FIRE JOURNAL

by

Lillian Jenner

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Boise State University

May 2022
DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS

of the thesis submitted by

Lillian Jenner

Thesis Title: Fire Journal

Date of Final Oral Examination: 04 March 2022

The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Lillian Jenner, and they evaluated the student’s presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

Martin Corless-Smith, Ph.D. Chair, Supervisory Committee

Kerri Webster, MFA Member, Supervisory Committee

Rebecca Wolff, MFA Member, Supervisory Committee

The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Martin Corless-Smith, Ph.D., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved by the Graduate College.
DEDICATION

For Brett, Stephanie, and all the fallen trees.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With grateful acknowledgement to Martin Corless-Smith whose respectfully generous hand is all over these pages. This thesis would be different under another’s care. And to my roommate and dear friend, Meredith Higgins, as well as and especially, Shriram Sivaramakrishnan, who believed in the necessity of this work when it burdened me and encouraged my seeking an understanding for myself, as to why (it burdened…it mattered).
ABSTRACT

Fire Journal is the poetic diary of my own experience as a wildland firefighter. More deeply than any news article, it confronts firsthand the issue that, in this ongoing climate crisis, as the fire season extenuates and intensifies, there are fewer firefighters willing to make the commitment. Situated between personal and professional suicides, the journal preserves a process of grieving which accepts change as promise of future living. And what changes more quickly, more unpredictably than a wildfire? In actual service against disaster, the journal explores human defense against one of the most climactic ecological experiences our earth has capacity for as metaphor for the journey of love and loss. And the love of a fire family, a love unlike any other – in which near strangers swear to defend each other’s lives – is tested with exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and the power struggles borne of any individual’s sense for self-protection. The account includes interviews I’ve recorded with my crew on the fireline.

This is the journal of a journalist; but with greater feeling…it is the subjective account of discomfort, struggle, and desire in one of the most dangerous and unimaginable professions of our time by a woman with a great capacity for witness.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ............................................................................................................... iv

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ............................................................................................... v

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................... vi

1. MY ISLAND ........................................................................................................... 3

2. THE FOREST ........................................................................................................ 13

3. OUR HOUSE .......................................................................................................... 32

4. OUR GARDEN ........................................................................................................ 52

5. MY MOUNTAIN .................................................................................................. 67

6. YOUR FOREST ..................................................................................................... 95

7. THE WILDERNESS ............................................................................................ 131

REFERENCES ........................................................................................................... 161
“To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things I am going to write will never cause me to be loved by the one I love (the other), to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimes nothing, that it is precisely there where you are not—this is the beginning of writing.” – Roland Barthes

“As communication, such a text is a dead letter.” – Anne Carson
About dandelion tea

I want to cite the lineage: how this weed has been extracted for generations, not my own, not because it uglies the suburban green, with its yellowing, but how it steadies the confused hormones my body, apparently, naturally produces, because it is afraid. I want to tell you, because you are my family.

And our bodies recognize one another better than we do with our blurred screens, with our “Poor Connection.” I want you to believe that I am better. Because I am here still. I want to lie that I am sober. I want to cry, to feel safe to cry. On any day of the week, I want to work. I want my body to work.

I want this letter to have any recipient who feels that they understand my strange accent.

That mothers are never alone is not enough of a reason to pull the yellow flowers when I see that no one is watching, closely, to tuck dandelions into my foraging tote and to make off with the little ones, who are not mine, but

Who saves me from the powerful man I want to be – how hard I want to be, how untouchable, unchanging, how steady,

and I want to be relied upon to always stand tall.

- I don’t want to be the hero. I don’t want to be the hero. -

I want to be free as the pesky dandelions, that weed, which matures in spreading itself across a grassland. As my skin erupts in hives,

(I am not fit to be the hero.)

You, my sister, will know me like you know yourself. You won’t ask how I grew better. I want to tell you. I start to tell you about dandelion tea.
1. MY ISLAND

First day

Who’s mothering you? How many people?

(No one, she says. Sometimes myself.)

Didn’t you try on that outfit once, consider buying it?

My armour is my only wear, / My only rest the fray.

Second day: The “real” sunrise

Having done it already, not once but twice, I think I can handle the “real” sunrise this morning, but it’s blocked by the trees, honking geese, why me?

I feel moisture on my toes and wonder if the sprinklers wept.
If it’s not the real morning dew?

*

I find myself looking blankly around me (not up), saying, “Help me.”

Help you what?

“There’s been a fire.”

I attend funerals and protests
In the cherry wood urn
on the mantle, wrapped

    in linen, that’s
    my sister.

“I can see her,” I say,
“she is contained.” “Yes,”

    you say, “she’s
    here.” Showing me the box --

we’re living out our greatest fear
    -- you ask,

do I recognize you, and I do. Do I

have any drugs, the recreational
kind, the good kind, and I do.

I hear your absence here,

    your body
    dust, tattoo

ink for the stronger twin.

    She’s living of you
    and for you and with
    you. She is you, in you,

remains. She’s the mother

    of ghosts. hugging me,

fat, you’re the mother

    of babies with bodies.

too
    tired    of sniffing ashes,

“stay with me now.” You do.

    A wildfire increases at a rate...which changes, depending on the type of “fuel” it’s
consumed.
Is there anything worth dying for worth living for as well?

*Fire, Fire.*

*Deploy! Deploy! Deploy!*

Scalded, I’m the volcano woman. My skin is molten rock.

*Third day*

I woke up unhappy, not unusual. I want my hand held by the sleeping beauty.

…and [here we have] found Don Quixote in the strangest costume in the world… his legs were very long and lean, covered with hair, and anything but clean; on his head he had a little greasy red cap…and in his right hand he held his unsheathed sword, with which he was slashing about on all sides, uttering exclamations as if he were actually fighting some giant:

In my dream, I leapt from the burning building. In my wake, I walked quietly, shut the door.

and the best of it was his eyes were not open, for he was fast asleep, and dreaming…For his imagination was so wrought upon by the adventure he was going to accomplish, that it made him dream he had already…

I try again expressing how alone I feel – as I speak with her.

…engaged in combat.

- Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*
Fourth day: Our roses

Women colliding in love battles (*jousts*) when I close my eyes. In my mind, I’m not the only woman present. These pornographic images redundant in my mind – from where have they sprung up? My life is a largely disparate one, by habit more than choice. Sobriety, too, I’d only ever imagined, before there was you, and your presence proved mine.

*Oh yes, I imagine*

*the smell’s, not even you, like chemicals, not even good,*  
*but burning,*  
*my brightness, my fire. I made for you*  
*this love*  
in which it is love, or the idea of love, I desire

*(so it’s not a great gift). Both ’love’ and ’desire’*  
*are wrong words. What I mean is ’proximity’:*  

*being*  
*here, being*  
*undeniably here*  

*when my own account is unreliable.*

There was a time in which I was merely an egg – yes, I was fragile, too. And we both hardened equally; except, you polished your calluses with extravagant lotions, taught me the benefits of moisturizing. How you would stay young forever, you vowed before you took your life. I had learned by then only to compete with myself, I had learned and unlearned an intuitive god. Because I was so creative, I imagined an isolation within the institution. It starved me of the affection I craved. Jealousy spread but did not conquer. Magpies saved me, and the meditative practice of focusing in and out with nothing but the drugs my body naturally produces:

*Your shape in the light of me.*  
*Whether you’re a shadow*  
*or a light of your own, press with your body, my body,*
so that I may figure for myself.

I know this story like I once knew my sister, now my angel.

*Face down in her fire shelter, that is where we leave her.*

She screams at me to never let you go. Or else, she holds on just a little bit…*I want to make her*

*stronger! I want to write her story longer.*

It’s funny, most of the time my ideas seem self-evident, and I fight the task of recording them with a self-deprecating laziness, all the while subsuming the perspective of *you*, my love/my reader. Imagining you understand me already, before I have written, I discard with your rebuttal – that if you had written, you would have written differently.

Maybe I still believe in pollination, even as I stiffen from it. Oh, the aphids can loiter all they wish, our roses will outlive them.

*Susan Sontag’s intoxicating lover, whose name she’s preserved modestly as “H”*

I’m Hot right now, sweat to cool me down.

“H” is for “Hunger.” “H” is for “Hermaphrodite.” “H” is for “How.” “H” is for “Heaven,” also known as “Home.” “H” is for “Hell” on earth.

I descend from my Helicopter in shy guy drag, in Hurt ppl Hurt ppl drag. My lungs fill up with smoke, and it’s the healthiest I’ve ever been.

You’re arguing against solitude, which I feel defensive of. The farther down I go, the easier it is to talk to you. From my belly, laughter. What we exclaim as love – how our bodies respond with lightness when they are held. And yet, I’m functionally the big spoon.
I keep thinking,

I ought to explain what’s wrong with me; to be unexpectedly confident would be alluring; and then, it’s really self-evident.

He says, “What can I get you?”

Satisfaction in solitude
but corrosive
compounds
eat everything;
apple pie; warm thighs.

At the very least you are with me in my mind.

Answer me

Sometimes this life is one big migraine, and I connect to no one, because I’m always tending to the migraine. Or maybe I feel discordant with my fellow people because I’m always playing a new role, and they want me to be consistent.

I came [here] because I wanted to [feel] [understood].
Only the breeze comes close. Only the brush-up toggles the breath in me.

“To belong to the masses is the great longing…

We must not oversimplify, however, the gratifications of personal ambition; they are merely the outward and visible signs of social usefulness, symbols of a recognition that strengthens the intellectual’s feeling of belonging.”

I think people my age, my gender, my sexuality, my race, and even most other people in my world are cocooned within a virtual reality – their screens, their crypto-currency, their virtual conversations (this one).
If she were sitting right in front of me, I would have begged her, “Answer me.”

It shouldn’t be so surprising – actually, to notice in all of my limbs the emergency state which exists in spite of me. This is why I seek to engage my body in real activities with real consequences. I want to know – the sweat is because I am hot, the shaking is because I am cold.

I don’t want to wonder, “Am I ok?” so tired I am of that silence which suckles the rhetorical question. I want to know, with my own eyes, to see, that now is not the time to be well.

Now is the time to get up and do something.

Seventh day: “There’s been a fire.”

Who made me do this? Sometimes I think it was Her – that in my desire to be desirable to her, i.e. physically capable to make love to a dancer who is “dedicated to [her] own body,” I took up something dangerously involved. She doesn’t write me back. I read Susan Sontag’s adolescent lesbian journals and blush all over, for she is Susan Sontag, and I am an island.

I share a hotel room with the only other woman on the crew, Collette, and I am an island.

Visit me. I’m asking you to visit me.

........

...Nothing. You’re asking me nothing.

A wildfire is an angry god.

“Let a new man arise, one who, instead of submitting to the world, will transform it. Only thus can he redeem the absurdity of his physiological existence.”

* The man I rode with here (I’ve already forgotten his name) said that physical dedication is the best gift we can give ourselves…and he touched me with his legs…Is it for me?
I think it’s for Brett sometimes.

I’d always wanted to die until Brett did, then I wanted to die honorably.
What was Honor in the light of the Explosion? Extinguishing the flame saved many.

(Extinguishing me saved no one.)

I think it’s for Stephanie, my sister, that I signed up that day at the station. She birthed 3 babies to death before she chose that same fate.

Probably, I think it’s for my mom, who has always had a thing for firefighters…how honorable she thinks this is. I won’t look into a mirror. Why? I can’t seem to say, although I know it must be true, I did this for myself.

On the day I showed up at the station I was so high I could hardly feel my grieving, but I could always feel my loss. How empty I felt, alone in the grass in the backyard, wondering, would I do it? I took one more hit, then I climbed into my roommate Meredith’s car. How blank I was, how anonymous, how simultaneously free and then contained I was when I arrived at the station, and said, “I would like to be a firefighter,” just as naturally as a person might say, I would like to know who I am and who I have been. I did all the training mindlessly, as if someone had done it for me, but they hadn’t.

I qualified honorably.

“Professional Ketman [a mental defense, a way of living with contradiction] is reasoned thus: since I find myself in circumstances over which I have no control, and since I have but one life and that is fleeting, I should strive to do my best.

I am like a crustacean attached to a crag on the bottom of the sea. Over me storms rage and huge ships sail; but my entire effort is concentrated upon clinging to the rock, for otherwise I will be carried off by the waters and perish, leaving no trace behind.”

Then Crystal, the dispatcher, called, and said, “There’s been a fire.”
“Man must be made to understand this, by force and by suffering.”

*
Why shouldn’t he suffer? He ought to suffer.
If the intellectual must know the agony of thought, why should he spare others this pain?”

— Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*

Meredith, who was there this time, hugged me goodbye. And now I’m in Nevada where we (left Lilly in Idaho) will quell the Wilson Creek fire. I sold my island in service, and just as Czeslaw Milosz warned against –

I identify with my occupation – so that what withers in me may at best / at last be stamped out, in service.
“When through the old oak Forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream,
But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.”

– John Keats
Too tired to write last night. Today I was so tired I thought I might slip on the rocks and roll down the hill. I return to the question, Why am I doing this?

*Brett is on the altar like it’s a stage.*

Was this the story I wanted?

I wanted to prove I was brave.

We’re all out on the hill now, resting, and I’m embarrassed to say (even to you, Diary), that I cried this morning on the phone with my mother.

Collette called me “tough” as she wrapped up my bleeding feet, introducing me to moleskin.

“I’m faking it.”

One of the boys, seeing my wrappings, used that same word: “tough.” I don’t tell “us boys” how often I think of quitting.

I met Ernesto yesterday, the beautiful brown boy. He blushes when he speaks to me and calls me “ma’am.” Who am I? Not attracted to Ernesto, although I can’t deny he’s beautiful. Out here, the many homophobic jokes wear me down more than the sexist ones.

Oh, it feels so relieving to admit this here and not to the boys with the cauliflower ears!

* Just now, a squad boss, Green, complimented my journal-taking. He said, “Dope!”

Better to create than to destroy.

I imagine my ongoing depression as an empty fucking void. It’s not the mountains or the trees. (That’s a different kind of isolation.) But I’m too tired now to even look around. 2 days sober.
Can you believe it’s only been 2 days? 

*It sounds like you’re underwater.*

How far we’ve walked on Smuckers packaged PB&Js alone. This note has refreshed me.

*They airlifted us out of the canyon*

My right foot has more blisters than my left, which is infected. I limped out of the truck on top of another mountain. Green took one look at me and said, “Jenner, don’t bother grabbing your pack. You’re sitting this one out.”

“Senor,” returned Sancho, “travelling on foot is not such a pleasant thing that it makes me feel disposed or tempted to make long marches. Let us leave this armour hung up on some tree, instead of someone that has been hanged.”

- Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

I’d come in low today, as if boarding a helicopter (yesterday, I boarded a helicopter for the first time, and I stooped, as the training told me to. They airlifted us out of the canyon).

“I would have gone,” I complained, limping back to the truck (following orders), and he urged, “I know you would have. You’ve got a lot of heart. But we need you to rest, so you’ll stick around.”

*

After a day of limping around the trucks, I saw that my squad boss was both right and tactical in not letting me descend into the canyon today, for if I had gone down, I don’t believe I could have come back up.

This rest has me thinking it’s OK that bodies have limits. I’ve hardly been able to eat, for instance. The food they ship out is awful. But I know I need energy (food/rest), and I am grateful that my leader knows that, too, although my body is different from the others (when I boarded the helicopter, I listed height/weight, and I was the skinniest bitch – “Jenner, 140”), and I’m surprised they want me to stick around at all…I’d come to think of myself as mostly (light)weight. Yesterday, I turned to one of the guys – who goes by “Karate Kid,” because he’s an MMA fighter – and said, “I’m a ‘snag’ [word for dead tree], dead on my feet.”
He shouted back I’m “a living tree.”

How long I have identified more with the deceased. I’m blanketed in dirt and ash and the truth is, I am alive in more ways than one. I sneeze blood as I write this, and I rest.

I found a cooler place in the shade, and my hands stopped sweating. MRE (Meal Replacement E?) for lunch was surprisingly good – shelf-stable pizza.

Striegler, whose feet are likewise “fucked,” is my only companion up here – a married man who makes a surplus of bad gay jokes I (certainly) and probably most others don’t find particularly funny. He makes no such jokes to me alone. He calls his wife, and I hear him gush about the vertebrae he found. Probably he is queer, as homophobes tend to be: afraid of being presumed gay, he emphasizes how hilarious he thinks another man’s anus is. He offers me his battery pack to charge my phone and a cold Gatorade from a cooler I didn’t know we had. We clean the trucks together – our only tasks today – and we don’t speak again. We sit separately, and we wait the long, hot day-off out.

I wonder…if things would be different if this Striegler guy knew I was queer (too?). Would he feel safer in my example to really be himself? Doesn’t the performance get exhausting?

Running the AC would drain the truck battery, and is against the rules, so I end up in the shadow beside the truck where it’s cooler.

Striegler loaned me a book on mythology (how queer!) knighthood, and chivalry, since my books are back at camp. Ironically, this is exactly the subject I’ve come all this way to study.

**Chivalry:** “ideal of the heroic character, combining invincible strength and valor, justice, modesty, loyalty to superiors, courtesy to equals, compassion to weakness, and devotion to the church.”*

*Note reads that chivalry in actuality involved much enslavement and abuse and has been revoked for good reason (in spite of how men idealize it)*

**Knight:** “traversing the country in quest of adventure, professedly bent on redressing wrongs and enforcing rights, sometimes in fulfillment of some vow of religion or of love.”
Arthur: brave but not always a successful warrior ("you’ve got a lot of heart")

"In the name of God, of Saint Michael, and Saint George, I make thee a knight; be valiant, courteous, and loyal!‘ Then he received his helmet, his shield, and spear" (his hard hat, his fire shelter, and Pulaski).

When the crew comes back up the canyon, I jump, “How was it?!”

I missed you, but my crewmates look exhausted, look annoyed that I’ve rested.

“R”

Today on the drive to our dropoff location the boys were talking about a past firefighter, and Striegler began to tear up. I thought he must be having allergies, because I’d never seen a firefighter cry before. He told me that the man they were referring to committed suicide earlier this year. The whole car went silent. I actually wanted to hug him!

Instead of embarrassing the both of us, I employed my best grieving tactics: Let him cry it out (as opposed to pestered, “are you ok?”), and eventually, I cracked a joke.

We all moved on, as we must. (Some smoke is OK…if it’s in the black, we let it burn out.)

Regarding boys – there’s one (“Karate Kid”) who loans me his sleeping pad each night and sometimes stares too long at my ashy earnest face. Maybe he thinks he loves me. Last night he winked at me. Probably he thinks he wants to fuck me. Then there’s Ernesto (“Lopez”) whose name I do remember because I remember he complained “it’s not that difficult,” and because he has a softness about him while still being one of the strongest men. (He carries the “dolmars”).

He looks like he wants to quit after the “R” last night (which stands for “Round”: it’s the circle the crew gets into at the end of a long shift, to talk about issues the team is having). Collette, who is a squaddie trainee, said that Ernesto had “attitude” with her, and then he really got wrung out.

“Lilly, are you OK?”

“Who’s asking?”

“Ernesto.”
“Yea, I’m OK.”

“OK, just making sure.”

“Are you OK?”

“Yea, I’m OK.”

“OK, just making sure.”

I’m rather fond of how he blushes around me…maybe addicted to it. Do you think Ernesto and Karate Kid would fight over me? Stupid, I know. Karate Kid would win, physically, but I’ve never much cared for the stronger man.

“Anything else we want to get off our chests?”

I thought to say, “I’m gay, and the gay jokes really piss me off.”
But I realized I might lose Ernesto’s blushes, which have been valuable to me.

Later, in my tent, I realized I would lose the sleeping pad, too, less valuable, but still a generous offering (token?). So I did not air my grievance. Karate Kid pointed out a rattler (“Uhhh…I just spit on a rattle snake”), and we all broke for bed.

Actual apple in my lunch today

“First piece of fruit I’ve had all week!” I exclaimed aloud and devoured the blessing greedily.

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

- New International Bible, Genesis 3:13

We all pass gas without a care – yes, bodies do as bodies too. I grow increasingly aware of my fellow crewmates, how we, all unique, do become like one when we work well together, and we work better together. The men wear the same armor I do: my yellow jacket protects me from the heat, my boots, although they “bite,” allow me to climb extreme terrain. They brought me here – overlooking the ongoing Nevada wilderness. I lean on my pulaski – which allows me to cut rocky dirt. I use it like a hiker uses their stick, marring the word of it. And as my body leans into this expanse, I feel limitless.
This is the journal of a queer lesbian woman firefighter poet artist emerging from the sea of suicide. This is the longest I’ve been sober in years. And I am just fine! More than just fine, although I have picked up a cigarette-smoking habit.

“You smoke cigarettes?”

I do now.

I learn, when popping a blister, to leave the skin on. The visual appearance of dust devils. And in the MRE, a water-activated heater to make coffee with. Thank you to the boys who have loaned me their knowledges and their battery packs for charging my phone and calling home. Collette tapes up my feet (with mole skin and duct tape). In the morning, we’ll change the dressings. I learn to air out the blisters at night. I learn because I ask questions, and people who are bored or confident and want to be the teacher of a teacher fill me up like my daily ration of four canteens.

We “spike out” on the mountain top, which means we’re in bed by 9pm.

I find myself looking for Ernesto who walks with his head down today. I heard he got a 2nd degree burn, reaching into the ash without checking with the back of his hand first, to see if it was hot. I also heard him challenge multiple men to fights. He seems on edge…Do I feel for him? All the men’s snores sound like bears growling.

* 

Rumor has it we’ll be “demobilized” tomorrow. We could be “reassigned” or we could go home. I’m ready to go home – I’m almost out of socks, since I’ve been wearing 2 at a time. I’m totally out of undershirts.

Will I ever come back? Although I wake each morning with dread at the work load, I find myself now cracking jokes with the guys, almost wishing the trip would last longer. Out here, as sober as I am, as vigorous, I feel I am a child, not the adult woman still towing other people’s bags, but a child. I laugh with the full strength of my face. But it’s been a week since I’ve showered.

At night, I whisper to myself, “Bless this rest,” and last night it worked. I actually slept a few hours straight through, no nightmares.

I’ll be gone too soon

Supposed to be weather today, so we’re all stationed on a lookout point, “keeping our (many) eye(s) out.” I’m saddled between Ernesto and Karate Kid, which has its moments of awkwardness, although I put myself here. This is exactly the last day I desired – there’s extensive cloud coverage (really cool out); Ernesto and I write poems back and forth in his little notebook (27 pages), now almost full with our conversation. I try writing a poem in Spanish, which he terms “adorable.” (Karate chucks sticks at my back). Ernesto asks me if I’m androgynous. I respond, “kind of queer.” He asks me if I’m gay,
and I tell him I am. Why kind of queer? I tell Ernesto how pretty I think he is. The clouds are heavy. He says he is the kind of giver I would drown in.

*Oh, I am the kind of griever...*

Do I love this for the effect of the writing or the content? Ernesto is a better writer than he realizes.

He is still a boy, I notice, as he chats with the team. And what am I? I’m enjoying this. We’re in some kind of staged lesson regarding safety, but Ernesto and I are still tossing our notebook back and forth. Later, when I’m thrown a few questions about the safety briefing (What to do in case of a flash flood? Where to stand when lightning strikes?), it’s clear I wasn’t paying attention. Only Ernesto and probably Karate Kid (“monitoring” *me*, like we monitor a fire, pretending to sleep) and I know why.

Rain falls. We all run out of the forest, and I find myself laughing because I feel like a child, running with this work family, slugging our 45lb packs, pulaskis, and hoes. We throw our packs and tools in the van and I hop into the saw truck (my crew). How I regret not grabbing you, notebook! My phone, which has some battery, disinterests me, so I make conversation with my squad boss (“squaddie”) to pass the time. Kyle is usually interesting to talk to...He has a complicated past and an unexpected intelligence.

I wish I had Ernesto’s notebook! (Just now, he handed it to me with an addition, and walked away without a word in the air: *I’m stuck in this truck and all I can think about is our writing. I keep re-reading everything.*)

I don’t know why, when I see him again, I say nothing, too. I think I’m embarrassed to speak. Writing is preferred. Writing is ungendered. Does it bother or confuse this sensitive man that I’m a lesbian? It bothers and confuses me. But I’m a sucker for the genuine connection we shared today. This man is a boy and I will not hurt him. He has a girlfriend he sounds ready to part with.

Don’t do it over me! I’ll be gone too soon.

*Radio static and helicopters*

^bumpy ride

*False departure*

We started to leave and then, instead, the crew was called to a station nearby where we wait now, on standby, also known as “staging,” as “resources,” still making “fire pay,” that is, the best money. Now I can tell you about last night.

My last note to Ernesto said not to camp too far from me. He followed my directive, which attracted much attention, but to my knowledge no one explicitly knows what’s
going on any more than I do. We stayed up later than the others whispering under the “mess of stars” (I’m quoting myself). Something got a “head” in me (like a fire, what pushes it forward), and I whispered to Ernesto to move closer.

I know he has a girlfriend, which makes me immoral, although I don’t mean anything by it. It really was hard to hear him, as the silence of the others got taut.

I said, “I just wanna do some gay shit, like hold your hand.”

Him: “Who are you?” (with incredulity).

Me: “That’s a good question (for my notebook).”

Then I went to bed and dreamt he came to me, falsely. “Hurry up and wait,” the saying goes around here. I gave Ernesto my number and we texted sweet nothings on the drive to this grassy shady spot we are “staging” at, only to pass around a fresh notebook.

The space of a fire staging, while it’s sweaty outside, feels walled in with Ernesto as a resource. He handed me a ladybug today and our hands touched, which felt like fire…at least one of us is not being gentle. Will these feelings last? I may have depleted what all can be said to him.

Talking to Collette today, I was reminded how I like to pose my body in conversations with women as the more masculine. She: long-haired, softball player, flirts with the engine crews.

Me: taller – butch, brawny, unidentifiably woman.

*

Last night, amidst our convening, I shared my delight at the feeling of brotherhood. Having only had sisters growing up who never got along quite right – we always argued – I’ve been so pleased to feel like one of the boys. And ever since my sister Stephanie died, I’ve felt…

Dear Stephanie,

On your birthday in November, I called. 
Mom gave me a number I could reach you at, and I did. 
You were in 
a bar in Oregon. 
I was in my home, 
one state over, in Idaho. 
I told you, “I’m in college again.”
I said, “I live alone. I’m in Graduate school,” and you said, “Isn’t that expensive?” And I said, proudly, “No, I have a scholarship,” but truthfully, it is, and I am always working. You said your friend had just fallen out of his chair, and you laughed, heartily. I felt we couldn’t understand what the other was describing, our surroundings so absolutely different there weren’t words for reference.

– He said not to trust the brothers much…they’d been talking bad about me. How crushed I felt immediately! So that I realized I had already trusted, for all my talk about privacy/security. I imagined all the horrible things they might have said about me and tunneled into a feeling I am deeply acquainted with –

Collette is staring into my soul but I’m going to act it’s nothing. I’ve never felt this romance. The only thing that comes to mind is my high school sweetheart. I never thought writing could be so beautiful, innocent, flirty, and romantic all at once. You make me want to write.

It usually means you write back, and that is something I “stage” for. Ernesto Lopez is a hopeless romantic.

Cigarette with Ernesto

Many nights I bring my notebook into my tent hoping to catch up to all that is occurring. But I’m so tired, I can’t possibly. Tonight is one of those nights. I’ll tell you this: we did not go home.

We stayed a night at a hotel. I showered and Collette graciously offered to launder our clothes. Ernesto and I met in the hotel parking lot “for a cig,” held hands at last, pressed up against each other, and exchanged a few syrupy kisses.

We did not go home. We were reassigned to a much more serious fire in Utah which we traveled to this morning. Today we dug hot line and that is why I’m so exhausted I can’t even explain what “hot line” is.

The embraces

Taking a moment away from the work to write about the embraces. It feels I am stealing this moment. (I am being paid = I ought to be working.)

When we met in the hotel parking lot, Ernesto and I hardly knew how to pose ourselves in our first moment of genuine alone time. I’m fairly certain that I moved closer first, as has been the trend for us: I am the braver. But our dance consisted of a forward/backward push and pull, in which neither had definitive charge of this moment.
“This is strange,” E noted (I have him as “E” in my phone, so that if anyone looks over my shoulder, they won’t know who I’m texting). It is strange to have pockets of air in a job as tight as this one.

We were so scared when we kissed in our firefighter uniforms (more of a hassle and less feasible to change before the meet-up, especially since I room with Collette, a higher up), I jumped when I heard the backdoor open. It was no one from our crew.

Ernesto has maybe the biggest lips I’ve ever kissed. I felt that they engulfed me; he engulfed me. More than we kissed, we held each other close. Ernesto’s hug is very strong, as you might expect from one of the strongest men on the crew. The way he held me, it felt like I hadn’t been alone. A rare feeling for me in the last year: that I felt held. Our meeting lasted maybe 10 minutes, but it replays in my head almost constantly. I fear I am not doing it justice in word. We were so hungry to touch each other – touching thighs, sitting on the bench when we were on standby only made me hungrier. This meeting made me almost aggressive.

