Georgia Review

The Ashes of August
Author(s): Kim Barnes
Source: *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 54, No. 2, Remembering Stanley W. Lindberg: A Festschrift (Summer 2000), pp. 308-323
Published by: Georgia Review
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41402106
Accessed: 19-09-2018 14:20 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Georgia Review is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Georgia Review*

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Kim Barnes

The Ashes of August

LATE summer light comes to Idaho's Clearwater Canyon in a wash of color so sweet it's palatable: butterscotch and toffee, caramel and honey. It is as though the high fields of wheat, the darker ravines tangled with blackberry, sumac, and poison ivy, the riverbanks bedded in basalt and shadowed by cottonwood and locust–all have drawn from the arid soil the last threaded rindles of moisture and spun them to gold. By four o'clock, the thermometer outside my kitchen window will read 105°. In another three hours, a hot whip of wind, and then those few moments when the wheat beards and brittle leaves, even the river, are gilded in alpenglow. Often my children call me to the window, and even as we watch, the soft brilliance darkens to sepia. But soon there will be the moon, illuminating the bridge that seems to levitate above the pearlescent river. Some nights my family and I spread our blankets on the deck and lie uncovered to trace the stars, to witness the Perseids of August–the shower of meteors so intense we exhaust ourselves pointing and counting, then fall asleep while the sky above us sparks and flares.

Other nights there is no moon or stars, only clouds gathering in the south and the air so close we labor to breathe. "Storm coming," my daughter announces, and we wait for the stillness to give way, for the wind we'll hear first as it pushes across the prairie and down the draws, bringing with it the grit of harvest. Bolts etch the sky, hit the ridges all around us; the thunder cracks above our heads. Perhaps the crop-saving rain will come, or the hail, leaving our garden shredded and bruised. Sometimes, there is nothing but the lightning and thunder, the gale bending the yellow pines to impossible angles, one tree so old and seemingly wise to wind that we watch it as the miners once watched their caged canaries: should the pine ever break, we may do well to seek concrete shelter.

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

These are the times we huddle together on the couch, mesmerized and alarmed. We know that the storm will pass and that we will find ourselves to have again survived. We know, too, that somewhere around us, the lightning-struck forests have begun to burn; by morning, the canyon will be nearly unseeable, the sunset a smoky vermilion.

The West, Wallace Stegner so famously noted, is defined by its aridity, and this stretch of north Idaho canyon land where I live is no exception. The Clearwater River is the reason for the numerous settlements along its reach as well as those of its tributaries. Logging, mining, agriculture: all are dependent on the presence and ways of water. Fire, too, defines this land, and at no time more so than in the month of August, when the early rains of spring have given way to weeks of no measurable precipitation, when the sweet blossoms of syringa and chokecherry have shriveled and fallen, when wild plums hang blistered with ferment. We must go high into the mountains where the snowpack held longest to find huckleberries, our belt-strung buckets banging our legs, our mouths and fingers stained black, and we go prepared to defend ourselves against two things: the bears who share our fondness for fruit, and fire. Our bear defense is little more than loud conversation and an occasional glance toward the perimeters of our patch. For fire, we carry in our pickup a shovel and a water-worthy bucket. If called upon to do so, we could hope to dig a fire line, or drown a few flames if lucky enough to be near a creek or spring.

Born and raised within a fifty-mile radius of where I now live, I have memories of late summer that are infused with fire. As a child growing up in the logging camps of the Clearwater National Forest, I knew August meant that my father would rise at two A.M. to work the dew-damp hours before noon, when a machine-struck spark could set the wilderness ablaze. But no one could mandate the hours ruled by lightning, and with the lightning came the fires—as many as fifty or sixty from one storm—and with the fires came the pleas for volunteers to man the Pulaskis, buckets, and bulldozers. Often, the loggers were not asked so much as pressed into service, ordered from their sites and sent to the front lines still wearing their calked boots and pants cut short to avoid snags.

