



The Magnolia Review
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Welcome to the seventh issue of The Magnolia Review! We publish art, photography, poetry, comics, creative nonfiction, flash fiction, experimental work, and fiction. The Magnolia Review publishes previously unpublished work. We publish two issues a year, deadlines on November 15 and May 15. The issue will be available online on January 15 and July 15.

While The Magnolia Review will not have physical copies at this time, the editors may compile a print version if funds become available.

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For more information, please visit www.themagnoliareview.wordpress.com or email us at themagnoliareview@gmail.com.

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Fire Sermon

“Did you hear what I said, Davey?” Jon was drunk, and his insistent words flowed with a sloppy ease that David sometimes saw in him. He was standing, unsteadily, before the eight-point deer skull hanging from a nail in a tree. “I said, I can’t think of a single reason why anyone would ever need to know that. Not a single reason.”

Jon had managed to push himself out of his chair and clatter through the empties, stopping before the skull he’d spotted, vanishing in the gathering darkness outside the glow of their fire. David had corrected Jon’s observation (“That’s one horny bastard!”) by pointing out that deer had antlers, not horns. A facile, automatic response to his friend’s misstatement.

“Just a burdensome factoid, Davey. Taking up space in your brain.”

Jon was about to take a swipe at the skull when David called him back.

“Sit down, Jon. You’re going to fall over.”

Jon staggered back a few steps, veering closer to the fire ring. He turned. “One thing, first,” he said. And then he unzipped his jeans and let loose on the embers, sizzle and acrid steam filling the air around them.

“Gimme another beer, Davey,” Jon said as he finally fell into his chair. The old canvas seat shrieked

beneath him, but Jon gave it no notice.

“Maybe you could zip up first. You don’t want a mosquito bite on that.” David reached into the cooler blindly and found a can sloshing in the melting ice. He thought about tossing it to Jon – he might have earlier in the evening – but his buddy was already enough of a mess, and he decided against adding an exploding beer to it. So he opened the can and held it out for Jon to take, which he did.

Jon pulled on the can and then rolled his head. “Man! How can you hear yourself think in all this racket?”

The night forest around them was alive with conversations. The constant rising and falling rasp of the tree frogs. The hooting owls. Even coyotes, who had been yipping and howling on the ridge across the valley earlier.

“You tune it out. Dad always said that the time to be worried in the forest is when you *don’t* hear any sounds.” He was listening for a whippoorwill, the three notes in the forest he never tired of hearing.

“Tune it out,” said Jon. “Tune it out. Goes both ways, don’t it, Davey?”

Jon had begun spewing cryptic statements soon after the beer started having its effect. Jon, who was always so reliably analytic and cautious, was, for reasons

David was slowly beginning to understand, yielding to his pent-up emotional self. A territory mostly unfamiliar to his friend. Or unsettling, David guessed. Untamed, maybe. And he guessed further that Jon needed to do this, needed to vent or unload or cry out or whatever this was and that clearly didn't happen often enough, and the beer was helping. Listening was something David could do for him.

"Throw some more shit on the fire, Davey!"

"How about an old peach crate?" David rose from his chair and stepped around the cooler, returning from the darkness with the empty crate he'd brought from home. More accumulation to be liberated in a cleansing fire at the old cabin. "Ought to burn nicely."

"Lemme do it!" Jon screwed his beer can into the gravel and reached for the crate. David passed it to him, and Jon then dropped the crate onto the burning logs. The jolt sent thousands of orange sparks spiraling into the darkness above them. The crate shifted, slipped a little to the side, and waited for the consuming flames.

"Whoa," said Jon with drunken marvel, swiveling his head upward. The flames soon licked the soft wood of the crate, just as they had two old birdhouses, bits of scrap lumber and broken picture frames, and an unraveling wicker picnic basket, turning them to ash that layered within the banking walls of the fire ring. Ash nearly a foot deep now after the decades of campfires burned there. The eager flames soon engulfed the crate, their bright orange light painting the faces of the two silent men sitting

before it. After only a few minutes, though, the crate collapsed in pieces onto the logs, the flames subdued once again.

Jon, recalling he had a beer, snatched it from the gravel and emptied it in one pull. He crushed the can and tossed it to the others at his feet, then fell into a slump in his chair.

"When I was growing up," he returned, "I was sure my dad never heard a word I said. Just tuned *me* out. Like nothing I had to say was worth a damn. 'Who told you that?' he'd say when I spoke my mind, like I couldn't have an original thought of my own." He ran his hands through his hair. "Now my old man is literally deaf, and he *can't* hear a word I say." Jon laughed, but David couldn't hear any delight in it.

"Fully deaf now? That's too bad." David's own father had drifted into senility before he died, which amounted to much the same thing. He understood Jon's lament, at least partly. But their fathers were different kinds of men, and David could only go so far with his empathy.

"Maybe so," Jon said after a moment. "Maybe so. But maybe not. Got another beer, Davey?"

David handed one across. There weren't many left.

"Maybe he just got tired of listening to all of the shit in the world, you know? I sure am sometimes. Still, he sits in his recliner and watches his news all day long. Like he *wants* to be miserable. And then he hollers when he needs something because he can't hear his own voice and modulate anymore.