I pause to note that I still don’t know how it would feel to have sex with a man, and that, for the first time in a long time, sex is not what I’m craving. I crave specifically to be cradled against Ernesto’s chest. Since our meeting, I taunt him to sneak into my tent, meet me in the woods. He won’t. He is a very good boy. After our meet, E asked me to text him how that felt? It felt “scary good.” I asked him to be vulnerable with me and he sent me a picture of his body…He asked me to be vulnerable…my fears at being at the hands of a boy (my experience, merciless). I told him how long it had been since I had been held in such a way. It is impossible to express to a person I’ve known a week how untouchable I have felt. But you, Diary, you know, as I have written it here many times over. So maybe it was no surprise to you that I turned totally water with tears.

What I grieved this night was not the people I’ve lost, but me – what has happened to me.

There is a spot fire in front of me, and so I may have to move. One moment please.

All clear. We break with our butts in the red retardant line, so I wasn’t expecting any problems, but Karate Kid yelled, “Jenner, watch out. Finish your last paragraph!” so that I thought I had reason to move. I do not and will not until it’s time to dig line again. I was trying to tell you what happened to me, but you already know. I was trying to explain how occasional sex hasn’t saved me. My body and the Lovers’ would press together so tight together that it felt like we were one being. And yet, upon separation, me me me. What I have with E is something else entirely. It’s the creation of a new language: in whispers, notes, and physical embraces.

The problem with being a writer always lies in the crevice between experiencing and recording.
Digging hot line with the crew, sneaking next to E in line, we whisper with our backs bowed, “I love your smile” (me) / “your eyes are beautiful” (E). Recording this fails me / words fail how the whispers energize me to work harder – Reader, do you want to feel it with me? – because Ernesto is with me.

Oh, yesterday was a very intense day! I mentioned that we were reassigned to the Mammoth Fire in Utah. Red rocks, chasmic, like you wouldn’t imagine. Like I’ve never seen before. This fire is HOT and my short team had a momentary situation when we first arrived. I’ll tell you about it next. This break is over.

Fire Story

Lilly: Have you ever been afraid on a fire?

Calvin: My biggest fear is something happening to my family when I’m not there. That’s my biggest fear.

L: Is it hard being away from them?

C: Yes, it is. It’s the hardest part. Other than that, this job is easy.

L: But if you were to quit…wouldn’t you miss the nature?

C: Yes, I would. I love being out in the woods. [exhales] You have a lot of time to think.

L: What do you think about in the woods?

C: Life: my next move, my mistakes...

L: So, you think forward, you think backwards…?

C: …my new challenge...Past, present, and future.

L: You...work through stuff?

C: ...figuring out ways to...that I can become a better man.

* 

We drove up in our trucks to the fire which was, in our section, split into much smaller fires, called “spot fires,” past a sign Do Not Enter, Country hopped out and removed. We kept driving as far as there was road, then left our trucks, grabbed our packs and tools, and walked into the smoke. Outflanked by spot fires, almost immediately upon arriving in Utah and being split into groups, also called “short crews,” I was not with E. We walked quickly on the lava rocks, which I struggle with more than most. Do I have weak ankles? Were my boots tight enough?
A low-flying plane dropped fire retardant, which misted us, and we kept moving.

It was a total war zone, little fires lighting up everywhere, “slop-overs,” like bombs. I was excited, jumping up and down to keep my leather laces from catching, carried by the adrenaline, I was pumping, so I never really felt scared. We made it safely back to the rest of the crew where was Ernesto. I am always so happy to see him, but was in this moment especially, flushed and covered in red retardant. Even my glasses had retardant on them. Yet, I remember thinking I was glad to have been away from him in that heat, because it meant that in the emergency, I didn’t think of him. I focused on getting out of there as quickly and as safely (not falling) as possible, which was what I was supposed to be doing. And it was peaceful, amidst the chaos, to be with myself again.

When we caught up with the crew, we fell into hot line: digging fire line with our tools along a blazing (spot) fire, not a control line. This work is brutally hot. Things singe, and my eyes really suffer from the smoke. Spiva has asthma and suffered and what is a firefighter without his breath? We don’t use water much out here. I mean that it’s a precious resource.

We dug hot line for hours. Kyle told me later he looked into my face right when I was “there,” on the brink of exhaustion, and it was “awesome.” He told me to take a short break. I couldn’t tell if I was grieving.

Mother, at what stage does grieving become dying, too?

Then we drove around in search of a place to camp for way too long. Everyone kept saying, “How does it feel to be a real firefighter?” and I was too exhausted even to lift my head up, but had to when we set up camp very late, almost midnight.

Ernesto ate dinner on my truck’s tailgate, and then I did not see him again until the next morning. We were allowed to sleep in until 5:30am. In his morning note, he wrote to me that he regretted not camping closer. What began as a poetry exchange has become Love Letters on the Fireline. Our notes get much more of me than this journal is getting, but I do not regret that. Our notes are sometimes all that get me through the work. Firefighting is by far getting the most of me. Today, we cut fireline the entire day, something I did not believe I was capable of. I was fortunate to have Ernesto following me (my Pulaski/his hoe) much of the day, mouthing “you’re beautiful” when I would start to say,

I no longer recognize where, how, or who I am.

We cut line for miles. I really have no idea how. Teamwork, I guess.

Little note
Today promises to be easier than the last 2 days. I’m proud of myself for not writing last night what I wanted to write about: my night with Ernesto. It is important to me that I relate the little things still, like how we carry our hoes to wander into the woods to shit; how we swing our pulaskis to take advantage of the weight of the tool, send it swinging down; and how methodical I have become in setting up my tent, which is in the wilderness my home.

*Large note*

I’ll tell you now how Ernesto camped nearby.

And as he was brushing his teeth, I turned off my headlamp and said, “Follow me.”

We walked into the darkness as quietly as we could, and met behind a tree, so no shadows could be seen. The fear was that even a vision of two, together could get us fired. But when Ernesto whispered, “I’m so scared. Feel my heart,” and I knew he meant of being found pressed together like dried flowers, I found that I had become afraid only of letting go. Oh, I am too far gone past the point of protecting myself from being tapped. I seep for Ernesto. Tongues and hands and he had to tell me to let, walk separately back.

I took refuge in my tent alone where feeling, the imprint of it. The knowledge that my lips now had took me soon to sleep.

*Bloodshed*

Yesterday, I unexpectedly began to menstruate, after many more hours of digging line. I did not come prepared for this, not on the hill. I ran back to Collette and stuttered, “Do you have a tampon?” She did not. I did not.

And so exhausted were my options of all the women on the team, I fastened medical gauze from the First Aid kit with safety pins to my already-soaking underwear – *the men out here think they’re so TOUGH, but it is more arduous being porous* –

and so began the strongest bleed I’ve had to memory. I went through packets and packets of gauze, to which I signed for restocking:

_Gauze, Jenner._

_Gauze, Jenner._
Again and again. At the blood loss, I grew faint. This is something I had not yet experienced, something I had yet to learn about my body – under extreme exertion, as this job has been, my blood flow is extreme. And I am subject to a fainting spell:

Kyle sent Ernesto, Clint, and I to go get bladder bags from an engine for a slopover. I was excited to be off with Ernesto, but the boys hiked so fast I couldn’t keep up! These fit, long, and quick hikers left me behind. Clint ran farther – to our trucks, somehow, to get a third bladder bag, and Ernesto and I were alone, briefly, on a mission to fill our two bags with the nearest engine’s water, maybe half a mile walk on the lava rocks. There was a fire blazing, and me! I thought we were going to kiss! but Ernesto, a firefighter at heart (me – a heart in a firefighter’s uniform) was more concerned with putting the fire out, and quickly. After the bags were filled, Ernesto ran off, and left me alone.

The lava rocks make me despair.

All this space in me erupted in appetite. You were my victim, now you’re trapped in my gravel.

Is it haughty to say, I could be exploding?

O, another way

I am always accelerating, not towards you.

Remembering my training, and always my inexperience, I felt afraid I wouldn’t be able to make my way back. We weren’t far, and I should have had more confidence. I also was worried for Clint who was perfectly fine, just out of my sight, which reminded me of the last time I ever saw my sister, Stephanie.

She begged me not to go, said she was worried about me. When I look back, I see – that she was the one in peril.

“this Lilly woman”

you say, “I spoke to her today”
and I recognize the sound

of a death call

swift scything of wild grass

it hails in Florida in the summer

a miracle, my sister’s suicide

with the trickling of water
I remember how to wonder

mother of a dead daughter

what happens to
the energy required to die

apologies

work
and more work?

I made it back to the fire alone and dispelled
the contents of my bladder bag to the best of my ability. My feet were screaming;
I wobbled with my load. Hooper saw me struggling and beckoned I sit down, but I
wouldn’t/ didn’t want to desert my duty, especially as it involved Ernesto (who had, in
fact, abandoned me gleefully to work himself senseless).

I resisted, but Hooper insisted, so I took off the bag and sat down.
Almost immediately, I felt my eyes roll to the back of my head.
I clutched at the ground and opened them up wide as they would go.

Glaring at the blue sky, I tried with a rigid sense of vision, to see, the edges, tattered.

*

Eventually, I came to enough to drink water and to eat carrot sticks and peanut butter
crackers from my sack lunch. This wilting had me at a loss of confidence – a breakdown
of my cowboy performance. I became soft and supple and felt the desire to bend over and
cry. Weeping?
At the fear? At the feeling? On the fireline?
I found that I was a little hurt at the absence of Ernesto.

*

At a lesbian bar in Chicago, I found myself against the vinyl booth in a circle of gorgeous
women introducing themselves: their names and their professions. Mostly tech jobs, etc.

I rather nervously stated my name “...and I’m a firefighter,” and the whole group burst
into applause. The ladies whistled. Later, at least one woman came up to me, “So, you’re
the firefighter?”

I had only done the training. I tried to explain that, technically, I’ve never actually
extinguished a fire myself. But I hope to, someday, soon. And she laughed with me. And
she leaned into me.
After he did his deed at maximum capacity, he came over to me, and I wouldn’t look at him – not because I was angry, really (recognizing how happy the job made him quelled that for me), but because I was still straddling the edge of tears, and I didn’t want to lose it, still at work.

He tried to comfort me, but my wounded pride swelled.

He sat right next to me now without fear that others would notice us, and he wrote to me a note of care. He handed me a Gatorade and spoke sweetly to me, and I did not cry. I came to, but I never really came to. I continued to feel weak and especially dizzy for the remainder of the day, so that later, at a break, Mieda looked at me and said, “I think we broke Jenner.”

He laid his sleeping bag near me and asked again, “What’s the move?” to which I inevitably replied with a request that he enter my tent later. But good Ernesto would wait until the saws were finished being sharpened. I waited urgently with my flashlight off, so that if he did come, there would be no shadows cast.

Ernesto fell asleep. I heard his soft snores with disbelief.

In desperation, I crawled out of my tent up to a softly sleeping Ernesto and pulled his ear until he wakened. Then I crawled away and sat upright in my tent with the fly open, staring into the darkness, waiting.

When he came it was so quiet, except for us. I demanded that he zip the tent fly, immediately, and he did so, quite cautiously.

We breathed into each other’s ears how lovely it was to touch each other. I put Ernesto’s hand beneath my 3 layers of clothing to feel my stomach. He, having asked so politely, navigated towards my breasts. He asked if he could suck on them. I couldn’t help but to think that this was very much a man’s desire, and I permitted. After, he asked me, *how it felt?*

He said that I was good at turning him on. I enjoyed that.

I wanted to be appreciated in the dark by Ernesto’s hands. I would like to be absolutely bare with him. I mean naked, in every sense.

So I gave Ernesto permission to love me with the risk of his heart most present in my mind. At 21, he is an adult. And yet, with what experiences I’ve had with what loss, I feel somehow responsible for protecting him, at 25. Age may not even be the distinguisher. How often my waters have been wrecked by the unreliability of love. How much they have changed me: there are so many names.
May I lay my bare chest across yours?

The boys joke to each other,  
“Sleep nearer to me.”

“Cuddle me.”
I think that they are really lonely.

*

Ernesto set up a tent this time, and I snuck in after dark. We removed our shirts, and E asked if he could lay on top of me. A strange request, and I liked him for it. Not, “Will you suck my dick?” Not, “Do you want to fuck?” But, “May I lay my bare chest across yours?”

I permitted. I wished it hadn’t, but his body did begin to weigh down on my chest, specifically. Unfortunately, so that I could breathe, I had to ask that he redistribute his weight. He is very uncomfortable about his body – I see now why when I asked for vulnerability, he sent me a pic of it. E looks like a perfectly sculpted man, dressed, in his firefighter uniform, but beneath his yellows and greens there tells the story of his eating disorders. I see how his fears related to my comfortability come from a deep worry about the shape his body makes. He jabs at his stretch marks and loose skin, which, anyways, I can’t see in the dark of his tent. I whisper “You’re beautiful,” like an incantation, that he may believe it. He is, a beautiful bronze statue.

The wind howled, a cover for more passionate kisses and whispers of oil (the fastest burning fuel). We slept intermittently, kissing in-between, and that was bliss for me, particularly because it was so much warmer in Ernesto’s sleeping bag than in mine.

3am, he whispered (I think? This is what I heard), “Baby, I think you should go to sleep.” I agreed. We exchanged a series of goodbye kisses. The zipper of the tent split, I exited in mock stealth, imagining, but not really performing, somersaults from his tent to mine. I slept some more, but it was so cold, mostly I just laid there and listened to the wind howl.

I begin to mother

Today we are staged, which means resting time and being with Ernesto. We exchanged more notes until we found refuge (on “lookout”) between the lava rocks. This was the closest we had ever been to being alone in the daytime. Mostly, we kept it “professional”
but sometimes gravitated towards each other, to avalanche into touch. I think we exchanged one kiss, which made Ernesto’s eyes bug out.

We stayed in the sun too long, because the spot was hidden. Ernesto became very sick. Was it heat exhaustion? COVID? something else? He let me rub water on his face and talk to him easy. I brushed his hair back gently and kept him company while he rested.

Higgins (squad boss) meandered over. Collette (squad boss trainee) meandered over. I said, “He’s sick,” and they said, “He looks it.” Some of the guys looked too hard, but we did nothing indecent, visibly. I was glad that the hike back was short, because I was worried Ernesto wouldn’t be able to carry the extra weight of his pulaski.

Is this not a nymph?  
Something between something already’d, I’m caught holding the myth of love?

Sometimes I am surprised by how hardly I recognize myself. In a note to Ernesto I once wrote that I am a “shape-shifter.” I want to embrace this more confidently, to be less afraid by my own willingness to change.

Dear Diary,

I sat with Lilly all day today. I like that we’re different yet emotionally the same. I’m still scared to fully submit; that requires confidence. Unfortunately I am still recovering. I used to be so confident I was cocky. It’s different now because I am alone (not really) in a new state. I’ve grown and backtracked, but I am happy. 13 days in two different states earning my keep. I love these mountains. I haven’t felt this whole since my last fire job. This time I know this is what I want, instead of trying it for the first time. The woman I met on these hills is also one of them. Since we exchanged gazes at base, there has been a weird attraction to her, but without expectations. All of this just happened, and I’m glad it did. It’s a breath of fresh air to talk to someone who knows what she wants and is ambitious. Confident. Sexy. Lilly is the most confident (wholly not pretentiously) and smartest woman I’ve met. It feels like I’m trailing behind her as far as accomplishments. I’m young and need to remember that. If a woman like Lilly likes me, I must be doing not too bad. – E

To keep myself warm
The next day we didn’t even try to look busy. Ernesto and I camped under a big shady tree and cuddled quietly, breaking apart at any snap of a twig. We talked more about suicide and addiction and I felt my edge. I try not to take offense to how dissimilar we are when you take into account these shadows: after the explosion of a loved one, I see only dazzling stars.

The closest Ernesto has ever been to suicide was in himself. He calls it “selfish,” because he is hard on himself.

Tonight, we park at a state fairgrounds and camp on the rodeo. The orders are to line up our tents in a neat line, and Ernesto and I land next to each other, not accidentally, so that we can whisper into the night. We wouldn’t dare “adventure” (crew’s whispers) into one another’s tents with the others this close. Besides, we’re going home tomorrow.

Ernesto told his sister about me, over texts, and insisted I borrow his zero-degree sleeping bag tonight. Karate Kid asked for his sleeping pad back, in turn, clearly jealous. That’s OK. I sleep better tonight than the night before – which reached the minimum temps my (Meredith’s) bag would keep me alive in. I had stayed up all the night rubbing my legs together like a grasshopper
to keep myself warm.

*I’m pyro – a love of any kind I would return, always, return.*
I’d never fallen so hard...

Since I can’t sleep, I might as well tell you how Ernesto came home with me.

It was a long, hot drive back to Boise.

All of the ash washed down the drain, and I introduced him to my bed. Then he was crying in the face of our intimacy, and I held him close to me many hours, like a mother, to soothe him. Until our bodies pressed with hunger, still-acquainted as they were with our regimented firefighting eating schedules, I would have to feed us. We would have to leave our house.

Intending to spend our R&R [Rest & Rehab] together (intending not to part), I skated and Ernesto long-boarded to the grocery store for sandwiches and supplies. Grocery-shopping together, I wouldn’t push a cart, not wanting to feel like the “woman,” shopping, so I carried everything in my arms.

On the ride back, I berated Ernesto’s “going too fast.” I couldn’t keep up on my skateboard, and I hit the pavement.

I’d never fallen so hard…I’d hit my head for the first time in my life, landing on my cheek, scuffed it, bruised it, but did not concuss it, I saw stars ***** as he shined a light in my eyes and, with kisses, ***** determined that I was OK.

A woman stranger stopped to help me gather myself and to bear witness to my fall. I fell and I hurt badly. She saw that, and with sympathy began to fill up my dizzy head **** with the sound of her. “I work in trauma,” she was saying, I think she meant emotional…“and when the body becomes traumatized…Can I pray for you?”

“It’s not that deep,” Ernesto cut her off, and he pulled me towards him, away from her. I thought he was unnecessarily rude but was glad at the result: that I was closer to Ernesto,
and the woman stranger no longer prayed over me for my relief. She tossed the advice of a feminist at us but otherwise backed off, parting strangely, she said, “You’ve got a great man here.” ** My “great man” walked me slowly home.

I stayed worried I was concussed, but he talked me out of it. I didn’t want to drink (alcohol) tonight, just in case. He didn’t want to drink * alone.

We had two days following before we would be “on-call” again, so we polished our boots and I made us lots of food. And we fucked and made love countless times. The extreme proximity inherent in the connection of these two bodies, I wanted more than I wanted to breathe.

…It felt strange and unfair to leave Ernesto even for a moment...Later, he told me he met up with his ex in that time, the one he dumped to be with me. She wanted to talk it out, he said, and she cried, he said, and he listened, but they did not reconcile. He did not tell her about me.

One by one, I told my family and friends about Ernesto. When he told his parents about me, over-the-phone, I heard him use the Spanish “mujer” for “woman” instead of “chica” for “girl.” “I met a woman.” It’s true I am the elder by four years, and I feel older even than that with my experiences. I give him advice without intention, and he heeds it or he doesn’t.

Ernesto is impressed by – the number of blankets on my bed, the fullness of my kitchen, and especially by the fruits of my summer garden. I try to explain that much of the gardening is the work of Meredith. Much of the art is the work of Odessa. I am a fractal woman, made up of the many women who feed me.

I make Ernesto extravagant meals. Am I trying to fracture him with my influence? And is this love? But Ernesto begs I let him drink of me the parts of myself even I don’t know.

_The truth is, I think about you every day, in little ways, and in connecting-the-dots sort of ways...This is not a murder mystery. I know you killed you, and to an extent I know why._

_But, moving on, if that’s what I’m doing – I’m still assembling the story of it._

_At the J train station, Schumer St. – you said you could never return to, you watched a person a bit younger than yourself step slowly down onto the train tracks. You thought it was a magic trick. You waited, as the J train arrived with a screeching halt, not soon enough, the Schumer St. station rang with the screams of New Yorkers. You watched, as a person not much younger than yourself never came back up again. The station closed and police came running in._
You knew you would have to leave the way you came, but you did not know that you could move from that moment, and I don’t think that you ever did.

What I couldn’t say then was how I knew the ghost now better than I knew what’s left of me.

Ernesto wants an honest woman.

*I am a recovering hermit, an active griever, and afraid*

*deeply afraid of loving, and losing again.*

Love

That four-letter word, he let slip a number of times in the two weeks since our meeting on the hill. Wasn’t it too soon? By the third week, I didn’t care. Ernesto was making love to me – his preferred position, my ankles tied around his neck, our hands holding against the sheet, I said, “I love you,” and I meant it. I said it more to myself than to him: “I am in love.”

For what is love if not this feeling? My mother says of my father, “In retrospect, you just know.” Might this be the making of a home, which was ours?

Ernesto in silk

Rosa
*in the garden, in my backyard*
*in my bed. Again, in my bed*
*and today he is my boyfriend*

*and tomorrow he is*
*in my bed, again*

*...he’s already planting the peppers*

About the garden, I must tell you about, although I fear that even poetry will not do it justice, I need to preserve it, some moments of it: and so I’ll tell you: that on top of me in the grass, in the sunshine, it was so magical, I begged him to come in me. What a woman he has made of me. I held him in me as he shuddered, the sun kissed us both: a blessing of our making.
The next day was so hot. We took to the shade under the rose garden.

I tied my ankles around Ernesto’s neck, and, on the tapestry Brett’s mother had repaired for me, he wanted to come in me again. Yesterday, when we finished, rose, and dusted one another off, we pulled the most aromatic rose, which was red, and laid it on our bedside. Today, as Ernesto came in me, I came, too, and behind his head, in our union, a white rose I plucked.

Ernesto tucked – sentimental Ernesto – our roses into one of my drawers for safekeeping. We joke (we fear?) that I am pregnant, based on the idea that lovemaking this precious must produce an heir. We will name her “Rosa”…no, we won’t, because I won’t have her…it. I will have a master’s degree instead. I will have abundant travels and solitary joys and joys in love.

But Ernesto says he wants to marry me, and I say so, too, and it’s difficult to tell which one of us is the more sincere. Or if there is even enough value in its sincerity, inherently. That the making of this love is worth recording.

Ernesto’s parents determined to surprise him

They came from Torrance, CA bearing Torrance Bakery pastries, came to my house where Ernesto had been staying, met me at my garden. She found wild raspberries in the backyard. Meredith would have been ashamed by the uninvited visitors – these berries were “weeds” – but I was delighted when Ernesto’s mother began plucking the berries. He has said so much about his mother who smokes cigarettes in such excess, he worries she’ll die of it, who speaks only Spanish, who picks fruit impulsively from any fruit-bearing tree or bush, first to feed me, then her first-born son, then, lastly, her husband.

“Any for you?” I stutter in my reborn Spanish I haven’t studied formally since high school.

No, fruits are for her beloveds. “You’re a good mother.” My Spanish grammar distracts me. Which form of “To be” do I use in the case of this action…I expect to be a defining trait of hers?

Mostly, I’m thinking too much, and my Spanish suffices. It’s a felicitous act for me to navigate these two languages; although for ease, when we all go out to dinner, Ernesto mediates for the table between Spanish and English, and I like the duty with which he approaches his role as first-generation American. The waitress is patient with Ernesto’s glutinous, joyous, somewhat “ill-mannered” parents. Buzzed by beer, as opposed to wine/liquor, I contrast this moment with how it felt to dine with Brett’s family. I’m pleased by the “culture” of: Ernesto’s father is proud of the bill, which he shows to Ernesto. I have seen bills larger, and even paid such bills myself.
I check with a Google translate before I compose in Spanish my offer to pay for at least the drinks. Pride encourages the wrestling between us: how to feign a proper joust on unequal footing.

*When Ernesto reads this, weeks later, he is offended.*

I feel privileged to be welcome here, a different kind of privilege than I’ve been invited to in the past. Like Ernesto, his parents carry suns inside of them. I lighten in their presence.

In the back of Ernesto’s van, they joke we are crossing the border. “Everybody get low!” shouts his father, laughing, and his mother grasps my arm as Ernesto whips us recklessly around a turn.

In her best English (which, really, is better than my best Spanish), his mother announces, “If my boy is happy, I’m happy.”

I felt sad today. On the drive to his parents, I told Ernesto willingly, thoughtfully, that I was “distant” and “dissociative.” He pushed further. What was I thinking about?

*Suicide.*

*Likewise*
*I think it would be*
*just as interesting (as what I plan on doing)*

*On the highway when I’m staring straight into the billboard lights*
*(not to the side of the road, the darkness, no, to the light)*

*although the sign reads* no unloading passengers here
*I think* well, what if we did? *and although the door says* No, you can’t open me / I am closed / and I am locked it’s a lock for children which I am not

*I know if I can still* open the door
*I could / I can even alone I can* let me out

*with momentum*
*into the dazzling sky.*

His parents left us with plans for [me] to make them dinner tomorrow – she was already calling me *hija*, daughter – when Ernesto asked at last:

*Why do [I] leave the red funeral dress hanging on [my] wall?*
It’s not just the dress, I told him, how the bedspread is Brett’s and all of the blankets, the cloth on the wall and much of the clothing, much of my art, my art supplies as well as my cooking supplies, this pen was Brett’s, this box and ash tray, and I think he starts to understand how thoroughly I am integrated with this dead person in my still-living life.

And yet, Ernesto asks me to let go. I think he means slowly, but I start to panic. *I wore the dress to my sister’s funeral, too,* I explain, in my anxiousness; it’s like a parade, I’m still walking in…It’s like a pilgrimage…!

* 

*He thought he wanted me to cry…so that I might let go…so that we might grow closer…*

I meant to say, “I have walls and you’re pushing them.” I tried to say, “I’m in the black” [the part of the fire fuel that’s already burned]. I laid my warning with my love: if you push me too hard, I will retreat into my grieving. There’s a boulder in me of love and hurt and never letting go of Brett, and if you try to push it –

Early the next morning, we got “the call.” Our phones buzzed simultaneously.

“Scary,” I woke; he checked his phone, confirming, *This was it.* Our honeymoon was over with one hour to reacquaint – back to the base, back to the fires, back to blowing kisses through whistling air.

We’d been assigned to a fire just one national forest over from where we just were, in Utah.

*Utah*

We lose 3 people to heat exhaustion on the first day, and 1, Benjamin, requires an ambulance ride to the hospital. I sip my 5 canteens + 3 water bottles + 1 Powerade dutifully, as if my only job is to survive the heat, since, in some sense it is. As fellow firefighters “fall out,” our squad condenses. Bella, the new girl, actually vomits. It’s harder for me to watch the 2 women go down. I thrive at the idea of our comradery. (“We’ll take over the squad!” I joke).

But I “out-hike” them both. Collette compliments, with a tinge of jealousy, “Girl, can hike.” Yes, I was first to the top of the mountain.

*If I hike ‘like a woman,’ what does that say about women?* I write to Ernesto.

Back at work, Ernesto buries himself in it. Sick with burials, *I’m trying not to be jealous you love the fire more than me,* I write in our notebook on the first day.
My work is I burrow into this journal, catching up on you, and that keeps my spirit company when Ernesto won’t.

This work does not fulfill me as it does him, but it does make me laugh, after the sweat. Sobered and depleted of everything I once knew, Collette tells me on Day 1 that she appreciates my positive outlook.

I respond, genuinely, that that’s amazing to hear. There has been so much darkness.

As for the apple

As for the apple I am actually cutting
it doesn’t take shape the way I’m imagining
geometric forms which don’t appear “naturally.”

It’s like sucking the air out of
two dissimilar parts so that they forget
they were ever different: “cold welding.”

Secrets? I’ll tell you everything, since, generally, I don’t like to be
touched. and talking puts space between us. We’re floating in the Bergdorf

hot springs in the total dark, and we aren’t arguing. Not because we agree
the other
(my mother) is also a child, but because the stars are so bright above us
we forget who we are. This doesn’t actually solve anything: us forgetting.

Then, the biologist says, “beautiful, isn’t it?” and since this isn’t a joke we
are simply afraid we can’t see her. We don’t know what she looks like.

“Yes, it is beautiful.” Not one of those words really meaning anything,
especially not “beautiful” or “yes,” which the poet could explain to make
sense of why she’s there at all, but the religious zealot, instead, says
something, I don’t know what she says since I can barely tolerate her.

On this particular trip, I notice

how muscular my back has become in my strapless swimsuit. and I forget
about you,
since it’s just
so dark. I see stars
for the first time. Instead of questioning beauty I question the darkness.

“What’s so bad about the darkness?” I ask, none of us prepared
to disagree about something so generally agreed upon.
I mean isn’t it just generally scary? obviously
a couple of women / alone / searching

in this story, which doesn’t end in any kind of death or anything serious
like that.

It’s funny, actually. I’ll explain:

I was feeling so aware of my body in the worst way that in the dark I
remembered I’m nothing.

Since everybody present I could hardly hear, I simply went under the
water, and learned.

Huge blow-up fire, the largest I’ve seen

How the flames extended erotically towards me, as if with the knowledge of my affection
for destruction. But I decided many moons ago that I wanted to live. So I work in
suppressing these juniper trees, these damn fire beetles which bite with a vengeance.

“Open your shirts a little to let some air in,” something I’m holding onto: Roland,
Patrick, and Jackson, bantering during a grid, just having fun; just being boys, they joke
about gang-raping the 14-year-old girls they noticed at the gas station. My blood is
boiling, and I don’t think it’s the heat.

It’s the memories: me, 16, at a college party...It’s night time, and the boys are gaining in
numbers around us, smiling these sinister smiles. I look to the girl next to me, and we
don’t have time
to speak.

