

Winter 2015

Fire-Adapted Ecosystems

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Recommended Citation

Donahue, Michelle (2015) "Fire-Adapted Ecosystems," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 82 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss82/4>

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FIRE-ADAPTED ECOSYSTEMS

[Zeus] said, "I slice each of them in two, and thus they will be weak..."

- Plato, *The Symposium*

her & him

My friends said I should snort cinnamon if I'm too poor for weed. I don't smoke weed, but my friends think I should.

I think they're joking about the cinnamon. We're too old for that.

Maybe twenty-eight is too old for weed too. I don't like smoke, but I do love cinnamon. I drink it in Chai tea. It's a perfect drink.

I'm driving home, to the mountain mazes of Southern California. We had sex in a LA hotel once, with the curtain open so we could see the Hollywood sign. You said that was like magic, but the mountains were even better. Beneath you, I looked up at you, as you looked at those mountains.

Perhaps I will snort cinnamon.

I'm crying. Large dinosaur tears into my cold Chai tea with cinnamon. Your skin is the color of cream Chai. You have cinnamon hair.

Or was it nutmeg? Did my friends say I could snort nutmeg?

I have no emotional attachment to nutmeg.

My mates keep giving me cigarettes. I don't smoke, but they say I need it. That I need something and that's least deadly.

I make a list of things more deadly than cigarettes.

Elephant stampedes. Sadness. Sad elephant stampedes. Magma and fire. Sad elephant stampedes through fire. It's a good list.

I'm flying to London then driving to Oxford. We never flew together. We always were halfway across the earth from another. I felt like if I could drill a hole into the earth, I could stick my hand in and touch you. Is California halfway across the earth from England? No, but it feels like it.

I'm tempted to smoke.

I feel too confined. I need to move, to stampede away my sadness. You have hair the colour of fire. You are too many kilometres away.

I tried to find the distance on Google maps. It said it couldn't calculate directions.

The distance between us is indeterminable.

home

I'm home again only it doesn't feel right anymore. The walls are bent and my body intersects them: stuck.

I do nothing but stare at walls and stare at the TV, which is like a wall. I flip channels searching for a British accent, one that sounds exactly like yours.

I approach recovery after break up like a scientist, because that's who I am.

I should be out doing research, in the chaparral of Southern California.

Hypothesis: If I get outside, if I unearth our box with the ring and if I do not remember, I can do research again.

My mates say home is where you spend most of your time. I am homeless everywhere but in the crook of your arm.

I pace around my empty Oxford flat and think of images to describe you. I can't, so I watch football instead. I cheer for my favourite club: Calcio Catania.

I paint you, one portrait a day, because art is the only way I think.

I should be on the streets, on the job, taking photographs.

A picture: you done in hot pink, blood orange, surrounded by fire. If I can burn you, forget you, I'll be fine.

meeting underground

We collided in the metro. I remember how your accent sat on your tongue, how you smiled and the skin furled around your eyes. You had a distinctive nose, sharp like a hook, and you hooked me. You were here for travel photography, a piece on Gaudi. A piece on unfinished work, his Sagrada Familia, big and grand, like coral sky spirals, his magnum opus, you said, left undone.

I saw you in the metro and ran into you on purpose. You were attractive, I noticed that: the curves, the white-toothed smile, how happy you looked. You followed science here, said something I didn't understand. I never understood those words, but I didn't need to. I understood you through visuals: gesticulations, the wink of eyes, the tilt of your neck.

After chupitos at that shot bar, the one with a shot for every state (I took a California one) we rode the metro to nowhere. I'd heard Barcelona was a city that never closes, but everywhere was closed that night.

Riding back, a drunk guy asked you if we had cigarettes.

You said, "we don't smoke." You didn't know me, but you knew no girl you could love would ever smoke.

Even then we felt it.

I looked at you, at myself echoed in your pupil. The retina sees images upside down. Your eye turned me upside down.

home

I drag myself outside. I have no energy because I'm on a diet. I'm tired of being just a little too fat to be average. My bones are dinosaur bones. I would love to be just average. It's better than being fat.

You liked fat girls you said. No, you were diplomatic, you said curvy. You weren't kidding. I tracked down two ex-girlfriends on Facebook.

You called me "quite thin" once. My heart broke because I thought you were joking. You weren't. I'd never been called thin before. I thought I'd never be called thin.

We went to a pub. I wanted to grab your picture, your dark magma hair and the flaming blue shot. We weren't drunk but pretended we were as we rode the metro and searched for a club, walked along the beach.

On our way back, a guy asked me, "do you have cigarettes?"

"We don't smoke." I hoped this was true. You wrinkled your nose and I knew you hated smoke as much as I did.