Patsy and I have to write notes when we want to tell him anything.” Jon pulled on his beer and ground his shoes on the gravel beneath them. “I thought he’d finally mellow in his old age. At least ease up on *me* some. But he’s still full of his advice. And criticism. Still telling me to go back to school for another degree. Stop wasting my life. Shit, I’m nearly fifty, and my old man talks to me like I was in high school! So now, before I ever say anything to Mikey, I try out the words in my head using Dad’s voice. If I can hear him speaking the words, I don’t say them to Mikey.”

Jon took a last pull from his beer then threw the empty into the fire. More sparks rose into the dark. The can clinked off a log and came to rest outside the coals. David would retrieve it in the morning after the ash was cold. But he wasn’t going to hand over another beer until Jon asked for it.

Buddies since the third grade, Davey had befriended the little outcast that everyone called “Ears and Nose.” Jon had grown into his nose since then, but his big ears had kept pace and were still the first, inescapable feature people noticed about him. Probably the night’s mosquitos would too. (“You know what they say about men with big ears,” Jon hinted to anyone who would listen and to many who would not.)

“At least he leaves Mikey alone. I don’t think Dad knows what to make of him. Not that the boy would listen anyway.”

“How old is Mikey now?”

“Nineteen.”

“Wow. When did that happen?”

“You just keep feeding them and it’s what they do. You know better than I do. We’re getting to be old men, Davey.”

“Yeah. Curt’s going to be twenty-eight this August.”

“What’s new with Curt?”

“He and Kelly are officially married now. They’re trying to adopt. That’s a mess. Oh, and Curt got into the New York City Marathon this fall. He’s pretty excited about that. Kathy and I are going up there then to cheer him. Never been to New York.”

“So he’s still running?”

“Never stops. We even run together sometimes when I’m in town, but I slow him down.” There came a time in raising a child, David had learned, when you just had to get out of his way and let him fly on his own.

“Still doctoring?”

“Yep.”

“Good kid.”

Jon picked at some threads on the handle of the canvas chair. The forest continued to hum, but he let silence fall between them. David didn’t interrupt it. He thought maybe Jon was finally mellowing himself for the night. Maybe finding some release from the bottled up frustrations that he was slowly revealing to his friend of so many years. He was becoming his own father. A burden, David could see, Jon didn’t much like. Jon’s dad had organized and planned every moment of that boy’s life. He’d planned

his boyhood away, David thought. He recalled Curt once saying that engineers lacked empathy.

“Mikey told me the other day that he wants to quit studying engineering and go to art school. Couldn’t believe my ears. I didn’t know what to say. Had to get up and leave the room.” Jon spit into the fire. “Maybe not the wisest response now that I think about it.”

Their boys being such different ages, David had only met Mikey a handful of times over the years. But these stories Jon sometimes shared were enough for him to see how different Mikey was from his father, which was a good thing, a necessary thing for any son, David knew, though Jon didn’t appreciate that. Not yet since he was still struggling to do the same with his own father.

“We’d worked it out. I made a chart to hang on his wall for all of the classes he would need to take, and in what order, to get his engineering degree. He could check them off as he went along and see his progress. And he could still take his art and English electives. I worked those in too. Every step, every semester as plain as day. Bam, bam, bam. Get it all done in four years. Made perfect sense. Except now he wants to quit engineering before he’s barely started. Says he wants to draw cartoons. What kind of job is that? How much money can you make drawing cartoons?”

David didn’t know. Probably not a lot, but he wasn’t going to say that. Jon had already reached his conclusions anyway. David simply sat and waited for when his friend would feel the need to speak more.

The night sounds continued

to fill in the silence between them. The logs snapped and hissed as they burned. The peach crate was gone altogether. It was time to put more wood on the fire or else let it smolder down for the night. David would let Jon show the way.

Jon reached in his pocket and fished out his phone. He tapped it a few times and held its glow close to his face.

“No signal!”

“We’re on the wrong side of the ridge. If you hike up the road a ways, you can usually get a signal.”

“How far is ‘a ways’ exactly?”

“A few hundred feet.”

“Too much work!” He slipped the phone into the pocket of his shirt.

Who would he want to call at this time of night? David wondered. Was there something suddenly so important? But the moment had passed, and Jon was slumped again, staring into the flames.

“Mikey snuck out and got his ears pierced.” Jon’s words were barely above a whisper. David sensed something besides frustration in Jon’s voice now. Dismay. Embarrassment, maybe. “I don’t know where he got the money to do that. Don’t want to know, probably.”

“Lots of guys do that anymore.” Curt had once jokingly suggested that David get an ear pierced.

But even by the waning firelight, David could see tears in the eyes that were peering into the flames as though there might be answers there.

Jon turned to his friend.
“But does it mean anything, Davey?
Does it mean he’s a queer? Gay?”

There was genuine anguish in his question, and David felt his own frustration that he didn’t have an answer. Curt was very conventional in his manner. David had found that there were not many signposts on this path. Or maybe, he considered, there were too many, and you could never be sure which to heed. He couldn’t give Jon the experienced answer he sought from him.

“I don’t know, Jon. You need to ask Mikey? Or maybe Patsy could? Or let him come to you.”