We run.

I hate the way these men speak of women, they call “slits,” they call “holes.” They make
me want to stitch myself up. I like to think I have a pretty good sense of humor out here,
but what’s funny about the entrance of a foreign object of aggression in your place of
love and sex?

The joke is that these men only talk about women, without actually being with them.
Women can sense how vulgar they are, I imagine, the only women they’ll get to are girls
who have yet to be traumatized. 1 in 5 women will be raped. Now they’re surfing Tinder,
the boys, notice some girls in a college nearby. 1 in 3 college women...the rape statistic
emerges in me. I close my legs instinctively.
Then I got up from where E’s leg was touching mine, and I walked in a series of lines, all my own, humming the song which always relieves me in times in which I am an island, adrift an indifferent sea:

Trouble in mind, I’m blue
But I won’t be blue always,
’cause the sun’s gonna shine
In my backdoor some day.

Trouble in mind, it’s true
I have almost lost my mind
Never had so much
Trouble in my life before.

Goin’ down to the river
Gonna take my ol’ rockin’ chair
And if the blues don’t leave me
I’ll rock away from there.

Bathing dream

Most of these moments I forget to share, because I’m trying not to let them get to me, to keep doing my job, and to do it well. “Why don’t you say something?” Ernesto pesters with care. “I don’t care to be difficult,” I tell him, “I already have a target on my back being a woman on the crew.” And Ernesto rolls his eyes, like a man who doesn’t understand.

“Woman pretending to be a man!” A deranged man shouted at me once in the grocery store parking lot. I got in my (roommate, Meredith’s) car and I drove away. “Woman pretending!” he cried after me.

This fire camp is a high school field, staged as a fire camp. I see it for what it really is: I want to kiss Ernesto behind the bleachers, but I don’t bother asking. He’s so safe. At night, the school opens the locker rooms, so we can take showers (in itself a kindness). The door for “Women” has a handmade sign on it which reads “Thanks for all you do!” I go in, for some reason, expecting more of us, although I’ve seen all of the fire crews at meal times, when we convene, and I know there to be fewer than 10 women here. There’s no line for the shower.
I am trying not to sexualize this scene of women bathing, but it’s my oldest lesbian fantasy.

I strive not to stare, feeling guilty first to the women, who deserve my respect, and then to Ernesto, who deserves my loyalty. All I see is ankles – white ankles, beneath white women’s bodies, caked in ash. If I’m looking for the hot shot crew woman, the one with the black ponytail and suspenders – who Ernesto and I both agreed is gorgeous – I don’t see her. The shower is more gratifying than words can describe.

*  

I let Ernesto read my journal on top of the hill, and he holds onto it in ways I hadn’t expected. I thought he might struggle with my many doubts…he struggled instead with something I’m sure of – the love I have for Brett. It bothers him I hold Brett’s ashes so close to me, I don’t know what to say about them. Even trying to explain how non-negotiable my grieving is makes me mountainous.

Ernesto falls into another comparison of a past relationship which hurt him, his ex-girlfriend, Madison, he’s still wrecked over. We are fighting now over text, sleeping in sleeping bags one foot from one another, surrounded by hundreds of firefighters and billions of stars.

“Every time you talk about Brett, he says, “it bothers me out.” Then he says, “We should go to bed.” He gets out of his sleeping bag to take a piss, and I don’t know why but I follow him.

I do have to piss, too, but I know that’s a ruse for the hug I’m desperate for. I’m desperate to feel understood, as Ernesto has accomplished in me before, but he looks angry when he sees that I’ve followed him.

We return to our sleeping bags without embracing.

*The distance*

I pull my sleeping bag over my head, and I think about the distance between my head and my body, between my heart and my body, and oh, I’m dissociating. Dammit. I feel the surge behind the:

*Well, If I cry right now at work, I’ll be fucked.*

*Look up at the moon, approaching fullness, and do not cry.*

*Try to appreciate the distance you feel.*
Back at home, Ernesto and I were inseparable; here, we don’t even touch. There is harvesting in my belly much loneliness, which is familiar, as Ernesto and I reach Day 3 of not touching.

I suppose it’s better that I don’t integrate too much with another lover…I’ve tried to explain how far I’ve come in my recovery.

I touch my singed edges, where Brett used to be. Yes, it is better to be me than to be loved.

Most people won’t know how to love you right, unless you tell them: I actually need an embrace, unless you know yourself. I actually need an embrace. I need to feel for one brief exchange the pressing of a woman.

She can’t be a man, because I want her to be my mother, who is alive but is resistant, who, even when I do say, this is how I want to be loved, it’s through a series of red to blue wires, yellow to green. and she comes back with the kind of life she wants me to live. and I don’t have the heart to say, I don’t want to live at all. so today I’m trying something different. I stopped taking those same drugs I’d been desperately feeding on the last year (read: 7 years), not because they were misfiring, but because the neuron stimulation was a simulation, incomplete, unreal, and I wanted to feel the ugly monster of my own helpless sobriety. to grasp her by the shoulders and shake her loose. Brett is dead. Stephanie is dead. What does that mean about my body? and today you said you were crying for me. I didn’t know how to feel about that, because I couldn’t feel anything.

How long have I been pushing this boulder against the entrance of this cave? I’m not going to do it anymore; it won’t budge. I am tired, and I need to feel embraced. so I took your tears, and I matched them, too. I thought to ask, and how are you? because as photogenic as it is (my shadow), I don’t like looking at it stretching before me before you. but this space was mine, it had to be. because I was doing somersaults alone in the grass, and, over-the-phone, I told you, how isolation is different from being alone: I was somersaulting in isolation, which looked like the edge of the earth when they died. and I couldn’t write. I could have broken my back.

Somehow you heard that I am lonely, I am scared. and you called today to say you (I) will be working with hardworking people, and it’s going to feel like mountain-climbing, because it is. Oh I was sweating already, sweating out the drugs (fear) (anxiety) (depression). Welcome to fire academy, a voice said. Was it Brett? not my mother? not my friend? How is a person in my position supposed to be a person at all? I tried being a dandelion, blowing in the wind, I became so scattered so thin. I wanted to eat my meals at regular hours. because a person without weight is something to bury. and I think I have so much more to give. I
saw Brett’s curly hair and I even saw the dimpled holes in Brett’s chin, and the scream I heard must have been mine because I was alone, I was running, I was running from my own bed each night. Later, you took me by my hands (I’ve calmed) and said (I heard), let these hands be full. not with fists.

Let these hands take flowers and make with them a tea to drink. That will stop the shaking. the sweating. That will feel like holding, even as you let them go.

About the red funeral dress hanging on my wall, it’s hard to explain – the dress is not for Brett or for Stephanie, although I wore it to both of their funerals. The dress represents the ghost of me, who I’ve become. I gasped when Ernesto asked me when it would be time to take it down. I suppose it’s been a year. Nobody has asked me these questions, not my roommates or friends. Nobody has asked, “Aren’t you haunting yourself?”

Oh love, we can talk of marriage and children all you like. Let’s plan that trip to Montana. But this – this pushing me to see again, without my grief in the forefront – this is too soon. You say, not letting go of Brett will make our relationship “rocky.” You say, you think I am obsessed. These are things I haven’t considered…For many months I’ve just been surviving the impact.

I could live a long life of loyal grieving…

*

Lilly: Do you – do you have fears?

Like, a lot of people would think that fire’s pretty scary, right?

Striegler: I mean, I don’t think it’s that scary.

L: Right, so, like, what is scary?

S: I don’t know, not doing this job, I suppose.

*

I look to the clear desert sky for fear of looking at my chest. But I know these questions cannot be answered by anyone but me. Just, please, can I answer them with time? And sleep tonight.

Pressing down on me
releases you
Spring everyday
I wake up
pulling the decay
I’m obsessed with it
You’ve been dead
all these weeks
Put me in the hole
I want to be alone
like volcanic rock
surrounded by memory

Cade

There’s this new kid, Cade, who’s in my truck.

Cade is 19 but looks to be 14. Braces, bleached blonde moppy hair. Oh, dear
diary, I don’t need to tell you how much this young queer (he confirmed, and
confessed
pansexuality to me) resembles Brett when we met. So, my wings, they wrap
instinctively around Cade. Because we’ve bonded, Ernesto joins the picture.
Eating meals, the 3 of us, on my truck’s tailgate, we make a small family out here:
I joke that Cade is like our kid. Ernesto seems to really believe I am pregnant,
and his sight’s on Rosa…but accepts young Cade as our first – adopted – child.

Cade told me over breakfast this morning that he doesn’t drink coffee because he doesn’t
want to be addicted to anything. If he really never has had an addiction, he must really be
the innocence his cherub face suggests. I try not to soil him with all my years and respond
only, as I down yet another cup of the stuff, that that’s “good for you.”

I can be energetic at times. It isn’t the caffeine.
It’s my dark angel, corroding.

Gabriel

He is boy-ish, my darling spirit, but sensible, but desiring,
to step in with the world. He carries shopping bags with his wings.

Let me take over, he breathes. But he moves in and out of it as much as he
pleases. How can he be so casual a waterfall on my bedroom blue walls.

His saliva on my shoulder. I don’t mean that I hate him.
I mean he is haunting. That kind of ghost.
The pressure in my arms, between my thighs. It isn’t lovely: I can’t get
away from his
clinical, obsessive, compulsive nature. (I can’t let go of him.) How he’s
always looking with a bird’s eye view into the full-length computer.
How willing he is to forgive my father. How like a father he is himself.

View of a battered boy, how like a boy he is. View of my dark angel. Friend, fried.
Splayed, arranged like a concerto. How he failed to fly, but tried.

How like a god he strived to be, but he is a snail. View of a swimming pool, bloating with a body.

Crushed sorrow.

Quit gasping, spirit boy. (View from down here.)

I share with Cade my chapstick, my advice, and my comradery. He lands on a short crew different from mine and looks afraid when he waves goodbye to me. I feel guilty he may have assumed I could save him.

But I’m spirited to see Cade’s sweaty curly blonde head at the tail end of the line “tying in” with us, still going, like [Ernesto and me]. Knowing a few people have dropped out (via radio, but not knowing who they were, because HIPPA laws disallow the radio delivery of personal medical information), I’d assumed like probably many others that Cade was “too soft” to make it.

“What’s up, ‘little man’?” I crow, sharing with him the nickname I have for my nephew.

For protection

Just now, Striegler asked if I told “Kaeden” about the showers (having plans to prank him, if not), and in a moment of shock I realized he does have the same name as my nephew, Kaeden. It’s uncanny. Cade says I give him “big sister vibes.” I don’t want kids, not really, but I might want a family, some kind of a promise – to stay. Though even family doesn’t stay…I think of my big sister…What gratification it gives me to care for someone as obviously kind and as pure as Cade: I warn Striegler not to fuck with him, I’ll set him straight.

* 

This morning, in the truck before Cade got in, Kyle, who I like very much, said to Country, “I swear to god, I thought that kid said his name was ‘Kate’ when he first got in, and I thought we had a trans on our hands.” Country laughed and made some joke in return I didn’t hear, because I got out of the truck and backed slowly away for some air. I thought about telling Cade, but didn’t, so as to protect him…
I tell Cade now that I was lesbian before, just recently, I met a very sweet boy. I don’t tell him who, but Ernesto, as if over-hearing me, wanders over, calling “Jenner,” he shows me his braided bracelet, which is falling off, and asks if I would like to “do the honors.” I pull the thread, and it falls off. I forget to ask what is the significance of the act I just did? But notice: I am still wearing the bracelets Brett left for me, locked to me, I don’t ask that he remove.

*I carried the dolmar...*

for the length of the day. And it was strenuous, I realized, how relatively easy I’ve had it, carrying only my pack (stuffed with waters and this notebook, a med pack, and my Pulaski with the handle I chipped on the lava rocks).

*Karate Kid: It’s a fight.*

Lilly: ‘It’s a fight’...? That’s an interesting way to put it.

KK: I feel like, the better I am, you know, when I use a Pulaski, the more aggressive...

L: So, for you, digging hot line – it’s like proving yourself to yourself?

KK: Yea, it’s a challenge.

L: That’s actually what Collette said, too...Have you ever felt afraid on a fire?

KK: No.

L: Never? You answered that quickly.

KK: Never.

We’re sitting in the shade of a “junie” (juniper bush) now – myself and my short crew – and I feel very much like a cowboy in my long-sleeve heat-resistant clothes, my boots, my yellow bandana. Extreme temperatures. Crude pastimes. And the open air. I eat mustard packets and salt to wear off the cramps of heat exhaustion. I seem to have quit tobacco, not that I ever really relied on it, it was just something to curb my other cravings, which I suffer from less and less...
Ernesto was on saw for the first time today.

He asked many questions and operated, as he should, the instrument of destruction (the chainsaw) with such slowness, the trees fell where they needed to. I watched him take down his first junie, and I jumped in to clear it. After that, we separated – I with Country’s crew; he with Kyle’s “goat squad.” Free of my desire, I focused well on my duty as dolmar, especially with the encouragement that Ernesto was working harder, somewhere, out of sight.

It did take such focus and determination to carry the mostly full dolmar, which contains gas for the chainsaws, up and down the mountainside. Although there came a newfound balance in shouldering the extra 40 or so pounds of weight, I had to watch closely my feet to keep from going down, for if I went down, the weight would knock me out. My legs shook on the downhill. In especially rocky terrain, I carried the dolmar with one hand, so that I could see my feet better.

At dinner, Ernesto came near, and his eyes were alight with the day’s challenge, his face black with ash. How precious this stone of a man is. The man who set fire to himself. He told me the tale of his day, as if I hadn’t been there for any part of it. And I shared with him the victories of mine. As sawyer, he was tasked with cleaning and sharpening the saw, while I indulged in another shower in the women’s locker room and watched the sunset through to the very last light. I set up camp too early – two boys cornered me in (Benjamin with a certain fondness), but I boldly pulled my tarp and things farther, so that E could whisper to me later. And he did, briefly, he spoke with me as he performed his nighttime routine. By flashlight, I showed him some of my bruises, which I was proud of, for they were naturally-occurring.

Maybe it was the role he played now, of cutter (sawyer) that spun Ernesto into the tale of how he stopped cutting (his wrists and his thighs) at the height of his depression: rinsing his arms in the sink, he told me, he watched his body heal more quickly than he could destroy it; the blood he tried to pour, with care, clotted.

My nightmare, last night, I wrote down too late. I know I dreamt of Brett’s grave, which I made, and guarded with my life. Ernesto has said that I talk too much of Brett, when truthfully, I tell all of this to my notebook. Only, I let him read this. These words: it is difficult for my hands to keep up with all these words I have to write with. Especially as I’m working, and my journal is a bit of a nuisance, if not to me than to others, many thoughts slip through me and never make it here to be preserved.
Becker: Yea, yea, and you know, uh, I think there was a long time there [my girl] was ashamed cuz of where I was at, I was writing a lot, and just doing some stuff of my own – my own pursuits.

Lilly: She was ashamed that you were writing a lot?

B: No, that I wasn’t working.

L: [laughs] Oh.

B: You know what I mean, like, people would be like, ‘what’s he do?’ You know what I mean?

L: I think I do…know what you mean.

* 

I’m down for you as long as you’re down for me.

Sorry I’m not a woman, or Brett, or whatever. I’m Ernesto and always will be, but I do know I love you Lilly. Have a goodnight. Oh wait, I forgot to tell you I dreamed of you while taking a nap. We were in high school, lol. It was nice to think about without a phone.

- E

Words like “never”

Kyle’s squad featuring Ernesto never did make it up the hill to us yesterday. My reflection on words like “never” includes how they could just as easily describe a death…Why am I like this, always anxious for love and life to end?

Ernesto told me this morning that he received a text-threat from his ex that she was going to kill herself. Hurt many times over, he was depleted of the necessary sympathy. We can be no help to others if we are not OK ourselves, I know this well. I asked if I could speak with her, and he refused. He says he doesn’t want me to be involved, “but I already am involved,” I reply.
The last thing he shared that she wrote was “Remember me happy.”

My fucked up brain imagines a young woman I’ve never seen with her brains blown out now, the weapon in her hand, only her younger brother left to find her.

I know with an acidic taste in my mouth that I can’t save the world. I wouldn’t, couldn’t try. If there is no god in me, then why do I assume that every person who enters my life has come for a reason?

Oh, I can’t save the world. I wouldn’t, couldn’t try. I can’t save the world, I say again, now in consolation, as people, still, they die.

**These days**

These days, they don’t grow back, like strands of hair, the forests truncated after the cutters. Remember me tall. Remember me happy.

What did the forest say that day? He said to ladle him into jars for preservation, and to make a book of him, and to send it home, like money. He said to pulverize him into scores of stars. Since these days we will be surviving on others’ lives.

*Your body has an end,* was my cutting reply.

For his body was the device that was all we could see it as, not you and I, but you and the world. These days we will be alone. But we will have books to read, and it will be like a task, like something to do. Like something for joy, which we will have, like books in jars,

One day again,
I hope to open with you, your hair, so unlike a book, because it never ends.

For your body was a privacy which won’t be guaranteed.

*Intervention with Madison*
I sat close as Ernesto called her – Madison – and I listened as she mistreated him, as he lashed back. She ‘blocked’ him, although she had asked for the help (did she? or did I invent that?), and he cried, and I regretted my meddling, which hurt, which did not seem to help.

*

In a brief trip to Autozone/gas station, Striegler notices a crystal shop which I enter and purchase as an apology a small gift for Ernesto – clear quartz, to cleanse him of the morning with Madison. When I come back to my truck it’s the last in the parking lot. I’ve done that disappearing into my mind’s desires thing again, and Kyle isn’t having it. He mocks my rock and orders me to stop straggling. I try to absorb this criticism without feeling too badly. He is right. Although I’m technically on-time, I am

Try to orient her towards the future. Remind her of her capacities and goals.

Listen more than speak.

Express care, not as an ex, but as a fellow person.

Let her know you’re taking this seriously.

She doesn’t have to want to live forever, she just has to make it through the day.

usually the last person to have my red bag packed by the trailer each morning. I can do better at this, and I will.

Intervention of poetry

Back at the IC Base where we’re being ‘held’ as resources, time passes slowly, especially with E nearby. I want to wander away with him, just, over there, behind the school. I want E to ‘hold’ me, one hug, I beg, but he will not budge. I try to understand why it’s not worth the risk for him. Our priorities butt heads. We were riskier when we met. I recognize feelings of rejection in me, he says he can read all over my face.

Read me then!
Moody Lilly, what a child she is, sulking when she doesn’t get her way. Temper Tantrum Lilly. Ernesto had texted, “Here we are, aren’t we? / Hold that in your heart tonight / We are here / Together,” but it’s daylight again, and the distance is blaring.

I take headphones with me onto a grassy hilltop in the field to sing songs to myself. Sing to take the need away. Until Ernesto and Cade, my little family, join me.

Cade, Ernesto, and I, too bored to keep watching the gleeful cartoon Cade had supplied, venture into my books together. I apologize for the apparent unattractiveness of the collection: all I have with me: a book of grieving poems and the diary of the young intellectual lesbian, Susan Sontag.

We start with the grieving poems. Cade is mostly too embarrassed to read poems aloud, and I wonder at that – Cade’s unwillingness to be sincere – but we coax him out with our unabashed exchange. Mostly E and I read, and Cade hums along with his eyes closed. E really embodies what he reads, a great joy to me, even as the content of the poetry is what Cade calls “sad.”

When I bring poetry like this, to unexpected places, it feels almost like my purpose. Some peoples of other crews pass by our little group in the shade here and there, but we hold our book up high, unashamed. Some poems, the three of us trouble over at length. “What’s this mean, professor?” E asks, joking, but I offer some interpretation of the language choice, the line break, the use of obscure pronouns, etc.

With my little family, and poetry, I am close to feeling happy.
4. OUR GARDEN

We, as a crew are tasked with cleaning the camp. If only I could lose myself in the order, as E does, and not fixate again on seeking the opportunity to be alone with him.

It starts to rain, which is reminiscent of the day Ernesto and I first exchanged softnesses. So, sopping the ache in me. E seeing, troubles over it, but does not supply the remedy. I crack open another book. So, the cycle: as the sun crosses the sky, Cade and I migrate towards the shade. I read to Cade SS’s journals, which Ernesto calls “gay.” (Yes, that’s the point.) Then, Ernesto jumps in and reads to Cade and me from one of Sontag’s lists of words.

“Crowning”
“Desire”
“Resignation”
“Rain”

It’s a day not like walking through the rocks, but like trudging through the sand. The crew decides to hit the town café. I’m resistant, because I don’t want to pay for a meal, generally supplied for free on fires. But Cade offers to pay for me, which doesn’t end up being necessary –

a local picks up the crew’s entire bill as a thank you, I guess, for technically saving the town.

I feel guilty that we mostly sat on our asses all day, and I think about the fact that the cooks at camp whose food we don’t eat tonight are also “heroes,” that the mechanics are heroes, the gas station clerks, especially the farmers, all are heroes as much, if not more, than we are. I think the most medial labors require the most bravery – I mean that I feed off the feeling of grandness, and I couldn’t possibly survive an occupation with so small a recognition. I need to be named –

and yet, we are the ones with flames on our shirts having our meals comped. Which I am not ungrateful for. I only wish all people did the same for all peoples. Is this a politics or a philosophy? Or is it a kind of religion?

Going “home”

I woke earlier than usually. Courageously (recklessly), I had pulled my tarp just to the edge of E’s in the night, so that we could whisper our hearts away, wistfully, I’d imagined. But we’d battled again about Brett. I counted bruises, and E fell quickly to sleep. Soft snoring as I settled into the flashes, as if I had looked too closely at a torch or an eclipse, I looked too critically at my grieving and the sadness which flooded. To protect my pride from all the men, I tiptoed into the women’s locker room to cry.
Waking earlier allowed me to move my tarp farther. When I woke, he was already signaling me away. He pressed my hand briefly, goodbye. I had told myself, not today. **Today I will not desire him.** But the more physically present he was in the day, the more I ached for our effortless love at night. Discreteness has been a great burden for me, greater for me than for E, who does not, like me, like to be seen. The night before last, because rain was predicted, I took the extra time to set up my tent. It was a full strawberry moon – I looked out through the back flap and saw that Ernesto was watching, too. So I shared aloud that I identify with the moon because Brett died on the full, Stephanie on the half, and each moon which after, has passed, represents another month I have survived my greatest horror. He said that he was proud of me.

*  

I got my red bag in by 6am with time to spare, so, finished the truck inspection before breakfast and ended up first in the breakfast line. “**Send it,**” 19 firefighters behind me urged. Where I walked, they followed.

We were demobilized from the Flatt Fire this morning. “You can change out of your yellows, we’re going home,” Miller announced to the whole of us. At the gas station on the way out of town, I called Mom to inform her of our work site change. She asked about Ernesto.

We made it as far as Cedar City before the crew got another resource call: we were being held for a different local fire, in Utah.

*  

**Introduction to a firearm**

No call for the other fire, just waiting – 3 hours to kill until we could expect to be discharged at noon – the crew found a recreation center we could play arcade games at. This was the time I smiled so big that Ernesto told me the girls, Collette and Bella, in his truck said, “She has such a beautiful smile.”

Ernesto wouldn’t play the first match – he stayed outside in the shade with the cool kids – and I pretended not to care. “Where’s Lopez?” Cade asked me. “As if I would know?” I replied tensely. My team won the first round. I went back to the truck to change out my camera film and to pee in the parking lot – how wild I’ve become, when there was a perfectly useable bathroom inside – and I ultimately convinced Ernesto to play with me. I promised to buy the game tokens, and I did buy $10 worth. Cade bought $20 worth and had a surplus, which he shared with Ernesto and me.
Close in the shooting game seats made me warm. Warmer than I was ready to feel with the crew so nearby – Karate Kid came up behind us to watch. E wants me to go really shooting with him, and I resist. Because violence is unpleasant to me. But if it could be like this, I think maybe I would enjoy it. Laser tag, pulling the phaser gun was fun. I found myself embodying the shooter with stealth and intensity. Would a bullet from my hands be so different?

* 

Has this weapon killed?
Has this weapon left behind a mouth which could not close on a goodbye, so it gapes open?

Has this weapon become the news
before news could come sympathetically from an officer in uniform:

“Is this your daughter?” He is tasked to ask with feeling. Is this weapon your daughter?

Does she mean to – can she hurt you?

This weapon is an automatic rifle. If this weapon
were a fishing spear*, were it closer, was it operated more by the effort of human torque, aggression, adrenaline, and follow through – if it were utilized in a way it was not intended for - would it be more humane?

It invents a method of dispersing flesh, quickly
More quickly than our human ears will give warning to, as you clutch them with your hands at the sound of it firing: Its bullet splinters.

If this weapon were your human hands, would you register your hands as a weapon?
With proper training – are your arms full with your daughter?

If this weapon were Tylenol? If this weapon were Xanax?
And if it were a simple rope?
This weapon is a machine of human ingenuity, this weapon of mass destruction, like a nuclear bomb or a telescope, this weapon is costly.
It costs –

If this weapon were a handgun,

Would you train her to carry it? To shoot: to pull the trigger, hands steady, at something, at someone – to destroy? And with pride, with awe, with the power of god, would you pray she never had to use it?
*When 40-year-old Matthew Taylor Coleman who murdered his two children with a fishing spear was asked if he knew what he had done was wrong, he told the FBI agents that he knew it was wrong, “but it was the only course of action that would save the world.”*

* 

The phrase E uses, I think he wants to be, “hard as fuck.” I do not want to be hard as fuck. True, I don’t want to crumble. But just as easily, if not more, I don’t want to kill. Ernesto refuses the equation of guns and murder. I think he means that guns for him represent a position of defense.

I still feel that there are enough alternative ways of demobilizing a human being which don’t involve firing a lethal weapon, I think I could never really shoot, even if I knew how to. This may be the child in me, or it may be the wounded adult, a survivor of suicide: the greatest form of violence a person can enact on themselves.

Talking about you and me

The crew was demobilized and headed back to Boise…back to my bed with Ernesto.

We arrived back at base late. They gave us 24 hours off to re-up our red bags. The word was that we would be leaving then for the entire month of July: 2 full weeks plus an R/R in-place. Before heading to my house, we stopped at Ernesto’s so he could pick up some packages and explain the situation to his elderly landlord in her garden: how we would be gone for an unknown swath of time and where he would leave his rent for her. From his van, I rolled down the window, watched and listened as Ernesto helped the old woman pluck her collard greens.

We grabbed dinner at Applebees, the only decent establishment open at 11pm. I could not eat all my chicken penne, so anxious I was to touch him again. Then we went home, and I took off my shirt, which was dirty and sweaty and bothering me, and crossed my legs in Ernesto’s lap.

He found his comfort spot with his hand on my breast and the breathing came easy, smoking the joint I’d rolled, listening to new albums released while we were away by Doja Cat: “We hug and

yes, we make love / And always just say Goodnight (la-la-la-la-la) / And we cuddle, sure I do love it / But I need your lips on mine.”

I took my third beer into the shower but did not drink it; we washed and touched. Slippery and naked, there could be no disagreements. Ernesto and I went into my bedroom and proceeded to make love for the next 3 hours. I know I begged him recklessly to plant the pepper seeds in me after many times whispering, “I’m so happy. I’m so happy.” Intimacy with Ernesto is a rapturous bliss that won’t be explained because I’m lost in experiencing it. But I tried explaining to him, “at the risk of being crude…”
He replied, “I don’t think you can be crude when you’re talking about you and me.”

*

The next day, around noon, drinking coffee lazily at my kitchen table with Ernesto, Crystal the dispatcher called me: “This is a fire call. Are you available?”

I tried making sense of the call as quickly as possible but was too stunned to respond at first. Ernesto was sitting directly across me and did not get the call, which meant that I was being called for the other Boise crew Crystal dispatches for, Alpha, and not for the crew we’d both been on, Bravo. We’d been told we had 24 hours off by our crew boss just 10 hours ago.

And besides all that, why was she calling me rather than sending the usual text? My phone volume wasn’t even on, because I’d assumed the 24 hours off, and perhaps she’d anticipated that; I answered because I happened to see it light with, Crystal.

Yet, when I mentioned the day we’d been given, Crystal, who wasn’t even at debriefing last night, laughed. She said I didn’t earn any time off because I didn’t work enough. She repeated her question into the receiver, Was I available? I looked at Ernesto. I looked at the coffee and my house and my red bag, all the laundry I had to do, and I had to say,

“No, I’m not available.” She hung up. My mind and body were racing.

Following my instincts, I messaged Cade, “Did you just get a call?”

“Unfortunately yes.” Cade had said yes. When I had asked, “Why me?” Crystal had said that they were “redistributing the women,” because there were “too many women on Bravo.” Whatever that meant. Too much estrogen? Too much softness? Too much criticism? And when I declined, Cade was the next to be called. Too queer?

Both Ernesto and I got a text not much later to be at the station at 9 in the morning, Bravo for sure. We both accepted and really kicked into gear then. Laundry first. Ernesto had to go back to Nampa to pay his rent. I had several phone calls to make, some cleaning to do, yardwork maintenance, restocking toiletries…E said he would bring me a sandwich from the grocery store and restock my “jolly bean” supply. I waited. And I became very hungry.

He was back by dinner. Curious more than suspicious, I asked what he did with all that time. He listed off a few activities of which meeting up with his ex was at the end of. Did that bother me? I asked E if he fucked his ex today, and he seemed flattered by my jealousy.

No, we just exchanged some things. He was jealous, too, that She, after many moons, had messaged me, “missing you Lillian.” She is not really a threat to E, physically, she is so distant. And he is so near!
But I couldn’t hide the feelings, so many years in the making, evident in my blush when She reached towards me again with this familiar, simple phrase. He kept asking, “Who is She?” when I mentioned her. “The brown chick?” Yes, that’s the one. “The dancer?”

*

Tonight, we did not make love. We packed everything many times over. He stayed up with me while I finished. Then he cleaned my bathroom of his own volition and said, “It feels good to do this work” and “I want a home.”

I slept soundly in Ernesto’s arms. We woke at 6 to water the plants, especially our pepper seedlings. To shower. To have coffee and to clean it all up, since we’d be gone for a month, and my roommates would return sooner. We shared breakfast at the local Goldie’s, a couple of firefighters, clean in their blacks and greens. A bit early to base, E pulled off at a gas station to make out with me, murmuring into my cropped red hair just what I’d been thinking:

*How long will it be until…?

At base, Teal, the company owner, gave me shit for not being ready to switch squads on my day off. I bit my lip (my pride) and called it a “misunderstanding.”

We were headed to Moab, Utah. Utah again! Why not just stay there?

When I called to inform my mom, Ernesto wanted to speak with her, to tell her how much his parents liked me, to tell her about firefighting, to tell her about me, and about him…

We planned the trip to Montana. I convinced him to backpack with me into the backcountry of Glacier National Park, and I watched videos explaining how and what to do if a bear attacks.

*

Because there are “too many girls on the crew” (3), I got my own room when we stayed in a hotel the first night on the fire. Spiva joked I’ll probably “flick the bean” in my room alone.

Not quite. I convinced Ernesto, sweet nervous boy, to come visit my hotel room at the price of a naked selfie. I was the only member of the crew on the 3rd floor, as far as I knew. He came while I was still in my bath.
Dear Diary, I have recorded every caress.

How can I still tell this story which is no longer true?

“I’m outside your door.” I let him in then laid naked on the king-sized bed. I started kissing him, aiming for the neck where I knew him to be particularly vulnerable. “So, what do you want from me?” He asked casually. “I could not be throwing myself at you more, I replied. He grabbed me by my ankles and pulled me to the edge of the bed. “Is this OK?” he always asks. And because I was gagging myself with the hotel pillows, it was difficult to encourage. Again, I commanded that he come in me. Again, he did. Ernesto kissed me and was gone exactly 30 minutes after he’d arrived. A punctual man. “That was efficient,” I texted after he left. “I hope you’re satisfied,” he replied. “I am.”

Your voice

You said, “I knew I would like you by the sound of your voice.”

No, that wasn’t it. You said, “I knew we would get along when I heard you speak,”

but the word was “voice.” You said,

“I love your voice”

or something like it: “Cut my neck. I want you to cut my neck,” but you didn’t say it like that;

it was shyer, less sure: “I have this desire for you to...cut my neck” and “I look at your neck” and “I woke up thankful for the freckles dotting your neck.” You begged, “your voice.”
I know for sure
you asked me to
"speak." Just speak?

Speak what? I

begged
you saw me
with your pretty knife all

that kissing I talked
all the way through.

Fears and dreams

(Coffee is an uncommon luxury.)

Directions this morning were confusing, and we didn’t hit the hill until 11am. At 10,500 feet, I could feel the incline up the mountain with every breath.

“Rig!” We all shouted when car drove by and split naturally into two groups. I was on the other side of E and these were our crews for the day.

Our mission was to contain the line, tying into 2 individual engines. Ernesto and I waved farewell to one another. My crew went far out, and the elevation was immediately noticeable.

I felt I had asthma. I gasped for my breath, which made my heart race: the more I hyperventilated, the worse I gasped for oxygen. Fortunately, I wasn’t the only one, and we stopped to rest, to catch our breaths, just as I felt approaching a heart attack.

Gridding the black, what a crew: Hooper and Karate on one side of me, both nuts; and Roland/Jackson/Patrick on the other. The 3 boys on my right were yet again talking women. Talking fucking women. Talking women’s body’s parts. Probably 20 minutes of silence in, I took a deep breath and asked at last, “Are you guys really that obsessed with sex? It just seems like all you talk about.” And they stopped talking.

Then said defensively, “It’s something to talk about.”

I thought to say, “I would rather have sex than talk about it, and do,” but didn’t.

And instead replied, “There are so many more interesting topics.” Roland, ever the joker, came up with a series of ‘more interesting’ topics: “Let’s talk about the current political climate.” Shit like that.
I joked back, “Let’s talk about your fears and dreams.” Still tense. And, “I’m going to the bathroom now, so you guys can keep talking about fucking women while I’m gone.”

Only Patrick had some remorse about him. He weaned off from the others to tell me he’s always been afraid of heights.

Roland noticed the shift and picked on him, “Buddy, you don’t want to hang anymore?”

Later, Roland made another gross joke, and neither of the boys laughed. Jackson told him, “You talk too much,” and that was that.

I’m recalling this all exactly as I relayed it to E after dinner, which is why it might seem like what I said was heroic – I wrote it that way.

_Dinner of steaks_

MREs for lunch. I stayed hungry. We learned that the fire we were “gridding” (formal movement of group surveying, so that we cover every square foot, dipping our hands in the ash, for heat) the black of – because it was essentially dead – no longer had catering for crews, and so we were fully (but not financially) responsible for all of our meals. Our crew boss, Dombi, was offended by the lack of attention we were getting. In that case, dinner would be steak. E and I sat next to each other at the restaurant with our legs pressed together. We spent hundreds of dollars among the 20 of us. Our crew boss, Dombi, thought it was hilarious.

I joked, in response to the many comments about the blonde waitress across the way, “I liked our waitress better. She had personality.”

“Yea, cuz that’s all you have,” Striegler replied, after a moment of silence for my lesbianism. “Just kidding, you’re cute,”

and a longer look than I was expecting from a man intending to be married.

_Hotel Ernesto_

Resources thin, but fire money, apparently abundant, the crew stayed a few nights longer at the hotel. Ernesto did not visit my room but texted me from his until we fell asleep.

Uncommon luxuries were becoming more common. It seemed at times like a vacation we were on, the fire, in Moab, Utah.
“Are you sure you’re a firefighter?” Mom joked when I sent lush photos of the forest we’d been ‘surveying.’ It was unclear to all why our Type II hand crew was even assigned to this ‘fire,’ which was extinguished, and had been extinguished, since before we’d ever left for it.

And we were supposed to spend a month here? Tasked with watching the forest surrounding the Arches National Park, a directive Dombi interpreted as, _Get lost in the forest until we radio you_, for PT, the 20 of us hiked 5 miles today to a lake.

Part-way through the hike, a storm broke out. The crew took cover under a canopy, E landing a little ways away, under a farther group of trees, then _came nearer_, in response to my gazing.

I anticipated the need of my hoodie, and removed it from my pack, dressed in it, receded into the hood with my knees inside the width of it, and it Rained, it Rained, it Rained.

E warned against stretching it. I showed him in response the details of my company hoodie, which was uniform – the zipper, military-grade.

But the food was not enough – I ate almost all of it as we sat prisoners – _prisoners_ because of our distance, not in forced proximity – to the storm: E kept distinctly from touching me but was close enough to speak. (Too damp to pass notes.)

Suddenly, it passed.

_“Back to work,”_ they called (hiking quickly through the forest). Shivering even as we moved, I put on my leather gloves (required packing, intended for wearing off the heat of the fire) now for warmth from the cold. _What was our mission today?_ It wasn’t much longer to the lake.

At the lake, with Brett’s old camera, I took pictures of the boys skipping rocks and even bothered Patrick to take one of Ernesto and me – holding the chainsaw I’d never once handled – I’m sure I will treasure. I caught up on some writing at the lake, then, we were “Moving” again, one-by-one, the message extended. “Moving,” we say.

_“Back to the trucks,”_ they say, to hike out the other direction.

_What was our mission today?_ a question which comes up often in the end-of-the-day huddle. I’m quick to answer when no one else does: it felt merely like PT, conditioning, especially as the altitude ripped at my lungs and my heart again.

Hooper, behind me, complained at the group’s slow
pace on the hike-out. “Do you want to be the one carrying people out?” I bothered, as Bella, especially, Spiva, Striegler struggled to keep their breaths.

“It’s not even that hard of a hike,” the old bearded man mumbled back.

“Yes, but some of us have asthma,” I snapped, spending my breath at him.

_We, to_  
_work optimally – hike in and out together._

_Really, when you think about it: to leave someone behind, in the wilderness, is like leaving you_  
_to die._

_Hooper_

Hooper is a military vet with “130 confirmed kills,” his greatest claim. He means people, 130 people. Farther into the hike back (it was a good few hours), Hooper got to reminiscing on “the old days” aloud – being in the military, his crew would sing songs while they walked (at a pace much quicker than this, he added – _you couldn’t even match the marching rhythm at this pace_) about decapitating and raping women.

“You can’t sing that now, because you’re working with women,” her woman-self quipped, making herself known again. _Men are so sensitive._ He was complaining about how “sensitive” everybody else was these days – that the VA pays for gender transitions now, which I knew could not be true. Private health insurances won’t even pay for transitional surgeries.

“Look it up,” he bluffed. No service out here.

When we got back to the trucks, we were allowed a brief break before we would hike now in the other direction. It was an expansive view into the canyons from our parking spot. I thought I could see Arches National Park. Ernesto, who had been just ahead of me in line in the walk back came now to talk with about my argument with Hooper.

“I don’t think anyone should pay for trans surgeries,” É said. Angry silence from me.

“Say something.” Since we had cell service now, I handed him a quick Google-resulted essay on the medical necessity of transitional surgeries. “What am I reading?” not reading.
“Read it,” I fumed. He skimmed it, unchanging. I tried explaining about the mental health crisis of gender dysphoria, about the physical dangers of being visibly trans in this society – how trans people are the most readily murdered of any demographic. How their suicide rates...

“So it’s an illness?” He asked, seeming innocent enough.

“That’s not what I said.” A volcano inside of me of knowledge – explosion or compulsion? to list off in a firing, about the relativity of ‘illness,’ how it’s based on the willingness of an ableist society to accept what it perceives as ‘abnormal.’ How ‘homosexuality’ used to be considered a disease. How women’s ‘hysteria’ was a disease!!

How Brett…!

Ernesto grows fatigued with learning from me.

I knew Roland, who was nearby, could hear us [arguing]. I thought I heard Roland say to Ernesto, “respectable,” and was sure he did not mean me. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” I fumed, and I walked 10 feet into a field of wildflowers.

How much the feeling inside of me kept me out of the team.

“Pack up!” and we headed out on the promised hike in the other direction. It was short – just a ruse to get us off the road and out of sight of the IC overhead.

“Find a comfy place, and take a seat,” our crew chief, Dombi, ordered. E and I found a spot, just above the others, out of sight of everyone besides Kyle, who thought similarly and sat horizontal from our vantage point. In Kyle’s view, I reopened my debate with Ernesto with an apology –

Now teaching, oh, now
I’m the teacher teaching

How to

Talk less
just talk less than
this ‘missing
you, missing
you.’
I explained –

*My nearly fatal mistake*

This occurred earlier in the day: Ernesto asked in front of his work-friends, the ones I dislike (the ones that dislike me), “Jenner, what’s this plant called again?”

I replied in recitation, “Queen Anne’s Lace,” and “it’s edible.”

He and Jackson both consumed the flowers – in exactly the amount of time I took to check my answer, I found in a quick review of the plant on my smartphone several articles titled, *Queen Anne’s Lace vs. Hemlock.* “Wait!” But it was too late.

E gave me a sample of the plant he had eaten, I surveyed, like I’d been trained to – no purple spots on the stem, a sure sign of Hemlock (which, if you’re not aware, is totally lethal and has no antidote), but why was the stem not hairy or the flowers purple – a sure sign of Queen Anne’s Lace, otherwise known as purple carrot? Ernesto was freaking out, poor anxious one. I tried to comfort him with what little information I knew. My only resource, cell service, was failing – I wished I had a plant book for that matter – which was not the kind of comfort he wanted.

When Ernesto feels badly, he won’t say it, but I sense that he wants to be mothered. It’s difficult for me to care for him how he wants me to and still keep our true relationship undercover, as he desires, so Ernesto becomes upset with me. He is angry the rest of the day.

The plant was Hogweed, by the way, the 3rd look-alike, non-toxic. Later, I found Yarrow, as that girl I’d been seeing, the girl who sewed this notebook for me…Cristina, the herbalist, taught me to identify…

*In my dream, Cristina, a transwoman, shows me her shaved legs.*

…I crushed the leaves between my fingers, which smelled in confirmation licorice-like anise but did not eat them.

*

*Poem in which I adore Queen Anne*

You’re Anne, so I adore you. and you’re Anne, too, before Disembarkment. You’re
Rum, so I adore you. You’re what’s left, Anne without her horse stables. Anne without her box braids. What’s Anne in a night turned old? What time is Anne if she isn’t ancient history? Anne is war-time, wrapping What’s left on Anne’s apron, grimacing, is a train-hopper. A ticket-dodger. Catch, Anne! No stopping Anne. Red Mustang Anne, your sun, summer, amber, Anne, I so adore you, Anne. Your flimsy wrists support this, your leave-taking in the breeze. Your heart, Anne. Anne, think about your heart, Anne. It’s pennies. Your right to the throat. Your position, no, your possession. How you rule in a way which rhymes with you, Anne, like a man, Anne, like a place to climb to. You’re accidental Anne, so I adore you, too, your tomorrow swearing-in, I’ll wear checker-print to represent you, my commitment to Anne in a high-collar zip-up, Anne, not swallowing her breath, but holding it in her throat, above astronaut silver, the bolts that keep Anne together. A button for Anne, pinned to my breast. A button for Anne knows it. Anne, I will not pull on you. Anne, I will wait for your orders. Anne, you’re taller than you realize. Your smile, Anne, is magnetic. and generations of peasants hurl potato legal soup. Have mercy, Anne. Have tomatoes in your gardens, juicy because they’re yours, and you will never have children, Anne, no, but you could have tomatoes. You could call, and they would come, running. Let go, Anne. Let go, for I adore you, Anne. I will punish you. Your butter-face, I could eat it with sterling silver, Anne. You’re what’s left. What’s hurting, Anne? For I adore you, and all of your concord grapes. Please smile, Anne. Your frowning is collapsing all the capitals, Anne, you have gotten so old, so everything’s failing, so i adore you, Anne. your
every woman, if i were free from, i don’t know what i’d do. i’d be
bored, anne, without you. anne, hire me to steel you.
i’m like airplane cables,
reliably sure, i’m yours,
The crew received radio early by the IC with instruction to leave the hill immediately and report to the station. What was the hurry? Was it weather-related? I hadn’t yet finished my jolly beans.

Although we were taking part in nothing suspicious, Ernesto and I left our secret spot separately. Then we all drove down to the station, about an hour drive.

Not long after arriving, E, from Dombi’s truck, caught word of what had happened. When he texted me to tell me, he said it like, “Did you hear?”

“Hear what?!?”

“We’ve been demobilized.”

“WHAT. Demobilized or reassigned?”

“D E M O B I L I Z E D.” Unbelievable. There had been plenty of times I’d expected to be demobilized early on a fire trip, but with the promised month of work, this was not one of those times. I tried to keep the secret, so that my truck wouldn’t know I was in contact with Ernesto.

We waited, 19 of us, watching Dombi pacing the station’s parking lot, screaming into his phone his face red presumably with Teal, our company’s owner. When Ernesto walked over to the porter potties where my truck parked, Striegler told me to hop out of the truck and ask him for an update. When I didn’t, in restlessness, he got out to confront Ernesto himself, and it was confirmed.

We’d been demobilized.

The IC’s reasoning: We were late, lost the first day to check in with IC. We didn’t stick to our land. We “stole” work from the engines. (Nothing about all the time we’d wasted.)

Kyle wanted to do donuts in the parking lot, he was so pissed, but didn’t, he considered. I could see how much he wanted to, but didn’t. As we drove off, he pouted.
“I should have done it. I would have done it.” But didn’t.

No explanation from Dombi before he drove off, and we followed; for instance, he made no announcement that we’d been demobilized, officially. He must have assumed the whole crew knew by now by some method of covert communication, which was true.

Dombi took the crew to some fancy resort town Mexican restaurant for dinner, no limit on spending. He sat quietly through appetizers, Shirley temples, etc., but not alcohol, although several of us pouted (myself included), “but, we’re de-mobed.”

Ernesto took pleasure in translating the menu as much as he tolerated the onslaught of jokes where we sat. He spoke Spanish, exclusively, to the wait-staff. I did not, although I could have; even with him touching my thigh beneath the table, I saw that this was not my place to be speaking Spanish with Ernesto.

*Playing with fire*

We stayed in Moab for the night to see what would happen. Would we bitch our way back onto the fire, because we’d been promised a stay? We’d already booked the hotel for a week and left our red bags in the rooms. Teal didn’t want us to stay the night in the hotel. He wasn’t convinced the fire would pay for it, and he swore his company wouldn’t. He wanted us to head home. We as a crew ignored that, looking instead to Dombi, as if he were our owner.

*If we get reassigned tomorrow, the new fire will pay for it,* I imagine Dombi reasoned.

I texted E from the bathtub another pic and asked if he would come tonight? Yesterday, I passed him the second key to my hotel room when we walked past each other in line for breakfast.

“*You’re crazy,***” he mouthed, eyes wide. That was yesterday.

Today, we demobilized early in our shift; it was only 8pm. We didn’t know what would happen next. There were no orders to rely on, only a wake up-call at 6am.

There were no rules?

*

Ernesto instead of responding to my text let himself in. He kissed me still in the bath and said he would wait for me to finish. I finished quickly and hurried to where he was stripping naked to lay on the hotel bed. “I’m not here to fuck you,” he said. I took off my towel and wrapped up in his naked body mine.
“So happy,” I murmured, kissing and squeezing him. He whispered sweet nothings in return. I said I was cold and he climbed on top of me.

“Is this OK?” He asked, moving against me.

“Yes,” I had to say, “I want you to.”

He picked me up and carried me to the mirror to show me, me in his arms, me wrapped around his neck: me totally swaddled, looking small, in the strength of him. He carried me back to the bed and laid me on my stomach, his stomach to my back.

“Is this OK?”

* 

“We’re getting you Plan B tomorrow,” he whispered, anticipating our heading home. “Stay with me a while,” I begged, and he did.

Flashes of memories like a storm – I won’t share what this moment made me think of, or who, because I know it would hurt E, to read this later – but I have the ability to divert them, and live in what I am, really, experiencing. And that is what I did with E resting inside of me.

The ability I don’t have – is to mis-record any aspect of this story.

“We’re playing with fire,” we both agreed. I got up to let it out. We laid a little longer before the time had come – E checked his watch and left an hour after he had entered. Efficient boy.

The next morning, Ernesto did not come to breakfast. We packed up everything. We were headed…to California where we’d been resourced. (Not home.)

*California means big bucks*

Everyone thought the same thing, I’m sure: California means big bucks, and the drive, which was 14 hours, we’d be paid ‘fire pay’ for, about 4 dollars more an hour than regular driving pay.

We’d be staying in Reno, Nevada tonight. Heading out, there was some miscommunication among the crew…or just me, really. I had a rash between my thighs from sweating I borrowed Ernesto’s Cortisone cream for and applied in the gas station bathroom before getting in the back of the checkout line to purchase some travel snacks. When I walked out of the gas station, I located my truck, and saw Kyle ready to drive. Thinking he was going to move, I approached
the truck slowly, until I noticed Dombi, in the truck in front of Kyle, pull out of the parking lot, and Strieggs yelled out the window, “Hurry up, Jenner!” They were leaving me.

I ran. I caught the truck. I texted E something about how much I enjoyed last night, and he responded with, “You need to hurry tf up from now on / You’re always last / And it pisses people off.”

I recognized the fight in me as recurring – last night, Collette had made some idiotic generalization about gay love, and I came at it with the same bite. This fight with Ernesto was my 4th fight in a day, and my 2nd, of those 4, with Ernesto.

In Ernesto, I recognized the fight as Ernesto.

Taking Dombi’s hardness on me personally, I texted, “He just hates me.” And “You don’t understand how shitty it feels to have to prove myself all the fucking time.”

“You’re being hostile.” “I’m not being hostile.” And on and on.

“You don’t want a relationship with me,” I pushed.

I meant he wasn’t trying to grow with me. When I asked if he could try to begin criticisms of me I didn’t ask for with a point of care, he responded, “To be honest you’re the most sensitive person I’ve dated so give me some time.”

And if I were to demand softness?

Instead, apologies I shroud myself in,

love of a man who troubles me,
love just as deeply as he wounds me,
sweet, hurt,

“Can you tell that I’m packing?” (pointing to the bulge, the gun, on) E.


do you think of me?

Your strand of hair upon my memory:
lying on our bed, you hold my breath,
so that I can’t say, “yes, this is ok.”
I wanted you to know I could be angry
that things didn’t go my way.

I wake up that way, angry.

I’m feeling better today.

I wanted you
to know that you could be angry, too.

I didn’t tell you, because you didn’t ask me to. but I wanted you to know.

Walking with a purpose

From this moment on I walk “with a purpose.”

I asked my truck, “How do I get on Dombi’s good side?” And both Kyle and Striegler admitted that they’ve spent time in our crew boss’s disfavor. They gave me a pep talk I was better encouraged by than E’s lecture: “It is unfair. But,

Be early to everything. Volunteer for random tasks, put yourself out there.

Work hard. We don’t always know why we’ve made poor impressions,

but once we’re there, we’re there. You can you must crawl your way out.”

“There you go,” said Ernesto, when I shared this advice with him.

*

Did I tell you? I made a flower bouquet for the truck of wildflowers I’d collected, I handed to Kyle, “to put on the dashboard,” and he preserved the flowers about an hour before throwing them to the pavement: the gesture, he feared, would inevitably “piss Dombi off.”

*
She texted me – little nibbles, a string of popcorn. She comes and goes like a circus. At first, I do not respond. Then she sends me a song – “Don’t Get Me Wrong,” The Pretenders:

Don’t get me wrong
If I’m looking kind of dazzled
I see neon lights
Whenever you walk by

Don’t get me wrong
If you say hello and I take a ride
Upon a sea where the mystic moon
Is playing havoc with the tide

Don’t get me wrong
Don’t get me wrong

If I’m acting so distracted
I’m thinking about the fireworks
That go off when you smile

Don’t get me wrong
If I split like light refracted
I’m only off to wander

Across a moonlit mile

“Oh, Sharleen” was all I could sensibly say.

so I hum that song
the one that’s like, I don’t wanna be

a loser. Think, be
a loser as

(the pleasure of) it culminates
(her utterable name) (escapes me).

Of course, if we were really talking, I would have told about Ernesto. But I haven’t spoken with Sharleen in months. How could I explain? But I must at the earliest opportunity. And it may be relieving, at last, for her appearances confuse more than they delight me.

What kind of a woman?
I asked Ernesto if he would visit me tonight.

“Too tired.”

I looked into the full-length mirror and practiced my many angles. This one makes me look long and this one makes me smooth. What kind of a beauty she is with her red chopped air...with her crested breasts, the rashes from her work, all her bruises, and the stubbly hair – for she shaved to impress her boyfriend’s parents – and her history of lesbianism, and her coyness, her promiscuity, her unceasingness – how she lives.

What kind of a woman – the kind of “woman” who asked, please don’t call me that, and then, later, in the bedroom, “I like it...in this context.”

“You confuse me.” I confuse myself.

“You’re such a woman,” as he plunges into me. What kind of a woman? And you’re “the sexiest man I have ever known,” as he carries me back to bed.

*

Several crew members have strong ties to California – all relate, as if they’re the only ones. Lost in reflection of the sunsets, the breeze, the bougainvillea and the trees – I, too, had a life here, but fight the memories of Brett, which I know originates in Ernesto (the urge to fight).

5 years ago, this was the town Brett’s mini cooper burst into flames in, and the fire department was called.

Now I’m the firefighter.

Sometimes, I think this space is the real me and the longer I go without speaking to it, the closer it gets to disappearing.

Don’t cry, my sweet.

When I touch you, I am both myself and something else entirely transformed.

Don’t leave me with the parts of me that taste sour on their own.
Today, on the drive to Weed, CA, I intended to be quicker and more useful:

We’ve been put on the night shift. At the fire camp, a “sleeper” RV was assigned to us to nap a mere hour in after lunch and before our shift. I thought I would feel claustrophobic in the sleeper RV, but didn’t. 50 bunk beds in a blacked-out van blasting AC. I signed into a bed on the white board. Wakeup would be 4pm. Trucks at 4:30pm. Briefing at 6.

I dropped my stuff off, then quickly hit the porter potty. When I came back, “Lopez” was listed at bed #36. “Jenner” I had written at #35. It was 3pm.

I unlaced my boots and took my sleeping bag up the ladder to the bed above Ernesto’s.

“You’re above me right?” he texted.

“Mhmmm.” I confessed I would like to touch his hand if the bunks weren’t so segregated.

“You’ll be fine / Get some sleep.”

We’re in the inversion now

“We’re in the inversion now. Night is day. Breakfast is dinner. And this is your lunch.” I took that in, scoped the lunch (bologna? sandwich?), watched the smoke thicken. Repeated it back to them, We’re in the inversion.

We strapped headlamps to our helmets with fresh batteries.

“They make it look scary, for the drama,” I reassured my mother. “Of course I’ll be careful! I’m sure our work won’t be too dangerous.” There are camera crews here, I’m told because it’s a California fire, it gets attention. This is the most rested I’ve felt on a fire, and it’s because the work hasn’t started yet. I wonder how I’ll feel towards the end of it…at 4, at 5, at 6am….


*  

Becker: Yea, and you should be able to do that. And then sometimes, I-I don’t know. I-I like everybody here, but I don’t – you know… I would die for everybody too, here, you know what I mean, to make sure…

Lilly: Technically, right? Cuz we all kinda would.
B: Yep, I agree. I told – that was one of the things I told my girl to make her more comfortable, I said, you know, ‘If I went down…’ I said, ‘I can only be as safe as I can be doing what I do,’ but I said, ‘I assure you that even the guys that don’t like me, I know would…’

L: Save your life?

*  

—Ernesto just split his energy drink “Bang” with me on top of the mountain. The time is 12:13AM and the words are rushing!!!

We’d staged an hour, just until it got dark. Then, headlamps probing, went into the night ripping trees from the dozer line. I texted E, “*sweet nothings*” which he did not respond to, I think because he was so focused on the growing fires in sight…Still pushing headway into Dombi’s good side, I grabbed the dolmar and a hoe to carry it. That put me in the front of the line (“Saws and dolmars up front!”) and away from E, but if he was going to focus on the work then so would I.

At least 5 men on the crew said, “Thatta girl!” when they saw me lugging the dolmar. I think they thought it was my first time. I saw Dombi look up at me from where he was repairing one of the many dysfunctional chainsaws and look up again to make sure he saw me right.

I thought that I was trained in this – working through the night – from college, like I said, but this was something else. “I’ve never been so tired,” E said later. My eyes dried from the smoke, the headlamp lights, and I lost my eyedrops. I looked into the whites of my crewmates’ eyes to compare with mine, to keep mine open.

Green took my dolmar, to carry it for me, but I wouldn’t let him. *Did I ask for help??* (I didn’t.)

Benjamin asked, “Got your dolmar, Jenner?” Actually, I misplaced it, often, lost in the total darkness: a wilderness – desiccated by fire, sucked dry of light.

*  

*She called out into an empty wilderness, supposing bears would hear her. She’d never been in love, and she wasn’t about to try.*

*I told her about you, making this moment about you, not about us (she and I).*

*I – am ready  
to go home, I said. I called you.*
You were headed to her.

How about tomorrow? you countered. Meet me in an open field, and I found, like sex, suddenly, I was in it. I was on top of it.

When you hung up, I laid out on my empty bed, making pretend it was the wilderness.

*

The dozer line was serpentine. “It looks like someone carved this drunk,” exclaimed Higgins, ecstatically (deliriously, Iam). Many hours passed before Ernesto’s light shined in my ashen face again and he said, “That you, Jenner?” and smiled bright.

“What time is it?”

Seeing Ernesto refreshed me to finish strong. We worked from opposing ends and tied in at the center where our crew switched off our headlamps and laid in the black in a circle for a group nap. I thought my training said I knew it was dangerous to lose consciousness in this total night, so couldn’t.

Too smoky for there to be stars, I wanted to hold Ernesto’s hand, and, especially as he did not offer it, I cursed myself for the severity of my desire. He expressed his fatigue, and I offered if he wanted to sleep, I would wake him up at Moving time. Staring into the darkness, then tangibly, my grief, I noticed how the brief swipes of E’s hands brought me great relief. Too much – I felt dependent on them. I wanted to do that for myself and not to need his interruption.

I lack the ability to intervene on my own feelings. I try – meditation along the way, sensory stimulation, hugging myself, and breathing from my stomach. Huffing next to sleeping Ernesto, I recognized the feeling, the one I got in all my relationships – how, following the feeling of incompleteness, there would be an instinct of resignation, to extricate myself from the possibility of disappointment by retreating from this person into me. I realized I was sabotaging the possibility of joy by refusing to accept the potential of pain.

And recognizing the pattern, lamented the bitter truth of it, without determining to change.

No sun

Tears fell quietly in my solitary watching of the night, while the rest of the crew rested. The morning light rose, but no sun, only the sky grew a lighter grey I strived to make
peace with. When Ernesto woke I was a smaller me. “Do you still love me?” I mouthed in my self-consciousness. He said, “yes / why do you ask?” Then joked with me, as the morning had not yet reached my face. When it did, there was concern.

“What’s wrong?” But the crew stirred, silencing the strength of my feelings. I stiffened my lip, grabbed my dolmar, my duty, and shrugged, “Nothing.” Swallowing it.

I felt Ernesto’s eyes on me on the hike out. When we got back to the truck, he said in front of many, “Text me.” When I didn’t, he sent, “I’m worried.” I tried to explain about the exhaustion-induced depression, about the dragging of my body which depleted my mind, how I hurt myself. About surrounding my life with ash…

Then I slept in the car, which felt like a merry-go-round twisting between dirt roads. We arrived at the gas station, or, I awoke when we arrived at the gas station, having missed any prior arrivals. I knew I needed things (eye drops!), but when surfaced in the convenience store, I felt, “Nothing looks appetizing.”

“It’s because you’re tired,” said sympathetic Green.

“Are you feeling any better?” asked overly-anxious Ernesto. My ‘surveying’ [there is no clear line of where I’m working and where I am living]: who had heard his question of care – it looked to be Jackson and Patrick, who were already onto us at this point. Who wasn’t, at this point?

Mom had texted, “anxiously waiting to hear back from you!” imagining me in the darkness, like a gone daughter. My truck was sent to get breakfast, aka dinner. While the boys grabbed the boxes, I phoned home. She answered immediately, anxious indeed.

I said, “I don’t have much time” to reassure her. She and Dad spoke with me until the crew came back. It is so rare to hear from my father, I waited for him to finish before, “I have to go now,” and “I love you.”

Already loaded back into the truck, with ears, “GAY!!!” my crew rang in unison when I hung up.

“That was my parents,” I defended.

I’m still so unacquainted with the anxious care of my parents, who had always been ‘hands off,’ in my discomfort, I explained, “Well, they already lost one kid, so my mom, especially, is anxious at losing another.”

I had dispersed my discomfort and was faced with their silence.

A bit later: “Reassure her of your safety,” said suddenly serious Spiva.
“I tell her I’m ‘healthy and happy,’” I told him.
E told me at the washing station he’s “going to see someone.” Because we’re in California, where he first started working on fires, he knows people here. He was dressed in civilian clothes and relatively cleaned up. I didn’t like that I knew right away he meant a woman.

“I didn’t have to tell you,” he defended when I betrayed my resentment.

“That’s true, you didn’t.”

I said it was irresponsible meeting a civilian when we were supposed to be resting for our next work shift. Then, buried into my night stuff, claiming the bunk above Ernesto’s claim. While he was gone, meeting some woman, I intended to write by the dim light behind my bunk’s curtain.

* 

The feeling of having forgotten my pen in the truck. Having already entered, and so taken host in, the sleeper van of silence, of sleeping through the day, I practiced what I knew from the year of loneliness in the pandemic: it spurted grieving. Rubbing my arms to create – not simulate, but to really create – a feeling of hugging, I thought of my sister, Stephanie. I let her face swell up in my bunk with me, to keep me company. More tears, and a shell, like shrimp have. I think it’s made of the likes of fingernails and hair – a thin crunchy veil, of me – and slept through the day.

* 

Woke and headed back out on the hill for the next night-shift. Dinner, aka breakfast. The grunt in me as we grabbed our packs.

I reached for the dolmar, but did not hesitate to return it when Dombi said we would only need 2, and Ben and Calvin were already equipped. Dombi promised tonight would be easier, and he was right. He said we would have the opportunity to rest on-shift, which we really did not.

The walking dead, my crew. Ernesto stayed close. “Why do you have such a nice smile?” he said to me, in front of Bella, and “I love to make you smile. It gives me butterflies.”

“You’re gunna make me blush.”

“Am I mean to you?”

“Sometimes.”

“I like to be sweet to you.” I like that, too. My stomach throbbed, but not with sweetness.
I’m writing this as I recollect it in the evening breeze before our next shift, on the tailgate, awaiting leave.

What is the relationship between isolation and anger?

Meredith said that anger is a core emotion?

My mom and I get in a fight on the drive about “What good is knowledge”? 

Filigree,

in the mountains, along the length of a road we imagine

‘We are free of them,’ then find our anger charging bison in each other.

I argue, “it’s more than that.” When she hugs me at the break, she says “I love you more than all that.” It’s both the right and the wrong thing to say.
Determined the black

We hiked all night, past the railroad tracks and up a very steep hill, back down. Our lights budding in the void. “Everything about this is surreal.” I let go of myself following the boots in front of me. It did not matter whose boots they were, the boots themselves were my guide. I did not fall often, but when I did, Spiva, always, grasped me by my pack.

“Rock!” a few times, we shouted, at the fault of my feet.

At a rest in the early morning, perhaps 2am, Ernesto pulled out his favorite energy drink Bang, he’d brought to share with me. We split it one sip after another. I wrote a bit by the light of my headlamp which Ernesto complained of. He wanted to see the stars, which were visible tonight. One could see the Big Dipper without trying. I lack the knowledge of any other stars…but determine to learn more, finish my paragraph, and turn off my headlamp.

* 

A man once told me that when it’s really cold the sky is always clear. It has something to do with pressure systems I don’t understand although he tried to explain it to me.

In the sky I see everyone I’m related to romantically, all of us tied together like constellations. Some of it breaks my heart, but not enough for me to fall, since I’m so tethered, since I’m so supported. Most of it does not fault me. What have I ever been but honest? Some of it’s ugly - bad connections I or we tried too hard to make something out of. All of it’s there. I am here. Where is we?

Wait – where is I?

* 

We stumbled back to the trucks to stage in the dirt nearby. With my hoodie, even, I was shivering, and I decided to wait in the truck, although Ernesto berated I was breaking team spirit by not freezing like the rest of them. He seemed to think that love should involve shared suffering, like God. I felt only that I was swallowing my pride. But I would not sleep.

If ever a truckmate would open the door to me, lying across the backseat, I would burst up, and shout, “Hi!” – I am not asleep, I am only waiting, out of the wind and off the earth. *
Our crew split in two before the group briefing – before we could split another *Bang* – and I got the tougher turf, the hill. We would meet at the middle, at the railroad tracks.

I think I could visualize this better if I’d ever seen a map.

As it is, I’m still asking, “Which side’s the Black?” when I need to take a piss.

---

*Benjamin*

I felt toughness from Benjamin last night. When he threw a branch at me, I said, “Hey, watch where you’re throwing…cuz you hit me?”

He responded, “Watch where you’re standing.”

Today, Benjamin warmed to me. He seems to be the kind of person who only respects *good workers*: When I found the heat pile in our grid / When I let him know to change the batteries of his lamp, as I noticed it dimmed / When I tried, but failed, to take down the branch above the burning stump hole (‘removing ladder fuel’), and he laughed,

“When I do that, it swings back and hits me.”
We made it to the trucks around 11pm where [Ernesto’s] crew had long been waiting. I had enough time to eat my sandwich and most of my chips (‘Lunch’), but not enough time to see him before Kyle asked for a volunteer to drive back up to division line.

Spiva and I looked hard into each other for signs of bravery, and I volunteered.

Message from E: “You left?” immediately upon leaving.

I didn’t know I wouldn’t be seeing him the rest of the night, or else I surely wouldn’t have driven up the dirt hill, off-roading, for a short-crew mission with Kyle, Country, Higgins, and Strieggs, blasting EDM. But I learned eventually, “We’ll be here all night.”

Nightmare on the hill

After we surveyed the hill, we settled into the dirt. I decided to hop in the truck for a nap, but it was too cold to sleep…unless…I convinced Kyle to turn on the heat.

E texted from the bottom of the hill that he was freezing, as guiltily, I drifted into a dream.

I woke with hot tears running down my face from a torturous nightmare about my dead sister and her three dead children. I texted Ernesto I’d had a nightmare.

“He’s at rest,” he soothed presumptuously, that Brett was the subject.

“No, it was my sister.”

“She’s at rest.”

I couldn’t breathe. The lasting image in my mind made me sick – I won’t repeat it here.

The car was hot as a panic attack. I burst out and into the forest, away from the boys, to weep plentifully. Lying on the forest floor, looking up at the stars, I tried to remember that the truth was somehow better than this nightmare.

When I could breathe again, I wandered over to the warming fire Striegler had pitched with Country. Country, realizing I’d abandoned the back seat, took the opportunity to move into my sleeping spot. I don’t know why I thought Striegler might be able to comfort me. He slept soundly, oblivious to my presence and state. Adding bits of fuel to the fire gave me some peace – something to control. Behind the fire, the sun rose, as if to reassure me – what I can’t control survives me.
Can this even be considered a kind of sanity?

It was determined that Mount Shasta is haunted, cursed even, and some members of the crew became obsessed with the possibility of ghostly activity. They wanted a ghost story, gathered around another warming fire the next night. I warned all it was dark, but…it did feature ghosts. Ernesto was silent and not giving me any special attention. Yet, “you don’t want to hear it,” he warned the crew, with intimate knowledge of my nightmares. I told my story anyway.

*

I got my period today, and privately cried to Ernesto who would not hear of Brett, not again, not ever again. He wanted to “clear [his] head,” and we kept the fire going all night, he and I, Lopez and Jenner, by chopping manzanita bushes with our pulaskis and lugging them into piles on the burn. The crew slept soundly around what became our baby. The baby we will never have.

And we never did sneak off to kiss or even to hold hands or to whisper, “I love you” although everyone slept but us. And then, everyone slept but me. Sipping my own energy drink, tossing sticks in, I wanted to tell – to text, since he wouldn’t walk away to talk – but this boy of mine
couldn’t tolerate my sensitivity. And as Ernesto began to snore, I began to say goodbye.

I looked dead at Jupiter, not wanting to be alone, and I told her, that shining – not twinkling, for that would be a star – planet, that “I can’t do this anymore,” because I needed to speak my resolution aloud, I imagined Jupiter to be a very strong woman, one who is not a mother, but has many moons which orbit her, she does so little for, yet stay they do.

*I kept the fire*

*Absolutely purple in the morning*

*Tossing paper in the pit prolonged the burning notes in my pocket*

*You wrote*

“I-I want to kiss you but I’m scared”

“I-I am tired,” I replied, and sat down. I am young and have a lot in front of me yet

I’ve tried to make this moment last. I kept the ace (which is most valuable).

“Well, you’re very pretty…” I explained. I was

*Cradling the head, but it changed its shape.*

Ernesto had moved closer, to sleep, but I was far away in my own grief.

The crew stirred, one-by-one. In the inversion, sunrise is the end of the day. When Higgins awoke, he initiated the dousing of the fire with what water was slept with, nearby. I preserved my water – too tired to refill my canteens for work tomorrow (tonight).

“The rules against warming fires are pretty strict…” said Higgins, as he emptied the crews’ water bottles on the steam of the fire he’d last night encouraged, “Don’t have one.”
He wrote into my silence, eventually, “You okay?”

“Yea, I’m good / Are you?”

Ernesto near-apologized for not being there for me. “That’s ok / I was there for me.”

*  

At breakfast, I sat beside my love on the curb, next to the trash cans, and I tried not to think, how cute he is. He pressed his thigh against mine to show me what he was doing on his phone. I let it linger there as crew members came by to toss their trash. Didn’t he mind this, if he wouldn’t even touch me in the dark? I pulled away myself, rose to grab my red bag from the trailer. Changed my tampon, my blood-soaked underwear in the disabled porter potty stall. There are showers on this fire, because it’s California (special, better-paid). In the shower I determined to drag myself to, I did not cry like I’d expected to. I checked my phone compulsively, but no more words from E…no reverberation off my pulling back, no expression of love, of sweet dreams, no selecting my bunk above his, no telling me where to find him so I could sneak a kiss, if the coast was clear, as he had shared the two days before, and I took him up on once.

My resolution: I planned to write it on the drive home and to give the letter to Ernesto when we arrived back at base – so that my decision would not impact his work; so that, I could leave in peace; so that I still had a week to think over my retreat. I wrote most of this from the top of three bunks by the small wall light behind my curtain. I’ve never been much of a napper: I only sleep in the day when I’ve thoroughly used up my body in the night. So, sleeping in the day feels like tenderest care. I suck on my blue water bottle, which has come to be like a pacifier to me. And I sleep. I wake to pee.

When I see Ernesto in the daylight, I tip my head down, having nothing to say. He comes right up to me and smiles when our eyes meet. “We’ve been reassigned,” he tells me. I knew already.

The Tangled Fire

I was stretching in the grass just before departure for the drive to the new Tangled Fire when Ernesto came to me to tell me that it’s difficult for him he can’t give me attention, that “all we have is words,” and his look at me melted me. Then we packed up (“Pack up!”) and drove into another wilderness.

“Are you ending this?” E sent into the void (I received later).
Without cell service, our crew struggled to find base camp, so traveled in circles along the mountain roads until, noting forest rangers turn a new path, we followed them. We landed in a parking lot along the woods where a number of neutrally-colored station wagons were parked, Kyle and Country joked that there must be a lesbian party. Kyle called it a “coven.” It was 10pm.

While Dombi sought cell service and/or radio signal to reach dispatch, I faded in and out in my truck, against the window. “You still awake?” I heard Kyle ask me softly. Then, “Get up.” We were moving our red bags into our trucks from the trailer, which was being dropped here – the road to camp too bumpy to take the hitch on. Were we working night shift, or weren’t we?

We weren’t. We found camp in a battlefield of wildflowers – I realized to be in the morning – in the night, I pitched a tent in the far end of the field. Ernesto and I only spoke in person briefly, in the dark, to exchange our camp plans, and he said he would be camping by Patrick (not me). I hardly registered the information, as Country was standing next to me, at the foot of our truck, asking whether I would “rehab” my pack tonight. “I’ll do it in the morning” is all I said, to Country, and made my way to the spot I’d chosen for myself. I set up my tent, and I cried

furioulsy inside, I slept graciously.

*

We were given until 7am to be ready, so luxurious it felt, my body wouldn’t let me. I woke as the sun was rising, close to 5. Because we spiked nearby, the hike in was brief. We were instructed not to approach the crime scene: a campsite littered with beers and a campfire, the suspected origin of the fire. Out here in the wilderness, such a campsite is already illegal; if it started the wildfire, it’s a felony.

In line we soldiered,
then quietly, from behind me, “I feel like I drag people down,” whispered E.

“I’ve been feeling the same way,” I whispered back.

I joined Ernesto’s short crew and wouldn’t budge when Collette asked someone to switch, because I felt we needed to talk.

“We need to talk,” he put to words. Throughout our work, we tried. We tried to talk. At last, Higgins sent the 2 of us alone to check on a spot fire. Digging into the heat with Ernesto was like looking out over a cliff. We had reached our edge. Would we turn back? Would we turn back together?

We mostly worked quietly, as members of the various other crews slipped past us. I reached

for his hand, but he wouldn’t give it to me. (Too many eyes.)
Alone, we said things we would regret; me, most prominently: “it’s none of your business,” regarding my grieving. Him: something along the lines of, you don’t care enough to tell me.

Then, “You have no idea how much I respect you!” Ernesto almost shouted at me. The fire in his eyes marking safety for me.

Striegler fetched us at last. “Jenner, Lopez, come on.” Lopez choked it back.

* 

“You two enjoy catching ladybugs?” Higgins mocked when we returned to our short crew. Really, we’d worked the whole time, Ernesto most persistently.

“We were 100%ing,” I told my squaddie, a term for total annihilation of a fire and its potential.

“100%ing what?” Higgins winked.

At lunch (MREs – small fire, no caterer), E heated up my “fettuccini” with the emergency heating pad I still didn’t understand how it worked – which was horrible, and I tried a bit of his beef goulash, which was quite good.

We’d hit the hill with such intensity that by lunch I had nearly exhausted all my canteens. I ran a quick inventory: I had 1 canteen and 2 water bottles left. E was down to just 1 canteen already. I tried to give him a bottle of mine, but of course he refused it.

At lunch’s end, Striegler asked squaddie Luke if he could fill a canteen at some dropped QBs he’d found, covered in retardant, which clearly were propelled in with the smoke jumpers. (What wasn’t clear was why they’d been abandoned.) I filled 2 canteens for Ernesto:

“Lopez, I’ve got something for you.” I tossed him the canteens and blew a kiss.

“You’re irresistible,” he smiled, “and you need to stop running away,” as I danced apart from my gift.

He slept in my area of the field that night. “Did you claim this spot?”

“I did, for us.”

* 

What if I told you this isn’t your memory you’re remembering? I would beg you
to help me remember your dreams.

* 

**Dream in which we can’t even remember**

(I) am broken, in need of care, (I) want to see the doctor. But the doctor won’t see (me). Because (I) need it, and (she) isn’t there, (I) think it’s a conspiracy. (I) rush out cursing the many forces against (me), limping, oozing from the running gashes. Instead of the medical attention (my sisters and I) need, (we) smoke pot together. Where has Mother been all this time? (She) comes now, to confiscate the weed. (We) convince her to smoke it instead. All high, (we) can’t even remember now, which twin is dead? Stephanie and her sister flicker in and out of one another. Like a mirage, like a dream.

* 

The next morning we were demobilized, and I never saw the Tangled Blue Lake, which Austin bragged he’d bathed in. “When?!” But he must have done it last night, because we’d only stayed a day. *Our crew has a tendency to work ourselves out of work,* I’m told. Were we really headed home this time? It would be a two-day drive, if so. and I fantasized about Ernesto, about the hotel, about taking a shower, about smoking a j, about hugging my roommate, Meredith, who was home now, watering our family of plants.

*I wanted to take a film photo of the boys in the morning light of the sequoia wilderness, but writing this, I missed it, for writing this.*

While Dombi was in (de)briefing, Kyle made the executive decision to move our truck out of the heat and hit the gas station: my boon: a warm burrito, an orange soda, and a cappuccino which was being sold at a booth in the parking lot. I drank the soda slowly with the intention of sharing what was left with E.

“Where are you?” He texted. “Dombi is pissed.”

“Filling up the tires, which were very low,” I explained, half-true. This was Kyle’s strike 1.

**“Next time stay with the trucks,”** Dombi scolded when we returned.

The crew got burgers (I didn’t have much of an appetite for, having already eaten) in Redding, where E used to live, at a place he’d recommended.
He beamed at our $300 bill at this old hole in the wall. The temp was over 100 degrees.

We’d been reassigned to a 4th fire this run. Maybe we would go the whole month after all. As soon as we started driving again, angry Dombi sped up, and Kyle’s truck – our truck – at the end of the line, got lost again.

*Lying to my squaddie*

I texted E updates from our backroad route. “Are you texting Collette?” Kyle asked, anxiously.

“Yea,” I lied. But the situation escalated, as we became more lost, and we would have to meet the rest of the crew at briefing in 3 hours, since we were fully on different highway routes – and Kyle was freaking out, and Dombi was telling E to tell me to tell Kyle to call him – I realized I had to fess up.

“Hey, Kyle, for clarity’s sake…I was texting Ernesto the whole time.”

“Oh…okay,” he stuttered surely wondering why I’d lied. *My stupid efforts to be discreet.*

“I don’t even have Collette’s number.”

*Our drive was prettier than theirs. I restocked on feminine products at the gas station, and, with pride, pointed to my purchase when I asked the female station owner to use the employee bathroom “For an emergency.” She said “Ok,” thickly. I thanked her bashfully, coming down on my pride when I didn’t put it in right and had to use the bathroom again a few minutes later. The truck tires actually filled with air in the meantime. And Kyle got a hold of Dombi, which settled some.

“Mission accomplished,” I texted my accomplice. I think he was laughing with me.

“Let’s make our relationship as HOT and apparent as possible before you leave,” he sent, and he meant it. When we got to base camp, Ernesto came right up to where I was writing in the truck (Kyle, to improve his image to Dombi while we waited, ordered that we all “Keep one hand on the truck” to my disappointment, as there was a lonely stump in the shade I have rather have written on), and Ernesto whispered in my ear he would really like to hug me after he asked quite loudly if I was writing about him.

“No!” I blushed, but of course I was.
I never get to the fire in this story because the romance I could twirl in it at the length of this writing break. I could tell you about the fight E and I had last night (Is that the fire?) after he helped me set up my tent so I could fill my canteens – and when I asked, he complained,

“You’re annoying.”

“For asking for help?”

“Yea, you should just tell me to.”

“I will stop this grieving,” I vowed.

And I solemnly swear, by the Tangled Blue Lake and all of the wilderness there,

\[\text{to love you...}\]

\[\text{That’s sweet my love. I hope you know I love you, too.}\]

“This fire is ripping.”

I had written in my little notebook to Ernesto, at dinner. I had this horrible anxiety of another pronounced death – Will it ever end? The anxiety, I mean. Of course people die! – and I called Mom to confirm, based on a(nother) dream I’d had, if Papa was alive or not.

My mother was full of laughter and joy when I called her. She hadn’t texted me back in 5 days – I was filled with dread – there was a hurricane in Florida. She and Kaeden were locked in, no work to be done! They watched a child’s movie about firefighting that she couldn’t explain why she found hysterically funny.

“Nana, your laugh is making me laugh!” She told me my nephew said to her. It made me laugh, too, and did my spirit good – to hear my mother’s laughter – to hear of my mother’s laughter, between updates on her parent’s terminal cancer, the addictions of my sister and cousin, and me, on my many fires. And that was about all we had time for before “Load up!” Mom sighed, expressed love and goodbye.

*

The drive to the fire was latent with smoke. I’d never seen (rather, not seen) anything like it, but the truck declared that this was normal for fire season in California.
We passed “Little Last Chance Creek” 3 times, which felt like a sign, but for what?

I didn’t know, but I wrote “Last Chance” on my left hand, so I wouldn’t forget it.


“Yea, it smells like blood.”

I wondered briefly if it was me that smelled like blood, but decided that the metallic taste was too thick in the air. It must be coming from outside, bleeding through the truck’s shut windows.

Last Chance

The day began gridding in the green, which was hot and boring, but crucial. If there were spot fires in the green (having jumped the road), and we extinguished them, we could save this whole side of the forest. On the only spot I found, I really did 100% it. Dombi came by to watch, and I thought he was impressed. Work seemed to drag on until we got the call to “bump to the road.” When I say drag on, I mean it was slow and hot gridding for all the forseeable future. But I kept the high on my mother’s laughter and the intent of good work with me, and I hope it lifted my crew – especially Ernesto, who had been so low.

“Bump to the road!”

There had been a blowup. We drove off in the trucks to where we would hike in from.

I tightened my boots, then hiked very quickly into the forest with my crew. Collette fell out, but not Bella, whose face was red and blotchy, and she sucked down mustard at every opportunity.

I knew her to be on the 2nd day of her period – we had essentially synced up, the only imaginable danger in my mind of having multiple women on a single fire crew – and cramping badly.

We hopped in on the hot line of a Type 1 fire crew. The IC manager barked orders at us in codes not even our squad bosses comprehended. We dug line against the heat of it, and as a flame curled towards me, I turned my head, and kept working, even when Patrick told me he’d been burned, and he stepped out of line to recover. I took his place. And I dug and I dug.
I looked up from my work again, and I was behind another crew – not my own – who had jumped in between us when we’d tied in. I lost Ernesto entirely, I imagined he was “swamping” (accompanying a sawyer) ahead. I moved out of the way of a bucket drop, which soaked some. Country fell out. He told me later he puked when the air tankers rained cold water onto the fire, he got hit. And when a burning log, and then another, came crashing down on our line, I lifted them with my leather gloved hands, which burned through the fingers. I chopped the roots. I did what I (thought I) needed to do. Then “Bump back to the road!” more spot fires, and we had to

“MOVE MOVE MOVE!” and when our IC manager demanded, “Get back!”

and “Head north!”

I ran better than I hiked. I kept up and E gushed over it when he noticed. “Shut up,” I responded, proud of myself, but focused on my performance, my feet, not falling, and getting out of there.

When we were out of the danger zone, we lined up, and shifted to a walk. I took the opportunity to praise Benjamin, who was in front of me in line, for grabbing the chainsaw when Collette fell out. Benjamin had repeatedly brought A-game since he’d been hospitalized. “Oh, don’t remind me,” he sighed, “I don’t know what happened that day.” Then he added, “You’ve been killing it, too, Jenner, don’t think I haven’t noticed.” Something about the way he said it made me blush.

He called me a “rock star,” then, which I received more neutrally. From the road, the spot we’d just worked to our right, defending our line – “thanks guys for trying to hold,” said the IC boss, sarcastically – broke our control, as to our left, the main fire (I’d never been so close to before!) made a head towards the road. We stayed at the trucks, and fueled on our lunches, ready to go as needed. The fire must have been over 200ft, heading towards us in all directions. “Is this one of those ‘get the fuck out’ moments?” I couldn’t decide, having experienced just one before.

“I thought we killed it,” I gushed over lunch, but everyone disagreed – we were disorganized. I could see it had been a panic. I only meant I never felt afraid.

Under the flames

The spots we’d dug line around went under the flames, as if we’d never worked them. On the other side of the road, the main fire pushed parallel. Its flanks headed where our crew was staged at the trucks. A hot shot crew believed they could hold it by burning a black with hand torches; we gasped in disbelief. A fire of this size could burn the same black again and again.

“It’s never going to hold,” Country scoffed.

“No prep, a quick dozer line,” Kyle added, the fire in front of us picking up speed. If it wasn’t going to hold, then why were we still on this road?
“She’s angry,” I exclaimed, addressing the behemoth directly; then to the liturgy, “She seems to control us more than we control her.”
“If you’ve taken any footage in that direction,” Hooper pointed, “delete it. We lost a structure.” Out of respect, he meant, that’s a civilian’s loss more than it’s ours. We lost two more cabins after that, and the flames grew in consumption of the fuel.

Ernesto came to me, and we watched together the smoke plumes – we could do nothing about – like they were fireworks, only more terrifying (only more dramatic). Only more romantic.

“I really want to kiss you,” he whispered by the light of the ‘lost cause’ fire. If I wasn’t already red from the heat, I was red from Ernesto’s closeness – I lost when he was selected for a short crew to survey and tackle some spot fires perhaps we could control. I was left at the trucks with Country, Striegler, Austin, Green, and Karate. My crew of idiots, relatively rested, guiltily awaited the rest’s resignation, which did come, well after our intended truck leave time of 6pm.

I took the opportunity to catch up on my writing – Green permitted if I hid behind the tire of a truck, so the other crews, who were really working, couldn’t see me.

It was a long wait, the most interesting event being, besides the fire seemingly defying all tactics – Karate held in a shit, impressively, the remainder of the day. He was swollen with it. But between 2 burning blacks on the road, there was nowhere for him to go.

In front of us, our main escape road collapsed. Country consulted the maps and found that the road behind us would take 3 hours to get back to camp. I was prepared to drive a truck if necessary, since 2 among us (Austin and Karate) were maybe certifiably insane. We waited. We watched. To the surprise of many, especially in these wind weather conditions, the burn held. Still, the bulk of the crew worked themselves senseless on the other side of the road,

as thoughtlessly,        the fire persisted.

Some traveler I am

with my body stretched out, face up
at the moon we share. Let me not
wander in a barren dream
like a lady Who goes for a swim.
Watch how the arm, now naked,
stretches, curls. See how she pulls

one
can ruin lives with such a gesture,
or, I could save them.

“today we believe in the possibility of love,”

joy.

depression and thinking better of it.
Too hot to write yesterday. Hot today, too, but I’ll try to tell you through the sweating of my hands, how we could not sit inside the trucks with AC running, needing what little gas there was in case of a quick escape. After the burn had definitively held before us, around 8pm, the road cleared, the fire no longer barreling towards us, we few who were left behind moved the trucks to reunite with the rest of our now thoroughly-exhausted crew.

Austin was given the keys to Higgins’ truck, not me, a blow to my sudden heroism – as if my truck-wielding could be so poor that Austin, who nobody trusted, would probably wield it better; Probably to dispel my disappointment, I was given the rather unnecessary position of all-truck backer. I stepped into the sun to motion them forwards, into 3-point turns, and around.

“Get in Shawty!” Striegler hollered, and I hopped into our truck.

On our rescue mission, Striegler and I bumped to what music I had downloaded on my phone already, not much – a couple of remixes of my favorite screamo songs and a popular tune by The Cure. I wanted more emo, since Kyle wasn’t near enough to shut it off (“too sad” or “too whiny”). Most of the guys out here sustain this ban on music which expresses feeling (“gay”), but not Striegler. I played MP3s my buddy Brody sent me, instead, which were still downloaded in my messages: summer EDM and some acoustic, Brody’s scratchy felt voice. And to the gay narratives of Brody, homespun, sung, Striegler told me about his genuine interest in anal play with his girlfriend/baby mama/soon-to-be-wife. This being the same man I couldn’t stand to be left at the trucks with in my first fall-out because of the jokes he’d made…I felt that he felt safer with me, without the boys around: just me and my evident gayness (when an engine girl flirted with me, Striegggs gushed, “Lucky!”...and Ernesto walked away.

Striegler has become a kind of friend to me, the kind that could only become on a fireline).

* 

I’m catching up now. Alone is where I write this from. E is two trucks over. I’ll say now only that he ended things. We’ve begun my last run, and I’ve asked him not to speak with me.

“That’s going to be difficult,” and he offers to buy me something at the gas station in, “to make up for how sad I look.”
“Talking to you makes me sad.”

“Then don’t talk to me wtf.”

I sleep sitting up. I listen to “Alone” by Doja Cat, “Get Lonely” by The Mountain Goats, and “It’s Gonna Be Lonely” by Prince, all on repeat. When “I Found You” by Hippie Sabotage comes on, I bite my lip. He sent me this song. I can’t manage to skip past it.

And even though I found you now, I need to hold you close
‘Cause I see you goin’ ‘round and ‘round and never get too close

You cannot stop me, it’s my destiny…
So please just understand that you need to let go

I found you, lost without a mission
So don’t move ‘cause I can see you slippin’

Now, we’ve been on the edge of the world so please
Just don’t look down, no, no, oh

We’ve been climbin’ to the top of the world
And I swear that we won’t stop now.

I know he got drunk last night (we got the fire call in the morning), and he texted me from beneath the beers some self-indulgences, (s)wallows. “Don’t fuck with me,” I said, and “I don’t want to be friends,” don’t penetrate; he smiles when he sees me.

He brushes against my shoulder. “Did you expect anything better from me?” I hug my broken heart, and I don’t respond for fear all the love I’m holding back will roll out, to take up this ungrateful boy. And what will happen to me? Nothing else. Nothing else to report on this.

* 

That next day – I believe it was that next – was the day I almost got heat exhaustion. The heat got ahead of me. No matter how many warm Powerades or hot canteens of water I drank, I couldn’t come back from it.

**Symptoms of heat exhaustion:** no longer sweating, cognitive disfunction (not recognizing territory); forgetting what state we were in – “Why is it so hot in Utah?” “Jenner, we’re in California…You should sit down”; delirious rambling. I was fortunate when we came to the end of our line. Even hiking to our rest spot was difficult for me. At the top of the dozer line we emptied out the remainder of bladder bags on each other. I shook like a dog under the bags of warm water both Striegler and Bella dumped on me at once. I smiled like a dog.

Green attested that the sight of my sudden joy was “awesome.”

*
– I’m trying, but I don’t want to be here.

I grimace at all of it. I grimace at the lining up of our sleeping bags (“No tents!” which I’d intended to let go in), I on one side, where I put myself, and Ernesto on the other. I grimace at there may be not being enough tarps, so that some will have to share. I grimace at the off-putting language of my fellows, feeling different from them. Feeling like an outsider, I grimace at my shaved legs, as much as I admire them (as a lesbian? a narcissist? a woman?)
– how they glow like two white moons, while the rest of me is tanned as a farmer, as a redneck.

I breathe deeply in the 5am wakeup time. At dinner, it rains a cold rain, and I eat my meal on the hood of my truck, in it, alone. As if some arbitrary – and so, necessary to this detailing of events – detail, I want to tell you how I couldn’t eat, like on the first fire, like the first day I quit drugs.
Or like, when I was so tired on our night shift, I couldn’t remember what I wanted, or needed, at the gas station, and so I got nothing.

To Ernesto, I wouldn’t admit this. To Ernesto, I won’t even speak. He eats nearby, 10ft or so from me, and he does not come to me. I imagine the smiles, the sneaking off.
At “camp” now, in a junior high school field – and where is he now? On the phone with someone – about me? (or worse?) as I write about him? – or worse? as I write about him? – I remember how we would talk now that the day was done, we would whisper excitedly, and I may convince him to touch my hand when the sky darkens. I would offer he should visit me tonight, and he wouldn’t. And I would neglect this journal.
– I want to write other things, to target my thoughts at the recollection of this work. Let this project pick me up from my
again, feelings of abandonment

feelings of loss, seeing how I’ve done this – offered all of me in exchange for some embraces. Then, flung back, I

can’t even take hugs from my roommates, Meredith and Shriram, goodbye. Her body bristles. She feels her face take on that hard grimace, and I wonder how evident it may be that I am only one face over from crying desperately, defeatedly, self-pityingly, at work. But Lilly, what good would that do? To drown in your tears as he would drown in beer? We’ll both wake with dragged-down faces. So I try to write anything else. To find myself in the discomfort.
To stop looking over there, towards the sunset,

He’s come back.

*

After my bladder bag shower – I told you how I laughed – I crawled into a shaded space beneath a tree where I napped two hours, and this restored some energy, at last.
I’d been the only person on my short crew not to carry a bladder bag. Too weak, I didn’t dare. Bella did, tenacious, stubborn soul, and she fell on her face, not smartly. Probably
concussed. I passed off what remained of my water supply to clean out her gashes. She’d engaged with the lava rocks, and her soft lotioned skin split where they were not gentle; they couldn’t be.

*

– *I moved over, out of my sleeping bag onto a playground bench, facing my eyes and ears away – away from all that pains me – I isolate in my bubble, in hopes it will contain me. Shriram said that bubbles never burst. We can walk through their walls, but just as easily will come back. Come back.–*

*

I had just closed my eyes on our lunch break when Kyle shouted,

“Everybody pack up! Let’s go! **Move! Move! Move!**”

A spot fire had burst out beneath us. I fought the fire in a spell, doing the most I could, I was not the most helpful firefighter on the fire. Surely Benjamin was. We rested only when it was thoroughly extinguished, having dug the line I wouldn’t recognize minutes later, the line we dug in the emergency, we dig because we had no other choice, the line which was all that separated us from the fire.

*Baby bear*

“Rest longer,” Country chided when I failed to make sense aloud. Kyle moved on to survey the next spot. He radioed to let us know there would be a baby brown bear in moments running past our rest spot. And there it was, the baby brown bear running past us. Some of us pulled our camera phones out, but the bear was too fast. It moved across the length of our field of vision – an open, barren hill of “black” (already burned) – in a matter of a few seconds.

“Cool!” I breathed, once the perceived threat expired.

“Not cool,” Country resisted. For if there was a baby, there must be a mother, and she would be less self-concerned than her child.

*

I talked to Benjamin this day, over lunch. I thought he may be interesting, but he wasn’t. Every description of his life he gave lacked intent. I knew I’d been flirting with him, and would continue to, although I had no interest in him. Since being with a man, I saw this
as a realm of possibility, not potential, for he lacked all of the sensitivity and sensuousness of Ernesto. He had only the flirtatiousness, not even the smile.

* 

The next day I was on Ernesto’s crew; I was in his gravity field. We monitored in the heat – I tried to write, but couldn’t – and fought (about) the presence of Brett, in my psyche, in my past, in this relationship (what’s left of it). The day was slow. When we did grid, in the heat, I worked myself into a stupor.

I asked E to write something nice to me, and he complimented this work ethic.

* 

We seem to understand one another and then we don’t. How suddenly it happens or, I am so slow to take no-tice.

* 

Monitoring again the morning of the last day on the Beckwourth Complex Fire (“Complex,” because it began as multiple fires, then merged into one conglomerate), I dug a place for us to lay in the ash, under a canopied tree, hiding from the hot winds which spattered ashes in our faces. There could be no real escape from what’s blackened: it gets into everything.

“Home sweet home,” Ernesto had said, at the place I had made, which was ours, in the dust of the dead trees.

Portrait which reveals me
*Fuck Salmon Challis.* Will I hold it together? Can’t stomach lunch. Will I keep it all in? E and I try talking. I displace some weight on him; I do what I said I wouldn’t – I beg. I promise things I’m sure I cannot give.

*Dear Diary,* you have always been a friend to me.

The flowers I pluck and stuff in my pockets are friends to me.

To the mountains, I beg, “Help me keep my head on.” And Ernesto laughs (at me). It’s like loving dead people how I take comfort in the inhuman life around me. They do not respond. They never embrace. I can never cry on the shoulder of this mossy rock. Or, I could, and it wouldn’t do me any good. And it wouldn’t ask me not to.

**Imagine life contained again, like a terrarium, and imagine it’s not sad.**

To keep from condensation, I recite words to myself, softly, aloud, and let the words shift into new words, instead of tears:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ladybug</th>
<th>longing</th>
<th>lost</th>
<th>wonder</th>
<th>will</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>walk</td>
<td>run</td>
<td></td>
<td>remember</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E tries to be friends, but it’s too close to good, good loving: “You’re like my sister…She doesn’t appreciate what’s in front of her until it’s gone.” I’m like my sister, too. Ernesto is a lover of photography. He brought a camera on this trip, he never has before. He asks to take a photo of me on his digital, and I decline. *Why?* I don’t want to remember this feeling / my sister, Stephanie, the last time I ever saw her, asked me not to photograph her, she was too sad. She didn’t want to be remembered like this. When I look back at those pictures, the last anybody ever took of her, I see that she was right.

“To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering.”

― Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

But I am not like my sister, Stephanie, and I am not like Ernesto’s sister, Kitzia. Like Ernesto is not a “Chad,” he is Ernesto. “And what are you?” he asks. For a long time I didn’t know, I was only grieving and alone. But I must **stop with this identification with the dead**…I beg with myself now:  

*Please eat, for you are alive, and I need you to stay that way.

*  

“No tents,” our squaddies said, probably because of this lightning. But then, didn’t that mean rain?
At night, the lightning flashed in the field like a flashlight in my eyes (like someone looking to see who I was). “This is terrifying,” he wrote to me. I thought he was saying there still was a chance. We had messaged late without coming to any resolution. (The rain here is relentless).

Around midnight, it really began, the thunder/lightning kept up with the rain. Ernesto and I took comradery in the ruin of it. Almost everything was wet. “I’m glad that my phone isn’t wet.”

“Me too.”

“Thanks for talking with me.”

“It’s survivable with you.” It roared. ‘The sleeping giant,’ they’d called this fire, but they might have meant this rainstorm. I didn’t think to tuck into my tarp when it broke out. I covered my notebooks, first, and then my battery pack. I tucked into my sleeping bag as deep as I could go and zipped all the way up, keeping my phone with me so I could be with Ernesto.

“I wish I was in your sleeping bag,” I pushed to say, when mine began to soak through.

“I’m sorry.” It came through the zipper and then breached my clothes. I laid chilled in the water until it stopped from the sky. I had a large black trash bag I put my wet body into without changing my clothes. Nothing changed. “It’s crazy how nothing has changed.” Nobody moved, but me. I snuck off to Kyle’s truck with a change of a relatively dry pair of jeans (my civilian clothes), a dry pair of socks, and my wet sleeping bag. I used Striegler’s yellow, which was tucked behind his truck seat, as a sort of pillow. But my hair was wet. My hoodie was wet, so I used his clothing sparingly. I woke a few minutes before the 5am wakeup call to sneak back to the sleeping site, in case my hiding in the truck was wrong of me; I hadn’t slept anyways. But the windows steamed from my attempt at heat, as if I had…a portrait which revealed me.

The firefighters looked like corpses wrapped in their tarps, like bodies burnt over in their fire shelters. I had thought, there’s no way they’ll make us work after this. I got my red bag in at 5:32am, 2 minutes late. Dombi stood over, watching, but said nothing to me.

“Did everybody learn their lesson?” He lectured at large. Few had slept.

“Next time, pitch a tent…Now let’s get to work.”

Last woman standing

It’s raining again on our work shift, giving me the opportunity to write this. I’ll try to tell you about the rest of the last day on the Beckwourth Fire now.
The fire smoke columns reached *pyrocumulonimbus*, which meant that the fire had its own weather system. Lightning reported from the other side of the storm. Though we could not see where lightning hit, we watched the clouds stack on top of one another, like it was our job, which it was. Monitoring eventually resulted in real work, and we had to leave the place I’d made for Ernesto and me.

I slept a full 8 hours the night before, at Ernesto’s insistence, so I felt confident I could go out again today, although Dombi asked, “Whose feet are fucked?” And several fell out for rest – and with Collette coughing blood inexplicably and Bella with a swollen face from her fall, I was “last woman standing,” which I was proud of, although it was lonely – to no longer hike *like a woman*.

We thought it would be a day of monitoring, but at the hottest point of the day, the crew was pulled off the hill and sent into the desert at the extreme temp of 104. I blistered to ask for a snack break after the hike in, feeling faint, for which I was afforded ten minutes to eat a sandwich, Oreos Calvin gave me pityingly, and an apple. Into the heat, again, the sand. I saw mirages of the end of it. *Was it Ernesto?*

It could have been. He’d told me he was feeling sick. I texted him with no reply, so he must either really be sick or else out gridding as well, with a separate short crew, or ignoring me.

Kyle kept saying there was an “ocean” at the end of this “beach.”

Too delirious to find it funny; too tired not to imagine. “We’re almost to the ocean!” He would exclaim, and knowing him to have a sort of omniscient understanding of the fire’s geography – because he’s an excellent hiker, he often moves forward to survey the land ahead of the rest of us – I thought there might really be a body of water in this desert, and I kept walking as if there was. I’m sure that was his intention, regardless of how true it was – to keep us moving.

The day ended at last when we tied in with Ernesto’s crew, and there was a lake, but it was unsafe to swim in. I don’t know how it got there; I didn’t trust it. I only dipped my hands in.

*The color Red, I explained // How this is an expression of Disenchantment // How this is an expression of humanity // Which coincides // In-time with the moon // I was bleeding, I explained // What it means to be sensitive...That I have known men // With hands softer // I have known men // With bruises bigger // That it’s not the Gentler I am seeking, it’s the Wilder // I tried telling her // How we would grow // Closer // Then, older // I told her // As she physically stroked my hand // A gesture of Intimacy // Of Pity // How the water would stay cold // It’s the body that changes // Knowing // Even the body is subjective // How we would think we were floating // Then it would pull us // Our bodies // Down together // I don’t know, but I know how to dance // Still holding my hand // I told her how heavy it is /*
All that I know / I am a practiced dreamer // She thought that was / The saddest thing she ever heard // So she gave me back my hand / To turn all my pockets inside-out / All my pockets / Emptied / So I could show her / Everything that has happened / All of the heavy / Fat droplets our bodies naturally produce // She was very impressed by / How bottomless I am // I only put my hand in / Into the River // I know when something is bleeding /

To elevate what is bleeding / To make it stop, quickly / To stop it //

When something is fleeting / To elevate what is fleeting // I did not tell about Brett or Stephanie

My mediocre performance

I was overheated, but not “heat-exhausted.” I had a horrible rash on my thighs from rubbing together, soaked in sweat. Cortizone (I kept from Ernesto) + baby powder was no longer sufficing. I needed to remove my crusty greens, and I did, immediately after coming to camp.

At camp – I don’t think I’ve told you about the most horrifying porter potties I’ve ever seen. They were filled almost to the brim – the Beckwourth Complex had over 2,500 firefighters contracted and fewer than 25 porter potties. They could be smelled just by walking on the path nearby. (I wouldn’t dare inhale inside.) Luke told me that the first thing he does when he enters the porter potties is he stuffs enough toilet paper in to create a layer over the other peoples’ feces.

The camp was so disorganized with mismatching tents, it gave me anxiety to walk through; I felt calmer when I arrive at our tents, which were lined in two perfect rows of ten (our squad bosses straightened them before permitting us to put our stakes in), matching company PatRick logos.

On this night, I could hardly wait to be in bed with Ernesto. When he leaned into my tent so I could hear him speaking Spanish with his mother on the phone, I couldn’t resist – I almost pulled him in. He narrowly escaped.

We performed strip teases for each other from the boundaries of our opened tents. “That was lovely,” he texted. It fascinates me what’s comfortable for E on the fireline, for this was his idea.

Of course, he wouldn’t visit me tonight, although I dreamt my dream came true…

*
The drive home from California was quicker than expected. Austin, in our truck, I tried to **make peace with** – I’d been tasked to. But when we got back to base, he challenged squaddie Luke to a fist fight, and was fired on the spot, in front of everyone. I heard later he wasn’t really fired, just moved to another crew. “That’s how hard it is to get fired from PatRick,” Kyle told me.

Ernesto had said he wanted to go to the bar the crew sometimes goes to, *Jim’s Alibi*, after our run. But when he got in his van, he changed his mind, and took us home instead where he met my roommates – back in town – at last.

*

When we made love that night, I kept getting dry, which was senseless. I had been begging for him. Maybe it was that particular time in my cycle. I don’t know, I told Ernesto it was because the fan was on, blasting.

The next night I begged him to be closer, but he wouldn’t be. There had been days we couldn’t keep our hands off of each other – we fucked in the kitchen, in the living room, we made love in the garden.

In an attempt to turn him on, and to get off myself – I was salivating – I handed him my vibrator. He played with it with me, searching for my clit. I came, but was not satisfied. I showed him, from the same drawer, my dildo. He commanded me to **fuck myself** with it.

I put on my clothes, feeling exposed. He was fully-clothed always. We talked 2 hours more. Did we come to what he might call a “conclusion”? What about me? I wasn’t listening, I kept thinking, “Shut up and kiss me.” But he wouldn’t. He did not hold me in our sleep.

*Morning is distinct*

*Everybody sleeps. Of course I want to, but as this hill overlooks an array of further hills, I re-read my words, and more words appear.*

*Some of the crew members say they hope to read you someday. If only they knew how cluttered you are with my emotional landscape, what an unreliable narrator I am, the breeze makes me write. Ernesto snores. Yesterday, having slept 3 hours (an increase from the night before), I determined to be less painfully sad, even if it meant deceiving myself regarding my position, I chatted with Ernesto. I made jokes, and I laughed at them. We’ve been cutting trees – so many trees – from the road, in case of an advance of the fire, which sounds likely. Over the radio, it’s reported that chances of suppression from this, from that, are low. Fire danger: very high. It’s so dangerous, they have us miles away from the fire. We can only just see the smoke here. I took the role of “road bitch” (I dubbed myself), last in the daisy chain, stacking the stacks (“fags”? in bundles) along the*
road, neatly. I worked apart from Ernesto awhile, collecting bundle hugs from Karate, from Benjamin, from Roland – when they handed sticks to me, we pressed chests.

Every morning
trickling or torrential
your ikon on my bed
illuminates, it glows
with the florescence of the curse, to be engulfed in your kiss
was a premature darkening, a young revelation,
before, before I ever knew, or ever thought to know
that we were always approaching death,
   *enduring life*, when we wrapped up in the golden sheets of my story, each other.

Or is it our story? It was.

*I no longer know what to do with my childlike indecency that needs an end to our story*. I will love you always, for now, we vowed.

I cannot write anything other than
I tried,
really, I tried anything other than to write
his lips or his hips. But as I wrote tree limbs, they turned into body parts.

But then I realized that those were my moles, that that was my neck in the poem. I was made into the subject.

I didn’t like that kind of attention, but I didn’t try not to write it.

The *betrayal of / a turning...head*.

That disproves me, I stuttered automatically, because I am here, because I love you. *and it doesn’t make sense that I’m here*
destroying our story, delineating it into something other than,
converting *a slight glint / then self-eclipse*
*out of nothing*, I put you
where simply I wanted you, your *arms protrude*.

Abandoning the child, I left you *hanging in the air like that*. Or did you leave me? to *create [this poem] which will end inevitably in the mouth of some flower* when too much is left unsaid?

And what of the many journals of the Lady still un-plucked? Pink is really just under-saturated red. Why don’t we talk about blue this way?
Ascetic beggar, my dear / in spite of that / everything remains the same. Nothing has changed.

And dear, Take care of your imagination. You will become it.

Speaking softly,

Please,
I understand. I accept grief…the tedium [of] hope.

But,
tired...of trapezing to start a new day,
I once found a soul like mine...a soul yes a soul.

Nevermind the hickies, their purpling. Forget me, everywhere, beyond the rose / shadow, the many flowers still-pinching the flanks of my neck. But you,

The mundaneness of living, or rather, the madness covets you

taking you with you wherever you go.

“...one of these days, I’m going to get in the truck, and run it off the cliff. You’re all going down with me...” – Higgins 7/18/21

That’s something they wanted me to write.

Half moon. My heart, slivers and fills again.

I wonder if Ernesto hates love, which does not die, as people do. Or does it?

Because we are alive and Brett is dead, I tolerate Ernesto’s harshness in exchange for his love. If this door must close for another to open, will it be me that walks through both? It started with “whatever you want,” the freedom E gave me to grieve now this relationship. And there was the implied, as well as the explicitly stated, “you can have me, but you cannot have us both.” He said that I was pushing him away, and I realized that ‘friends’ was an
incomprehensible concept to us both. I tested it by volunteering to be moved to Ernesto’s short crew.

“Where did you come from?” he asked when I walked up.

“I volunteered.”

*

“I’m happy you’re still a part of my life, and I love you,” he wrote, and I sucked cherry honey cough drops, having developed a sore throat. We’ve agreed to start over, no commitment.

I realize I am losing, even as he’s still in reach.

This morning, I woke at 4:45 to get my red bag to the trailer at 5:30am on time. I was ready by 5:20, and saw that Ernesto’s tent was still up. “Do you need help?” I asked, trying not to ‘mother’ as he’d accused me of yesterday when I asked the new guy (big boy, I only remember his nickname, “Beef cakes”) to take E’s position swamping.

“Yes,” Ernesto gasped this time. Roland flew in, too, to help his buddy, and we had the tent packed in three minutes flat. I started to walk back to the truck when I saw that there was one last tent up. Not knowing whose it was, but in the spirit now of helping, I rushed over. Skinny person…one of the girls? No, it was the new guy, Brayden. I got his tent packed up, and he finished packing his red bag. “It’s 5:29, get moving!” I told him when I’d finished packing it.

In the dark of dawn, I saw Benjamin trying to help too, but I told him “I got it,” using Green’s method of rolling the tent poles and stakes in the tent itself before stuffing the bundle in the bag.

*

Country promised the hike today would “put Wilson Creek [Fire] to shame.” Our starting point was at 9,000 feet. I prepared for the worst, mentally, physically, switching between water and coffee exclusively.

“You ready for this?” E mouthed from across the briefing circle.

“No.” My throat ached.

While we waited for Division to send us out, without ever getting the official word, I sat on the bed of my (Kyle’s) truck with E and began to discuss where to go from here. Could this rain be enough to “wet” the ground? To stop the fire? Unlikely, almost impossible. It may be enough to slow it down only, so they keep us on standby (in the rain) to wait it out. Some fire means some work for us.
We’d been flirting again, or maybe just me. On the hill yesterday, “Can I be honest?” (me)

“Of course.” (E)

“When you’re sweaty like this...” I passed logs over the road to the curb, stacking them almost to my height. I must have moved hundreds of logs at the end of the line until my arms were too weak to throw anymore, and E and I switched roles.

“When I’m sweaty like this...what?”

“When you’re sweaty like this, I really want to kiss you.” And E got hot. Later, he complained that new kid wasn’t pulling his weight, so I stepped in, as E was swamping, and kicked my own ass to relieve him. And because the hard work kept me awake. At the end of the day, “You’re so sweaty,” I mouthed. And he winked at me. I turned around to blush privately. I was sweaty, too. I turned back to Ernesto, and he winked again, and I think that Country saw.

“Don’t you want to come home to me?” I asked this morning, and he accused me of being ‘seductive’.

There were microwaves atop this mountain, emitting 100ft away with a sign warning not to come any closer.

Ernesto suggested we should not have sex. But Why, I pressed, Why waste our perfect chemistry?

Wet again. Everything sopping.

Did I tell you how on the second night of this trip, how residually wet I was from the lightning storm in the field? My sleeping bag, my sweats, my PatRick hoodie, my greens, my yellows, underwear and socks, and all but one of my undershirts. The temp dropped down to the 40s, which would have been fine to sleep in if my sleeping bag wasn’t wet, too. I slept in my work uniform that night, which had dried more than my red bag contents, because I’d worked in it. I slept in my bra; I didn’t want to change. I woke up, and this was the day I’d slept through my alarm. I desperately began to take down my tent with 15 minutes to spare.

“It’s ok!” Striegler shrieked at me in the dark. “We can leave out tents up.”
Sigh of post-despair relief. I worked in the same clothes I slept in, the same undershirt and underwear I’d worked in the day before (the yellows and greens are always the same), which Lopez called “disgusting.”

Today, I woke coughing and aching with what I assumed was a cold from the procession of rains, from the persistent dampness, the lack of sleep and the fleeting preciousness of dry warmth.

We were assigned new territory on a gorgeous mountaintop at which sat a lake like no other. I sat on the steps to the lake, sipping my shitty camp coffee, alone (E would not come near me because of my evident sickness – he took further precautions from with what he had available: packets of Emergen-C and hand sanitizer.

*Cade is here, on Alpha squad. I see him usually at the porter potties during or after breakfast, and his simple smile always brings one up in me. He told me today that Alpha’s trip had been extended. The team voted – he opted “no” – and they would be staying a 21-day run.

*“We’re human beings,” I protested, last night when dinner was postponed to 10pm, we’d have to set up our tents in the downpour, and briefing would still be at 6am (red bags at 5:30) with breakfast, probably, late again.

“If you want to be treated like a human being,” answered Country, alone, since few others would suffer my sick-wearied complaint, “you’re in the wrong line of work. We’re paid slaves.” I think he meant that we lack freedom.

*The girls, who are hard on me – I think because of how minorities sometimes turn against each other in fear that one another’s individual performance reflects, in this instance, the 3 of us – tell Ernesto I’m sick because I stood out in the rain.

“What? When did I do that?”

“When you were peeing.”

“Oh yea, cuz that’s my fault.” He told me otherwise – he whispered from a “safe” distance – that more than just the girls now, Dombi presses him with questions about our relationship.
“Why do you care?” he said was his response.

“I don’t, but it’s so obvious,” our crew boss retorted, “it looks like love.”

My (ex?) lover reported this to me alight, almost gleeful with embarrassment.
Then he bopped the tip of my hat down with his palm, and I haven’t seen him since.

– The sun is coming out now, so I’ve shed my sweatshirt, and smiled, even. – When I can’t write, I read, usually Susan Sontag’s journal from her young adult life – a bit younger than me now, but she was so much more mature. She’s writing now about her voracious lover, she calls, H.
I eat the “love” up, what she calls it – hostile, passionate fighting.

“Stop reserving this journal so exclusively for the chronology of my affair with H!” She wrote suddenly, in 1958.

Dear Diary, when I flip through you – yes, I delight in the remembering. And I notice – I would be lying to myself if I didn’t know already – that there is one main character whose chronicles as pertain to me I preserve much better than any other.
…I love you, Journal, and I created you...More than the story, I take comfort in the words, in the many pages which have listened better than any person I have ever known...

Truck ride gone awry

Ernesto and I spoke at length under a tree by the corner of a babbling brook today. And he does not want to be my boyfriend – all this, regardless of how special we are.

“Maybe I should just get over you,” I said, and this began much anger in him I could not have anticipated. Useless apologies from me. He left me in the drizzle when he stormed off to his truck. My truck, gone, apparently – Kyle was bringing Hooper to replace another guy (our new guy) from Miller’s squad in Stanley – I was left in the cold with my cold for a bit, until Dombi said to “Pack up!” we were moving to another location.

I had little choice but to ask E if he could squeeze me in his truck. He looked at me gravely. “You’re really gunna do this to me?” as he motioned for me to move into the middle seat.
He anticipated much teasing from his truck for this: our legs bumped each other’s, on the drive, which I enjoyed. I don’t know if he did. Then my water bottle – he’d taken into this bag to give me more leg room – opened, and all of his things were wetted. And because I inexplicably have my period again (spotting?), I wanted to use the porter potties we drove past: Dombi permitted the other trucks, but responded harshly, “If you can do it quickly,” when I asked, and I hopped out, and rushed to change my sanitary napkin. When I came back, E was actually warm to the touch with anger. More useless explanations I’d type out on his phone to him if he’d let me (mine was with Kyle in Stanley). We were headed to camp, apparently; Dombi is consistent in revealing so little of this information. When we arrived, Ernesto said to Back off. And I shrank to the smallest version of myself – after checking on my tent, to see how much rain sank in today – walked as far as the clearing – and let myself cry more deeply than I had since this trip began. When I came back, E made his way slowly, sociably, towards me, and he offered me a cigarette and a light apology.

‘Sunny all day’

Then he signed, “I love you,” and I forgave him. We all stood in the rain awhile. (It wasn’t just me, and my truck was still gone, delivering Hooper, who I will never see again.)

E came very close to me, semi-privately, behind the trailer, which startled me, but he was the one doing it, “to make [me] happy,” he said. We’d been sharing cigarettes he bought, American Spirits, although I had a bad cough from my cold, and he hated cigarettes, because his mother smokes them. He insisted on lighting mine.

“Hey cuties,” Bella called, approaching us alone again. Were we bothering to fool anyone?

*

We are nowhere near any fire, so that I’d start to forget, if it weren’t for the uniforms, we’re even firefighters. The forecast today said ‘Sunny all day,’ and I made the mistake of unzipping my tent flaps, to dry out my tent and the towel I’ve been using to soak up the ground water. Likely, it’s wetting instead, as it’s raining again. But the raining is what’s letting me write this. (We don’t work in thunderstorms.)

Did I tell you about when Dombi reminded us to wear our blacks to meals at briefing, and I responded professionally (without tears) that both of mine were soaked? He sent me back to camp in the middle of our work day to dry out my black PatRick sweatshirt, and I hung up my sleeping sweats alongside my work clothes.
How was it that I was the only one so wet? Lack of experience? Too much estrogen? Too much softness? Too queer? “Fuck off and take care of yourself” was how E described the directive.

