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"Fire on the Mountain"

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When Lyn tells the story, she leads with astonishment. The mountain was exploding with flames, she says, ashes drifting down from lurid clouds of smoke; I drove down the driveway and found Scott sitting on the deck drinking a beer.

That's a true account, as far as it goes.

The report from the Northern Utah Interagency Fire Center on events leading up to the day Lyn found me drinking beer on the deck states that

The Bald Mountain Fire started by lightning on August 24, 2018 in the Mount Nebo Wilderness just off the top of Bald Mountain. Due to a recent rain, a reduction in fire danger, and it being a natural ignition at just below 11,000' in the wilderness, the decision was made to employ a monitor strategy. Over the course of the next 2-3 weeks, the fire only grew to about 20 acres. On the afternoon of September 12, the fire became very active due to low Relative Humidity and high winds; fire quickly spread off the mountain and continued to actively burn. The first evacuations were Thursday, September 13th. That day a decision was made to order a Type 1 Incident Management Team, IMT.
SCOTT ABBOTT

We were both at Utah Valley University that Thursday—Lyn teaching her class on the history of the American West and I preparing for my afternoon seminar on German Romanticism—when calls from the Woodland Hills emergency system informed us that all residents of our little town had just been placed under a pre-evacuation order. I cancelled my seminar and headed home. Lyn didn’t get the message until her class ended.

Woodland Hills is a thirty-minute drive south from the university, snuggled up into an elbow of the Wasatch Mountain Range. The town’s steep streets rise more than a thousand feet above Utah Valley. At an elevation of 9000 feet, Tower Mountain leans over the town from the east. Looming above the last houses perched along Eagle Nest Drive, Santaquin Peak rises abruptly to 10,633 feet. For more than a week we had been watching smoke from the Pole Creek and Bald Mountain fires burning to the southwest. On this day fires were beginning to lick our side of the mountain. Ragged clouds of smoke burst unpredictably into the already cloudy sky.

I parked in the garage and began preparations to evacuate. All the things our little cat Bella would need: litterbox, food, medicine. Some changes of clothes for me. Computer and accessories. Irreplaceable chapbooks, gifts from my dear friend Alex Caltiero. And that was it. I took pictures of everything in the house, top to bottom, end to end, lamenting the threatened loss of each work of art, of each book, of each piece of furniture—of the house we had designed and built only thirteen years earlier.

Then, a cold beer in hand, I stepped out onto the deck where I sat between the mountains and the long valley. For an hour I sat there, maybe longer, and maybe there was a second beer. When the gusty west wind shifted to the southwest, smoke billowed down from the mountain, finger-length ashes drifted onto my legs and shoulders, and the air gathered an acrid density that would have been unbearable if the hot wind hadn’t then gusted from the northwest to drive the clouds back against the mountain.

What was I thinking? Nothing, really. The experience was beyond thought. I was seeing and smelling. The wind rushed past my ears and the air heated my face. I could taste the smoke. I flinched whenever a stand of fir trees blew up like a giant Roman candle. Erratic shafts of sunlight swept across the mountains and valley. Dark shadows periodically eclipsed the sun. It was intense, enlivening, profound.

Lyn drove down the driveway, entered the house, stepped onto the deck, and asked what I was doing sitting outside drinking a beer. Before I had a chance to answer, the loudspeaker mounted on a pole down by the town’s mailboxes crackled and a voice announced a mandatory evacuation for all Woodland Hills residents, effective immediately. Report to the Salem Hills High School.

Lyn packed quickly, we left a green milk crate at the top of the driveway to signal we were all out, and within minutes we were standing with neighbors in a school parking lot looking back up at the burning mountain. We had become refugees like so many people around the globe displaced by war and famine and natural disaster. Unlike other refugees, however, our house was insured, we had continued income from our jobs, we had adequate health care, and there were multiple offers of shelter. We were soon settled into a spare bedroom offered by our generous friends Sam and Nancy. Bella and their aging border collie Cedar stared curiously, even avidly, at each other through a low window in the bedroom door. The four humans scoured the internet for news about the fires.