“He doesn’t talk to me, Davey. He doesn’t listen to me.” He dropped his head into his hands.
“We’re strangers. I can’t talk about something like that with him. And he would *never* talk to me.”

“Jon, it wouldn’t matter if he was gay. He’s still your son.”

Jon didn’t hear. Or didn’t agree. Or maybe he didn’t know what he felt. What he ought to feel, was entitled to feel. David guessed Jon was clinging to a certainty that had served him with unexamined sufficiency until recently. But it was a heavy certainty that wasn’t all that certain when looked at with emotional wisdom. Yet it was hard to let go. He could hear the struggle in his friend’s words. It was a perspective he only rarely saw across their years of friendship. Just once before had he been this open with David. Not too long after he’d married Patsy and they’d finally had a boys night out, with too many lubricating beers again, Jon confessed his doubts about his choice. “It’s like when you’re coming up to a stoplight,
Paul Lamb

Davey,” he had said then. “And the light turns yellow. You know you should stop, but you’re going so fast, and you’re so close to the intersection, and you just keep going.” He never spoke of that again, may not have even remembered it the next day, and David was wise enough not to bring it up, to pick at the scab that seemed to be Jon’s feelings about his marriage. Soon enough little Mikey came along and the family settled into the give and take of their lives together, and David hoped his friend’s problem was behind him. But problems, David knew, had a way of never really leaving.

“What else you got to burn?”

“Maybe it’s time to let the fire die, Jon.” There *was* one more thing he’d brought from home to burn. An old wooden chair that Curt had scavenged from someone’s curbside trash when he was a boy. He’d wanted to paint it like a rainbow, every slat and piece of wood a different color, and use it to sit at his desk. But his enthusiasm had waned before the first drop of paint had been applied, and the chair soon was just taking up space in their tiny apartment, then tucked, forgotten, in a dusty corner of the basement when they moved to their house. Yet now, decades later, David couldn’t bring himself to throw this remnant of his son’s life on the fire. He found that unlike the worn-through gloves that he had retired to the flames, to Jon’s astonishment, he didn’t want to be rid of Curt’s old chair after all.

“Then gimme another beer, Davey!”

“They’re all gone.” That might have even been true. “We drank every one.”

"Don't say it! No more beer? It hurts my ears!"

He stood abruptly and nearly fell into the fire. David had grabbed his arm to hold his swaying friend more or less upright.

"Let's go into town right now and get some more. C'mon, Davey. I'll drive."

"No, Jon. I think we're done for tonight."

"C'mon. Let's get some more beer. I need more beer."

"Jon, we're done. What you need is to go to bed now. Let me help you."

Jon considered the words as he stood swaying in his friend's grip.

"One thing first." As David held his arm, Jon unzipped once more and peed on the coals. "Gotta put out a fire if you're gonna leave it. Right, Davey?"

"Right, Jon. Are you zipped up again?"

Jon didn't hear. He let himself be turned from the fire and steered around the camp chairs. A can clinked before their feet. David reached into his pocket and brought out a flashlight. He didn't like to use it much since he knew his way around the cabin site, and he would lose his night vision if he did. But Jon was a mess, and getting him into the cabin and into his bed was going to be tough enough without the hamper of darkness.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Into the cabin, Jon. You get the luxury suite. Here are three steps onto the porch. See?"

"What?"

He managed to get his friend into the second bedroom and played the flashlight around the area. "There's your bed. And I'll leave you this so you can see where you're going if you need to get up in the night. Please use it. Okay, Jon?"

Jon didn't answer but instead fell back on the bed. It squeaked in sudden protest.

That was how he was going to remain, David realized, because Jon had no more initiative in him. The beer had displaced it. He tugged off Jon's boots but decided not to tuck his friend back into his jeans. That was perhaps too much for the depth of their friendship, especially in light of Jon's worries before the campfire. David threw a quilt over him to keep off any stray mosquitos that found their way inside the cabin.

David turned off the flashlight and set it on the bedside table. It would rest in the moonlight there for a while, and maybe Jon would see it if he needed it.

He didn't close the bedroom door behind him, removing one hurdle from Jon's night, and returned to the fire. It was mostly just glowing embers now. David scattered the coals, spreading them so they could burn out more quickly. And then he unzipped as well to quench the coals further.

It was only after he had done this and was turning to return to the cabin for the night that he finally heard the call of a whippoorwill. The very best sound in the forest. A totem sound for him.

In the morning, David heard no sounds coming from Jon's bedroom, not even snoring, but he noticed that the door was closed. Best let him sleep it off, David thought, and he passed quietly through the cabin and out the door to see about rekindling the fire and maybe making some coffee. A weak string of white smoke curled from the fire ring. Empty beer cans were scattered around it. He didn't know when Curt and Kelly might be out next, so he thought he should tidy up and not let them find a mess. Not just because Curt was so fastidious, but because he didn't want his son to think that his dad now held debaucheries at the old family cabin.

It was when he turned to go into the cabin to fetch a trash bag that he realized Jon's car was gone. That was unexpected, and he first thought that maybe Jon had driven up the hill to get a cell signal and call Patsy. Or even Mikey. Maybe he had purged enough before the campfire and could finally attempt to speak with his son.