Like my father, my uncles had taken up the life of the lumberjack. Our communal camp was a circle of small wooden trailers, out of which each morning my cousins came, still in their pajamas, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. I remember my mother and aunts in those weeks of

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

searing high-altitude heat, how they rose with their husbands and made their biscuits and pies so that the wood-fueled stove might cool before dawn, then loaded a pillowcase with sandwiches, fried pies, jugs of iced tea and Kool-Aid that would chill in the creek. Somewhere just over the ridge the men battled to keep the fires at bay, while my cousins and I explored the cool recesses of the stream bed, searching for mussels whose halves spread out like angel wings, prying the translucent periwinkles from their casings to be stabbed onto hooks that would catch the trout we'd have for supper. My sensory memories of those afternoons—the sun on my shoulders, the icy water at my knees, the incense of pine and camas, the image of my mother and aunts lounging with the straps of their swimsuits pulled down, the brush of skin against skin as my cousins sifted the water beside me in their quest for gold—are forever linked with my awareness of the smoke rising in columns only a few miles away and the drone of planes overhead, belly-heavy with retardant, the smell of something dangerous that caused us to lift our faces to the breeze as it shifted. When the men returned they were red-eyed and weary, smudged with pitch and ash, smelling like coals from the furnace. I watched them drink tumbler after tumbler of iced tea, wondered at the dangers they faced, and thought that I might want to be like them and come home a fighter and a hero.

As a child raised in the woods, I gained my awareness and wariness of fire by way of the stories told by my elders as they sat around the table after dinner, picking their teeth with broomstraw, pouring another cup of the stout coffee kept warm atop the cookstove. New fires brought stories of old ones, and so August was full of fire, both distant and near, burning the night horizon, burning the edges of my dreams.

There was the fire of 1910, the one most often remembered by those old enough to have witnessed its destruction, their stories retold by the generations who have sat and listened and seen with their own eyes the scars left across the land. That year, July had come and gone with only .05 inches of rain. Thunderstorms had started spot fires throughout the Clearwater National Forest; the Forest Service and its small force of men, working with little more than shovels and picks, could not hope to suppress so much flame. And then came August, "ominous, sinister, and threatening," according to Forest Service worker Clarence B. Swim's account of that summer. "Dire catastrophe seemed to permeate the very atmosphere. Through the first weeks of August, the sun rose a coppery

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

red ball and passed overhead . . . as if announcing impending disaster. The air felt close, oppressive, and explosive."[1]

"Ten days of clear summer weather," the old-timers say, "and the forest will burn." No rains came, and the many small fires that crews had been battling for days grew stronger and joined and began a run that would last for weeks. It swept up and down and across the Clearwater drainages: the Lochsa, Warm Springs Creek, Kelly Creek, Hemlock Creek, Cayuse Creek–the Idaho sky was black with ash. One Forest Service veteran, Ralph S. Space, whose written history of the Clearwater Forest contains lively anecdotal recollections, remembers smoke so thick that, as a nine-year-old boy rising to another day of no rain, he could look directly into the sun without hurting his eyes. The chickens, he said, never left their roost.[2]

On 21 August 1910, the wind began to blow, picking up velocity as the sun crested, until the bull pine and white fir swayed and snapped, and the dust rose up from the dirt roads and fields to join the smoke in a dervish of soot and cinder. Men along the fires' perimeters were told to run, get out, it was no use. Some took to the creeks and rivers, pulling their hysterical horses along behind them. (One legend tells of a panicked horse breaking away and racing the fire some fifty miles east to Superior, Montana–and making it.) Others fled northward, subsisting on grouse whose feathers were too burnt for them to fly.

As in any war, many who fought the fires came away scarred, some bearing the marks like badges of courage while others, whose less-than-brave actions in the face of disaster had earned them the coward's stripes, hid themselves in the backrooms of saloons or simply disappeared. One man, part of a group sent to fight the blaze near Avery, Idaho, was so undone by the blistering heat and hurricane roar of the approaching fire that he deserted, pulled his pistol, and shot himself–the only casualty to beset his crew.[3]

One of the heroes was a man named Edward Pulaski. When he found himself and the forty-three men he led cut off from escape, he ordered them into the nearby War Eagle mine, believing the large tunnel their

---

[1] Stan Cohen and Don Miller, *The Big Burn: The Northwest's Forest Fire of 1910* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1978), 3.