Even then I could read you.

You were a painting, visceral and unworldly. Like a Cezanne, blurred, the perspective slightly shifted.

I begin painting, trying to find the way to forget. I bump my head on the ceiling fan in my studio. I'm too tall, have always been. I have elephant bones. I'd love to be shorter. Not short, but less awkward and tall.

You loved tall guys, you said. You never talked about your other boyfriends. I could never gauge if I was your type or just an anomaly.

"You're sexy," you said once. I thought you were joking, because I grew up feeling ugly and unwanted. Mum cheated on Dad with his brother and left. Dad left me at

I loved that freedom. Standing naked in front of you, knowing you thought I was quite thin and not worrying about the dimpled upper thigh, the flabby jut of ribcage, or the soft pouchy stomach.

I'm outside, walking. The wind brushes trash and pebbles across the asphalt and it sounds so much like rain. Cement leads me to the chaparral.

meeting under glass, between plants

We walked through the rain in that small city outside Copenhagen. Higlerove or something. We dragged our luggage. I was tired because I had slept in the Milan airport on the hard gray bench by the bathrooms. We stayed in a hotel, that wasn't really a hotel, but more like greenhouses tacked onto a main building. I had told you how much I loved greenhouses, how I loved glass, being able to see the sky, warm plants.

My hair was drenched from rain; it was a rattled tornado, but you didn't see this. Looking at the sky, feeling you beside me, within me, we were a tornado. Connected to the ground and to clouds, I was everywhere at once. We spun until our worlds turned upside down.

sixteen, as if that's old enough to be an adult. As you stood naked, in front of me, you glowed and I forgot what it felt like to wander in the rain, to live in a flat with seven others, to drink in an empty car park.

I paint outside. It's raining. I let the thick acrylic paint run. Look out at the Oxford domes and imagine you here, beside me, on the canvas.

You took a break from your research and followed me to the city, Hillerod, for one of my photography assignments. I felt bad, because I wasn't prepared and had lost the directions to the hotel and we wandered around so long in rain. But you looked so beautiful, wet hair, clothes sticking to your breasts, the concave curve of your waist. I said you're fit, you're sexy, you're beautiful because I wasn't sure you believed it yet.

I took you to Frederiksborg Castle, the largest in Scandinavia. You liked the gardens most, baroque, green hedges sprawling until they hit the ocean, the plants twisting like a maze. You were always impressed with how much humans could change nature.

You showed me your tornado-life and I liked this new perspective.

home

There's so much nature here in LA County suburbia. There's a lot of cement and ashy trucks too, but there are these lucent pockets of green. The smog gets eaten at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains, in the chaparral. Wooded grassland. More wood than grass though. Grassy woodland.

There are a lot of forest fires here. I walk through these flame-licked lands.

I kissed you in the maze and for the first time I felt that I liked being stuck.

Oxford is cloistered. It's beautiful, but it's the beauty of books, of academia, of indoors. I can only take so many pictures of the blue slate, butter yellow buildings. These buildings aren't enough to burn you from my mind. My paint and my canvas aren't enough either. With you, here. I'm too stuck.

I buy a plane ticket. I take a bus, then the tube to Heathrow Airport.

meeting dinosaur-elephants

What London needs are woods, you said. There's Hyde Park, I said. With rain-fed grass and some trees. And that statue of Peter Pan. It wasn't the same, you said. There are benches in Hyde Park. You hated benches; you never could sit still. You moved through places like a migratory bird.

You move around too much, I told you. It's hard. I never know who you're with.

You said, trust me. And I did trust you when I was with you, as we

We went to London together, almost my hometown. An hour away but mum never took me to visit. That surprised you. I knew then that your parents were different than mine; it was hard not to yearn for that. I met your parents once and then you made so much sense to me.

You must have a flaw, I said. You said yes, many. It's hard for me to trust people.

Trust me, I said. You got silent and I could tell you were nervous as

walked through Hyde Park.

In Hyde Park, there was a fake elephant, painted like a dinosaur. Green, with lots of teeth. Let's pretend to be dinosaurs, I said. Let's grow claws and thick skin and become ectotherms. I told you that meant cold blooded. Blood affected by heat.

My blood felt too warm. You made me too warm.

I took pictures with you and 44 elephants. In every photo you held an iced Chai. You hated coffee, but you were British so you couldn't hate tea.

home

I'm in search for our ring box, searching through the chaparral. You were here once when you met my parents and I took you to these trails. No benches here, you said. And you pulled a ring from your pocket. Simple, clean silver. Not now, you said. But a promise. Let's keep it in the earth until the time is right.

My reflection hung upside down in the ring, like when you look at yourself in a spoon. It was a sign you weren't ready.