David grabbed Curt's old chair to take into the cabin. He shouldn't have left it out for the morning dew to find it if he'd intended to keep it. Maybe he would paint it himself, he thought, and surprise Curt when he was next out to the cabin. "I didn't forget your dream, Curt," he would say. That was a good idea.

Inside the cabin he knocked softly on Jon's door, not expecting him to be in the room, of course, but just showing some reasonable courtesy. No answer came and David opened the door. The room was a mess. The mattress was half off the bed and the sheets were twisted and

spread across the rug on the floor. Jon had done some thrashing in the night apparently. What was that all about?

When David tugged at the sheets to free them from the mattress, a small vodka bottle slipped from them and clinked on the floor. The vodka still in it began to spill on the rug and David snatched it quickly. He wasn't sure if Jon had driven into town after all—he certainly wasn't in any condition to do so if he had—or had brought the vodka with him. It didn't matter. What mattered was that his friend appeared to have deeper problems than those he'd confessed around the campfire.

David set the bottle on the table beside the untouched flashlight. When he turned back to the mattress, his toe knocked something under the bed. He bent to reach for it and found Jon's cell phone. So he hadn't driven up the road to make a call. He had apparently just left to go home.

Was he embarrassed by his firelight confessions? By his behavior? By his appetites? Or was he just in such a hurry to get home to his family that he simply forgot his phone? David understood that he would likely never know. And maybe that was a good thing. As much as Jon needed to talk, a great part of him needed to remain silent as well.

David would make a long detour on his drive home to bring Jon's phone to him. Maybe chat a little more to see where things stood. That's what a friend did, right?

Journey

And if blue is an illusion
what will become of innocence.

Lorca, Autumn Song

The long roads of us, years toward the musics
Of rivers, heavy beat
Of always horizons.

The blues of sky and sea, great swaths of world
Where sunlight and promise
Met and stayed,
Twin anchors keeping us firm,
Keeping us warm.

If we were only sojourners in somebody else's world
We kept on the trail, made steps where none had been,
Made feast from the leftovers of fields and what
Found in the lendings of the fortunate.

In winter we climbed high in the
Mountains to build warmth from ice and cold, small fires
Welcoming as the stars close enough to touch in books
Of summer dreams.

When war came we backtracked on roads now strangered,
Long arteries leaking blood on surfaces
Once armored in nothing more
Than dust.

Caravans of the aged and wounded and children already
Specter eyed and
Numbed of mind.

The slaughter of the innocent we heard over and over through
Stench of death and shriek of shells overhead.

Who are we some asked in moments of calm. Who are they who
Bomb us from behind the mountain.
Where does innocence begin,
And end.

Winner of The Magnolia Review Ink Award

Crescent Drive

Adam tossed Carla's wedding album into the banker's box after he dumped a DVD of Meghan and Amanda's fourth birthday party at Disneyland. Carla's lower lip trembled as she ejected a four-letter word and told Adam to move faster.

She spoke that way when she was scared. Adam rolled the expletive through his mind, the verb use of the word, for Carla was a tawny, fit animal, and the verb was the reason he had come to her house. Carla's hard legs pushed against the edge of her shorts. The grooves of her striated forearms ran to her wrists. The first three buttons of her three-quarter-length white blouse—the one she wore for Adam's visits—were open, exposing the start of her cleavage, moist from sweat. Her gray eyes were wide. He could smell her despite the smoke in the air, and her scent made him want to—

"Fuck, Adam, don't stop," Carla said.

"Relax," Adam said. "It's not that close." He walked out of the master bedroom closet and across the room to the French doors. Located at the top of Skyline Way, Carla and Irving's home featured a view that swept from Catalina Island to downtown Los Angeles, but Adam saw little of it today. Black smoke reared from the east ridge of the canyon, reaching into the clear sky where it billowed into a mushroom cloud and made the Santa Ana wind

smell like char.

He had heard the announcement—"Voluntary evacuation is in effect"—over the bullhorn of a patrol car, moments after he had arrived at Carla's house and had seen her BMW parked on the street, facing downhill. Adam had driven his Lexus onto the carport and parked under her eucalyptus tree. That had been at noon, an hour ago. He wanted Carla then and he wanted her more now. Adam returned to the closet and reached for Carla, eager for her good smooth skin, but she pulled away.

With all five TVs in the house tuned to the same station, the newscaster's voice sounded plangent as it boomed through the rooms. As of now, she announced, traffic was being diverted off Sunset Boulevard, starting west of Bundy. "It's still optional," Adam said. "You'll be fine. After all, you and Irving just finished your remodel." It was a pathetic attempt at humor and he knew it.

Carla said, "I don't want to lose my things."

"Is that why you left your key in the ignition? So someone'll steal them?"

Carla straightened up and said, "You should do the same, so we can get out of here fast."

He followed her out of the closet. From a shelf on the king-size headboard, Carla removed more pictures of her

twins: on the beach, in the yard, at parties. Adam ran a hand through his thick hair.

A helicopter swooped near the house. "Voluntary evacuation..." said a metallic bullhorn voice. Adam was surprised at its clarity over the rotors.

"See? There's no hurry," he said and put his hands on her shoulders. "I love kissing you."

She allowed a fast French kiss before packing the photos.