[2] Ralph S. Space, *The Clearwater Story: A History of the Clearwater National Forest* (Forest Service USDA, 1964), 96.

[3] Stan B. Cohen and A. Richard Guth, *Northern Region: A Pictorial History of the U.S. Forest Service 1891–1945* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1991), 61; Stan Cohen and Don Miller, 18–19.

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

only hope for survival. As the heat rose and the fire ate its way closer, several of the men panicked and threatened to run. Pulaski drew his pistol and forced the men to lie belly down, faces to the ground, where the coolest air would gather. He hung blankets across the tunnel's entrance, dampening them with what water he could, until he fainted. By the time the flames had passed around them, sucking the oxygen from the cavern, replacing it with a scorching, unbreathable wind, five were dead from suffocation. Another man who had chosen to run before Pulaski could stop him was found a short distance away: the rescue party had stepped over him on the way in, thinking the blackened mass a burned log; only on their return trip did they recognize the charred body for what it was. Pulaski had stood strong in the face of events "such as sear the souls of lesser men," declared the Washington, DC, *Star*.[4] He would go on to become even more famous for his invention bearing his name, the Pulaski—a combination shovel, ax, and mattock that since has become standard equipment for fighters of wildfire.

Pulaski's story is just one of many that came from that time of unimaginable conflagration. For three days and nights the wind howled up the canyons and down the draws, taking the fire with it. The ash, caught by updraft and high current, traveled for thousands of miles before falling in places that most Idahoans had only heard of: in Saskatchewan, Denver, and New York, the air was thick with the detritus of western larch and hemlock; in San Francisco, ships dropped anchor outside the bay and waited for days, unable to sight land through the blue-gray smoke that had drifted south and descended upon the city.[5] Norman Maclean wrote that in his home town of Missoula, "the street lights had to be turned on in the middle of the afternoon, and curled ashes brushed softly against the lamps as if snow were falling heavily in the heat of August."[6] The "Big Blowup," they call it now, or the "Big Burn"—not one large fire, but 1,736 smaller ones that had come together across the Clearwater Region. By the time it was over, three million acres and many small towns across Idaho and Montana lay in ruins; at least eighty-five people, most of them firefighters, were dead.[7]

---

[4] Cohen and Miller, 18.

[5] Cohen and Guth, 58.

[6] Norman Maclean, "USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky," in *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 140.

[7] Cohen and Miller, v.

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The Big Blowup of 1910 was not the last August fire to rage across the Clearwater: 1914, 1919, 1929, 1934—major fires every five to ten years. The fire of 1919 is synonymous in my mind with the North Fork of the Clearwater, where I spent much of my childhood, for it is there, in the middle of the turquoise river, that a small rise of land bears the name Survivor Island. I remember how, aware of its legendary significance, I studied the island each time we passed along the dusty road, how the heart-flutter of danger and adventure filled my chest. What written history I can find records how two packers and their packstrings, two Nez Perce, and several wild animals had found safety from the fire by swimming to the island. But the story I remember has only three characters: an Indian grandfather, his grandson, and a black bear, all secure upon the island as the fire raged by, the winds it generated whipping the water into whitecaps. At some point, the story became embellished with a detail I still can't shake—how the child, emboldened by the success of their escape, wanted to kill the bear, and how the grandfather would not let him. Perhaps the elder understood the mythical ties he and his charge would forever have to that bear; perhaps he believed that nothing else should die in the face of the carnage that surrounded them.

With each year's August, I feel the familiar expectation that comes with the heat and powder-dry dust boiling up from behind the cars and logging trucks. Expectation, anticipation, sometimes fear of what lies just over the horizon—August is a month of waiting for storm, for fire, for rain, for the season to change and pull us away from our gardens, our open windows and doors, back to the contained warmth of the hearth and the bed that comforts us.

Yet some part of me loves the suspense of August, the hot breath of morning whispering the possibility of high drama, the calm and complacency of dog-day afternoons giving way to evening thunderheads brewing along the ridge. Something's afoot, something's about to happen, and I shiver with the sureness of it.

