooden spoon or cut two feet from the weeping cherry as i waited in the bathroom, a hornet's nest inside. *If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways...* A child learns through the body's pain. Touch a coal to not crawl into the fireplace.

*

i brush the blister on my inner arm, the oblong inch of raised tissue where i pressed my skin to the baking pan. How i fear the healing, the blank sea where the body will erase all signs of fire, leaving only desire and distance.

II.

i run, counting the miles.

i run

2645 miles from the Pearl Hill Fire, 2660 miles from the Cold Springs Fire, 2728 miles from the Claremont-Bear fire, 2,747 miles from the Holiday Farm Fire, 2776 miles from the Beachie Creek Fire, 2784 miles from the Glass Fire, 2804 miles from the August Complex.

Where: a wood at the edge of a -ville, the clay red with oxidized iron.

When: a humid afternoon at the tail-end of a summer of grief.

An overhanging branch scrapes skin, blood dripping a lowercase *I* down my cheek. Before i pull out my phone to read my face, i've already translated the pain:

I for *listen up!*
I for *leave*

*

i write and rewrite a poem: *The first time I got drunk was at Cannon Beach. You must navigate the telling of your first intoxication (was it / the fire or the sea)*

Pronoun: a word in place of a ~~noun~~ confession. "You" a moniker for i/me. The past in place of the present's abyss. A myth in place of my news feed.

*

i read, *Human activity causes the majority of wildfires, but lightning was responsible for 71 percent of the area burned between 1992 and 2015.*

We want to personify these fires. We want to blame somebody. But lightning doesn't have a face.

*

In 1965, Johnny Cash set off a wildfire in Los Padres National Forest with his overheated truck, the ensuing blaze killing 49 of the area's 53 endangered condors. Responding to legal investigators, Cash said, "I don't care about your damn yellow buzzards."

In 2014, a thirteen-year-old girl set her backyard on fire in San Marcos *to see what would happen*. An ember sparked the Cocos Fire nearly half a mile away, eventually destroying 36 homes.

In 2017, a fifteen-year-old boy lobbed a smoke bomb into Eagle Creek Canyon during a fire ban. Winds blew smoke and ash west onto Portland. After three months, the fire had consumed nearly 50,000 acres along the Columbia River Gorge.

In 2018, i broke a fire ban with my friends at Cannon Beach. It was the summer before the firestorm destroyed Paradise, the summer headlines read “Portland Breaks Record for Most Days Above 90 Degrees.”

*

By the end of the century, if humanity doesn't slash greenhouse gas emissions to fight climate change, “we might expect to get 50 percent more lightning.”

Even if there were no changes in lightning frequency, the impact of warmer and drier conditions associated with climate change help make lightning more effective at igniting wildfires.

*

In both drafts of the poem, *a blue bottle of vodka* and *wildfires to the south and east*.

The new version ends, half accusation, half confession: *you don't talk about love (the boy who wanted / the fire, the flick of the lighter, the clean blade of liquor / cutting your throat) you say “I lit the fire I put it out”*

While i change commas and pronouns, my friend's family cabin burns down in the forest east of Salem. The forest that used to drip with old-man's beard next to the river where our faces beam in a photo from five years ago, my hair still short, our cheeks touching.

*

What remains? My memory of the parable where the man in hell cries for water. Just a fingertip dipped in a stream to cool his tongue. But it's impossible, the chasm too great to cross.

No one able to come or leave. Over 2,500 miles. All this space between.

III.

i click on a headline from the *Spokesman Review*: “Eastern Washington slammed by fires, dust storms, and power outages.” At the top, a photograph of a wheat field under a sky bruised with smoke. A lone ponderosa, two telephone poles.

On the horizon, fire shimmers in the shape of a doorway.

*

When my mother and i drove across the country, i told her i’d always wanted to write an American Odyssey but with female protagonists. Like *On the Road* but without the sexism, i almost said, but she wouldn’t have known the reference and doesn’t believe that word. Instead, i spun our epic: mother and daughter in the middle of winter, driving an old Toyota toward what meteorologists were calling *battleground weather*, a cold front clashing with unseasonable heat.

