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## Uncontrolled Burn

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## Uncontrolled Burn

### I. September

The headline reads: *Fires Rage. You Must Evacuate. What Do You Take?*  
The question lingers over honeyed oatmeal as the paper goes unread.

Suddenly the fire is something more.  
This is not just my family's house;  
our communal home is ablaze  
while we feed the flames and  
promise to reform our ways.

A child's feet patter on the floor.  
Though the morning teems  
with early light, the hour  
is far too late for deliberation.  
No newspaper can prepare us for this.

### II. October

Dusk, scent of decaying  
leaves, ember-tinted sky.  
Moisture, chill air,  
decline of a year's growth.  
But to be undone is to open  
the possibility of being re-done.

Geese call out their passage,  
and when, for a moment, I close my eyes,  
it is with the sensation  
that this is everything, that all I have been—  
or will be, or am—is wrapped  
in the damp odor of woods in October.

My daughter follows the geese  
with her two-year-old eyes, and then,  
back in the garden, greets her father  
and sinks her fingers into the earth.

As she does, we take in a view of pines,  
our house, our neighborhood.  
The fires out west have calmed,  
snow arriving long before it will here,  
but the geese give us pause.  
He asks what, of all this, I would save.

Ten, twenty years ago, I would have had  
a ready answer. I no longer know what to say.

Within my gaze lie the dried husks  
of purple flowers from the butterfly bush  
and the soft-tipped milkweed he planted  
before our daughter turned one.

I have no use for the photos we took  
of the slow-moving caterpillars, the chrysalis,  
no need for the message he sent to tell me,  
after one particularly harsh storm—whose winds  
claimed three large limbs of the redbud—  
that the caterpillars survived.

Our home has been empty, this week,  
of the summer's wildflowers, their remains  
nourishing the soil, absent the hummingbirds  
that hovered, drinking, preparing  
for their long flight home.

I watch her digging in the dirt and smell October once again.

This.  
I would save this.

Why didn't I think of it sooner?

### III. November

It is late afternoon, and the only fire  
I see burns safely in the metal confines  
of the wood stove. I toss in the article,  
still unread, asking what I'd take  
if I had to evacuate. Each headline  
and heartache is its own kindling,

impossibility hovering in the margins.  
Surely this is someone else's story, not mine,

except the fire is in my mind,  
smoldering in the perfect silence  
of knowing too much, and also  
not enough. Having been betrayed,  
we risk betraying our children.

Once, a small red fox approached  
and peered straight into this room,  
then left as quickly as it had arrived.  
We are poised and ready  
for all the wrong things.  
If anything is to rise from these ashes,  
I won't be surprised to find it verb  
and not noun, or maybe a simple,  
universal cry: *madre, nne, mare,*  
*ema, majka,*  
mother.

**ELIZABETH MILLER** is an educator who lives in Maryland, midway between the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Chesapeake Bay. She enjoys hiking with her husband and daughter.