Years when I have lived in town, surrounded by asphalt, concrete, and brick, there was little to fear from the dance of electricity lighting the sky except the loss of electricity itself..Here in the country, on the south-facing slope of the Clearwater Canyon, what surrounds us is something as volatile and menacing as the tinder-dry forest: miles of waist-high grass and thistle the color and texture of straw. Just such desiccated

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

vegetation fueled the flames that killed the men made famous by Norman Maclean's book *Young Men and Fire* (1992), the story of the tragic 1949 Mann Gulch blaze.

We have no rural fire district here; those of us who have chosen to call this small settlement home know that should a wildfire come our way, we have only our wits to protect us—that and every available gunny-sack, shovel, hoe, and tractor the community can provide. All through the summer we watch from our windows as the sun leeches the green from the hills and the color from the sky, and the land takes on a pale translucence. Come August, we have counted the days since no rain, and we know that somewhere a storm is building, perhaps just to the south where the horizontal plane of the Camas Prairie intersects the vertical thrust of the Seven Devils—the mountains whose peaks rise jagged and white through the brown haze of harvest.

We check our flashlights, our candle supply; we fill our bathtubs with water. There will be wind, which will switch the sumac and send the sagebrush busting across the gravel roads; it will tear the limbs from the trees, drop them across the power lines in some part of the county so remote that the service crew will take hours, sometimes days, to locate and repair them. Then comes the lightning, blasting the tops from the tallest pines, striking the poles that carry our phone and electricity. The lights will flicker, then fail; the air conditioner will moan into silence. Pumps that pull the water from the springs will lapse into stillness; our toilets and faucets will gurgle and go dry. If we're lucky, what passes over us will be nothing more than the black raft of storm clouds, and the seconds we count between lightning and thunder will never fall below five. But there have been times when the bolt and jarring crack have come simultaneously, and we have known, then, that the lightning has touched somewhere near us, and that we must watch more carefully now and smell the air and be ready to fight or to run.

The summer of 1998, on just such an evening, we sat at the dinner table with my in-laws, who had arrived from Illinois for a weeklong visit. My husband Bob and I had each kept an eye on the clouds mushrooming behind Angel Ridge; to my Midwestern relatives, the oppressive humidity seemed nothing unusual, but to us, accustomed to zero percent air moisture, the too-still air signaled a weather change. When I stepped out onto the deck, I could hear the wind coming, huffing its way up the canyon like a steam engine. Within minutes, I was hit with a blast of hot air, then felt the cool come in behind it. The first reverberating boom made the

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

hair stand up on the back of my neck, a response so atavistic I could barely resist the instinctual urge to take shelter. Instead, I raised my face to the wind, redolent with fennel and sage, locust and mullein, the arid incense of a summer's rich dust; along the edges of the breeze, I could smell the dampness of distant rain.

Back at the table, we drank our coffee and shared stories of the past year. I got up once to fill a few pitchers with water. The lightning moved closer–only a few seconds between the flash and thunder–and then a clasp so loud and close we all jumped. Not really a clap, not even a boom, but a sharp, ripping roar. Bob and I looked at one another and headed for the porch, and then we could see it: to the west, a narrow column of smoke just beginning to rise. Even as we watched, the column grew thicker, and then we felt the wind gain momentum, pushing east toward us.

The county road, we knew, was our best hope, cutting between us and the fire, providing a fuel-free strip where the flames might falter. Earlier in the summer, Bob had cut, raked, and burned a fire-line around our house, decreasing the chances that fire could reach us, but what we couldn't shield ourselves against were the airborne cinders already beginning to descend.

"It's right behind the Bringman place," Bob said. "If we don't get it stopped, they'll be in trouble."

I had a vague acquaintance with Mr. and Mrs. Bringman, a retired couple who have worked the canyon land for decades. Their house and outbuildings sit a quarter-mile above and to the west of us, in the middle of what was then a good crop of ripe wheat. We had come to know them as we have come to know most of our neighbors: by our happenstance run-ins at the PO. Mr. Bringman is also known for his homemade wine. Local history holds that his land had once belonged to a man of some note who had imported grapevines from France and planted them in the sandy bluffs above the river. "Noble vines," Mr. Bringman pronounced, and we began saving our empty store-bought bottles so that, once a month, he could swing by on his four-wheeler to collect them and drop off a sample of the wine he had put up the past summer, which we dutifully shelved, though he insisted it was quite ready to drink now.