Was this before or after she hit the patch of ice at 70 mph? Middle-of-nowhere Montana, the divided road licked by drifting snow. i grabbed the wheel as the Avalon slalomed—*Let go!*

Before the cemetery in South Dakota, before the stories about her father, before the jackknifed semis in Iowa, the shells of sedans on the shoulder, before the hotel next to the Gentleman’s Club where we holed up from the storm, i told her as we left the plateaus and mountains of dry pine, *Imagine the stories we’ll tell. Men do this kind of thing all the time. Aren’t we as capable, as free?*

*

A memory like a house temporarily spared from flames. An invisible threshold waits for someone’s body to be carried across.

Will the fire jump the ridge, the river? Have you packed the necessities just in case?

My cat bats the pen from my fingers. A message: stop making yourself the center of everything.

*

In the *Spokesman Review*, a woman watches the fire across the Okanogan River and worries. *The sky was red and the moon was up.*

The word *across* from *o cros*: in the shape of a cross.

Oh the meanings i could reap if i wrote, *i sleep with my arms extended and my feet pressed together, a nocturnal crucifix.*

Stop making your suffering out to be more than it is.

*

i watch myself in my father's house (the house cut in two) as windows shatter, wind scrapes scabs of shingles from the roof. The house sways in a desert spiderwebbed with cracks like a piece of sandstone about to shatter under a hammer's fist.

i dream this.

i dream a muted apocalypse, my mother's name eclipsed in my mouth. i dream a landfill in the grave of a lake—microwaves, empty Gatorade bottles, the bulbous head of a baby doll. i dream an earthquake in eastern Washington: the elephantine bones of the house explode behind us as we escape.

i carry seven words to keep my family alive.

[] [] [] [] [] [] []

In this version of the dream, the helicopter doesn't arrive.

*

When the jet stream broadcasts smoke across the continent, i step outside, the sun engorged, familiar, pink as an infected wound.

i climb a tree by the river. A rope hangs over undisturbed water.

IV.

The days mold and decompose. A banana peel fuses with yesterday's headlines, language complicit, complying.

Cardinals and bluejays screech outside my paned window, flashes of red and blue refusing my graph, my grid. My sight can't hold their movement. The news doesn't count the nonhuman among the dead.

*

One. The cicada on the laundry room floor. Its husk leaf-light on the lint-ridden linoleum.

Two. The raccoon reshape into silly putty on the country road.

Three. The Swainson's thrush on the sidewalk, its cinder-black eyes burst from their sockets, tethered to the body by thin red threads.

What word culled you? In which language should i weep?

*

Something for your poetry, no?

*

Once, i dated a man who believed the earth is the center of the universe.

Is my lie any different: pulling distances into orbit as if naming is an act of gravity? The fantasy of *I*. As if their suffering is my suffering. As if i could speak for the trees.

Jesus tempts me, *Deny yourself*. Guilt and abstinence the first steps of healing. Let me employ the old theologies, incinerate self, sex, body. How easy to claim salvation, objectivity, entrance. What sweet seduction, this release from my own telling. Unburdened from an *I*, i fly and fly, cross country, story, species. (O Douglas fir, O big leaf maple, O Western hemlock darkening the hillsides from Portland to Eugene)

i use the pronoun *you* and multiply. Am fern and frog and blackened mountain. A murmuration wheeling above the city like flakes of ash lifted by wind. For weeks we don't speak. My [] and i. My [] and—

*

Animal sounds echo at eight am. A dog like a seal in the stairwell. Pain and rage as paws screech across linoleum. Each bark a saw blade pulled across the morning's outstretched limbs.

How many mornings before i learn: in New Mexico, thousands of dead and dying birds. Swallows grounded on a golf course, bluebirds, warblers, sparrows, blackbirds. An *unprecedented* number. All insectivores, both migratory and year-round birds. The article states *some researchers suspect the West Coast's raging wildfires could be to blame.*

They could have been affected ... They could have been forced to leave... They could have been forced into a longer journey...

*

What is a boundary but a threshold of responsibility, of return?

In the back of the canyon, a bush burns, a place of yearning not yet consumed. All this heat, and the bush will not pretend to be other than it is. A temporary city of matter, electrified by sap, gathered into bones and leaf. Spark plug, downed powerline, cigarette smoldering in dry grass.

My body won't be carried past where it exists.

*

What holds? The space past my cervix i fill with bones.

