On Fire
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On Fire

PAUL CRENSHAW

Modern scientific theory claims that the universe was born in fire: that at some silent signal an infinitesimally small, infinitesimally hot singularity began to expand or explode. The first planets were hot rocks sizzling through space. Burning gases united and formed the stars, and these stars drew planets around them, fire always at the center.

When our planet cooled enough to allow life, we crawled out of the primordial ooze, where the sun was waiting to warm us. We manufactured our first gods from the sun. They rode chariots, or boats, or winged creatures, and they hid at night, possibly in the darkness beneath the Earth, but always they came back to draw the world in light.

In other words, we worshipped fire. God's first words in Genesis conjured fire from which light sprang forth. To speak to Moses, God turned himself into fire. Plato writes of shadows in the light of a flickering fire forcing humanity to become self-aware, to seek reality, to find illumination. Buddhist philosophy searches for an inner light.

It is not hard to see the beginnings of civilization in the light of a fire. Prehistoric man sits before a fire that flickers on the faces ringed around it. Australopithecus or Neanderthal stumbles upon fire from a lightning strike, holds his hands out for wamth. He takes a burning branch back to the cave. He piles on more wood. Fire then becomes a thing around which to gather while shadows flicker on the wall, sacred because it brings warmth and light. The idea of governance may have come from squatting around a fire while spitted meat burned, a place where men came together to discuss and discourse.

The first rule of survival is to find water or fire, depending on where you have become lost. It is not always the warmth you need, but the psychological effect fire bestows. Warmth yes, and light, but also comfort, a pushing back of the darkness.

Creation then was a pushing back of darkness.

Which means that in the beginning, there was fire.

As a child I lived in fear of fire. Thirty miles from us stood Fort Chaffee, one of the largest live-fire forts in the country. Every weekend bombs fell in the distance, rattling the windows in our house. The constant barrage sounded like thunder, or some great cataclysm crawling out of the earth. At night, fighter jets streaked overhead, their red lights like fire drawn across the sky.

In the heat of summer the fires began, when the bombs ignited the dry Arkansas grass. Most of the time Fort personnel got the fires under control quickly, but some summers thick lines of smoke twisted skyward. Thirty miles away we could smell the smoke, like coming war. Driving along the highways that circled the base the air shimmered in the distance, or thick screens of smoke rolled across the highway like fog. At night the horizon glowed. The stars seemed distorted as the heat rose. Sometimes the fires could not be contained and marched ever closer to our house, the smoke thick enough to obscure the sun, and always I wondered what would happen if the fires could not be stopped.

Afterward the land lay scorched, the grass blackened and burned. Ash fell like snow. Trees smoldered for days. The heat lingered in the earth, rising like radiation. The fences along the roads occasionally trapped fleeing deer, their burned bodies twisted in the barbed wire or pushed against the chain-link, eyes melted out of their heads, once-pink tongues hanging black out of a mouth drawn back enough to expose the grayed teeth.

Once the summer fires at Fort Chaffee had burned themselves out, the fall fires out west began. My father worked for the Forest Service, and when lightning strikes ignited the arid West, he was called to fight. In the pictures of those times are men far too young, with blackened faces, eyes red-rimmed and teary. There is always smoke in the background. My father speaks of hot wind, sparks swirling, airplanes dropping slurry from far overhead. His job was to dig fire breaks ahead of the flames, chainsawing trees and shoveling trenches in hopes the fire could not jump across and would, then, burn itself out. But fire is always a precarious thing. If the wind comes up—and giant fires create their own wind through the process of heat rising—then sparks can fly across the break and ignite the other side and the whole thing continues, the firefighters running from the flames, the flames themselves like a living wall destroying everything before them.

When my father came home, weeks or months later, he was hoarse and hollow-eyed, his skin and voice gray, unable to get the smoke out. For weeks he smelled like the remnants of fire, like smoke and soot and ash, until winter began and the fires finally ended. Then the seasons would roll around again and when summer came we would wait for the fires to kick up—near us, or farther west, where my father might have to go. Later, when he and my mother divorced, he would marry a woman who had worked as a park ranger and spent several summers in a fire lookout tower in southern Colorado, scanning the ringed mountains for sparks or smoke, and I always wondered, after he no longer worked for the Forest Service and was no longer called to fight fires, if he missed it, and if so, what did he miss—the flames, the heat, or simply being in the face of a force so much larger than he was?