"You get on the phone," Bob said. "I'm going up there." Already the smoke and ash had darkened the sky to a deep shade of gray.

"Wear boots," I said. "Take a wet handkerchief and gloves."

While Bob gathered his gear, I picked up the phone and dialed. Mrs. Bringman's voice came on the line, high-pitched and quavering. "Tell

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

your husband to get here as fast as he can," she said. "Call anyone you can. It's coming our way."

I hung up, then began a series of calls, knowing that for each call I made, two more would go out, word of the lightning strike spreading faster than the fire itself, fanning out across the ridges and high prairie for miles, until every family would be alerted. I knew that every wife and mother would dial the next number down the road, that each man and his oldest sons would don their hats and boots, grab their shovels and buckets and be out the door within minutes, all guided by the pillar of smoke that marked the point of danger as surely as a lighthouse beam.

I paused in my calling long enough to kiss Bob as he hurried out the door. I could see the charge in his eyes, the urgency and excitement, and I felt the regret and longing and resignation I had as a child when the men had gone into the wilderness, to the front where the stories were being made and the dramas played out.

"Remember how fast the fire can move," I said. I had a momentary image of my husband scrabbling across the canyon's steep pitch and felt my heart jerk with fear. "Do you have a lighter?"

Bob nodded, remembering, as I remembered, the story of the ranger who survived the Mann Gulch fire.

"Be careful," I cautioned.

"I will," he said, and was gone.

In *Young Men and Fire*, Norman Maclean researches and describes the 5 August 1949 blaze that caught and killed all but three of the fifteen Forest Service smoke jumpers who had parachuted into the Helena National Forest of Montana. They had been on the ground for less than two hours and were working their way down a hillside toward the fire—an error that would cost them dearly, for a fire racing uphill can easily catch even the fastest man. But what they had found was a simple class C fire, no more than sixty acres. It was a "ground" fire, one the men expected to mean hard work but little danger.[8]

Yet there is always danger when a wildfire is present, and so the crew knew that this one might "crown," as its charred path suggested it had done already before moving back down into undergrowth. The fire that has crowned is what creates the great roar of sound so many survivors describe as the noise of a fast-moving train descending upon them, so loud

[8] Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire: A True Story of the Mann Gulch Fire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 33.

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

that communication becomes impossible. A crown fire creates its own weather system: the warmer air rises and the cooler air rushes down to replace it, creating a "fire whirl," a moving convection that can fill the air with burning pine cones and limbs, as though the forest itself has exploded. This incendiary debris gives rise to spot fires that can flare behind or in front of the fighters; crews find themselves suddenly surrounded, ringed by fire that seems to have come from nowhere, sprung up from the ground and converging.[9]

With these conditions comes the possibility of the phenomenon firefighters most fear: the "blowup." Blowups occur when fresh air is drawn into the "fire triangle" of flammable material, high temperature, and oxygen. Few have witnessed a true blowup and lived to tell of it, but those who have speak with wonder of the fire's speed. Maclean recounts the experience of fire expert Harry T. Gisborne, perhaps the first to observe, survive, and describe a blowup. The 1929 fire Gisborne detailed occurred in Glacier National Park and burned ninety thousand acres with almost incomprehensible swiftness, demolishing "over two square miles in possibly two minutes, although probably in a minute flat."[10]

The Mann Gulch smoke jumpers were young and had dropped onto a terrain that may have seemed at the time less threatening than the densely wooded ridge in the distance. They were at a point where the tree-studded mountains broke open to grassy plains dried to amber. Perhaps they believed themselves safe amid the loose-rock slope and low-lying vegetation, but they were tragically mistaken. They had their tools—their shovels and Pulaskis—but what they did not have was knowledge of the ways of this fire and of how, within an hour, it would cross the gulch and push them screaming up the steep hill, crest at the top, and die there with them. Bunch grass, cheat grass, some immature pines mixed in with older growth—these were all that was needed to create the blowup that engulfed the men. Two of the three who survived did so by racing the fire to the ridge and winning; the third, the crew's foreman, saved himself by escape of another kind: instead of running, he stopped, struck a match, set fire to the grass at his feet, then stepped into the flames he had created. He lay face down on the still-smoking earth, covered his head with his hands, and waited for the main fire to catch and sweep over him. And it did.[11]

---

[9] Maclean, 34–37.
[10] Maclean, 35, 37.
[11] Maclean, 74–75, 102–106.