V.

What does compassion mean across distance? Compassion from the Latin verb *to suffer* and the preposition *with*.

My faucet sputters, spits sound without form. Outside, men in neon maneuver yellow machines. The water cut off, a momentary need.

*

My mother visits the poem. She travels cross-country to sit with a notebook and pen and listen to the poem. She sits in a pew and waits for the poem to walk up to the podium. She waits for the poem to extrapolate the poem, to perform exegesis, exorcism. She waits for a man to carve three clean lines on the poem's skin and tell her where to stand.

She wants to know where i stand, the xy coordinate of my belief. i want to know the equation that will carry my body into the burning. i write water = water. i write ~~my~~ mother = the woman whose clothes burned off as she walked through fire. i write distance = the amount of carbon dioxide released when a machine travels the length of the vector from desire to need.

The page still blinks, motionless, the chasm between knowledge and grief. i lift a match to the polished wood behind which the poem stands, protected, in power.

*

After a fire, even if you have a house to return to, the water likely isn't safe to use.

What we see: a blackened car, *the melted skeletons of washers and dryers, a water pipe in the charred remains of a building*. What's hidden: contaminated plumbing, smoke and toxic chemicals pulled into the water supply. One such volatile organic compound is benzene, *which can cause nausea and vomiting in the short-term, or even cancer over time*. Even if you don't drink the water, these compounds can be released into the air through washing your hands or showering.

Within the article, a photograph of a green hose surrounded by ash, its nose pointing left to right like the line of a poem read across space and time.

*

For four hours, i cannot shower, wash, or drink. The fast imposed by external force i read as solidarity, the way my mother reads scripture: extracting signs and symbols, matching her life to an established meaning.

When my mother asks how i make sense of why we are here, i don't answer. She keeps asking me questions, hoping she'll lead me to confess the God she says i need. i keep writing poems to reach her. Each of us trying to save the other in our own language.

*

Women kneel in skirts on the carpeted steps at the front of the church. Their faces fractal in the red glow cast down from stained glass. A pair of slacks straddles the podium. A pair of hands lifted over them. Each woman holds a child. A burnt or sin offering.

My therapist tells me i can change the dream. i start with a blue seam-ripper, dismember the clean tight stitches circling their waists. A miracle: i multiply the knives, one for each woman. Together we rend our clothes, rip collars and hems, tear cotton nylon polyester linen, the air clawed with our small violences, our bodies emerging—nipple, neck, mole, knee—like the white knobs of mushrooms after a rain.

We strip till we are as bare as the woman who escaped the Beachie Creek Fire outside of Salem. i rend the words to reach her. Angela. The name of my aunt in Spokane.

*

My parents named me Hannah after the woman in the Bible. Hannah the woman who wept and would not eat. The woman who disappeared from the story after she gave birth to a son. Hannah the woman who prayed so the priest could not hear, her lips moving without sound. He thought she was drunk.

*

Is this anger or grief? The need to resist the narrative that shadows me.

i want to write: This essay was never about the fires. The story was never about the son.

*

In October, the news swerves to Colorado. Outside of Boulder, two mega-fires in the Rockies. My uncle's house bathing in smoke, my grandfather's bar pinned under an orange anvil. A resident says to the reporter, *It's crazy, just crazy. We'd usually be wading through snow this time of year.*

Drought and acres of trees killed by bark beetles. High winds. Record heat. The East Troublesome fire grows by 140,000 acres overnight. Smoke crowds the sky over the cul-de-sac where my mother pitched baseballs, grew breasts, walked to a field at the end of the street to see the horses gathered at the fence. It is here where we meet, two symbols in a coordinate caught between aspen and pine.

When we both reach out to touch the warm nose of a roan, our hands brush each other in the reaching.

*

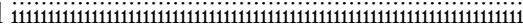
Still, i eat but cannot weep. In my revision of the dream, i stand behind the podium and part my lips. My body opens. An O through which colors leap—rain, wind, thunder, fire, daughter—howling in a field surrounded by flames candling the trees.

VI.

i flip through the notes i wrote at the start of the year before the pandemic, before sex, before apostasy, before the West's pyrotechnics and lightning. In my journal, a diagram of forest succession drawn with circles and dotted lines. Each sphere a snapshot of an ecosystem at a point in time, arrows signaling the direction of growth in the absence of fire:

grass/shrubs → seedlings/saplings → young trees → mature trees → old growth forest

In the presence of fire, the pathways splinter, depending on the severity. Does it burn the crown or only the understory? A low-intensity fire can regenerate a forest's current seral stage, but a lethal fire resets the pathway, the community looping back to grass and herbs.

What path have you taken, little i, falling from your height to sprout in this field, a single stem among the plural  of bunchgrass, blue gama, and elk sedge?

*

Of my doubt, my father says, *God doesn't change even when the world does.*

Of my deconversion, my mother says, *Perhaps you never knew God's grace. Perhaps you were never truly saved.*

i write and erase a face in the window, the face i once addressed with a capital *I*. Does it matter whether the letter is *I* or *G*? How many times did i pray while looking in a mirror, needing an image i could address, a body i could believe?

*

On a walk, i see a hawk with a broken wing on my neighbor's doorstep. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself...* Too easy of an interpretation. He hops away from me.

Hawk from the Proto Indo-European root *kap-*, meaning *to grasp*. i google "cooper's hawk" and am shown the website for a winery. What figure of speech is this: a word stolen from its referent, relocated, and extorted for economic profit?

i try Wikipedia (free, but they're asking for donations) and find a description that matches my already hazy memory of the bird. i can never identify a species at the moment of our encounter. Wasn't it Augustine who said we can never name the present? For as soon as we say "now," it has already passed, the words fading into the space where something has disappeared or changed.

*

As climate change and over a century of fire suppression lead to more high severity fires in the future, it could be harder for forests and other ecosystems to recover, *Science Magazine* reports. *Already, some ecosystems in North America that have had frequent or intense burns are not regenerating. In some places, such as the sagebrush ecosystem of the Great Basin west of the Sierra Nevada mountain range and forests in the Klamath Mountains along the California-Oregon border, invasive shrubs or grasses appear to have taken over.*

As for the aftermath of this year's fires, it's hard to predict. *Some habitats will bounce right back, others will struggle for years to recover what was lost, and still others will completely change to a new type of habitat.*

*

O this liturgy of the literal, this forest where i dwell, where i write a forest for my thoughts to sit among bark, humus, lichen, and leaf. When i was a girl, i climbed the maple in our backyard, pressed my ear against its trunk, and heard the wood groan and creak as wind tossed the canopy.

O little i, i set fire to the images i thought i knew, and what grew back from the ash? Here i am listening as i did long ago, listening to the trees.

VII.

An elegy for the endangered Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits, half of their population baked or asphyxiated in the Pearl Hill Fire this September.

A hymn for the wood-boring beetles that sense heat from miles away and swarm burnt trees in the hours after a fire, seeking charred wood in which to lay their eggs.

An elegy for the sage grouse, for the 30-70% killed in the flames, for the sagebrush they inhabit east of the Cascades, a shrub-steppe habitat that's shrunk 80% since the 19th century.

A hymn for the black-backed woodpecker that dines on the wood-boring beetles' larvae and drills nesting cavities in fire-damaged forests.

An elegy for the mule deer whose charred carcass twists like a piece of driftwood in the photo taken 60 miles west of where i curled inside the dead doe's belly.

A hymn for the chickadee and the mountain bluebird, for the Myotis bat and the flying squirrel who live in the cavities after the woodpeckers leave, their excrement dispersing seeds that grow into pine grass and fireweed.

An elegy for the eight porcupines unable to escape the Whitney fire that razed the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area. An elegy, here, in the wetlands of a poem, for their bodies found in what had been an oasis of rushes, cottonwood, and aspen.

A hymn for the afterlife, for the uncertainty of what will grow in the decades after burnt trees topple, sky to soil, their trunks now providing shelter for rodents and snakes.

An elegy for the fires suppressed through dogma and the government's zealous crusades. An elegy for the fire deficit haunting the West, its stockpiled fuels erupting into infernos that burn hotter each year.

A hymn for the mosaic of burned and unburned land after a fire, a black and green checkerboard that protects animals and regenerates a habitat.

An elegy for the loss of these mosaics as fires become larger and more severe, refugia and pyrodiversity replaced by monochrome moonscapes of bones and ash.