Adam opened the French doors. Carla's lawn was Astroturf green; the furniture on her pool deck, perfectly arranged. Only a blue plastic bucket next to the infinity pool marred the landscape. The canyon's far ridge was a bright yellow band that divided the smoke from the earth. The rich, warm air energized Adam. He wanted to take Carla on the flagstone island in the middle of her swimming pool, as he had last month, at noon, with the fountain bathing them.

Carla said, "You're mad because you ditched that inner-city kid you mentor to come over here."

"Yes, I did," Adam said. "The same way you blew off that open house, so let's have some fun. Irving doesn't get business trips to Chicago that often."

Carla moved to the kitchen, and Adam trailed after her. The sinks, the refrigerator door, the countertops, the marble top island, the twelve burners on the Wolf stove—all were spotless. Pictures of firefighters filled the flat screen between the cabinets while the announcer talked of "nervous residents." Adam ran a hand over the

smooth, cool countertops on which there was nothing but a bottle of Fiji water. He pulled out a drawer and let it glide shut before following Carla across the foyer into the living room, a white space with a white marble floor and a white Louise Nevelson wall sculpture, much too heavy to carry. Carla removed her small Rodin mock-up from the coffee table.

"Why don't you assign him a case with lots of out-of-town depositions?" Carla asked.

They had reached the den, and Adam raised his voice to compete with the television. "That's not what I do as managing partner. Irving has his own clients."

Carla took an antique sextant from the bookshelf and the ivory chess pieces from the game table. "Let's keep moving," she said.

Into their trunks they dumped her things, in no particular order. The rare books went into his Lexus; her children's clothes, into her BMW. Adam put the keys to her safe deposit box in her glove compartment. Carla filled her console storage compartment with jewelry. Several small art pieces ended up in Adam's car, covered by three of Carla's blouses, which, when she went back into the house, Adam brought to his nose and inhaled. Maybe he loved her, he thought. Carla returned with some of Meghan's toys.

Adam said, "Just our luck to have a brush fire today."

"We'll have time. I promise."

"When?" The word came out louder than he wanted. Then, more quietly, "Look, if we

have to get out of here, why not spend the night somewhere?"

Carla maneuvered another banker's box into the Lexus' rear seat. "And do what with my things? Leave them in the cars?"

"They'll be safe at a good hotel," Adam said.

"I want to take everything to my parents."

"Where do they live?"

"4000 Crescent Drive," she said. "Park down the block, and I'll take the stuff in myself. I'll meet you at, how about the Beverly Wilshire?"

He followed her back inside. A travel commercial blared from the flat screens. He brought another box out to his car. High school yearbooks lay on top. Carla and Irving had met in civics class. At first she had limited their dates to one a month, but Irving had persisted and when, after college, Carla was home and lonely, he had called again. Within a year they were married.

Adam opened Irving's yearbook and found Carla's head cheerleader photograph: body in air, arms to the sky. Carla had chosen to sign Irving's yearbook on that page: "Many, many thanks for everything and the best of everything always. (Oh brother, what a sentence!) Love, Carla"

Another helicopter chop-chopped overhead, preventing him from hearing Carla approach. "Here, look what he wrote to me," she said, turning the pages to Irving's senior portrait. "'The chemicals of our minds are in synchrony.' A real geek, for sure. I went to the prom with Doug." She slapped the book shut and tossed it into

Adam's car.

"Who's Doug?"

"The cutest guy in the class. He ran track and got straight As and killed himself in a car accident his first year at Yale."

Adam folded his arms around Carla's narrow waist. She pulled free and said, "We gotta get the twins' art."

In Meghan's room, thirty watercolors hung on the walls. Meghan and Amanda were at a friend's for an overnight, arranged a week earlier in order to clear the house for Adam's visit. "Take Amanda's drawings," Carla said. "She'll cry for a month if she loses them."

As he stripped the walls, Adam felt the rich texture of the Somerset paper Carla had bought for Amanda. He could hear Carla in Meghan's room, pulling down her watercolors. Adam preferred Meghan's work. In a harder medium, Meghan succeeded in depicting subjects and moods. Amanda's pencil had deposited mere swirls on the paper.

Carla put Meghan's art in Adam's car. Adam laid Amanda's drawings in the passenger seat of Carla's BMW. "Okay, what else?" he asked.

Carla paused. "I—I think that's it. Albums, videos, jewelry, papers,"—she patted her pants pocket—"my flash drive. I think we have it all."

"In that case—" Before Adam could touch her, Carla eased away, around the side of the house to the backyard. Adam sidled up behind her at the edge of the lawn, where the grass met the brush and her property dropped down the slope. The eastern side of the

canyon was a glowing slab. Tufts of dry wind caressed them.

"We should get out of here," Carla said.

"Darling, they'll never let the fire get up here. Not with all these five million dollar houses." Scattered across the canyon floor were trucks and firefighters. Seen from Carla's house, they were shrunk to the size of Currier & Ives miniatures.

Adam cupped her breasts in his hands. "We can watch from your bedroom. Might be fun."

This time Carla did not move away. "You really like taking chances, don't you, Adam?"

"I've never seen a big fire up close," Adam said. He squeezed her, and she leaned her head back against his. Despite the smoke and sweat, her brown hair smelled freshly washed. "Let's go storm chasing next spring," he said. "It'll be a great excuse to spend a week together."