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

A steeply pitched basalt-strewn slope covered with dry grass and scattered patches of timber—the very terrain into which Bob was headed. I prayed that he would have the foreman's presence of mind should the fire overtake him. I could see the flames themselves now, flaring twenty feet into the sky. I let the screen door swing shut, went back to the phone, and began another call.

The men came in their pickups and stock trucks and cars, on their four-wheelers and tractors—a steady parade passing by our house. Having exhausted my list of numbers, I gave up my station to stand with my children and in-laws where our gravel driveway met the gravel road. We tried to determine what we could of the fire's direction. We waved our support as our neighbors flew by—driving too fast, we thought, though we understood their urgency. On the slope just above us, the Goodes and Grimms and Andersons had set their sprinklers atop their roofs, dampening the embers and sparking ash that floated and fell around us like fireflies in the darkening sky. I'd instructed my ten-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son to stand ready with the hose, knowing that should the power lines go down, our electric pump that drew water from the spring below would be useless; our only defense against the fire would be whatever water remained in the storage tank. But if we used that water for prevention, we would have none left should the fire reach us.

As twilight deepened, the fire's glow grew more distinct along the western horizon, until the last rays of sunlight were indistinguishable from the orange-red aura melding sky to land. My mother-in-law, city raised and only half understanding her son's desire to live in such a wild place, did her best to reign in her fear; my father-in-law, nearing eighty, paced in frustration: he should be out there, offering what help he could. Had it not been for the fire's location along the breaks of the canyon, our ability to keep him clear of the battle would have proven much more difficult.

We all knew the immediate danger Bob and the other men faced—the fire—but there were other concerns I kept to myself. Just down the road from our house is a jut of land named Rattlesnake Point: we kill an average of two diamondbacks per year in our yard; the annual score we spy along the roads and paths outside our property we leave be. In times of fire, every living thing flees from what threatens it—cougar, deer, elk, rabbit, pheasant, field mouse, bear, and rattlesnakes, too, slithering ahead of the heat faster than most could imagine, sometimes smoking from their

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

close brush with death. My hope was that, should Bob encounter a snake, it would be too intent on escape to strike at the legs of a man.

And then there was the terrain itself: fragile shelves of talus, slanted fields of scree. The land could give way beneath your feet, begin moving like a tipped mass of marbles. I have had it happen before, while hunting chukar, and found myself grabbing at the smallest outcroppings of sage and buckbrush, feeling them pull loose in my hands, the only thing below me a chute toward an outcropping of columnar basalt that would launch me into the canyon. I've always been lucky, able to catch a knob of stable rock or wedge my foot into the roots of a stunted hawthorn, but that memory of falling, of gathering momentum, of hurtling toward endless open space, has never left me. I knew that Bob was sure-footed and careful; I knew, too, that in the lapse of light, the ground's definition would fade.

The smoke thickened. We covered our faces with our hands, coughing, our eyes watering, unwilling to abandon our vigil, knowing how much more those closer to the fire were having to endure. I ordered the children back to the house, but they would not go. They wanted to be of some help, perhaps believing, as I did, that our standing guard might somehow keep the fire at bay. The glow had moved higher up the ridge; the flames leapt, receded, then leapt again. With the wind and lack of equipment, we had little hope that simple manpower could contain the fire. I estimated that a half-mile of pasture land separated us from the conflagration—that and the road—and I told myself we could hold our ground for a little while longer before loading the cars with what we most treasured: photographs, books, laptop computer, the children's most precious belongings. The possibility of losing our home and everything in it seemed very real to me, but I considered it with little emotion. What was uppermost in my mind was the safety of my loved ones: the family that gathered closer as the smoke increased, and my husband, somewhere just over the ridge, risking his life to save the nearby houses and barns, the crops and timber, perhaps even an entire small town should the fire run the ridge and drop over into the next draw. At that moment, I wasn't sure the saving was worth the risk. How could I weigh the loss of my husband against nothing more than property and economy? There was little chance that anyone other than the firefighters was in danger—by now, everyone in the county had been warned. Why not stand back, allow the fire to meet the river on one side, the linkage of creeks on the other? In the end, it would burn itself out.