Twenty-person hotshot crews were arriving from around the country. A Type 1 Incident Management Team was in place within hours. Air support was on hold because of high winds. Digital maps indicated the extent of the two fires and suggested
where they might join into a single fire. Ongoing high, hot winds were predicted.

Just before we sat down for a bite to eat someone found a report that said the fires were being fed by “Timber (litter and understory). Mixed conifer with fir, heavy dead and down and brushy understory. Oak brush and juniper with a grass understory.”

Sam is a botanist and he and I rode our mountain bikes for a decade on trails like the one that snakes up Sangaquin Peak. Our intent, we wrote in the preface to what became our book Wild Rides & Wildflowers, was to ride a single portion of the Great Western Trail again and again and again, to see and hear and smell and taste everything along the trail so minutely, so sensitively, that our readers would be astonished. Unfortunately, we were aging men with tics and foibles that precluded much sensitivity. So we wrote about what we knew: fear of aging, anguish at the relentless “development” of wild lands in the American West, and generally about what Thoreau described as “wild and noble sights . . . such as they who sit in parlors never dream of.”

Over dinner, we agreed that the wildfire was one of those wild and noble sights. The desire to experience the wildfire as noble, I thought, might explain why I left the house to sit on the deck. I would have to think that through more carefully. In the meantime, we talked about the information in the incident report. Douglas firs dot the mountain, dense pockets populating folds between ridges. Some of the firs are brown hulks left by a bark beetle infestation amplified by climate change. At the higher altitudes, aspen are plentiful, as are maples, although the fire report ignores both. Perhaps they don’t burn with the intensity of the firs, Sam speculated. Oak brush grows tall on the north-facing slope, boosted in size by moisture the mountains extract from rising and cooling air. Lots of dead wood from fallen trees, yes, and plentiful, tinder-dry bunch grasses.

For obvious reasons, the firefighters left wildflowers off their list. In the interest of a fuller accounting, and because we love this mountain, Sam and I talked through the spring progression, a sequence that repeats itself at successively higher altitudes over the course of the season.

Delicate pink spring beauties bloom first, lifting their flowers in patches between lingering snowdrifts. Wasatch bluebells and yellow glacier lilies follow quickly. Ball-headed waterleaf are succeeded by little white woodland stars and then by swaths of false Solomon’s seal. Yellow violets, Oregon grape, paintbrush, and arrowleaf balsamroot give way to mule’s ears. Sego lilies and wild roses appear. Bright pink phlox, whose name in Greek means fire, peeks through green grasses. Profligately fragrant yellow cliffrose! High on Sangaquin Peak, we once saw purple fireweed; will it bloom again next spring after this fire? All these flowers are adapted to occasional fires, as are the mountain’s grasses, trees, and woody plants, and they will rise again. But what about the animals that make their homes in these mountains?

Our neighbor to the west (also evacuated) is called Elk Ridge for good reason. Early each spring a herd of elk numbering in the hundreds drifts down out of the mountains to be in local alfalfa fields. In the early evening we can hear them bugling in the ravine to the west of our house. One summer, hiking down the trail on Sangaquin Peak, we watched two young black bears scramble up a steep incline to avoid us. There have been cougar tracks in the mud and snow and we routinely see coyotes and foxes traversing the mountain. While we listed rattlesnakes and horny toads and squirrels and voles and butterflies and flying and creeping insects, Nancy found Borges’ short essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” and we reminded ourselves that our lists will inevitably reflect our own ways of seeing the world of which we are a part:

These ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies remind
us of those which doctor Franz Kuhn attributes to a
certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled “Celestial Empire
of benevolent Knowledge”. In its remote pages it is
written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to
the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e)
sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present
classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with
a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just
broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look
like flies. (Translated by Lilia Graciela Vázquez)