"My aunt and uncle live in Kansas," Carla said. "I've seen tornadoes, thank you."

He nibbled at her neck. "I like your remodeling job," Adam said.

"For \$500,000, you better," Carla said. She turned and kissed him. "I supervised the whole thing, and it came in at cost."

"That's unheard of in this town."

He guided Carla through the French doors into the master bedroom, stark because her art had been removed from the walls. The anchorwoman was lecturing about fire prevention. Adam hit the mute button before coaxing Carla's body toward

him.

"You should have seen Meghan and Amanda the first night in their new bedrooms," Carla said.

Adam said, "They were great at the beach party." The law firm's party had been six weeks ago. Adam had watched the girls and his son build a sand castle, laughing together as they did so, until without warning, Adam's wife had said she was bored and wanted to go home.

Carla said, "I've never seen them so happy."

"And Irving?" A plane buzzed in low, silencing them for the few seconds it took to cross the canyon and dump retardant on the fire.

"Yeah," Carla said. "He likes the remodel. I guess. It brought us closer together, which is okay because you'll never marry me."

"We've talked about that," Adam said. "I don't know what else I can say." He looked at the empty walls.

"I know," Carla said. "You love your son, you can't afford a divorce, you want that judgeship. You've said it all, dear."

"I could fall in love with you," Adam said.

Carla said, "Irving has to go to Houston on October 28. Can you get away?"

"I have a mediation that day," Carla remained silent. "All right," Adam said. "I can reschedule it."

"Do that, Adam. I'll make it worthwhile for you. And listen. I signed up to serve meals at the Union Rescue Mission on Thanksgiving. Why don't you join me?"

He paused to listen to a helicopter before answering, "I'd have to see."

"It'll make us feel good, and then we can go to one of those motels on Vermont Avenue, you know, where they rent rooms by the hour. You'll be home in time to carve the turkey."

Adam kissed the hollow of her neck and enjoyed the salty taste. Carla's breathing deepened. He knew she liked to be undressed slowly. He slipped his hands under her blouse and worked his fingers along her back muscles, then withdrew one hand and unfastened her fourth button.

"I need a moment," Carla said and disappeared into her bathroom.

Carla's telephone rang, and because its caller ID flashed the reverse 9-1-1 system, Adam picked it up. The evacuation was now mandatory. Adam slammed down the receiver.

"Who was that," Carla asked when she emerged, naked and glistening.

"Some telemarketer," Adam said.

"I want you," she said and reached for him.

A siren warbled in the distance. "God, I missed you this month," Adam said.

She squeezed his upper arms and smiled a wicked grin. "You like doing it in my husband's bed?"

"I love doing it with you everywhere." Adam propped himself on his hands and noticed, alone on the headboard, a framed photograph of Carla's husband.

Carla said, "Guess I forgot to pack it."

Adam glared at the picture. "Watch, Irving. I'll show you how it's done."

He thought he heard Carla saying, "Let's cuddle," before the roar assaulted him, and when he opened his eyes, the TV screen was black, and everything beyond the French doors was black. Adam grabbed his pants and bolted outside, why, later, he couldn't say. To see the burning canyon—was that it? A helicopter buzzing the house—was that it? Adam saw neither. Blobs of smoke obscured everything except the bucket on the deck, which Adam thrust into the pool. Wind roared at him and burning brands flashed over his head. He felt as if he were in front of a mammoth hairdryer that had been turned on high, and it blasted him back to the bedroom, where he heaved the bailing bucket and its contents vanished into the dark. "Carla," Adam bellowed, and he would have yelled, "Let's go," except that his next breath took in nothing but smoke that made him gag. He went for his loafers and managed to put one on when a flame slashed at the edge of Adam's right hand, and Adam ran.

From the hall, he heard a "Help me," puny against the roar that had become deafening. The air crackled, sizzled, sputtered, fizzed. Carla's next "Help me" sounded farther off, toward the kitchen, or was she in Meghan's room? His eyes stung too much to open them; instinct told him to save his sight, and so he banged into walls as he chased her screams, and he hollered when the sole of his bare foot touched something insanely hot.

He limped and coughed through the house, trying to follow her cries, barely audible now, until something—a beam?—crashed in front of him. Adam cracked open one eye. It was the chandelier in the foyer, and it wasn't dark anymore. The house was bright and the fire was lunging at him. Adam reeled through the front door onto the carport, but the fire had arrived there first and consumed the eucalyptus tree whose burning branches had fallen onto his car and, because the sunroof was open, onto the seats, where the flames feasted on his upholstery and Meghan's art. He started back for Carla, but managed only two steps because the pavement felt like a griddle and beyond the doorway he saw nothing but orange. He tried to call her name, got out only a croaking "Ca," because the second syllable turned into a wild cough, and when she did not emerge, Adam hobbled to Carla's car on the street, banging his shod foot as he got in.

The driver's seat burned his naked back. The baking hot ignition key seared Adam's right thumb and index finger. Adam screeched and weaved down Skyline Way, slamming against the curbs as he went, and the contents of the passenger seat spilled onto his lap. He shoved them away moments before hitting a speed bump and feeling the grate of chassis on asphalt. To his left, houses were disappearing. The fire had stripped one to its frame and leaped to the next, where, launching from the roof, a red ball soared over his car. The air sucked his mouth dry. His hand stung, his ankle throbbed, and his back felt

raw.

