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LENA CROWN

FATHER AS NATURAL DISASTER

- Winner: *Montana Prize in Nonfiction* -

MY EARLY YEARS smelled of eucalyptus. The trees enclosed my grade school in the Berkeley hills on all sides, and the products of their molting littered the cement schoolyard, pencil shavings of bark, slender leaves curved and tapered at the tips like goose feathers.

At the base of the dense grove across the street, the hillside so steep that to scale it would require scrambling on all fours, a white sign planted on wooden stakes read FIRE DANGER TODAY. Below was a rainbow of colorful segments, like a wheel of fortune sliced in half, green melting into yellow, boiling into red. A thin white needle pointed to one of five levels that began not at zero but at LOW, followed by MODERATE, HIGH, VERY HIGH, and EXTREME. From the backseat of my father's car on the way to school, I would crane my neck to see which segment the needle had chosen. It pointed to EXTREME so often I had trouble believing that every day, someone spun the wheel anew.

In 1991, half my elementary school had burned in the Tunnel Fire that razed Oakland and Berkeley, destroying almost three thousand of the homes that either clung to the slopes like koalas or thrust bravely into the air on stilts. Because both the eucalyptus bark and the aromatic oil stored in its leaves are highly flammable, the trees were largely blamed for the severity of the blaze. California is home to thousands of them—a century ago, in an ill-advised get-rich-quick scheme, state developers planted the invasive blue gum tree so aggressively that today, eucalyptus whispers over untold acres of woodland.

People say that eucalyptus smells like mint and honey. But to me, the fragrance that hung in the air was the tannic bite of a freshly snuffed match.

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MY FATHER IS flint. Short and solid, an inverted triangle, chest muscles like two boulders from swimming every day.

My father is gasoline, salt-and-pepper hair slicked back smooth and wet like Frank Sinatra, gold mezuzah glinting at his neck, the tank always full, and don't you let it dip below the quarter tick, or else.

Growing up, my father taught me how to discern certain characteristics of a fire just by looking at it, details like the color and volume of smoke and flame, as well as its aftermath, its char patterns and heat shadows. He worked in fire, though he battled insurance companies, not flames. He used to bring me with him on his rounds to visit his clients, people who smiled at me with sad eyes as they stood before the scorched remains of their business or family home.

I struggled to explain my dad's job to my friends. Or to anyone, for that matter. The official title, "public adjuster," illuminated little. Finally, when I was ten, I found a shortcut in Pixar's *The Incredibles*. "You know the nasty bossman who orders Mr. Incredible to deny the nice old lady's insurance claim?" I'd say, waiting for the inevitable nod. "My dad fights those guys."

During peak fire season, in September and October, he left my mother, my brother and me in Oakland and drove down the coast to sell his services in areas where the land itself had sparked and caught. But chasing wildfire claims was competitive stuff, and he often came home with nothing to show for the trip. When he'd arrived at the scene, he told me, stooges from Greenspan—the gargantuan company my dad had once worked for, an emotionless machine, if a well-oiled one—were already promising the client the moon, and my dad, with his one-man operation from his desk outside my bedroom door, could offer only himself. Afterwards, he would brood for weeks, traipsing around the house, slamming doors behind him until

he ran out of fuel.

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DURING CALIFORNIA'S GREAT Camp Fire of 2018, I was living in St. Louis, where I'd attended university. I returned home for the winter holidays just a month after the blaze had finally abated. Rain showers had wrung the ash from the clouds, and the air smelled shamelessly clean.

On the last day of the year, I gazed out the passenger-side window at the desiccated moonscape of the coastline as my college friend navigated us toward Santa Barbara for a New Year's Eve party. Huge swathes of hillside were charred black. From a distance, bushes looked like bushes, but as we drew closer, thickets fractured into bunches of blackened twigs, like skeletons of grape clusters.

We drove by a burned-out church, the first sign of human habitation in miles. My friend glanced over and said, "Whaddaya know. A little piece of St. Louis."

I frowned, but I knew what he meant. In St. Louis, destruction—at least the kind scabbed on the surface of the city—almost always involved man-made objects. Disaster looked like abandoned brick factories and cars smoking on the shoulder and the personal effects of an evicted tenant heaped on the sidewalk: dressers and clothes and books and strollers and coffee mugs and all the minutiae of a life which, when piled randomly on the asphalt, looked like trash.

I fidgeted in the passenger seat. Branches scattered the shoulder, even when no trees stood beside them, and where there were trees, I spotted raw, red blisters on their flanks, as though fresh scars had split. Dead cacti—not black at all, but pale ivory—lay in small piles in the brush like lost teeth. I recalled a poem by Natalie Scenters-Zapico, "The City Is a Body Broken." I turned her question over in my head. *Which of us has become the natural disaster?*

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WHEN IT WAS my dad's turn to drive me to or from school, if we happened to pass the carcass of a burned building, he'd slow the car to a crawl and lean over to squint out the window at the wreckage, murmuring a rapid-fire diagnosis, equal parts admiring and grave. "Look at that. Kitchen fire; major smoke damage. Mm-hmm. That right there is a million-dollar loss." Sometimes he'd jot down the address in his little black book.