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

But then I remembered the stories—the fire of 1910, the young men who had died so suddenly by thinking the distance between them and the fire enough—and I realized that this wasn't about the wheat field a mile down the road or the home of the family at the bottom of the draw. It was about fire. It was about crowning and whirls, convection and blowups. It was about August and a summer's long drought. It was about three million acres burned in a matter of days—the width and breadth of many whole states.

What I wished for, then, was the help of all the technology and knowledge such fires of the past had brought into being. The fire of 1910 showed everyone that crews of men scattered about the burning edges would never be enough, and then the Forest Service began its study and transformation of firefighting. But we do not live in a forest; we live on private land, too distant to warrant the protection of the city, too sparsely populated to afford the luxury of a volunteer fire department. That August of 1998, our situation was little different from the one facing the farmers and loggers and townspeople of 1910: our primitive tools had not changed, and at that moment, I began to realize that our chances of saving our home had not, either.

I moved down the driveway, preparing myself to announce that it was time to pack up, to position ourselves by the river where Bob might find us. But then came the roar of something overhead—the thrum and air-beat of a helicopter. I looked up to see what I had believed would not come to us: help from the outside world.

From beneath the helicopter hung a length of cable attached to a large vinyl-and-canvas bucket. The pilot did not head for the fire but for the river, where he hovered and dropped and filled the bucket with nearly one hundred gallons of water—a half ton hoisted up and swinging from the Bell Jet Ranger. As we watched, the helicopter leaned itself toward the fire's furthest point, the bale opened, and a sheet of water rained down.

My daughter and son let loose with whoops of excitement. My in-laws and I clapped and hugged, jubilant at this unexpected turn of events. Again and again, the pilot followed his path from river to fire, until the ribbon of flame along the horizon had dimmed to a faint glow; within an hour, we could no longer point to even the smallest flare.

We stood watch as night came on, unable to see the helicopter now but tracing its direction by the deep hum that drifted to us on the smoky breeze. Although we were safe, rescued by the graces of the Clearwater-Potlatch Timber Protective Association, who had sent the helicopter be-

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

cause they were fighting no fires of their own, we all knew our wait was not over: somewhere in the darkness was our father, son, and husband. The line of vehicles that had sped by us earlier now came in reverse—a slower-moving column whose lights passed over us as we held up our hands in a gesture of greeting and gratitude.

"Bob will be coming soon," I said. "Let's go make him some fresh iced tea."

We walked the few yards back to the house, turned on the porch light. Our jubilation had been replaced by a quiet fear that grew with each passing minute—fear that receded and then leapt up each time another pickup approached but did not slow and turn into our driveway.

"He should be back by now," my father-in-law said, pacing from the window to the door and back again. "Maybe I should go see if I can find him."

I knew that Bob and the other men would have driven off-road and into the fields, gaining what time they could against the fire. Even if we could locate our four-wheel-drive, there was no guarantee Bob would be near it. Without light, the diminishing fire behind him and the total blackness of rural night before him, he could walk for hours before finding his way back to where he had parked.

"I think we should wait," I said. "He'll stay as long as he's needed. Someone will come and get us if there's trouble." I listened to my own words, only half believing. What if Bob had gotten turned around, fallen into a ravine, been isolated and trapped by the fire? What if he were lying somewhere in the dark, injured, unable to save himself?

I thought again of the rough terrain—familiar to me from the many walks Bob and I had taken, the many hours we had spent exploring and visually mapping the area. The fire likely would have eaten its way across Bedrock Canyon, down to the river and up to the top of the ridge, creating acres and acres of charcoal earth, charcoal sky—like a black blizzard. How could we hope to find him?