The street curved left, something Adam failed to notice until his right front wheel skittered along the curb and he overcorrected, causing more of Carla's possessions to slide off the passenger seat and thump against the door. He wished he had gotten to know Amanda and Meghan better. His coughs became savage hacks. They could act in a school play with his son. Half a mile later, the view cleared. He was at the bottom of Skyline Way, where fire trucks lined the curbs and gray hoses lay in the street. Firefighters surrounded him, all in plastic yellow helmets and yellow gear with brighter yellow stripes at the end of their sleeves.

He started to turn around, but one of the firefighters, a husky woman, waved at him to move on. Adam lowered the window and coughed, "There's a woman up at 1090. I—"

"Keep driving, sir," she said.

"Please. She's my—"

"Keep driving, sir. Right now."

At Sunset Boulevard, Adam was diverted south, into the flats. He crawled through the traffic to West Los Angeles, averaging a block every few minutes. His cough had subsided, but his whole body throbbed, from his singed red hand to his bare sole from which something now oozed. He was not going home in Carla's car, laden with her belongings, and in any event, Adam had told his wife that he had two days of depositions in San Francisco, an alibi given to his entire office in case his wife

called. He drove slowly down the street, past colonial houses and traditional houses, all set back on capacious lots. When he arrived at Crescent Drive, he braked, and the last of Amanda's drawings slipped off the passenger seat onto the floor.

Adam's iPhone vibrated. "Carla, darling," he was about to exclaim, but the caller ID displayed Gonzalo's number. He probably wanted to know why Adam had failed to mentor him today. As soon as the phone dumped Gonzalo into voice mail, Adam tried Carla's mobile phone. All circuits were busy. It was getting dark. He tapped the first two digits of her landline into his cell.

The bulletin on the radio stopped his finger. Forty-two houses on Skyline Way had been totally destroyed, the announcer said, and the fire was headed west across the Palisades highlands. It was too early to know if anyone had been killed, the newsman reported, but Adam felt a vice close on his ice cold gut.

4000 Crescent. The number was easy to remember. Adam eased the car south to a house famed by trees and mature shrubbery. He shifted in his seat and stared, wondering which second-story window opened into Carla's old bedroom. The dark one to the left, he guessed. Light came from the windows on the right. Her parents must be watching the news and trying to reach their daughter. He imagined himself delivering Carla to their home at this moment. Would he go inside with her or let her out and drive into the night? Would he tell her he loved her before

she left the car?

Headlights approached, slowed, and moved on, but not after making Adam shiver. He knew it; he felt it. Sometime between now and sunrise, another pair of headlights would come, this time to stop at number 4000. Adam had to leave before then, before that car parked and one—no, it would be two—individuals—dressed in suits or uniforms?—got out and approached the front door. Adam did not want to hear the first scream, the loud male voice he knew would follow, or the sobs that would last and last.

It was late. Adam let Carla's car drift away from 4000 Crescent Drive, and at the first large intersection, he turned east, in the direction of a hotel where he and Carla's possessions would have to spend the night. Waiting for a light to change, Adam lowered his head. Amanda's drawings lay on the floor. He leaned over to pick up the top one, a jumble of black squiggles that made no sense to him. Holding the work by its edge, Adam put it on the passenger seat.

Highways Like Frozen Rivers

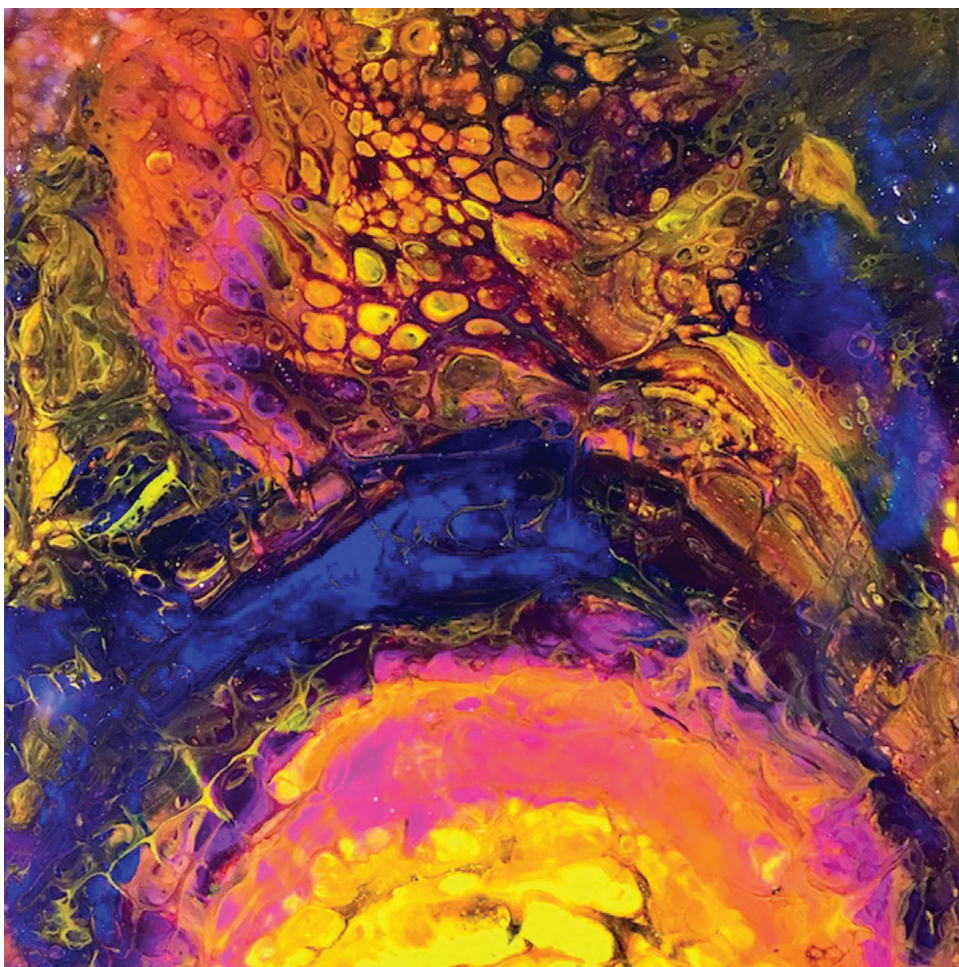
The highways like frozen rivers
isolate,
capillaries and deltas of asphalt
sprawling,
'this is the future' the past will say.