A few years after the divorce, after my mother had remarried and we were out on a fall Saturday clearing land, our small brush fire got out of hand and raced toward the old barn. As we watched, helpless, the dry wood caught quickly, burning green and blue from the paint and old nails and rusted horseshoes inside. The heat drove us

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back, hands in front of our faces. The trees behind the barn ignited. The long grass smoked and smoldered and burned. The fire roared up the hill behind our house, and smoke drifted over us like hot fog. For months the grass lay black underfoot. Ash stirred in the slightest wind, and years afterward the scorched trees still struggled to recover from the flames.

At the Baptist church I went to, we heard constantly about hell, the fire awaiting us there. Our pastor rained down fire and brimstone from the pulpit, and the lake of burning sulfur shimmered before us like the highways outside Fort Chaffee or the mountains out west or the burning barn.

We also feared what might fly through the skies from the Soviet Union, unannounced and us unaware. Heat lightning in summer made me afraid the bombs were falling and soon the sound would reach us, along with the blast wave. Our last lighted vision would be a mushroom cloud. I knew from my father watching the six o'clock news about SALT II, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that caused the United States to not sign the treaty. I knew from movies and TV how the missiles would soar skyward. They would disappear into our atmosphere, then strike, silently, and the world would become fire.

As prophesied.

Prometheus was punished for bringing fire to man. He looked down from Mount Olympus and saw humans suffering and cold, living in caves, and it occurred to him that with fire they might progress from the caves and create cities and civilization.

But his contemporary gods deemed man too infallible to be trusted with such power. Man would either become strong and wise enough to challenge the gods, or would destroy himself with such a dangerous tool. Fire, to them, was for gods alone.

But Prometheus did bring fire, defying Zeus. Carried it down the mountain on a burning branch. With fire, man was able to progress, to burst forth from the caves.

Prometheus, as metaphor, stands for human achievement, the struggle to better our circumstances. He also stands as a warning of the dangers of power—in this case, fire.

His punishment then, was not for giving mankind the means to warm himself, or light his caves, or cook his food. It was for giving him the knowledge to destroy the world.

In medieval Europe, harvest rituals included burning the fields after harvest to insure fertility for the next season. In ancient times animals and sometimes humans were set afire to appease the gods.

During the Spanish Inquisition, those thought to be witches were burned at the stake. People gathered in the center of town to watch, dressed in feastday clothes. The law stated that victims were to be strangled before being burned, but many were not. They were tied to a stake and wood piled around them, so all there could hear them burn, see their melting flesh (Catholic law forbade the spilling of blood, and, without flesh, they would have no form in the afterlife). Mostly women were burned at the stake for the crime of heresy—which could mean anything from the ability to adopt an animal form to being Protestant in a Catholic country.

In World War II the Soviet Union employed the scorched earth strategy, fleeing before the Germans, burning everything as they went, so the German army moved through a vast and desolate landscape where they could find neither food nor water. Russia had done the same thing a hundred years earlier, when Napoleon invaded. Sherman destroyed the South on his march to the sea.

After the atomic bombs were dropped, the ruins of Nagasaki and Hiroshima looked like the end of the world. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese were killed by fire. The dead lay burned in the street. Aerial photographs of the city show the ordered lines of streets, the carefully planned structure the city's creators built, but there are no people, no buildings. There is no city, only a world reduced to waste.

Before the modern fire engine, the modern hose, water supplies, how did man fight fires? One supposes buckets passed hand to hand, but how many buckets, how many hands to even have a hope at containing such a thing? When the first fires broke out did they simply save what they could and move on while the fire still flickered behind them, knowing the only thing to do was rebuild?

Firefighters use the word containment when arriving at a fire, a word that captures our ancient fear of fire—if we cannot stop it, we can at least not allow it to spread. Even the way a fire is fought emphasizes

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the idea—the fire must first be contained, and only then can it be controlled, then weakened, then extinguished, the whole process following a natural, logical order.

A few other interesting terms in firefighting are black fire, a fire in which heavy, dense, superheated black smoke pours from a structure, and BLEVE, an acronym for Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion, both of which conjure for me lines of smoke billowing from open windows and force me to ponder the words we create to understand the phenomenon of fire.

In the early 70s, the first nuclear arms talks began between the Soviet Union and the United States. Our hoards of nuclear weapons, now no longer only bombs but ICBMs that could reach across the world, had become too large, and the two countries began to talk about containing them, as if someone had looked to the future and saw the land ravaged by black fire, our lakes boiling and expanding under waves of superheat, the whole thing spreading to engulf the world.

When my stepfather crossed the desert in the winter of 1991, in the early days of the ground war in the Gulf, Saddam Hussein's troops had already lit the oil fires and black smoke spewed into the sky. The horizon lay lit like sunset, like the last days of the earth, he told me. They rode in darkness, with only the fires for company. Hundreds of miles this way, he said, only oily, yellow flames in the distance, the smell of burning sulfur, the vast and empty landscape.

Close to Baghdad they began to take on enemy fire. My stepfather's unit shot 8-inch diameter shells from howitzer cannons, and in only a few minutes had fallen into line and began to return fire. The night lit up with explosions. The world became fire, he said; the night turned into day in brief flashes, and with each explosion came heat and noise, the ground shaking beneath them.

A few miles behind them a battalion of Multiple Launch Rocket Systems had set up and were firing over their heads, and when a missile went past, the red trail of its ignition system lit up the world like hell. In its wake, they could see each other's faces. Many of them were young kids, my stepfather said, and in the red light their faces were filled with fear.

For weeks they crossed the desert, always finding the remains of fire—trucks and tanks with blacked-out interiors, tongues of black where flames spilled out of windows. They passed small villages where the Iraqi military had hunkered down, and though occasionally a soldier appeared from a deep bunker with his hands held out in front of him, mostly they found the ravages of fire from the bombs that had been falling for months.

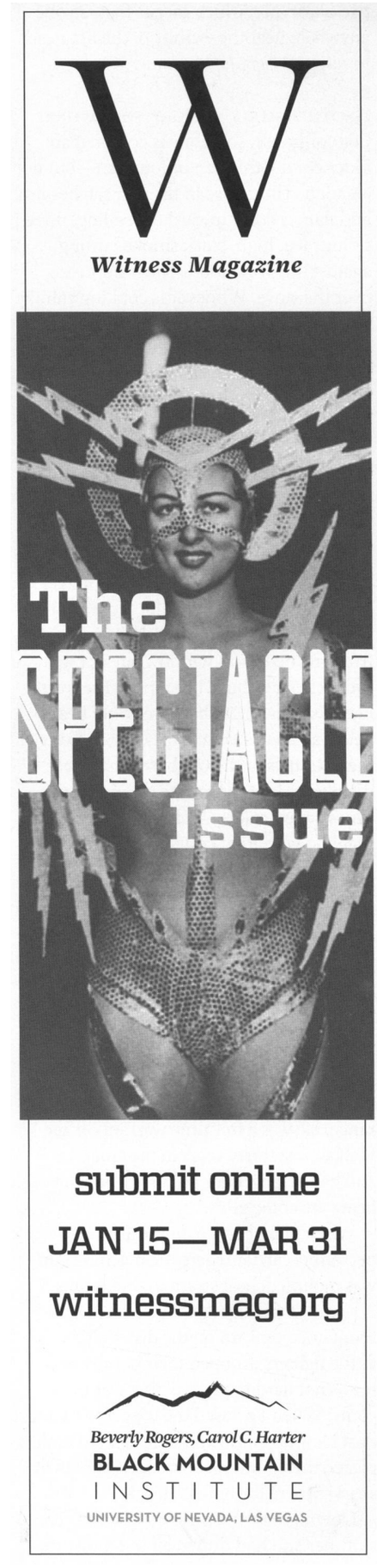
In the distance, the oil fires still burned. At the end of each day, he told me, with sunset flaming the rim of the world, you could not tell what was fire, and what was supposed to be there.

The Cuyahoga river in Cleveland has caught fire at least thirteen times since the 1860s. The Buffalo, Rouge, and Chicago Rivers have all caught fire as well, due to either piles of debris or pollution such as oil and industrial waste. Imagine seeing a river on fire, flames boiling from the surface, like the fabled lake in hell. This seems extraordinary to me—that we have created a way for water to burn.

One night, waking in the back of my parents' car, I looked out the window to see a barn on fire. It sat in the middle of a field, and the moon shone silver on the landscape. From the front of the car my parents' voices were soft, not wanting to wake my brother and me. We were coming home from somewhere, winter, I believe, and the frosted grass in the great field reflected the moonlight. There was awe in my father's voice as the flames climbed toward the stars, sparks rising in the night. When I woke the next morning I wondered if I had seen the fire, or if it had been a dream. I never asked. Going to school in the mornings as winter came on, I would look out at the fields for the remains of a barn, still-smoldering wood, a blackened patch of grass where something had once stood.

According to the International Fire Service Training Association, there are four stages to a fire: incipient, growth, fully developed, and decay. All seem to me analogous to human life: the soul as spark, inception equals conception, then growth, decay a sliding downhill toward death, until the final spark is extinguished. It might also be the stages of the cycle of the earth, waiting for only a fully developed fire, and then decay.

I wonder at what point a fire is considered out of control, or unstoppable, but neither of those phrases seem to enter into official lexicon. The closest we get is a



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five-alarm fire, which means that anyone anywhere near the vicinity of the fire needs to respond *right fucking now*.

Another early memory: somewhere, not our house, someone is cooking, an older child—thirteen or fourteen—but not an adult. The grease in the pan catches fire, and flames erupt toward the ceiling, three or four feet high, black smoke curling against the oven hood. The fire spreads over the stove. Whoever is cooking calmly reaches for sugar and dumps it onto the flames, and the rest of the day the kitchen smells like burnt sugar, but a crisis has been averted. Only later did I learn that had the person used water to try to extinguish the flames, the entire house might have gone up.

When I joined the military, my National Guard unit summer-camped at Fort Chaffee, closer now to the bombs I had been hearing all my life, closer to the source of the distant fires I had watched from my bedroom window late at night, fire flickering above the tops of the trees like false dawn. On base we could hear heavy artillery firing constantly, shaking the windows of the old barracks, knocking plaster loose from the ceiling. Sometimes a particularly violent round, or one that had gotten off course and landed too close, shook our beds, and some nights we woke wondering what had just happened, a ringing in our ears that should not have been there.

My second or third day on Chaffee, before we moved to the woods and set up our tents and camoflauged netting and pretended that war had come for real and that the planes flying overhead were looking for us, my boss drove me out to the .50 caliber range. He was a full-time warrant officer with almost thirty years in the Guard, and had arranged for me to fire one of the heavy machine guns.

When I climbed up on the armored personnel carrier where the machine gun was mounted, heat swam in the distance. A squad of fighters flew overhead. Dirt fountained upward on the distant hills as the fighters dropped their bombs, and it was not hard to pretend that war had come. When I pressed the triggers dirt and dust blew up far down range. An old tank, placed there for target practice, erupted in sparks where the bullets struck.

Down range, the grass caught fire. The summer sun had drawn all the moisture out of the ground, and the shrubs and grasses had turned brown and yellow. The tracers, bullets with phosphorous embedded in them so the rifle operator can see where he is firing, had ignited the dry grasses, and in only a few seconds a brush fire sprang up. In the July heat, the fire spread quickly. We radioed back to base for fire personnel, but could do nothing more, only watch the fire grow and move toward us.

The wind came up as the fire came closer, the heat stirring the air, whipping it around.

The wind kicked up as the fire came closer, the heat stirring the air, whipping it around. Ash rose into the swirling air as a two- or three-hundred-foot-high tornado grew from the wind of the fire. It whirled toward us out of smoke and dust and ash. I could hear it, not like the real tornados that dropped from spring storms, but a low moaning, like the voice of fire. There was an ambulance nearby, and as the tornado came for us I dove in the back. The fire seemed to follow me into the back of the ambulance, swirling gauze and bandages around, ash thick in the confined space. Sparks landed on my skin. The smoke caught thick in the back of my throat. My eyes watered and stung.

After a moment it was over. The fire was already burning itself out as it ran out of fuel in the sparse landscape. Base fire personnel came and stomped out the last of the fire. The tornado dispersed as the fire lost intensity. In a few minutes everything was over, and we started firing again.

I first read about Mount Vesuvius and the city of Pompeii about the time Mount St. Helens exploded and rained hot ash across half of America. I still retain an image in my mind from some old book of ancient Greeks with their hands held up to cover their faces as fire fell down on them. Another image that remains is an excavation of Pompeii, bodies preserved by ash, the city, once uncovered, standing as it had 2,000 years ago.

When Mount St. Helens erupted, the north side of the mountain exploded outward. In the forests around the mountain trees were blown over for hundreds of miles. The heat from steam and gases melted the glaciers and snow on the mountain, and vast mudslides swallowed everything below. Smoke, steam, and ash rose 80,000 feet into the atmosphere. Lightning bolts shot forth from static electricity created by the clouds of ash, and lava poured from rents in the earth. The forests caught fire. There was a great earthquake, and the sun turned black as sackcloth. I was eight years old. I remember watching this on TV, watching the mountain blow apart, the smoke and steam rising in stop-motion, the side of the mountain collapsing. Scientists detected ash in the air as far away as Florida.

One summer night between years of high school, a few friends and I were endlessly circling in our cars, windows open, the night muggy and hot and perhaps lit up by heat lightning in the west, when the fire alarm rang out over the town. In a few minutes the first responders were speeding through the streets, then the fire trucks, red lights coloring buildings and the tops of the trees.