We made the tea. We gathered and washed the dinner dishes. We distracted the children with books and puzzles until none of us could be distracted any longer. We gathered outside in the cooling air, still heavy with smoke that would hang in the canyon for days.

"Come on, Bob," I whispered to myself. "Come on." I thought of my mother and aunts then, waiting as I waited, fighting the growing panic with the mundane details of daily life. How many hours had they spent watching from the window above the sink, their hands submerged

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

in soapy water, their fingers blindly tracing the knife's edge? How many Augusts had passed in a haze of worry and despair as the lightning came down and the flames rose up and the men disappeared into that place where no one could reach them?

But then, the lights at the top of the driveway, the held breath, the release as the engine idled and died.

I let my daughter and son reach him first, escort him into the house. He was covered with soot, his white T-shirt scorched, burned through in some places; his face was red, nearly blistered beneath the ashy smudges. We hovered around him, offering tea, voicing our concern and sympathy. I stepped up close, breathed in the familiar smell of everything burned—the dead grass and live trees, the cloth on his back, the singed hair.

"I'm so glad you're okay." I wanted to cry—out of relief that he was home, out of anger at the fire, out of frustration that I had found myself caught up in the same cycle that my mother had known so well. I knew that the stories Bob would tell of the fire would become part of our family's shared history, that we would recite and embellish the narrative with each passing summer, that we would always remember the way he shook his head when he told us: "There was no way we were going to be able to stop it. But then I heard the helicopter, directly overhead. I looked up just as the bottom of the bucket opened. I've never felt anything so good in my life."

The next day, we drove downriver to view where the fire had burned—an oily pool spread across the golden hillside. After the fire subsided, Bob had found himself disoriented and had wandered in the dark for an hour before coming across several other men. Together they were able to find their way back. "I can look up there now," he said, "and have no idea where I was."

Later, when I asked my son what he remembered about the fire, he answered quickly: "I remember that I couldn't breathe." My daughter recalled the ash falling and my concern that we would lose our water supply. And she reminded me of something I had forgotten: "What I remember most," she said, "is how badly I wanted to go and help fight the fire, and how you wouldn't let me."

Perhaps she will be the one to leave the phone and go to the place where stories are being made, the one who will not be left behind. One of the most respected smoke jumping crews in the country is composed entirely of women; of the fourteen Oregon-based firefighters who died

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

in the Colorado fire of 1994, four were female. I shudder with the thought of my son or daughter choosing to try himself, herself, against such an adversary. I wonder if I would come to dread and despise the month I love so well, for I am strangely wedded to the tyrannical heat, the thunderstorms, even the fire—the absolutism, the undeniable presence of August in my life.

Instead of wading the ashes of August, I spend many late summer days wading the river. This is Nez Perce land, and the water's flux covers and uncovers the remnants of their ancient industry: arrowheads, spear points, blades of obsidian. I come to the Clearwater armed only with a hook and line, meaning to fool the fish with a tuft of feather, a swirl of bright thread. I step in to my waist and feel the strange dissonance of temperature—my feet numbing with cold, the crown of my head hot with sun. I stand for a moment, brace myself. I am all that is still, an island anchored by nothing more than the felt soles of my boots. I load my line, cast toward the calm above the current. I imagine the fish rising, its world a kaleidoscope of shattered light.

Through the cooling nights of fall, during the long nights of winter when ice rimes the eddies, I dream of August, the water at my hips, my line lacing the sun. I wake to the odor of woodsmoke—my husband firing the stove—but for a sleepy moment it is the warm wind that I smell, the burning of yellow pine and prairie grass and wheat stubble. I smell summer sage and mullein, the licorice spice of dog fennel. I smell the cool drift of fish scent off the river. I open my eyes, expecting early light, the windows still open to the morning breeze, but what I see instead is the darkness before sunrise, the frost that glisters each pane of glass, and I am bereft.

This content downloaded from 132.177.238.83 on Wed, 19 Sep 2018 14:20:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms