

Burning Sage

Poems from the Lytton fire

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Caitlin Press 2023

*This is my memory of how it happened.
Others will remember it differently; we each have our own truth.
We each have our own story to tell.*

For our community,
for Helen,
and for B.

Take a deep breath in, letting the sweet morning air fill your lungs. Someone is smiling as they sweep the grocery store sidewalk; hear the quick rasp of their broom against the river silt. Look at the thriving garden across the street with its brilliant orange poppies. Notice how their delicate petals tremble in the breeze.

A tailgate slams shut. Glance into the farmer's basket as it is carried past you: those fresh-picked greens are so vibrant they could have been painted. Follow them around the corner, just beyond the rainbow crosswalk, where people are laughing and setting up market tables in the cool shade. At one table, a batch of bannock is sizzling as it fries. Try a piece, piping hot, with a layer of homemade huckleberry jam. Savour this Nlaka'pamux comfort food.

Listen to the tinkling wind chimes when a door opens and the inviting smell of espresso pools out. Here, tucked beside the cheerful café, a courtyard garden is alive with lush ivy, fragrant lavender, a flourishing maple. Order your favourite coffee and sit with it for a while as the sun lifts into the sky, its rays warming your skin. Nod at the friendly locals as they pass. Fall into the rhythm of the silvery birdsong. Slow to the pace of this town.

Remember this moment. Breathe in deeply. Feel the beauty of this little place—because tomorrow, it will all be gone.

Entrails

A PROLOGUE

You didn't ask me about it

you weren't like the others
who asked

aggressive
bloodthirsty
cameras rolling

extracting
trauma
for the consumption of the viewing public

you didn't ask me
about the ash filling the courtyard
the black smudged sky falling heavily into the windows
the man rushing breathlessly through the doorway
"That fire's really close you gotta go"

you didn't ask me

you don't know about
you didn't
see

a tired neighbour peering down the street
looking for the fire
while the hillside behind him
burned

a small child
tripping over summer sandals
pulled by her mother's hand
faster than the wind
faster than the fire

you don't know

that insidious silver shimmer

the sidewalk empty
windows dark

(maybe everyone else is gone)

(maybe they're still home
shut in
oblivious

as the town burns around them)

You didn't ask

a fireball
explodes
across the highway
above my house

Fire at night

I stood on the highway
behind the barricade
and watched the glowing sky
that night

both sides of both rivers
both sides of the mountain between
everything glowing in flame
and the mass of smoke above
glowing red too

somewhere in the dark
was our town
an unknown
probably gone

and somewhere among those flames
were homes, farms
the school
probably burning

that red glow

our whole world
on fire

others watched beside me
their expressionless faces
lit up by the glow

flames reflected in their eyes

we stood together
in silence

and then looked away

At Siska

When everything is burning
there is no cell service
no internet
no connection to the worried world

I am not ok

so I go south
on an empty highway
to find a pocket of reception

messages flood in
by the hundreds

from friends
family
reporters

no

no,
I am not ok

I can't reply
can't focus
so I don't

except to write "we're safe"

my town is gone
my café is gone
my house is likely also gone

I don't know what to do

I am not ok

at the roadside
other locals
check messages too

we hug
say "Love you"
but we are not ok

we are not ok

the messages become
too much

so I go north
toward the fire
on an empty highway

I am not ok

Lightning

On the second night
a storm
moves through

every strike
(there)

means the possibility
of another fire
(there)

I rush from window to window
looking for flames
(there)