Inside the pinecone’s blackened shell...

My tent wasn’t wet. It was dry, but cold. Yesterday – or the day before? I think it was then, when E told me he loved me after radiating displeasure through our shoulders in Dombi’s truck, I’d gone deep into the woods, past, and into the clearing and cried like I hadn’t cried in days. Ernesto softened, I forgave him, but what lingers is how his anger, turning on me, makes me small. When I am a tall firefighter woman.

Then he mentioned describing fire life to someone on the outside. To whom? Realizing his mistake, he wouldn’t say, so I was made to assume it was one of the girls he has the freedom to text-flirt with.

When I rose for dinner – Higgins had wrapped me in his black puffy jacket, which he said he would disinfect later, having overheard my chorus of nasty coughs – I did not accept E’s hand. And he was angry with me: “You’re so annoying.” We ate dinner separately, then, at our tents, he asked me to kiss him. I did sneak him a kiss when no one was looking. I told him I was going to bed, and he asked me to stay up.

Why does he reach for me like this, just as he pushes me away?

And this morning, he called me “bitch” when I asked for the roll of toilet paper to blow my nose in, he’d offered as a gift the day before. One mustn’t take comments too seriously at 6am in the woods, however, on day 7, especially…I’m sure he didn’t mean it, but it fell in a cycle, a jerky dance, between love and?

* 

“Tango, that’s my favorite...of the names,” said the fuel tank operator regarding our division.

“Mine is Whiskey,” replied Kyle kindly. He has a funny, sort of respectful tone in conversations with toothless old women. Certainly, he doesn’t speak with me this way, but I have my teeth, and I’m his (woman) worker.

* 

I don’t think I mentioned, an image reoccurring in my mind. I think it was the day that Karate, after looking at me too hard, so that I tensed in my boots, offered me caffeine
pills, which I’d never taken before. “I think they were caffeine pills,” I joked with Green, implying Karate would roofie me on the fireline. “I didn’t see the packaging.”

“Well, if you have to pee, warn someone,” Green darkly joked back. I took two that day and stole a third – confirming the bottle description with my own eyes – I’ve yet to take. If I haven’t lost it yet, it’s still in the right breast pocket of the yellow I’m wearing.

Yes, it’s still there, I just checked – along with another rock, pink and sparkly, I’m sure Ernesto gave to me. He gave me a pinecone on this day, too – or was it the day before? Because I remember we were hardly speaking – and he told me to open it.

Inside the pinecone’s blackened shell was a remarkably lovely pink bloom. “It’s an analogy for you,” he said shyly. I was struck both by the discovery as well as his case of ‘analogy’ over ‘metaphor.’

“How did you know it looked like this inside?” I asked.

“I’m a curious boy.”

*

Rock garden.

I’m hurt you found me in.

We’re so anxious to be here, we’re in love.

You’re the hike out. You’re a balloon.
I’m a cruel spider. I’d always occupy this room.

I am not a guaranteed good time. I’m a pinch of salt.
A woman and a tongue.

Nothing like an oyster. You are nothing

Like a breeze, a touch, and then it’s gone.
You look at me too much, and then it’s gone.

That and the sparkling and pink rocks in the sun.
I honestly dream of you. You are a good laugh.

Not a woman, but a Threat. To stay in bed all day.
It’s a fabulous Way. Not a woman, but a Tongue.

I am the silence I demand from you.
"I don’t want to be the hand-held mirror
Of a solitary girl’s.

I am the naked moon.

And I am a man who makes promises.

Half-asleep, half-tongue-tied.

Rock scramble,

You are the thinness of the ruler, and I am the teacher.

You have never been the hum of the pencil, sharpening.
You make me work. Long past retirement.

I am the yellowing of the leaves.
I am a genuine Testament to the absurdity of Love.

And you are a Lingering
Note I once wrote in a book.

Drug-induced panic

Kyle fed me Mucinex and Dombi, Dayquil. I took Ibuprofen besides that and began to feel light-headed. Becker picked up much of my slack after puking from what he joked were heroine withdrawals, or was it just the camp food?

“Got any opiates?” He added, when I listed the drugs I was on in explanation of my sloppy work.

I thought about taking that last caffeine pill to add it to my cocktail until I remembered a story Country once told me – about a girl who took too many caffeine pills on a fire once, had a panic attack, and had to be replaced.

*  

Ernesto has a dear friend Gabe on Alpha he knows from fighting fires in California. Gabe is who told Ernesto to move to Idaho and join PatRick. Yesterday, Gabe had a small heart attack during the work shift. That was day 15 for them, as Alpha had extended. Gabe was “8-lined,” and helicoptered to a local hospital where the nurses – who are now being questioned – determined he’d only “given himself a panic attack.” Ernesto saw him this morning at base camp.
“You’re back?” He told me he asked.

“Yes,” Gabe explained what he was told, that it was only anxiety. And Ernesto gave Gabe a hug.

Over the radio today, we learned that Gabe had had another heart attack, and he was helicoptered out again to the same hospital. Cade, who barely knows Gabe, told me that when the 8-line was upgraded to a Code Red, he cried.

“The softest man I’ve ever met is Cade,” Country said.

“He’s not even a man yet,” Kyle retorted. It is generally believed that Gabe is alive.

Maybe save the white pines?

And something about the trees: Maybe save the white pines, which are endangered? But sawyers see in tunnel vision.

“Shh...” Country motioned to me not to respond, after cutting one of the endangered trees down. Was it really an accident? Or so forbidden, he couldn’t resist? I feathered the bristles of the dead white pine, soft, softly, before carrying it off into the forest grave.

“Kill, live, kill, keep this one! I like this one!” Such was the randomness with which Higgins ordered the execution of trees. “We’re killing them so that others will live.” That’s the idea, at least: by thinning out the fuel, we slow the potential of the fire running down this whole forest.

Collette, when I asked, said that the trees which live (the trees which we don’t kill) are determined by health, the age of the tree, and which canopies it’s touching. “And of course, we leave all the white pines.”

* 

“Fuck, I didn’t see any of those trees that were supposed to live. Were there any?” asked Higgins, having had the whole section cleared, well beyond our “10ft from the road” directive.

I think that sawyers are like executioners. They do their job gleefully and guiltlessly,
if they do it well. And I wear earplugs all day long, settle into the subdued noise; it’s privacy.

*I’m in a truck with Collette and Higgins now, driving into town for an unexpected grocery run.*

Higgins is driving – it sounded just now like something broke off the truck. Did he break a third truck? But he pulled over to checked and didn’t see anything new. Collette is shotgun, technically copilot, but she was bitten by something unknown today. There are circles and time stamps in pen on her hand around the bite, to mark its swelling. She comes in and out of “you’re clear”s to Higgins, reeling, since she took a load of Benadryl. And I’m in the backseat, not saying much, until I see Higgins’ tired eyes in the rearview mirror, and feel, for our safety, I should keep him awake, somehow. I read him some of this. Otherwise, I cough. I suck cough drops, and I write this.

* 

Yes, his third truck. I got plentiful of groceries for myself and for the boys, including my preferred ink pen – the above entries are written in Striegler’s, Benjamin’s, then Higgins’ ink.

*We’re on the side of the road out of Salmon now.* “They’re never gunna let me drive again!” bemoans our driver, who claims he had nothing to do with it. He was just driving!

*The truck had killed itself!*

I went hiking down the dirt road in search of service to call Dombi, and I left a very unsure voicemail, feeling scrutinized, even in conversation with my boss’s mailbox, I realized I didn’t even know what road we were on.

“The only road…” I explained in my message, “We’re on the only road out of town.” Then I got a hold of Kyle who always finds service on his hikes – so he can look at the fire maps and his crypto-currency profiles – and he told me that Collette and Higgins had already reached them, and Green was already on his way to help us. Hm, stupidly, I’d thought I was our only chance.

So I turned around and headed back up the hill where Collette after a few minutes of walking alone was coming towards me.

“Jenner!” she called, laughing. I laughed, too, and wondered, *Am I helping you or are you helping me?*”
My forehead beat with fever. “How are you?” the grocery store clerk had asked.

“Great,” I sprung, feeling strange in the society of a grocery store, I hadn’t seen in weeks.

“You look tired,” she said, “and hot” in the Safeway AC.

“I’m a firefighter,” I said. “Thank you,” she said.

As if I had saved the town of Salmon, Idaho, single-handedly, she pressed our groceries into the hands of a hero.

Plums

Higgins’ truck totaled, we emptied its contents into Greens’ and left it there to be towed away in the night. I wasn’t much help, as my fever had spiked in the heat, Higgins has ordered me to

“Sit tight in the truck’s cooling AC, and wait,” and that is how I’m writing this.

* 

When we got back to the work site around 7pm, we’d been gone ‘to town’ 6 hours, and although we did stop at the gas station Burger King for burgers, all else were approved missions. It was the truck breaking down without cell service which wasted so much time – I distributed the goods: the guys had given me a list of snacks they were too embarrassed to ask overhead for; and I bought cookies and bananas for all, because I was the only ‘little guy’ given the chance to go, I thought I ought to redistribute some boons to my fellow grunts. Benjamin, who claimed he needed nothing – “I come prepared,” he bragged – was just beginning to cramp when I arrived with the incidental banana cure. Patrick said it was the best banana he’d ever eaten.

I gave Ernesto the bag of plums I’d bought as a gift. He’d been saying that plums were his favorite fruit, since they’d started coming occasionally in lunches. Here were four more from the store, I presented gleefully. He accepted and told me to Stay close for the rest of the work day.
We whisper-fought at the tents that night. Ernesto claimed his space, and I asked that he
cuss less and that he never again call Brett “that loser who killed himself.” We professed
our desperate love for one another…I’ll admit I am embarrassed to record this
desperation…I think I thought that to love meant a willingness to be ashamed.

I was sitting cross-legged outside his tent he’d zipped the main zipper to, to keep out the
mosquitoes, a barrier between us that meant we were non-physical, but unzipped the vent.
Someone walked by and wished us Goodnight, I don’t know who. Neither Ernesto nor I
responded. Eventually, Ernesto addressed the crowd, our crewmates he thought were
listening, in a loud voice. I don’t remember what he said. Something to let everybody
know he didn’t care
what they thought of us.

He said then, more quietly, to me, “I told you, ‘once you’re in, you’re in,’” referring to
his heart.

But the way he said it, like an encouragement, he might have meant the team.

I’ll take it to the hill

Ernesto, catching up to me in my cold and beginning to fade himself, opted for the
relatively easier work of pulling from the road. “Get in there,” he hedged, meaning for
me to take up his swamping position, in the woods.

The inside with chainsaws howling is a colosseum of commotion, branches flying, trees
falling. Ernesto told me to take my earplugs out – people were trying/failing to
communicate with me.

“It’s really loud in there,” I explained, but took the plugs out, I’d been using more to keep
my head from aching than to preserve any sense of hearing. I hadn’t taken Ibuprofen
today, but I did take the Dayquil and Mucinex I’d purchased on the supply run the day
before.

I became dizzy,
then I became really dizzy, and I had to take a seat. Then stood to receive the information
of importance, which Country was explaining me: the new daisy chain plan; I
understood; but responded in gibberish, surprising us both.
I tried again to say – it was something like – “I’ll take it to the hill,” and this time the
words were right, but the order was wrong: “I’ll hill take to it.” I sat back down.
I heard Country say to Kyle, “There’s something wrong with Jenner.” Then Kyle – because he’s overhead, was not working, not sweating, but rather looking fresh – was standing over me, inquiring, asking me to speak.

Words were coming out of my mouth now mostly as I’d intended. He asked if I was OK.

“I think so,” I replied.

“You don’t look it.” Yesterday, Green had asked, because of how sick I’d become, if I wanted to sit out, and I said No. Now, I had no choice, as Kyle guided me to safety back to the trucks, away from the ruckus of the chainsaws screaming, into the quiet of my mind, still trying to say, “I’ll take it to the hill.” Aloud, I repeated, “I’ll take it to the hill,” proud that the pathway from brain to speech was returning. Kyle looked at me incredulously, but said nothing, and I practiced speaking a number of other phrases aloud. I sat down by the shade of the truck, and he offered me a water, but I still had one in my cargo pants pocket, I showed him, so he took his offer away.

“Did you move that?” I asked, questioning my own senses more than his actions.

“Yes, I’m gaslighting you,” he laughed. I felt nauseous, but not like vomiting. It was nausea of the head: my brain wanting to barf up all the words it struggled against.

*  

Is vomit a form?

Cloth mask  
nitrile gloves  
Hop Along  
through the clouds  
holding you by your club hand  
demanding, Why’d you do it?

This plane’s not going down  
just lulling me  
to sleep. That other  
passenger  
gives me a thumbs up  
(safe).  
You sit  
in the exit row and remind me  
if I have forgotten: I deserve  
to live as much as  
you did.

I’m reminded that this was a mistake.
I’ve had your diaries
in my possession. All this time, I didn’t
read them
until you died. You wrote, I
love you on every page. You wrote,
Will she miss me? I do. I’m awake
next to your pale body
to be sure there is nothing
still I could do to protect you
from harm. You’re wiping
the doubt away
with the strokes of your hand
in my hair when it was long. This time
you’re having weed withdrawals
like I couldn’t imagine possible.
This time you’ve been bitten
by a black widow spider,
and you’re hallucinating. You’re
having acid flashbacks, so you don’t
want to go to the hospital. I’m so nervous
you’re going to die when we total the car,
this time in flames on the road trip to Canada; this time
off black ice. There’s ice again
and you’re vomiting at the Pie Place;
and you’re vomiting out the window, on the curving mountain drive;
and you’re vomiting because you’re hungover;
and you’re vomiting because you’re scared. I’m scared
for you, for your stomach, and you
say you’ve done permanent damage to your brain. I think you’ll be OK
if you can still play piano. But you’re vomiting just before the
performance.

It’s like
you’re trying to expel something.
Like both of us are

Jesus and Mary Magdalene,
we wash each other’s bodies in the shower every time.
It’s a ritual I think
could only do us good, like saying. Good morning,
I love you every morning for one thousand days.
I would kiss you at every parting.
I don’t have anything
to say
you aren’t already
reading in my mind.
You’re showing me
to love so fully
you don’t survive.

We’re drinking the Portuguese
wine. We’re drinking the Georgian
wine we were saving
for this reunion, and I feel
myself closing in around your memory.

You sit
in my lap in every bath tub
in your long body, lean back
against my chest.

I feel safe with you.
You were

always
calling me my love; so anxious
you were shaking. You had to
call an Uber – Uber out of here, or else,
some call it “pulling a Brett,” this hasty exit,
no goodbye, like at a birthday
party. I turned around and there you weren’t.
I’m reminded
that I couldn’t make you happy, and you couldn’t
make me. Of course, you’re singing
to me, if I’m lucky. I’m reminded
that I couldn’t bring you back, couldn’t beg
you, Reconsider. This is what
Resigned looks like.
It’s you
with your better lawyers
committing the crime. I’m inhaling
my own breath, and it smells bad
in this mask. The song you sang

when you were afraid was
“Moon River” – “wherever you’re
going, I’m going there, too,”
but you’ve asked that I stay a little longer,
flush the coke down the toilet
and tidy the castle bedroom. If I read this to you now,
you would say, It’s beautiful. I’m sorry
I don’t have any critique.

_You’re asking if we can stand in the back_
_because you’re embarrassed you’re so tall._

_You’re plucking out your chest hairs_
_now, stringing your violin._

_You’re (trying to) teach me_
_how to play the piano_
_like Amy Winehouse._
_I actually, technically, have the better_
_hands for playing, just_
_not the patience._
_You’re losing your temper now,_
_and I’m losing mine._
_We forgive_
_each other, and we grow old together._
_You would be so handsome_
_in middle age._
_You would be so beautiful_
_with wrinkles_
_and saggy skin._

* 

I took the opportunity to grab a hoe, my baby wipes pack, and headed into the woods for a slow shit. That was relieving. After I covered my poo, I sat in the trees awhile and talked to myself aloud. I wanted to sing some songs, but with my head cold, it was too much work to enjoy singing to myself, so I made my way back to the worksite, assuming my position, again swamping.

Only a few minutes in, Kyle found me. “Did you talk to Dombi?” he asked. I had not, though I had seen him, we’d exchanged no words. “You’re sitting today out.”

I don’t know why I resisted. “Can’t I do light work?” pride begged. “Pick up the little sticks?” as I had made a habit of with what strength I had the day before.

_**You can do light work at the trucks**_ was his definitive response.

*
The sounds of Dombi’s anger were not my preferred to clean the trucks to, so I asked politely to listen to music on my headphones. I put on a Caroline Polacheck album, and let the music wash out of me my desire: losing my language, I’d wanted more than anything the comfort of Ernesto’s body.

When he came over to the trucks, at break, he asked immediately – and to my ear, angrily – What happened?…My leaving meant that he had to step in and swamp again, since certainly nobody else would take the initiative.

“I really want a hug,” I said, and he fed me instead, some handful of something I ate without tasting it, then he went “Back to work.” And I went back to the truck. At 3, the crew took lunch.
I ate with them, and, sitting next to Ernesto, laughed at whatever the boys said – I wasn’t listening – wanting not to be apart as I was.

* * *

“You look good,” Ernesto said, coming close to me at last when his shift was over. Our bodies posed naturally towards one another.

“I guess the rest did me good.” I felt him watch me now: remove my yellow to change into my black – baring quickly my undershirt – and smile to himself. “Are we getting dinner already?”
I turned to face my love. It surprised me that I hadn’t even written today.

At our tents before bed he played me his favorite Mitski songs (an artist I had shown him). I played him a Caroline Polacheck song in return: the one that made me think of him, which has the lines (at least, this is how I always hear it),

“Do you feel safe / Now that you’ve found my gun?”

My gun

About our breakup – it was the day we were supposed to go shooting, I’d agreed to at last. We’d planned to rise early, to go before it got too hot out. My roommates were going to come. Ernesto gave us all a proper gun safety course that night, which began with him showing us his shotgun, to get us “comfortable,” and his AR-15 – “the gun of war,” my roommate, Meredith, who is a pacifist, emphasized, and she became suddenly angry: “This gun was designed to kill people.”
Though he’d had no intentions of killing anyone, Ernesto agreed, that was the design’s intent. He argued however, for the beauty of the machine, which he’d constructed himself, some parts of it being illegal to acquire in the state of California where he’d moved from, he was proud enough to mention. But in Idaho, he didn’t even need a gun license.

By the end of it, Shriram was fascinated, and Meredith, afraid. She’d lost any intrigue she may have had and wished us luck.

Ernesto finished the safety course with me alone. He opened up the shotgun, which was loaded, “but we should treat all guns as if they are loaded,” and he handed it to me. We kept the shotgun in my bedside table that night, quite near the roses. He likes to say that guns are like poems.

“One last piece of advice,” when he handed me the assault rifle:

“Don’t point this at anything you aren’t willing to destroy.”

* We hardly touched that night, and in the morning, I was wrecked with anxiety. He talked so long with Shriram I couldn’t stand it. I texted, “Come talk to me or I’m not going shooting.” I knew we were out of sync. He didn’t check his phone. I came into the kitchen and dragged him back to my bedroom where I asked him for a hug, and he refused. He wandered around my house awhile, finding Meredith, he asked her to explain me to him. Meredith came in and she hugged me.

I recovered, but we did not. He and I talked a long while, and I begged him to stay, until finally, I asked him to leave. He hugged me then, goodbye. I watched him drive away.

He must have texted me as soon as he got home, 20 minutes later, “Do you like me because I’m dangerous?” (Is he quoting me?)

* It’s strange where we are in the wilderness, so far from the fire...there are butterflies and cicadas, grasshoppers, and clicking beetles. There are flower and fauna: deer and bighorn sheep, because there is no fire.

* Lilly: This is your dream?

You’re living your dream?

Patrick: I mean, look around us. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.
Only in photographs do I notice how lovely our workplace is. (I don’t see it with my own eyes.)

I was deep in my feelings of rejection, and Ernesto confined to linger, when “as a friend,” he asked to take a photo of me. I wrote here how I did not want to be photographed in my state. You remember?

He showed me the picture today, and it was beautiful: the meadow around me, sullen, like me, because of me and how I’m posed against it. If I didn’t know this person, if this person were not me, I would have asked, “Why is she so sad?”

It looked out of place, her despondency, as if painted on, after-the-fact.

Days without my lover

Days without my lover, I count: 1, today. Tomorrow will be 2.

I have never been a mother in the liturgical sense of the word.

Because mothering is a lineage of women, I’ve scissored, I’m sorry to my mother, to my mother’s mother. My sorry multiplies, as women do, or ought to.

I’ve never used my body for anything but sex and for money, I never shared my body with a child that so depended on, that really depended on my milk, and for living. So when I held my lover close to my breast,

These are like the breasts of a mother, he smiled. “No,” I said, really taken aback by…These are my, I – shuttered, to hold my breast in my own hand last night in my bed. It didn’t look like my hand, but it did look like my breast – between erotic memory and tender, fleshy realism, we cast the shadow of one against my wall.

This felt like consummation, but without marriage. I shut the open window, so no breeze could come in, neither unwanted visitors nor violators. This, the safety I had longed for:
myself and my body.

How has nobody ever appreciated your breasts, as I have? I remember he asked.

I examined them now
and tried to imagine the accumulations of fat, which
never made milk, as a lover would. I did not squeeze,
but rather. Held my own breast until I left for sleep.

Grieving is a love which has nowhere to go.

It finds expression through humming, once moans, now groans of
withoutness, not withholding—

days without my lover—I think he meant “my mother”—“these are like
the breasts,
which were mine, which were given to me by my mother.” A lineage.

How full they become without their intended’s use, my 2 white moons.

*  

2 nights ago, from my tent by the light of the headlamp, I sent Ernesto photos of my
swollen breasts, puffy from the compression of the sports bra I wear 15 hours/day. The
first pic wasn’t exactly solicited, a partial view of just one. Then he asked to see both.
And he sent me a photo
of his chest, too, and he flirt-texted me: “We could sneak off into the woods to have sex.”

I knew he couldn’t have meant it, but how intimate the conversation had become…how
open was the clearing I knew was through the woods.

I’d been there and thought, We could kiss passionately in these woods. “No one would
know,” I pressed. “I would sneak off even just to really kiss you.”

“I know hehe.” And we left for sleep.

“Maybe it is not the destructiveness of the volcano that pleases most, though everyone
loves a conflagration, but its defiance of the law of gravity to which every inorganic mass
is subject.

What pleases first at the sight of the plant world is its vertical upward direction. That is
why we love trees. Perhaps we attend to a volcano for its elevation, like ballet. How high
the molten rocks soar, how far above the mushrooming cloud. The thrill is that the mountain blows itself up, even if it must then like the dancer return to earth; even if it does not simply descend—it falls, falls on us. But first it goes up, it flies. Whereas everything pulls, drags down. Down.”

— Susan Sontag, The Volcano Lover

Heavy sleeping

I slept, for the first time last night on this trip, straight through the night.

Some of the factors which I think contributed to my deep sleep: I discovered my warm sleeping clothing balance to be 2 jackets + 1 pair sweatpants + 1 layer of wool socks, since the lower half of me gets warmer in my sleeping bag than the upper; I pulled the hood of my sleeping bag over me, which meant I couldn’t toss in the night, but was restricted to a mummy-like sleep; not looking at my phone before bed, because I lost it. I left my phone at our lunch spot on the hill yesterday, because I was “yard sale”ing and a bit over-heated; exhausted, but insistent on writing. It’s just been returned to me; nothing “nefarious” (word of the supplies man), since firefighters are relatively reliable, since firefighters never take without asking.

Patrick worked through 6 gas tanks on the saw, and it brought him stress dreams, apparently crying out in the night. “How did you not hear that?” Roland asked me. “Ernesto heard it, and he sleeps right next to you.” I grimaced at that last bit, feeling seen. “You must be a heavy sleeper.”

I’m not at all; yet, I really was not disturbed when Patrick screamed in the middle of the night, “I can’t feel my right arm!” And bolted out of his tent, he explained later, because he thought he fell asleep on the (fire)line. I resonated – not with the screaming, but with the fear of falling asleep on the line. I was dead on my feet yesterday and kept closing my eyes even as trees were falling around me. And I’d been having that recurring nightmare that we’d switched to the night shift directly after a day, and I’d fallen asleep just as the saw turned towards me. In my dream, it’s the same work we’re doing in the day: cutting, pulling, cutting, on repeat.

Tree, tree, tree, then me.
– When Kyle plays heavy metal at 6:30am on the way to the hill, heat blasting, I have the strangest fever dreams. I’m falling into one now. –

*Becker*

The new guy in my truck, Becker, is a hard worker and a loud personality. I find I appreciate him more than Brayden (Brannon? Brandon? I never remember) whose *greens are always clean*, although he’s a bit of a conspiracist, and has argued with me, for instance, that “climate change isn’t real,” (while we as wildland firefighters are servants, professionally, to the desiccation).

Becker told me he was in jail for nine years, and I didn’t ask why. I asked how expensive the weed was (VERY) and whether he smoked it (he did). He explained to me how “the people” (the regular inmates) keep the peace and how the “lifers” (prisoners for life) have the most orderly cells, because it’s all they have.

He related this to Dombi’s obsession with the cleaning of our trucks – when you live in it, you – wouldn’t you? – want to keep it…livable? Becker felt that we firefighters were a lot like inmates, though we were free, of course, which meant that we were “less respectful.”

In jail, he explained, you never know who you’re talking to or what they’ve been through, so you don’t use big words, for instance, for fear of accidentally calling someone stupid.

“I wouldn’t last long then” was my reply.

*Cycles of life*

*Lunch now. I hope for more writing time today.*

*I’ll try to catch you up on the last two days – although they weren’t eventful – because there are four days left of this, my last run, and I don’t know but I think I’m writing the conclusion, or beginning to...On the fireline, too, things are starting to feel like they’re ending, as if because of this story with its faux-leather cover. Because these are the fresh pages now I’ve sewed in, in my tent, by the light of my headlamp, to hold my conclusion. Their whiter color – not soiled by the ash and dirt of this summer at large – distinguishes them.*

I asked Kyle why he’s here.
“Like, firefighting?”

“Avoiding your family?” I joked.

“This is my family” was his essential response – “the people and the trees.”

We talked about the killing of trees to save them – I walked alongside his rig, picking up sticks, as he drove on, bringing the truck to the end of our line, so we wouldn’t have to walk the 5 miles back. He said, growing up, he’d never even been to a city larger than Boise, Idaho, and he doesn’t think people growing up in cities know enough about cycles of life.

“Oh, we see death,” I countered, identifying as a city person, “but it’s…more traumatic, less natural.

I don’t know why.”

*

My first day back from my day of rest, not even an hour into work, I was trying my hardest to make up for what felt like the slack of me when I lost my footing on a steep hill and fell, head first. Bella tried to catch me, recognizing her own fall in mine, she kept asking, “Are you alright?” and enforcing, “Take all the time you need before getting back up again.”

My glasses wedged had into my nose, leaving the scar I carry there now, and another one above my right eye. But they didn’t break. I bruised my whole right side, too, especially my thigh.

“It looks like a crater,” Ernesto said, when I showed to him later what the fall had done to me.

*

About my body – it smells in places I’ve never seen it smell before. My abs are the kind of abs that support. They are not cut; they’re full and my torso is rectangular now, it is no longer curvy.

My thighs have been smoother. I suppose they store all the calories I require to keep me going so many hours in a day, but the skin of them bruises as it always has. My calves are swollen with hiking muscle to the degree of almost no longer fitting my boots. Ernesto, trying to lose weight, asks me often, “Do I look good?” I am more bulky – I don’t care to know what I weigh – but more muscly too than I’ve ever been before. My forearms have never been anything but skinny. I’ve laughed at them in my adult life – how my biceps noticeably bulge, but my forearms won’t budge. Pulling trees as I’ve been doing on this last fire has shaped them at last. I’m sure they won’t stay this way, but I am
fascinated, as I often am in this context with how malleable the human body – this body! – can be. There are times, I’m so delighted, I hardly recognize me.

*

My stomach killed, I think from the cold meds I’d been taking, and I resigned to take no more. But it killed, and it made the work more difficult. I took the last caffeine pill I found broken in my shirt pocket. I knew as I was doing it that it was a questionable decision. The gas escaped me every few minutes, and it smelled of “rotten eggs” – Bella’s term – I sheepishly claimed what she smelled when she asked, “Who’s the culprit?”

Talking to women like Collette and Bella, I feel a strong sense of control. Not with men. Men I am mostly either disinterested in or afraid of. Then there is Ernesto who claims his manliness with pride…I like his softer moments, how he cowers, how he cries. He does this only when he is in pain. I like these especially against his muscled chest, his building biceps, the cuts on his wrists from his high school years, still-visible.

I just realized – have I ever told you that Ernesto is bisexual?

He asked me not to tell anyone, but I don’t think he could have meant you?

Ernesto angers with me and my work. He says I throw too hard, I don’t look at him right when I pass to him what I am carrying.

I offer to swamp for him, seeing how tired he is. He laughs, “You want to do what I’m doing?”

“I don’t, but I don’t like seeing you like this.”