We have forgotten the birds, Lyn noted. Wild turkeys
flourish on the mountain, as do quail, pine grouse, raptors, and
songbirds. One spring I was riding my mountain bike up the
switchbacking mountain trail and heard the harsh kree of a red-
tailed hawk. It was perched on a dead tree to the side of the trail.
Did it have a nest nearby? A fledgling it was protecting? I rode
past as deferentially as possible. Later, riding back down the hill,
I heard the warning cry again. I thought I could pass with the
speed of gravity and was indeed past when a sharp blow hit me
between the shoulders and I felt the wind of the hawk’s wings as
she skimmed my head and rose for another strike if necessary. It
was not necessary. I got the hell off the hill.

Back at work after the Tuesday evacuation, I told the
students in my Romanticism seminar about my sojourn on the
deck while the fire burned and asked them to help me think
about why it was important for me to sit there amid the smoke
and ash while our house and our town were under siege. The
touchstone for our discussions of poetry, philosophy, and painting
by the German Romantics had been nature philosopher Friedrich
Schelling’s “Nature is visible spirit, spirit invisible nature,” and
that’s where we began.

You may have felt you were at the intersection of nature
and spirit, one student ventured. Another student agreed

and elaborated: Your mountain is inanimate, the plants and
animals on it animate, yet they interact in ways that make that
distinction meaningless. The heat from the fire made the wood
produce gasses that burned to heat more wood and so on. The
transformation from solid to gas manifest in the flames put you at
the heart of Schelling’s attempt to link mind and nature.

A third student chimed in: If overcoming your alienation
from nature was truly important to you, you should have hiked
onto the mountain and stepped into the flames. I’m not being
a smart ass—I was thinking of Friedrich Hölderlin’s poem
Empedocles:

Das Leben suchst du, suchst, und es quillt und glänzt
Ein göttlich Feuer tief aus der Erde dir,
Und du in schauderndem Verlangen
Wirfst dich hinab, in des Aetna Flammen.

You seek life, seek, and a holy fire gleams and surges
at you from deep within the earth,
And you, consumed by dreadful desire,
Throw yourself down into Aetna’s flames.

My dreadful desire was no match for Empedocles’, I said,
but yes, I think I was seeking life; and the fire was surging and
gleaming seductively.

A fourth student brought in Kant’s theory: It was the
dynamic sublime at work, she said. The wildfire aroused fear in
you, highlighting your physical powerlessness in the face of the
fire, but as you contemplated the fire from a distance you also felt
independent of and in a way superior to nature.

I’ve always loved Kant’s thoughts on the sublime, I
responded, and my experience with this fire begins as he predicts
with fear aroused by a natural force in the face of which I felt
powerless. Each new flareup frightened me. I suppose the fact that I was thinking about the fire from some distance ameliorated the terror I would otherwise have felt. But rather than feeling independent of and superior to nature, the hot wind and falling ashes and boiling clouds and fierce flames gave me a sense that my beating heart and surging blood were indistinguishable from the conflagration I was witnessing. No, not witnessing, that implies separation. Experiencing is a better word.

The beer, a fifth student noted, we haven't thought about the role of beer in your experience. I'm thinking of those lines in Hölderlin's "Bread and Wine" that praise sacred drunkenness and a bolder life and then invoke divine fire to urge us to venture beyond ourselves, out of our circumscribed circumstances and into what he calls the open:

Göttliches Feuer auch treibt, bei Tag und bei Nacht,
Aufzubrechen. So komm! Daß wir das offene schauen,
Daß ein Eigenes wir suchen, so weit es auch ist.

Divine fire drives us to set forth by day
And by night. So come! Let us witness the open,
To seek what is ours, however distant it may be.