A hymn for the matches first made from human bone and urine, an elegy for the bodies that became sites of flame.

A hymn for my father who taught me how to lite and tend a fire, for my mother who taught me to sit near a body in pain.

An elegy for the sounds i made before syntax, before story.

A hymn for the match i hold to the page.

A hymn for the silence after my words have burned away where i find myself crying and can't say
whose water is released, which river splits the stone inside me.

Mist rises from the falls in the center of the city where my mother wakes and sleeps. After a season
of fire and smoke, she walks through the pines, pulling me into her orbit of praise and grief.

NOTES

The title for this seven-part lyric essay has been taken from *The New York Times* headline “As the West Coast Burns, Communities Unravel With Each Death,” published on September 12, 2020.

Definitions and etymologies come from the Oxford English Dictionary and from etymonline.com, except where otherwise noted.

II.

Italicized language in the sections beginning with “i read, *Human activity causes...*” and “*By the end of the century...*” has been quoted from *The New York Times* article “In the West, Lightning Grows as a Cause of Damaging Fires,” published on October 23, 2020.

III.

“Eastern Washington slammed by fires, dust storms, and power outages” was published in the *Spokesman Review* on September 8, 2020. *The sky was red and the moon was up* is a quotation taken from this article.

IV.

Something for your poetry, no? is quoted from “The Colonel” by Carolyn Forché, which appears in her book *The Country Between Us*.

Italics in the fifth section are quoted from the article “Thousands of dead birds in New Mexico could be linked to West Coast wildfires,” published online by the *New York Post* on September 15, 2020.

V.

Italics and information about water contamination are taken from *The New York Times* article “After Wildfires Stop Burning, a Danger in the Drinking Water,” published on October 2, 2020.

“*It’s crazy, just crazy. We’d usually be wading through snow this time of year*” is quoted from “In Colorado, It Feels Like a Fire Season Without End,” published on October 18, 2020 by *The New York Times*.

VI.

In “Ponderosa Pine Ecosystems,” Graham and Jain explain how seral stages progress in a ponderosa pine forest: “Succession is a term applied to the gradual supplanting of one community of plants by another on a given site through time. Vegetative complexes evolve after a disturbance such as a lethal fire (i.e. fires that kill the majority of the dominant and codominant canopy layers). Early-seral stages often begin with a grass/forb/shrub stage, succeeded by tree seedlings and saplings which grow to young trees, and subsequently develop into the late-seral mature and old vegetative complexes. In some systems, such as those dominated by ponderosa pine, these or similar stages may develop in

less than 250 years but in other systems, such as Pacific coastal Douglas-fir... it may take in excess of 1,000 years for the full compliment of structural stages inherent to the system to develop.”

In *Confessions*, Augustine writes, “Therefore, if the present, so as to be time, must be so constituted that it passes into the past, how can we say that it is, since the cause of its being is the fact that it will cease to be? Does it not follow that we can truly say that it is time, only because it tends towards non-being?”

Italics in the fourth section are quoted from the article “As wildfires continue in western United States, biologists fear for vulnerable species,” published online by *Science Magazine* on September 30, 2020.

The phrase *where i write a forest for my thoughts to sit* is drawn from “Let Them Think I Am No Different” by Sara Nicholson: “I should probably // Tell you it’s wrong... to keep the forest / In your mouth. I should probably tell you // What poetry is—a record of the attempt / To keep up with the mind. A forest for our / Thoughts to sit in.”

The phrase *i set fire to the images i thought i knew* is drawn from Nicholson’s poem “O’er,” in which she writes, “I am one of them who sets on fire / The images we think we know. // The rest is guesswork, a description / Of the ocean in motherfucking / Blank verse.” Both of Nicholson’s poems appear in her book *What the Lyric Is*.

VII.

This section was informed by the following sources: “The Loss That’s Killing the West’s Wildlife” published in *The Atlantic* on September 30, 2020; “Wildlife, habitat take devastating hit from wildfires across region” published in the *Spokesman-Review* on September 21, 2020; “Endangered wildlife, habitat burned in Washington wildfires; years of effort to boost populations wiped out” published by *Seattle Times* on September 16, 2020; and “Life After Fire” published in the March 2021 issue of *National Geographic*.