Besides, it’s not like I haven’t done it before…But Ernesto, rather than resting, moves on to swamp for the short crew ahead of us. When we tie in, I am exhausted, thoroughly. Proudly, he asks, “Am I asking too much of a poet?” with a mocking smile.
Your joy is a pleasure to witness / This is love

The next day, they put him on saw. I became so sleepy in the redundancy of this work, the only thing still working was my mind. Ear-pro wedged halfway to my brain, to the distant (muffled) whirring of all four chainsaws, to keep myself awake, I was playing with a phrase I’d come up with: “pseudo-intimate.” In sex I’ve approximated a feeling of closeness with people; and while, in love with Ernesto, I’ve felt real closeness, I saw myself now begging for a version of this love in sex. (Is this the real morning dew?)

In the beginning of the day, I really enjoyed watching Ernesto work on the saw. He gave me his camera, and I made myself his personal photographer. Our crew members laughed at my efforts to capture most every tree I saw him saw.

I recorded on my phone the sound of him cutting trees in the Salmon-Challis National Forest. In the recording, the chainsaws muffle me, far away, singing “A Rich Man’s World.” This is another way of saying I recorded the sound of him running a chainsaw in the background of my singing – and yes, I was supposed to be working.

“Your joy is a pleasure to witness,” I had written before the afternoon drowsiness weighed down on me. I avoided overusing the caffeine pills, in hopes of producing my own endorphins, which were slow as the work we were set to: clearing this 4-mile road. We would not finish this evening, and would work all day the next day and still not finish, and Division would then let the assignment go entirely, rendering the work we did unnecessary, if not a total waste of time.

– I’m watching Ernesto sleep on lunch break now as I write this which I do not want to write. –

He said to me, “This is love,” meaning my attention towards him as he trained, and “Let me grow,” because he is a child. Aren’t I as well?

“I let you grow, don’t I?” was my reply.

The pepper babies grow

Somewhat in spite of me, but
entirely in my care, the pepper plants
not only live but thrive! The 3 – there
were 10, and there are 3 now –
and everyday they have new leaves,
(I’m counting the days)

even as wintering argues for the finishing.

“You’re hurting me,” I whispered, fighting quietly at camp again. He went back to his
tent (he had come to mine when I’d expressed that there was something on my mind).
“Please come back.”

I’m hoping for a sunny one.

He took his boots off. “You can come here if you want to talk so bad.”

My boots off too, I crawled to his tent on my knees.

They mourned. Until grief had turned stony, too, and they came back. Awed by the
completeness of the erasure, they gazed upon the fattened ground below which their
world lay entombed. The ash under their feet, still warm, no longer seared their shoes. It
cooled further. Hesitations vaporized...most of those who had survived set about
rebuilding, reliving; there. Their mountain now had an ugly hole at the top. The forests
had been incinerated. But they, too, would grow again.”

― Susan Sontag, The Volcano Lover

From breakfast on, we found ourselves smiling at each other.

*

(It just seems to me perverse, how I’m making the dead dance.)
(Shriram said, Maybe the dead is dancing. And you’re just writing about it.)

*

“You’re so unpredictable,” I laughed, at a work rest, when he brushed his hand against
mine and added a little rub of the thumb...“like a fire.”

My kind of woman
Last night he called me over to his tent with the request, “I want a kiss.”

I started to complain how back and forth he was but cut myself off, because I wanted a kiss, too.

I leaned almost into his tent, and instead of kissing, we cradled one another – almost impossibly so, it felt that neither of us was really the larger. Was this the hug I’d always needed?

Ernesto always has music playing from his phone he treats like a boombox at night. This time, “My Kind of Woman” by Mac Demarco came on. “This is fitting,” he spoke closely into my ear. We’ve never been this pressed in the open air at work before. The tents which faced Ernesto’s, opened, were all closed, but still it was risky. If there were stares I couldn’t feel them. I only felt the slow lean into two kisses on Ernesto’s large lips. He kissed my forehead then. We held each other more, maybe another minute longer. Then he grabbed me by my neck and pulled me into something deeper. I was totally dazed, the good kind of I’ve lost my language. “You look like you want something more,” he said.

“No, I got all I wanted,” although he had asked for me.

He pressed his forehead against mine. “Now, let me take off my boots,” he commanded, and I went dutifully away to my tent where, before changing into my sleeping sweats, I lay replaying our kiss in my head. I’ve recalled it many times since, only last night. Too many times, I fear for it still to seem real.

*The mind which runs the body of a sawyer*

It’s its own world it seems, the mind which runs the body of a sawyer.

Ernesto got heat exhaustion on the saw yesterday. I tried not to ‘mother’ him, although he wrote to me, “I feel like crying.” My advice, like a father: “Don’t.”

But I wondered if the scare of it aided in his softness towards me this day. Because we needed the recovery, we both slept seven hours this night. Still, he is snoring in front of me, on this hill as this lunch break perpetuates (I am grateful for). With the breeze, I can smell him from here. And I crave him in what bed I don’t have. Now it begins to rain. Who will wake him?

*Me?*  No, he wakes himself (and he does not need me).

*Benjamin found Ernesto’s notebook. He may only have read what the notebook was bookmarked to by his pen, he mocked Ernesto, “Ernesto is on fire.” The note from me continues: “Your joy is a pleasure to witness.”*
I learned that Benjamin “has a girl,” and I found that I was embarrassed to learn this, because I’d really thought he’d been flirint with me.

* * *

There’s a new girl on the squad who’s major butch vibes, but not the cute kind, at least not to me. She’s replacing Luke who’s being brought to Miller’s crew. I don’t know why I really don’t like her…as a fellow lover of women, I don’t really want to be associated with her. But without my comradery (she looks at me, sits next to me, but I say nothing, and move away), I hear her say on the phone to her wife at night how hard it is to integrate into a new crew like this one. And I know that the boys don’t like her, Ernesto tells me so. And I don’t expect that the girls like her either, especially when she talks loudly about her wife, and they are made uncomfortable. And I wonder what’s my role here?

Get lost

Just now, Becker was telling us about a poet, Buddy Wakefield, who “is gay, but you wouldn’t know, the way he writes about love.” I tell Ernesto he and I have a ‘gay relationship,’ because I hardly know any other kind. We’re picking up sticks, trying to look busy for overhead, as we’ve been doing all day, and he insists, suddenly sternly, “No, this is a straight relationship. We are man and woman – it could not be more straight.”

* * *

When Ernesto kissed me so sweetly last night, I kept the story of it playing in my mind. I woke around 4am to pee, and when I went back to my tent, it was thinking of E. A sex dream followed: it was hot, and I woke up stirring from a dream of sex with a woman, which Ernesto undoubtedly inspired.

I’m sure it would bother Ernesto to read this, wouldn’t it? He doesn’t read my journal anymore (says it’s “too intimate”). I know he’s proud of his manhood. And when I see him walking around camp at night, tightened and oiled from his work on the saw, and he so fully fills out his uniform – which is designed for men, in his man’s body, I think, “How beautiful he is.”

*
These past two days have been slow (busy) work: “You pull sticks now” (Kyle’s directive), in front of the “masticator.” As horrifying as it sounds, the masticator is a monster of a machine which consumes trees as well as anything else which come before it. When a masticator is running, the buzz becomes me, which creates a kind of peace.

I put one wireless headphone in one ear and pulled my bandana down to cover it, to pass the time. Everyone I confided this to agreed that I was hiding it well.

* 

Ernesto was on saw most of the day. By the end of it, I missed him.

“Can you quit following me like a puppy?” he asked suddenly.

I don’t think he meant to say Get lost. “I just don’t like to be followed,” so I drifted…

I think my puppy is getting younger. My puppy’s eyes are getting wider and less concerned-looking. My puppy is carefree is playful.

is insisting on staying awake. “It’s another fun day!” my puppy seems to say. To me it’s really amazing. With each day, my puppy consistently looks not what I imagine an adult to be, is reversing time, or somehow not participating.

Interviews on the fireline

When we all parked on a hill to hide from Division, I was without you, notebook, and I decided to give interviews to the crew to kill the time. Most complied; only Green and Higgins denied – too cool to be real, I guess. “I appreciate what you’re doing, I just don’t want to be a part of it,” Green cushioned.

I saved Ernesto for last. I wanted to interview him alone, so I could ask him questions about love more than work – granted, I could have just asked him off-the-record – but opportunity wouldn’t have it. Patrick and Roland jumped in with their own questions, like, ‘what was your favorite fire?’ and ‘what was your best fire experience?’

“How do you like being a sawyer?” Patrick asked. Ernesto said it made him feel like a mother. “How is a sawyer like a mother?” I wanted to know, but I didn’t ask.

Patrick said it made him feel like God.
Calvin, when asked what he was afraid of, if not the fire, said he was afraid of leaving his family alone, without his protection. “What would happen to them?” I asked.

“They could die in a car crash,” he replied. “I could, too.” I read this as anxiousness until he told me privately (off-the-record) later that that’s exactly how his sister died.

“Would you miss your family?” I asked Ernesto, when he said in his interview he could keep fighting (fires) all his life.

“No,” he answered simply, “this suits me.”

“Being alone suits me,” he clarified with sad confidence.

When asked what could stop him from continuing, he said, only a life-altering injury, or, if he ever had a child.

*The touching of the branches*

Did I ever tell you about the touching of the branches? It was many fires ago, sometime this summer I don’t remember when…driving slowly out of our worksite Kyle reached out of his window and stroked tenderly some leaves.

“What was that?” I asked in amazement from the seat behind him. He and Country playfully kept me from the experience a bit, mocking my difficulty in grasping the branches firmly enough from the backseat of the car to really stroke their leaves. Then, Kyle pulled the truck close enough, just for me, so that I could reach out and feel the trees.

I’m trying to believe that I could be the hero of this story, not Ernesto (he is my anti-hero?).

To pass the lazy time, Collette and Bella and I played a game in which we impersonated all our crew members. When asked to impersonate Ernesto, they just said, “He’s so sensitive.”

“So it’s not just with me?” I wondered aloud.
MJ, who is the new lesbian, sees me lift a tree and asks me to lift another, this one for her. Ernesto has said, and I feel it now – as Bella, too, asks me to break a stick for her – that I am “strong.” I think he said, “You’re fucking strong.” I think he meant, physically. I think Calvin told me about his sister, because he heard about mine, and it’s the kind of thing one feels alone in, until we find on those rare occasions other people that that happened to, too. We don’t have to explain to these people, “This happened to me,” because they know it in their bones as we do.

*

I jumped into Green’s truck when the predicted rainstorm hit, exactly on time, at 2:16pm.

One’s Capacity for Destruction is Another’s Mistake

“Guess what?” Higgins approached my truck.

Nobody could believe it when Higgins ran over the saw Striegler had been running.

It had rained, we’d evacuated our worksite, and we’d already driven off to a parking spot with cell service before Striegler widened his eyes and whispered, “I left my saw behind the tailgate.”

He’d left the saw behind one tailgate, yes, but with how tightly the trucks were lined up, front-to-back, it was in front of another: as quickly as Higgins had touched the gas, the chainsaw was crushed. It was the best-running one, too – Country’s saw, he’d loaned to Strieggs to train on.

“[I should have trusted it with Cleveland,]” Country bemoaned when he believed Higgins’ story at last. Now Benjamin is in our truck, shot-gun, where Country was, and Country is driving Higgins’ rig, which he surrendered voluntarily, anxious as he was – having been involved in another truck-related accident – over his own capacity for destruction, Striegler’s mistake.

*

As I approach my leaving date we are more and more reckless about being sure no one is watching: 2 nights ago, he asked to suck on my breasts, and I let him in the open night air, since he wouldn’t let me into his tent.
Ernesto kisses me nightly, roughly; he grasps me by the throat.

Am I accepting these gestures in place of intimacy? I know only that my body sings when Ernesto closes in on me, and I wouldn’t have it any other way, if he’d let me.

“Let me lead,” he tells me, and I can’t help it – I do.

*

The day was done by 2pm yesterday, since the rain made most of the work difficult, and it was all “busy work” anyways. We had cell service where we were hiding from work in the rain.

I received from a worried friend I hadn’t spoken to all summer long, my best friend Brody, a message which accused me of taking on, temporarily (as suits me), whatever role I can cull a story from. “My reckless behavior in love” – and I’d said I was a lesbian? “If this Ernesto kid fucks you up like wtf? I think you are distracting yourself from real personal work you need to be focusing on,” said Brody, a gay man, who had heard I was dating a straight man for the first time in years.

If Ernesto hurt me, who would put me back together?

“But he’s bisexual,” I protested...

“I’d do it a thousand times,” he reassured me. But he didn’t trust men like Ernesto. It came as an omen. “You didn’t lose me as a friend.”

*

The chance of rain is low (some 20%), but that doesn’t mean it won’t rain. It means that 20% of the day, it will rain, somewhere...

“It’s raining,” Ernesto mouthed at me through the canopy of trees. I was already running out of the Salmon Challis National Forest with headphones in my ears, tears fresh in my eyes, which blended with the sky’s, panting from my omen with Brody.

I did not lose my phone this time I crashed into the car seat, but I did lose my gloves. Poor wet Benjamin, caught in the rain, held my gloves up to me through the car window – I’d wished I had my camera – and wrung out the mud in a sad clown performance: making us all laugh like dogs.

*

Last night – my last night on a fire – I wanted more. “We’ll be back in Boise tomorrow,” he promised. “Goodnight.” Another kiss on my downcast face. “Goodnight,” he pressed at my reluctance. When a rig drove by, its brights alight his tent; it was too late to hide.
“Don’t move,” and I listened, with my breasts supporting the shirt he’d lifted, held by the light, but facing: to his tent may not have been visible. Or else, they might have been.

* 

In a second interview I went off-script, but on-the-record, I asked him,

Lilly: “What do you think love is?”

I could tell he was surprised. I was afraid he might be angry. After a heavy pause, he said that

...Love is a commitment.

Ernesto: You choose to commit to that person, loving them, and caring for them...

L: Or not to.

E: Or not to.

* 

“Another perfect song,” Ernesto noted, the song which came on, which played randomly from his music library, repeated, “I still love you” while we kissed one night.

“Do you still love me?” I asked, because the opportunity was there as much as the question.

He had once promised he would continue to love me. (“When you’re in, you’re in.)

“I don’t know,” he said now, honestly.

“It wouldn’t be fair with what I did.” I knew that now, as I continued to indulge in what may be a limited supply of Ernesto’s kisses. “I think I do.” Love you, I mean.

* 

I am too poor of a swimmer to dive for you. That is why I look away, why I head back up for air, it is because I can no longer bare, to look at myself. And my body can no longer breathe.

* 

“I don’t want you to have prove anything,” Brody had said, but he questioned who my authentic self was. Am I really even queer? “I just feel personally lied to.”
Not knowing who or what I really was, I responded defensively,

“[Queerness/lesbianism has] been fully genuine and it’s totally isolated me…If I were just doing it performatively, why would I do it in this kind of setting??” in which I identified with my loneliness.

But Brody contested that there is joy in these experiences he’s known personally, I’ve still yet to encounter.

*  

*I’m writing this along the length of Idaho highways I’m starting to recognize, as a kind of home. We’re pulling through Stanley now, in one of those vertical spaces, I’ve just come out of a spiral of highway, in which writing made me so sick, I slept on thoughts like you instead.*

*  

>To whom it may concern,

I’ve been thinking hard about not thinking about the days separating us and sinking.

But I love the sound of me sucking on your chest, and other parts, in a useless and humiliating attempt to hold you near to me.

Have you noticed that, while we sleep, our bodies push off of one another as if we are each other’s pool walls, and then we swim with assisted speed in opposing directions? And in the morning light, when we can see again, our bodies fling back towards each other, and we collide, and we revive, and we forget to say that I’ve been at sea all night long and I have only just found land? I’ve been trying hard not to try to remember all the things that I am terrified to forget:

how your skin feels, and your eyes look, and your lips taste, maybe because all these things are different every time, and I want to remember immortal things.

*It’s lonely at the top*

Poor beefcakes (James) is recovering from the same cold E and I had and a total lack of sleep, as I had. It shows on his face, and, more seriously – in his performance. I’m fascinated by how even Beefcakes, who approaches 7 feet, and looks more than human is
subject to the same human weaknesses we all are. I check on him daily, and I think he interprets my fascination as empathy.

In some sense, it is.

* 

After dinner, Collette comes to me. “Jenner, are you busy…or could I ask you something?” With such shyness it makes my heart pump. What could she so desire to ask me now in the darkness? My only thought could be Ernesto. “How can I be a better leader?” instead, was her inquiry of me, and she looked so suddenly small. Collette is just a year younger than me, but in her position of power, I often imagine she better understands herself. Then again, even experienced leaders can be subject to the drug of power, which was what I told her (How to be a better leader).

* 

It’s…quiet here, without Matthew Becker. And spacious.

That character, Matthew Becker, had pitched fights with Roland, Green, and at last Dombi…his path to Boise. He wouldn’t really be fired. That’s how difficult it is to get fired from PatRick. Probably Becker will be moved back to Alpha’s squad – which he let us know as frequently as yesterday, he would prefer. Green, braver, (or bigger? or taller? or manlier?) than me, apparently unafraid of a fight, drove Becker halfway away, to be met by Teal and brought back to Boise, which meant that there was one less person in our truck for the drive home.

Dombi called for a brief R to discuss the incident with Becker and to display his intolerance for such evident disregard of authority on his crew. On his way out, Becker shared that he and a few others (Roland, Benjamin, Patrick, and Calvin, at least, though I know there are others) believe Collette is undeserving of her position and suspect she’s acquired it only through the favoritism of Dombi.

“Being in power means, often, losing friends…It’s lonely at the top,” Dombi told the crew, evoking an audible sigh in me.

I’d felt so alone today, in keeping my space from Ernesto, so he would enjoy work with his sawyer crew – Dombi tells me privately he has his eye on them 4 as potential trainees – and say goodbye to Patrick, who is also going back to school.

Who did I have here without Ernesto? But he has said to me that more than my best friends, my crew members each would die for me.
Collette asked me to read to her my first impression of her, then Bella joined in, and Dombi, too – I found myself reading bits of you, *Journal*, to the three of them at the length of an hour.

“Thank you for listening,” I sighed when I had finished.

“Thank you for reading,” they hummed in chorus. Dombi said I wrote like Nicholas Sparks, which I would absolutely never say about myself, but I realized it was meant as a compliment when he explained that his girlfriend sent him Nicholas Sparks novels while he was in jail, and he read them all repeatedly. Then Dombi – unwittingly, as he had not witnessed any of my interviews – asked me my favored interview question:

“Why are you out here?”

I wished I was recording myself, for consistency, yet, this is that: I wanted an adventure, yes; I needed money. I had some experiences this past year I came here to heal from, to get away from my comforts: out of my head and into my body and out of my head again (*loving and losing and loving and losing again*).

“That’s really cool,” my crew boss said.

*My failure to hero*

It would take some knowledge of the history of the company to understand how Collette and Bella had earned their positioning more than it would ever be evident in their work – their hiking ability for instance, or their general endurance.

After I shared my writing with them, they shared their history with me. This time last year, there were three others in the place of Bella, Collette, and Country, the three trainees. Two moved on with greater ambitions and one did not/could not withstand the balance of living: Donny, as we know, took his life.

Bella and Collette survived his suicide and showed promise in their staying on that they might be relied upon as semi-permanent fixtures of the crew from which to grow new growth. One might say that they earned it; one might say that their promotions were the results of their performances; that they grieved perfectly.
Kyle’s interview

Lilly: Tell me about the relationship between ‘squatting’ [homeless] and being on a fire crew.

Kyle: [sharp inhale] Oh, just the carry-over from my past life is uhh pretty good, the, you know, working within groups, and kinda being a dirtbag and traveling a lot, being out in the wilderness. I mean the only difference is I kinda know where I’m going and what we’re gunna be – how we’re gunna be eating, and all that kind of stuff.

L: That’s just because you’re in a position of power, like, I don’t know where we’re going.

K: Yea.

[Both snicker.]

Yea, you don’t know where we are [both laugh]. You don’t know where we just were for 2 weeks! [both continue laughing.]

You know it definitely caters to the – I don’t know – wild degener[ate] in all of us that do it –

L: Why do you think –

K: – me specifically.

L: – Why do you think you pity people like Becker?

K: [quiet] That’s a…that’s a turn, uhh…

L: [snickers] Well, because he’s a ‘degene’, right?

K: Yea, but –

L: And he wants to be respectable.

K: Yea, we were kinda talking about that before, how, a lot of people who work in this job have mixed backgrounds and have seen this as a chance of redemption for themselves.

People [like Becker] end up repeating destructive patterns in their lives that they either don’t see or they [think they] can’t control, and it’s a little…pathetic…it’s a little sad.
L: [clicks tongue] Have you felt a need for redemption?

K: Yea, I mean, probably at times.

L: Like, are you ashamed of your past?

    K: Kind of. There [are] definitely some fun aspects of it. I tell fun stories from it.
    But it’s like – you know – what did it accomplish in the end? Not a lot.

L: But, when I asked you what the goal of all this was, you said ‘a good life.’

K: Yea, that’s always the goal.

L: Yea, so – so where does respectability come into play in living a good life?

    K: Well, because if you do, I mean, if you do good things for the world and [for] yourself – then, you respect yourself more.

L: Hm.

K: You asked a bunch of people uhh, ‘have you been afraid on a fire?’

L: Mhm.

    K: – and you didn’t ask me that, and I’ve thought about that question before, and like – I wasn’t really afraid until I was responsible for other people.

L: What are you afraid of – letting people down?

    K: Uhh no…I mean, letting people down in small ways is kind of – that just kinda happens. Like, hey, we have to do this shitty job that nobody’s gunna like.

[Both snicker.]

L: But we’re all gunna do it.

K: We’re all gunna do it. Uh, no, I’m afraid of getting people hurt.

L: Yea.

K: Or making…the wrong…decision.

L: Huh.
K: Yea, nobody [chuckles to himself] – nobody wants to be in a position where they made a decision that was stupid, and somebody got hurt.

L: Yea.

[after a pause] Do you feel like you’ve ever done that?

K: No. I’ve never done that.

L: How do you prevent that from happening?

K: [sharp intake] Uh, you just maintain awareness of what’s goin’ on.

L: ‘SA’ [situational awareness]?

K: Yea. You think about all the possibilities and try to account for them, and think on your feet.

L: So, besides fear of people getting hurt under your direction, what else are you afraid of?

K: [a pause] I mean, that’s the big one. Obviously, you know, I don’t want to have a serious injury, or die. But…there’s, you know, there’s plenty of things…

[trails off]

L: L-like what?

K: Well, I mean, just, you know, all the ways that it’s possible to...get seriously injured or die. Cuz we do dangerous things every day.

L: Are you afraid of the fire? and its unpredictability?

K: [after a pause] I have a healthy fear. I think anybody that says they don’t probably isn’t paying attention.

L: Mhm. Or hasn’t been in it long enough to see –

K: Yea.

L: – how much it can change, how quickly.

K. Yea. Yea, if you’ve seen how rapidly a situation can go from, uh, fine and relaxed to [inhales, remembering] like, balls to the wall, shit’s goin’ down.

L: Yea.
K: And like, if you, you know, if you don’t stop it here, then it’s gunna get crazy [chuckles]. Uhh, yea, if you haven’t experienced that, you probably don’t have that healthy fear yet.

L: And that’s why they say not to be complacent, right?

K: Yea.

L: Is there, like, a specific fire experience that you learned that healthy fear from?

K: I don’t – I don’t know what the first one would be, but – I mean, there was a good example of uhh…one of those last days we had on the Beckwourth, you remember that?

L: Mhmm.

K: – when we were all just sitting around for lunch on this dead piece of line that had been gone over before, several times, and –

L: Yea, and it just popped off –

K: And we were all just sitting in the shade, and then that corner just kinda popped off, and if we didn’t get to it right then –

L: Right –

K: – that seriously could have taken off.

L: Mhmm, yea, I mean, I was falling asleep when that happened.

K: Into that drainage, yea [chuckles]. If we didn’t have those bladder bags, I don’t think we could have –

L: …put it out in time.

K: Yea.

L: Yea, I was falling asleep, which is the thing you’re not supposed to do [laughs] on the fireline.


L: And that’s a great example of why.

K: Yea, that’s in…in the 10-18, the uhh –
– the small fires and the deceptively quiet areas of large potential.

Jim’s Alibi

At the bar, Jim’s Alibi, after my last fire trip, I met Dombi’s girlfriend, Ferra. “She writes like Nicholas Sparks!” I heard Dombi gush to her, which won her favor of me immediately.

They told me over beers that they’re looking at getting a new dog (as Collette’s puppy, Steel, played happily with our leather boots beneath the table). Their last dog passed just one month before Donny died. Ferra wanted two dogs, so that one could be guaranteed in the case of the loss of another, but Dombi argued otherwise, that dogs, unlike humans, are too loyal, so loyal, in fact, that on the occasion that one passed, the other is very likely to follow.

The multiplication of deaths in dogs had me thinking of my own loyalties and disloyalties in grieving. Did I believe the ghost of Brett would physically haunt me for my failure to grieve consistently? No, it could not be. In a very real sense, I think ghosts are the dizzying manifesting of the living’s guilt; and while, I repent – as one does, in instances of suicide and other tragedies – my failure to hero, I don’t harvest guilt with the death of Brett. I have been an honorable griever to say the least – honorable to my own feelings as much as to the time we shared in love. I have offered, in my living desire, to experience physical and emotional closeness with Ernesto…to remove the talismans of my grieving which make him uncomfortable. If this gesture has been disloyal to the reality of my process of grieving, I think it has only been to myself.

On our last day of the Mud Licker Fire (if that’s what it was called, I never knew. I called it the Salmon Challis Fire mistakenly, which sounds much more reasonable to me, but evoked roars of laughter and endless jokes from my crew), after some busy work, which was laughable – spreading branches to “rehab” an area, the boys planted dead trees, quite seriously, and joked:

“It’s like we were never here” – Ernesto sat alone with me on my tailgate for a “debriefing.”

We talked about the intervention of my friends over text.

“They don’t know our relationship,” E resisted. But they know me. And I learned much about myself in their critique. He argued otherwise against the always-working-oneself-out, which is my way. To Ernesto, a simple guy, it’s a state of queerness, this obsession with one’s own identity. (Is that something he has a problem with, I start to wonder?)

When I read excerpts of my journal to overhead it meant rifling with speed through the many pages which never saw them, the many days in which my eyes looked exclusively inwards, or into the eyes of Ernesto. Speaking more than listening…the inevitable
deafness of a serial confessionalist. Ernesto and I are two very different kinds of processors, wholly different machines (though, perhaps, equally emotionally beings, in our own ways), and I would not be so hateful of myself as to accept his way as my way, too. But I tried with all the maturity I could muster to think this over, to consider and be willing to learn from a person who is significantly – I notice it more and more – younger than I am, but how could I really say he is less experienced?

*

We take off just as I’ve called my mother. “I’d love to tell you all about [my last fire], but I’ll be losing cell service as soon as we turn this corner…” onto the mountain road we’d last broken down on: Collette, Higgins, and I.

Benjamin notes that Kyle and I have an easy banter with one another. I think we’d better at this point, the number of hours we’d spent together. Kyle tells me he isn’t coming to the bar tonight. He has some family obligation. “Aw, I wanted to meet your wife.” Am I joking?

“Well…you have my number…” he begins. And the other two, Brayden and Benjamin are very quiet. “You can text me if you want to hang out with her.” Was this a sexual offer? I said nothing awhile. The heat was still on from the morning frost, but Kyle turned it down now. “It’s hot in here,” he explained.

“Anybody else want me to hangout with their wives?” I asked the group aloud. Nobody replied.

The hero of my story

I’d wanted a finale. I kept telling the crew that something more dramatic was required to feel that this story could close, since the “fire” we’d been on wasn’t really a fire – I mean, there was a fire 15 miles away, but we couldn’t even see the smoke plumes.

“Is that the fire?” I would sometimes ask, pointing at some collation of puff in the sky any which direction.

“No, that’s a cloud.”

I could not instigate this occurrence, but it felt so aligned with my desires I couldn’t help but to wonder, Did I somehow play a role in the birthing of Striegler’s baby, nearly 2 months early?
How much does desire take hold of our experiences, of how we experience them? is the worthier question…than Did I somehow evoke the breaking of the water?

It was Green’s truck with Striegler riding shotgun which skipped out of the town of Salmon, Idaho with speed enough to get the man home in time for the birthing of his baby. A reasonable man wouldn’t let us touch his infant, but I imagined Striegler would. And what of Erin? The silent fighter in all of this, who carried the baby through the fire season.

I shared the drama with my mother over text. The baby is coming! The newest member of the fire crew! (replacing me).

“If it’s a boy, maybe Blaise,” she replied, assuming the role of naming I’ve known her to take at the birth of nearly every infant.

Over text, Striegler announced to the crew, of which, in this moment, I was still considered a part of…a girl, Finley Annelise Striegler. It would be useless to debate with my fire brothers or even my fire sisters about the nuances of gender at this point. Besides, Striegler has already heard my take better than probably anyone on the crew, better probably even than Ernesto, who really thought it was useless from the beginning. I sent simply my Congratulations, which I meant sincerely. It warmed me to witness the pride of this man in even the photos he’d sent holding, with his soon-to-be-wife (if she accepts), exhausted from her work, their tiny daughter, whose name means “fair-haired hero.”
The End.
REFERENCES