The roads fill with travelers almost
together
yet always alone, infinite headlights
weave
and merge—so why is it still dark?

There you are, driven insane by
clogged
arteries of pavement and pollution,
gasping,
a human out of air, for some joy.

Friend, breathe deeply. It helps.
Can you see,
beyond the windshield, the mountains?
Can you hear,
above the radio, the rain?

Phoenix Rising



Dog Days

Tuesday evening you and I fought for nothing. Tired for explanations, unfit to negotiate, we slept sealed in our sulk. In the night, like every summer, fires burst over the mountains. Wednesday, a thickness in the air made our breathing harder. Nothing huge—a sense of oppression, that’s all. Around breakfast we apologized. Why did we even argue? The reason was futile. What took hold of us? It all seemed unreasonable.

Wednesday the air conditioning broke in my colleague’s car (the one I ride with). Two sound systems at work overheated, then collapsed. Was it because of the outside temperature, quickly rising? Now I could smell smoke, though the fires were still far and, they said, under check. But the smell was pungent.

Thursday my colleague and I were sent to the nearby city of Sunland. We are dancers. Our company sells Polynesian-themed shows throughout the month of August. It’s a summer routine that we know by heart, as we know the institutions and residences where we perform. But on Thursday we got entirely lost. In our separate cars, we wandered the hills through serpentine avenues, leading strictly nowhere.

We arrived on location minutes before show time. “Luckily,” we simultaneously exclaimed, “I met a mailman!” Later we figured out it was the same one. How did it feel, being stopped twice by a frantic gal in a grass skirt? And why were we stranded? Did the heat cause some kind of mirage? True, the air was scorching. Maybe it subtly affected our cognitive processes.

We danced in the patio for a congregation of sweet, smiling elders. The fires were so close, we thought we could hear them. Was it an illusion? A noise, as if someone were trampling fallen leaves... But why was the party outside? Two in the afternoon! The traditional menu involved a whole pig, slowly roasted on a barbecue just a couple of feet from our stage. I could see sweat beading those weary, frail, wrinkled faces. Not surprisingly a lady fainted.

One of our peak numbers is danced in honor of Pele, fiery goddess of Hawaiian volcanoes. We hold lava rocks in our palms, playing them like castanets. In the sun, they get burning hot. Our hip twists and suggestive hand motions are supposed to appease the divinity. Maybe on Thursday they didn’t.

In the evening I slipped in bed like a balloon deflating—a soap bubble melting with the most inaudible ‘pop,’ a tear on the pillow. I was fried, to say the least. In the middle of night you got up for a drink of water. The heat was smothering, the air drier and drier, the smell acrid. As you groped your way to the kitchen, you must have bumped your toe against a shelf, close to the sewing table. Nothing but a vibration, yet a stack of small drawers fell—piled up in precarious balance. Beads and buttons exploded over the floor—a rain of plastic and glass, a carpet of stars. On my four, I gathered it all.

Friday, when we started the show, a furious client interrupted us. He had canceled the thing more than a week before, he barked. We should pack up and go. The air smelled of charred animal’s skin—another pig,

roasting. In the restrooms where we hastily put on civilian clothes, my cell rung. Could we sub in another place? Two performers of our group had car trouble. A water pump broke.

Our gig having been canceled, we arrived to the new address ahead of time. We sat in a minuscule square in front of the mansion. Tall trees promised a corner of shade, maybe a gush of breeze. The man shouting, earlier on, had shaken my nerves a bit. I needed to cool my mind, if nothing else. Here: I had a little craft project in my tote bag. Tiny scissors... I began meticulously cutting paper feathers. Pretty. Light. Soft. Soothing. Then a whirlpool of dust, out of nowhere, blew the lot away. Listen. No, listen. No, I didn’t get mad. I laughed. I just couldn’t stop.