I laughed, pleased at the Dionysian idea, but then had to admit that a single beer, or even two if there was a second, hardly contributed to anything approaching sacred openness. Yes, I said, there was joy in my soul. The fire felt like the burning heart of Spinoza's nature-god and it was an invitation to something beyond my mundane life. Yes.

Back at Sam and Nancy's that evening I tried to share the fruitful discussion, but without the background in Romantic thought the class had in common, my summary only made partial sense. More interesting were the reports we were getting on the fires. Driven by the hot, high winds, the Bald Mountain Fire and the Pole Creek Fire had joined into a single, rapidly expanding blaze. More than 1000 firefighters were already at work protecting the evacuated towns. Erratic gusts were keeping air support grounded. At a tense public meeting in a Salem Hills High School auditorium crowded with anxious evacuees, a uniformed representative of the incident team gave a detailed update on what was known and what was being done and then asked if there were any questions he could answer in the remaining minutes. A rancher who had lost twenty cows to fire stood and excoriated the official and the federal government and the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management and all the idiots who had decided to let the fire burn and who was going to pay for his cows and the public lands ought to be in private hands and liberal politicians were dead set on taking away our constitutional rights and now he had dead cows and he wasn't going down without a fight. Shut up and sit down, someone shouted, the government has been subsidizing your grazing for years. And with that the meeting ended.

Day followed day, night followed restless night as the fire expanded. Lyn took a photo of me sleeping with my long grey hair fanned out on the pillow. Bella snuggled up against my head as if to comfort me. And maybe she was seeking comfort for her own evacuated self as well.

Depending on the morning's wind direction, we often stepped out of Nancy's and Sam's house into a valley choked with smoke. At night we called up a NASA mapping tool recommended by our friend Byron, a biologist working with nematodes in Antarctica. One evening the map showed Byron's and Marcie's house at the upper edge of Woodland Hills as having been engulfed by the fire. As with all data, Byron reassured us, what we are seeing are approximations. The critter-cam outside our house shows it still standing.

In the next meeting of the Romanticism seminar, I
reported that our house was untouched but still threatened and told
the students I'd been reading Gaston Bachelard's book The
Psychoanalysis of Fire. Bachelard examines various human
responses to fire, I said, and asks what those responses reveal about
us as a species. Interestingly for us, he finds the most intriguing
answers in works of the German Romantics.

A chapter titled "Psychoanalysis and Prehistory: The
Novalis Complex" works with Novalis' novel Heinrich von
Ofterdingen and with one of Novalis' letters to Schlegel: "You can
see in my tale my antipathy for the play of light and shadow, and
the desire for bright, hot, penetrating Ether." Sitting on my deck,
I reminded the students, I was fascinated by the play of light and
shadow, and also by the heat on my face and by the smoky air
penetrating my lungs. A clear case of Novalis complex.

In a section about "Sexualized Fire," I continued, Novalis
again is a major player. As far as I can remember, there was
nothing sexual about my experience with our fire. I'll ask my
subconscious about that at some future date.

The chapter "Alcohol...Punch: The Hoffmann
Complex," features those seemingly magical moments we found
in E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot" when the salamander/mon
Archivarius Lindhorst slips into and out of a burning bowl
of punch. Bachelard ends the chapter with a thought that echoes
Schelling: "Since brandy burns before our entranced eyes, since,
from the pit of the stomach, it radiates heat to the whole person,
it affords proof of the convergence of inner experience and
objective experiment."

"Idealized Fire," a late chapter, ends with this statement by
Novalis: "Assuredly I was too dependent on this life—a powerful
corrective was necessary... My love has been transformed into
flame, and this flame is gradually consuming all that is earthly
within." As it had in his beloved Sophie, tuberculosis burned
hotter and hotter within Novalis until he died at the age of twenty
nine.