"Loss" was a countable noun in his language. A loss was something you could look at, something you could drive toward and past; a heap of singed objects, or, depending on the duration and ferocity of the fire, a collection of absence. Loss was a place. When my dad was trolling for new business, he'd snatch his keys off the hook in the pantry and breeze out the door, tossing over his shoulder, "Gotta visit a potential loss over in Berkeley." The loss had, of course, already happened; what was "potential" was whether or not that loss would belong to him.

I still remember the thrill of these fire tours—a house might look perfectly normal at its face, but after the car crept forward a few yards, I'd see its flank flayed open, innards like gristle chewed up and spat back out, a mess of crumbling plaster and jagged beams so deeply black it was as though the house's viscera were coated in a thick layer of paint.

I could never look as long as he wanted to. "Dad," I'd whine. "I'm going to be late."

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ONE AFTERNOON, I walked out of my apartment for work and into a tornado funnel of black smoke swirling over South St. Louis. On the highway, I took breaks from watching the road to gape at the source: a warehouse the length of a city block engulfed in flames, roiling just beyond the railing of the overpass. News helicopters circled. The fire lasted for almost twenty-four

hours, and the smoke even longer.

I guessed correctly that the cause was electrical—it was a cold, clammy day, and the building was commercial. Electrical fires were common in the city. No matter what neighborhood you moved into, you knew the building probably wouldn't be up to code, because there was no code, or at least no consequences for disobeying it. We all had our horror stories. (My personal favorite was the waterlogged chunk of bathroom ceiling that fell into my bathtub one day, where it sat for three weeks before my landlord finally sent someone to patch it up, only to have the exact same thing happen in the bathroom down the hall a few days later.) St. Louis was an old city, and an insolvent one, so many of the buildings—though quaint and nostalgic from the outside—were sick on the inside, a mess of faulty wiring and rusted pipes and lead paint, their foundations eaten away by systemic racism, housing discrimination, graft, neglect. The warehouse had begun as a classic case: the building was nearly a hundred years old; the basement, where the fire started, had no sprinklers. Firefighters at the scene became especially concerned, though, when they learned that the warehouse contained a stockpile of more than 150,000 candles made of solid citronella, an essential oil not unlike the one stored in eucalyptus leaves.

Passing the inferno on the highway, I'd assumed the fire was electrical by a process of elimination: to my knowledge, St. Louis didn't have wildfires. To me, wild meant natural, biological. Without the excuse of a flammable canopy or the dryness of late summer heat, it often felt easier to see the man-madness of fire in my new home, the hand guiding the match. But Merriam-Webster's definition of the word "wildfire"—"a sweeping and destructive conflagration, especially in a wilderness"—makes no mention of its cause.

Fabricated or not, we reacted the same way, Californians and St. Louisans both: once you'd nested in kindling, you could take steps to stave off disaster on your own, like not using the microwave at the same time as the toaster, but there was nothing really to do but sign the lease, spin the wheel of fortune every day and hope the friction of the needle didn't

produce a spark. Or else become people like my father, who made their living in the ash, who promised to make you a phoenix.

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ON MY DAD'S fire tours, I pretended to resent his disregard for my little-kid schedule, for the sluggish slither of the car as I sulked in the backseat, but I secretly liked that I was the only one in our family who learned the vocabulary of combustion, the language of aftermath. It meant my father brought his ambitions and successes and failures to me first.

He admitted to me once that many people found his line of work exploitative. It was true that he profited from the settlements he reached with his clients' insurance companies, even though the payments he helped broker were often tens of thousands of dollars greater than what the companies originally proffered. I didn't think he was doing a bad thing—I saw the way he cared for his clients, learning every family member by name, taking their panicked calls early in the morning and late at night, walking them through the same bureaucratic labyrinth again and again. But I felt a burgeoning discomfort as I got older and realized that when my dad's work was going well—meaning any time he was busy—it meant California was burning.

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On the day the warehouse went up in smoke, when I walked out the door of my apartment and saw the black tornado, my first instinct was to tell my father.

After I got my first cell phone as a teenager, if I passed a burning building or found a fresh loss, I'd call my dad's mobile and rush to the nearest street sign to plot my coordinates. He received tips like these from his network of allies and contractors and even competitors—like his younger brother, who made double my dad's salary working for Greenspan and occasionally ceded

smaller claims to him—but even so, I sometimes managed to beat everyone to the punch. I would listen for the faint scratching of his pen onto the mint green pages of his black leather book, imagining his car idling at a red light, his shoulder pressing the sleek silver plate of his Razr to his ear.