We followed the trucks to a small side street, where the first flames were seeping through the cracks in a small house. Sparks rose from the roof, and smoke curled up under the eaves. We parked across the street and watched as a crowd gathered, teenagers like us and neighbors risen from bed to see what was going on and cops to keep us all back.

The firefighters ran their hoses and shot water into the air. They walked up the porch steps with the water beating back the flames and the fire hissing at them, then into the house, while a second team attacked the roof and a third broke windows from which smoke boiled out. Even across the street we could feel the fierce heat. The night turned damp with steam. The shingles on the roof blackened and curled, and the power lines running to the house caught fire. The leaves on the trees in the yard ignited, flaring quickly, the branches catching until the firefighters turned the hoses away from the house long enough to put out the burning trees. The grass in the yard smoldered, and a car next to the house smoked. The paint peeled from both car and house. The walls leaked smoke in thick furrows, and through the thin gaps between the wood we could see the flames.

We stayed until late in the night, after the fire was finally out and the house stood black and burned, the thick smell of wet

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smoke heavy in the air. We watched as the firemen disappeared inside the house, still wearing their masks, and began carting out the bodies in black bags. A new smell came to us, one I will not attempt to describe. We would learn later that the inhabitants had been asleep when the fire started, and had never woken, that the smoke had gotten them, filled their lungs while they dreamed, asphyxiating them.

For a long time the house stood empty. The city boarded over the windows, but we could still see where the fingers of flame had crept out, as if they were trying to escape. The trees in the yard grew leaves again, and in the spring they mostly blocked the house from the road so you could not see the blackened shell with boarded over windows where bodies had been brought out. You did not have to remember if you did not wish to.

My house in North Carolina is two blocks from a fire station. From the frequency of fire trucks leaving the station there seem to be thousands of fires in this city, though I have never seen one. I only hear the siren whine as the engines fire up and roar out of the station and onto the street, the sound blasting through my open windows in spring and summer, then fading into distance. When we first moved here the sirens would wake me late at night, and I would lie in bed and imagine fire and flames, but now I don't even hear them. I suppose a person can get used to anything.

On days when the guns weren't firing we often drove across Fort Chaffee on our way to Fort Smith, which was once a frontier fort on the edge of Indian Territory but is no longer, only a city of some eighty or ninety thousand people. Sometimes my father and I drove on Chaffee roads in the spring, looking for deer. Sometimes we hunted or fished on Chaffee lakes. Always, I looked for fire.

On the north side of Chaffee stood the old barracks, and driving past on our way into Fort Smith we could see the long, straight rows, windows filmed over like ancient eyes. The barracks were begun in 1941, as the US Army prepared for imminent war, and the first soldiers arrived on December 7, right about the time fire began to fall on Pearl Harbor. Elvis Presley lived in the barracks for a few days on his way to Fort Hood in 1958, right before he was shipped to Germany. Cuban refugees were housed there in the 80s, fleeing from the disorder in their own country—three weeks after arriving, the refugees rioted and burned several of the buildings.

I spent summers in those barracks in the early 90s, not long after coalition forces fought with fire in the Middle East, near the Plains of Megiddo, where prophecy says the last battle will take place before the world ends in fire. Walking through the empty barracks, I was reminded of the number of men who had passed through here on their way to war, the number of people who had been housed here after fleeing war and fire and civil disorder, or whatever it was that had destroyed the world in which they had lived. Outside, the bombs were falling, shaking the windows in the old buildings.

In early 2008 a fire started in one of the buildings and spread quickly, going from incipient to growth and staying there for some time. Firefighters used bulldozers to cut firebreaks to prevent the fire from spreading, but 50 mph winds pushed it into other buildings. The old wood went up like kindling. There are videos on YouTube now, people driving along the stretch of Arkansas Highway 22 that ran close to the barracks, and you can see the black smoke and flames rising from the buildings, spreading quickly, as if the fire I had so long feared had finally come.

Over 150 buildings burned. All that was left of the old barracks were the stone chimneys, smoking and smoldering, pointing skyward. In 2011, on the hottest day ever recorded at Fort Chaffee, another fire broke out and burned most of the buildings that remained.

Much of the land now has been returned to the cities of Fort Smith and Barling. No permanent military troops are stationed there. But in the summer, Arkansas National Guard troops come back to train. The Air Guard drops bombs on Razorback Range, shaking the earth and distant windows. The buildings are gone, as are the gate posts and the fences that once surrounded the fort, but every summer the soldiers return and the fires begin again.

How angry the gods must have been at Prometheus. Angry enough to chain him to the mountain, an eagle eating his insides for all time. But they must have been afraid as well, and fear often drives our anger, so that sometimes I wonder why they did not punish him with fire. It seems more fitting. □

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