I need to find the ring. It's difficult; the chaparral burned since and looks different now. It burned

we walked through Hyde Park.

There was an exhibit in London, elephants hidden throughout the city, all painted by different artists. I painted the one in Hyde Park, for you, because I knew you would like it. But I didn't tell you it was me. I wanted you to think it was London's magic.

I thought some things were better left unspoken.

I took a picture of you, kissing that dino-elephant. I developed it by hand, watched your face, upside down, slowly appear as it soaked in developer.

I need to see you. Or else I need to unearth the ring and melt it away, to burn the promise from it. I'm not sure which yet. I have twelve hours of thought, of being wrapped in this winged, metal box. The perfect place for thinking. We boxed the ring to keep it safe, housed it in earth, because I knew you'd like that.

Now, I think, why did I do that, why did I hide a piece of me so far, so close to you? I was too certain of us.

I bought the ring, because I wanted it to happen now, but I knew you weren't ready. I had been

once too, when I was twelve. Firemen came to my door at three am, the night before Halloween and told us we had to evacuate. I remember because I had been to a Halloween school dance and my hair was a sticky tornado from hairspray. When I had to evacuate I brought only two things: a photograph of my best friend and my stuffed leopard Leo.

If I had to leave now, I would take our 44 pictures of elephants and my stuffed leopard, Leo. I'm far too old for him, but some things I can't let go.

This mountain dirt road goes up forever.

married before; it lasted only six months. It never felt like us. That was a whisper and you are a roar. The plane engine roars beneath me and it sounds like a magnified version of the soft way you snore. I sketch in charcoal on the plane, quick sketches of you. I used to do this frequently, if only to show you how beautiful you always were.

If I could go back, I would propose to you, stay on my knee with a ring I couldn't afford and refuse to leave until you believed everything I did.

My plane lands and I step out into the hot, California sun.

meeting photographs

I yelled, until the words didn't make sense anymore.

In our Athens hotel, with fake statues of Athena and Zeus, I picked up your wallet: soft, worn leather, and a picture fell out. A young girl, maybe three, with that same strong nose as yours. The picture was folded and when I smoothed it, I saw you, smiling, holding her hand.

A daughter, I screamed. Do you have a wife too? I wouldn't know would I? You'd seen my home, but I hadn't seen yours. You'd told me to trust you.

I wonder if maybe I kept the photo in my wallet on purpose.

You yelled, a lot. You really had a set of lungs (you used to be a swimmer.) I wonder if I kept the photo in my wallet because I was afraid, overwhelmed and too used to chaos. It was you who taught me the science of entropy, how the world tends toward disorder.

I had a wife. Six years ago for six months, I said. I had a daughter too. Lizzie, who didn't make it past her fourth birthday. I didn't say that part.

We'd touched in so many countries, spread too thinly over too many years. Long distance was hard enough; we'd begun to fray, had burned too bright. I cared too much.

I threw my scarce belongings into my bag and stormed out.

I didn't tell you about the wife because thinking of her meant thinking of Lizzie. I couldn't throw away Lizzie's picture, but I also couldn't talk about her.

I had promised then I wouldn't care that much again. Now, that too, a lie.

meeting manzanitas

I walk past a manzanita tree, tall with branches like cobwebs. It has no leaves, not during the summer. It did, when we walked through a patch of these trees and picked it as the place to bury our box. I'd told you about the chaparral, how people say it's adapted to fire. They're wrong. You can't adapt to a force that strong. Too much fire destroys it. It's only adapted to certain fire patterns. Fire must happen at the right intensity and the right time. Or else it all burns.

People forget that fire can kill manzanitas, the ancient trees that can live for hundreds of years. They forget the baby trees grow slowly and are fragile. If they don't grow enough and there is a second fire too soon, they die. And they don't come back.

Still, people say some species were born to burn.

I drive to your home, at the base of the mountains. My rental car feels clunky and I'm always surprised by how jarring it is to drive in the wrong seat, on the wrong side of the road. You're not home, but your car is in the driveway. You can walk nowhere except the trails from your house. I drift out there too, in search of you or maybe our ring box. I try to remember about those manzinitas. You loved them, so when you talked of them, I tried to love them too.

After a fire, the tree grows from the burls at the base of the burnt shrubs. The chemicals in smoke and charred wood makes their seeds germinate. Manzanitas cannot sprout from the seeds without fire. Fire decreases competition from other species.

There aren't many manzanita trees here anymore.

Can you imagine that? I asked you when we walked here, too long ago.

A burning life? You asked. You had sad, Modigliani eyes. Oval and dark. All smudge, no light. You said, yes, I can imagine.