I'll end this little lecture on Bachelard, the Romantics, fire,
and my own responses to fire, I said, with some thoughts from the
end of Bachelard's book: "What I recognize to be living—living
in the immediate sense—is what I recognize as being hot. Heat is
the proof par excellence of substantial richness and permanence:
it alone gives an immediate meaning to vital intensity, to intensity
of being." Sitting there on our deck amidst the seemingly
animate flares and clouds and winds and heat of the raging fire, I
experienced an intensity of being that will remain vivid and vital
in my memory.

After ten days as refugees, we were finally allowed to
return home, again under a pre-evacuation warning because hot
spots were still smoldering on the mountain. We swept ash from
the decks and aired out the house. Bright streaks of red-orange
fire retardant slashed across the mountain just a hundred yards
above the town's highest street. Four tanker planes had flown
to Boise, Idaho, nearly four hundred miles to the northwest,
to take on each load of retardant. Their flights had been suspended
several times due to high winds that made the already risky low
passes over steep mountain slopes impossible and once because
some idiot was flying a drone above the fire. More than two
thousand men and women had fought the fire on the ground.

For a glimpse into what fighting wildfires entailed, I
read Norman Maclean's heart wrenching, masterful account of
smokejumpers killed by fire in Montana's Mann Gulch: Young
Men and Fire. Only three men of a crew of fifteen survived
the lightening-swift grass fire that overtook them as they raced
for the top of a steep ridge. "On forest fires there are moments
almost solely for beauty," Maclean writes. "Such moments are of
short duration." When the Board of Review asked the foreman
of the crew and one of the three survivors "if he had explained
to the men the danger they were in, he looked at the Board in amazement, as if the Board had never been outside the city limits and wouldn't know sawdust if they saw it in a pile."

There were no lives lost in our fire, but the risks the hot shot crews undertook and the skill with which they fought the fire brought an outpouring of gratitude from Woodland Hills residents. Signs appeared around town, several of them bringing God into the picture: THANKS TO OUR GOD & OUR FIREFIGHTERS FOR SAVING OUR HOME! Maclean links God and the firefighters less sanguinely, reporting that two of the survivors remembered thinking, as they raced toward the ridge, "my God, how can you do this to me?" The final act of the men fleeing the fire, whether they saved themselves or not, Maclean writes, brought the men "about as close as body and spirit can to establishing a unity of themselves with earth, fire, and perhaps the sky."

As we settled back into our homes, heavy rains from Hurricane Rosa approached from the south. Fear of debris slides from the mountain triggered desperate activity. Residents gathered to fill thousands of sandbags and the Utah National Guard set up jersey barriers to try to direct any debris flows toward the city park. Years ago I had read about debris flows in John McPhee’s The Control of Nature, and I picked it up again to review the final chapter about the battle between the city of Los Angeles and the San Gabriel Mountains. Why do people live against precipitous mountains plagued by earthquakes, wildfires, and ensuing debris flows? McPhee asks. "There is air there. Cool is the evening under the crumbling peaks. Cool descending air. Clean air. Air with a view." McPhee calls us—and yes, we live in Woodland Hills for the same reasons Californians live cheek-to-jowl with wilderness—"dingbats in the line of fire." Don’t we remember the last flows? Don’t we realize we are building in danger zones? A geologist hired by a developer to certify that houses built against our mountain would be safe concluded that there was a high likelihood of snow avalanches and debris flows. The developer hired a second geologist who approved construction. Three new houses now stand on a site reached by a succession of avalanches just ten years ago.

The remnants of Hurricane Rosa delivered plenty of rain to our burned slopes, but did so slowly over the course of a week. "The early-winter rains" McPhee reports, "are not enough to make the great bulk move. Actually, they add to it." Which leaves us with jersey barriers and sandbags on our high streets as we wait for spring.

New Year's Day was a low point for us; our little cat Bella died. After the intense reproductive heat of lymphoma caused an organ to burst, we held her while a veterinarian named Licht (German for light) injected chemicals that almost immediately stopped the raging cells and ended Bella’s life.