Even after I moved two thousand miles away, I continued to send him these bulletins. Sometimes they involved fire, sometimes merely in-progress construction or property that had been deserted in an interesting way. He'd reply something about the cost of repairs or the rotten siding or the Victorian windows, all original, and then he'd tell me he missed me.

Leaning over the wooden railing on my balcony, I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture, then several more, toggling with the zoom in an effort to give the shot a sense of scale. In the photo, the pillar of smoke blooms at its crown, mingling with the clouds.

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In Elisa Gabbert's meditation on disaster, *The Unreality of Memory*, she writes, "I had an overwhelming desire for disaster stories, of a particular flavor... I felt addicted to disbelief—to the catharsis of reality denying my expectations, or verifying my worst fears, in spectacular fashion."

Growing up in California and coming of age in St. Louis, however, disaster didn't verify fear, and it definitely didn't deny expectation. In the former, destruction by wildfire was both spectacular and predictable; in the latter, misfortune was minute and mundane, lifeshards piled on the pavement.

Maybe that's just me. Maybe it's because in our house, my father's rampages were both daily and spectacular. I knew what would set him off because the catalysts were always the same—little things, like the pile of dirty clothes on the floor of my closet—but out of stubbornness, exhaustion or both, I didn't try too hard to avoid them. Sometimes I cowered. Sometimes I didn't, or I pretended not to. When I was feeling brave or reckless or just uncontrollably enraged, I played the steel to his flint, hammering at his

temper with clenched-fist determination. I still remember how my clothes looked littering the gravel path from my stoop to the street, damp and sad, like so many fallen flags. Some of my T-shirts snagged on my mother's rosebushes, and when I picked my way through the garden a few hours later, stuffing each item into a trash bag, I found tiny thorn-holes punched into the fabric. But like the piercings in the flesh of my earlobes, most of the holes closed over time.

After each of these episodes—sometimes after days had passed without speaking—he would reluctantly apologize, and I'd accept his apology, and we'd all agree that it couldn't happen again, not like that. We would do things differently. He would be less irrational, less explosive; I would be less messy, less a child. Then we'd re-enter the cycle refreshed, purged. For a little while, we could rebuild.

I suppose I did experience a sense of catharsis from these tiny apocalypses, but disbelief would have been a luxury. I was never surprised when normal turned tornado. Again and again, I was reminded that calm was flammable, that no matter how careful you were, at any moment, forces beyond your control could strike a match.

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IN *THE INCREDIBLES*, after a tense meeting between Mr. Incredible and his boss at the insurance company, Mr. Incredible wraps his toaster-sized fist around the bossman's throat, the man's stubby arms and legs scrabbling like centipede tentacles, and hurls him headfirst through four walls.

We weren't the only recipients of my dad's rage. I've lost track of the apology emails I revised for him after an ill-advised eruption at a client or colleague. I edited his grammar and modified his word choice, but my real job was to excise all the equivocations, bending his sentences into the shape of real accountability, real regret.

I know my father does his best to help the fire victims he works with. In many ways, throughout my life he's been more available, committed,

and generous toward his clients than he ever was with us. I can see why the work agrees with him. My dad excels at aftermaths, where actualities replace hypotheticals, where restoration supplants prediction and prevention, where blame is moot. When he gets hired, the worst has already happened.

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A FAMILY IS like any landscape. Ours burned, fizzled, and grew whole again in cycles, sometimes naturally, sometimes after a concerted effort. Physically removing myself from the landscape helped. Once I settled in St. Louis, our family continued to exist like one of Calvino's invisible cities, an abstract empire, a phantasm.

It wasn't until I'd been away from home for a few years that I realized disaster made me feel closer to my father. Ruin reminded me of him.

In "The City is a Body Broken," Scenters-Zapico performs an act of reciprocal cartography, mapping a relationship onto the terrain and the land onto love. The poem takes that old axiom, the one about how we're all a product of our environment, and ties a double knot. *Which of us has become the natural disaster?*

Like most everyone I know, these days I worry about how we've learned to live with calamity. Because we have learned, or at least we keep living. As Elisa Gabbert explained in an interview about her book on disaster, "We can't function while we're panicking, and adapting to horror brings our panic levels down. But it can work *too* well." When I read something like that, I can't help but feel a little grateful for whatever prevents me from becoming inured to devastation. For better *and* worse, my father tuned my ear to thunder and threat. He helped me notice aftermaths, to stay alert, to read the landscape for its fading scars. It gave us a place to meet, even if that place was loss. There, in the ash, was language; there was resignation, and rancor, and love.

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WINDING THROUGH THE wake of the wildfires on my road trip along the coast, when I began to feel depressed by the lifelessness of the hills on my right, I'd turn my head away and gaze out at the ocean. The day was clear and blue. Along the horizon, a long silver slit of light like a wound. Or a seam, binding the sea to the sky.

I had to squint to see it, but in some places along the shoulder, there was already new growth. The baby grasses glowed emerald in the arid dirt, peach fuzz on bone.