Don't you see? You asked. No species needs flame the way we think it does.

No, I didn't see. My parents almost burned my house down. They smoked, in the house, right in my face. They needed fire.

meeting gods

You tried calling me, but I threw my phone down Lycabettus Hill, the highest hill in Athens. I walked there from the metro. I bought a pound of red grapes for only one euro on a small street. I hit the steep slope of Lycabettus and started climbing. I had no water, only all my clothes, my backpack and one pound of grapes. It was 98 degrees and noon. But when I reached the top and found that small little chapel and looked at the Acropolis, I forgot the heat.

Later, much later, I stumbled to the lookout behind the Acropolis. I climbed all the stone and my sandal fell off twice. Lucky, my feet were rough and thick like dinosaur skin. People were drinking, right out in public, in daylight. Some guy offered me one, but I said no, because beer was too weak to support my sadness. I looked at the city, so old and dirty and breathtaking. I took pictures,

I left the hotel, but didn't take the metro, just kept walking on the hot stone. My feet weren't used to this heat. I walked up the steep hill to the Acropolis. I wandered, eyes holding the tears in, until it was too much. I cried with Athena right there in her old temple. It had been three years since I cried. I touched the crumbling ruin and felt the heat and art of it, even though the signs said don't touch. I was kicked out of the Acropolis because I couldn't stop.

I tried calling and you didn't pick up. I left a message. A stumbling message, trying to explain. I waited for you to call and I wandered down the hill, to the melting asphalt of Athens. The Temple of Zeus was across the street, so I went there, not bothering to look both ways. I hoped maybe the god of gods could provide me with answers. Or maybe just a lightning bolt, through my body,

of the crumbled rock, the dim city lights, the faint outline of Lycabettus in the distance. I imagined this is what sadness would look like.

or else in my hand, so I could aim it. Start my own fire. I think Greece, like California, has fire-adapted ecosystems.

meeting on mountains

The phone in my pocket vibrates. I always bring a phone in case I step on a rattlesnake. One killed my neighbor's big dog. If I were an average weight, I would weigh as much as the dog, so a rattlesnake could probably kill me too. Especially the babies. When they bite they don't know when to let go.

I take the phone from my pocket and squint at the glinting screen.

I answer, Hello? I hear your voice, but it's in pieces. Reception peters in and out here, mostly out. I can't hear you, I say. I want to talk, I do. I don't know why you're calling. But I like seeing your name on my phone.

Then I see the tree. The manzanita, the one I know we buried the box under. It has three main trunks that each split off into two more trunks. I take out the trowel I brought and dig. It's hot, the sun burning the dirt I dig out from the earth.

I call, the mobile buzzes. You pick up, but I can't hear words. I love you, I scream. I don't know I've said it, until it's already out. I hold my breath to hear your response. All I hear: I...can't... All else static. I swallow, my throat tasting of dirt and sweat. I walk, aimless now. Walk until my feet start to blister.

My white trainers turn brown. The rubber sole grows soft.

I hear a snake, somewhere nearby, in a bush, and it sounds so loud, louder than an elephant stampede. A hawk glares at me through his amber eyes. You told me the retina sees all images upside down.

I feel upside down. My brain isn't working anymore, isn't flipping the images to the right side up. I've flown over almost half the earth to see you, my world literally has a different side up. And this changes nothing between you and I.

I scoop out our box, fire and rainproof, from the dirt. I enter the combination, take out the velvet pouch. Feel the warm metal ring in my hand.

I slip it on. I should never have put it on my finger like that. This is something that once done, cannot be taken back.

I have some weed, but all I want is Chai and cinnamon. I roll a joint. It's lumpy and sad looking because I don't know what I'm doing. I light it. My thumb hurts; I'm not used to using a lighter. But now the sad end of my pathetic joint burns. I suck in, until I can't stand it.

My friends said I should snort cinnamon, but I wanted something more dramatic.

But weed isn't dramatic. My eyes are bleary. My lungs hurt.

It's too hot now and the whole forest screeches.

I think the trees are on fire.

I sit on the dirt and a pack of Marlboros my mates gave me falls to the ground. The red and white box, cigarettes spilling out.

I pick one up. I should never have done it, because once it was in my hand I had to light it, to smoke it.

My mates gave me a lighter too. My hands shake. I light it and just watch it burn until it burns down. I flick the butt, still burning, to the ground. I light another, watch the flame burn a little longer. I hold the cigarette loose between fingers. I suck in, until I can't stand it.

My mum almost burned our house down by leaving her butt, still burning, on the couch.

The long grass by the trail is on fire. I yell and stomp on it.

The soles of my shoes are thin and start to melt.

I think the trees are on fire.