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One of my most vivid memories from early childhood is of walking through the halls of my elementary school somehow knowing about "the Collinwood fire" and being afraid that the same thing would happen to me. Some thirty years later the memory of this knowing and this fear have come back to haunt me. This piece is my attempt to understand why. It is dedicated to all the world's children for whom there was no way out.

ASHES, ASHES . . .

*This is the way remembrance is born
into the years. It catches
whatever will ignite in a flash
of sudden recall, or the slow hazy smoldering
of a persistent dream, an image,
a whiff of dread lingering
behind the wall for years, for decades.
Until one day it breaks through.*

"RING AROUND THE ROSIE,
A POCKET FULL OF POSIES.
ASHES, ASHES,
WE ALL FALL DOWN."

What i remember about Rutherford B. Hayes
elementary school, Cleveland Ohio,
is the huge strip wood floors running
from one end of the building to the other,
running to the stairs descending down
to the front and back exits.
There was my classroom on the second floor,
and the basement room where us kids often played.
But what i remember most clearly
is that barren expanse of the 1st floor
that doubled as a rec space, how it would haze off into shadow

under closed doors i was still too young to enter.
How, crossing that floor, i am suddenly afraid
of fire, of burning, am recalling
Collinwood and being quite afraid
of having no way out,
though i don't know how i knew to be afraid,
have no recollection at all of who told a 6-year-old kid
about that day, about a thing like that.
How so many children could not get out
and burned because the school doors opened inward
and the cumulative weight of their small bodies
against those doors trapped them, killed them.
Though the doors of my school open outward
I am still so very afraid.
This is how i see it then: the children
at the doors; my school burned,
the vestibule charcoal, the air stinking of smoke
though clear as glass; the children
still pressing at the doors, at the sunlight
on the other side of the panes,
forever crying to get out.

Thirty years later i come to know
that the doors at Lakeview Elementary
in fact opened outward
and had initially been open that day as required.
But the stairwells were so very narrow
and there was that wooden partition
between the two inner doors.
I read that one of those inner doors
was probably knocked or blown closed
in the chaos leaving three feet of exit space,
that no one had or could find an axe.
I know that the stairs descending
to the exits turned sharply and were very steep,
that the children panicked
falling down those stairs like cut trees,

tumbling down, piling, suffocating, piling up
at the open inner doors, a mere few strides
from the unobstructed outer doors, piling up
6 to 8 bodies deep and unable to move, to be moved,
to be pulled free before the fire came.

Thirty years later i read about the wood
floors and panelling, about the vast terrain
between the front and rear exits, the big open floor spaces
that were the center of the building
with the classrooms off to the sides.

I learn that it happened on March 4 1908,
fifty years before and two days after me;
that that March 4 was also Ash Wednesday.
That 172 children ages 6 to 15 died there
along with two of their teachers and one man
who stayed too long trying to save a few lives.
That Lakeview Elementary was the pride
of the mostly European immigrant community
of Collinwood, Ohio,
that it satisfied all the safety codes of the day.
That it was built in 1901, eleven years
after Rutherford B. Hayes.

Everything was done that day
as it should have been, as if for a fire drill.
Everything was correct
except for the smoke clogging the halls,
the fire whoring up from the basement
to devour the front exit within minutes.
No one accounted for what the smell of burning does
to school children who have no reason to really believe
in such a fire, no reason to expect the fire drill
to ever be more than that.

What was 2nd grade teacher Miss Weiler's
school marm manner, her oh-so-sensible demands
for quiet and order, before the terror of 7-year-olds
in the maw of that heat, that smoke,

the gut-growling of that fire coming for them
up through the floor and out of the walls?
What was her adult body,
“tall and strong and nearly six feet in height,”
or her adult understanding of danger and death,
of the appropriate responses to them,
before the gross liberties of the flames
with warm human skin?
They found her bones in the ruins
beneath those of her students.

The townspeople, at first, wanted to blame the janitor
even though Mr. Hirter’s Helena, Ida and Walter
had died there, too.
Historians still cluck their tongues
over the Collinwood fire department
and its appallingly antiquated equipment and procedures.
A national outcry ensued over building codes
for schools and other public buildings.
Some laws were changed, others enforced for the first time.
Accusations, reasons and solutions abounded,
all the official ways to say “no!” to such events.
But how do you say “no!” to the innate properties
of wood and fire and air, the ingenuous ease
with which they lust each other like storybook newlyweds,
gleefully embrace everything around them
in their zeal for their own ardor?
How to accuse the beautiful Georgia pine
that was the floors and walls and stairs?
Or the brisk March wind coming in off Lake Erie that day?
Coming in through the windows smashed
to let the children out, the far too few
who found their way back to the classrooms
through the smoke in the halls.
The windows, letting some of them out,
let in all that vampire air
to suck the flames that much deeper,

that much faster into the beautiful wood,
into the pretty dresses and the well-combed hair,
into the beautiful bodies of the children
stacked like cordwood
at the open doors that were not a way out,
not a way out, not a way out.

Shall i fault our inexorable need for warmth and light?
Or the essential fact of human flesh and blood,
what it does under fire, what it does to love?
What of James Turner, Nils Thompson and Frederick Paul
who, having gotten out,
went back in for younger siblings
and did not come out again?
What of the parents who stayed with their children
wedged in the back exit so tight they could not scream?
What of the fathers, their muscles hard and fast
as the trains they repaired for a living,
who could not free even a single child
though they pulled arms from sockets with their efforts?
What of the mother of Jennie Phillis
who stayed with her 14-year-old daughter,
talking with her, stroking the fire away from Jennie's hair
once, twice, taking it into her own hands
but only once, twice, before the fire,
out of patience, pulled her child into its jaws
and there was nothing left for her to hold
but fire and love was not enough to save.
And love is all anyone has left.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

*This is the way remembrance grows
with the years, catching
whatever will ignite. There is the flash
of sudden recall. Or the slow hazy smoldering
of a persistent dread, an ever-unfinished dream,*

*a flickering of image
behind the wall for years, for decades.
Until one day it breaks through.*

The story is told us when we are their age.
The story is told often without names,
dates, numbers, told as often as not by
we can not say who, told in important details
which may, or may not, be the exact historical facts
but which make the story true,
which make the story tell,
which make the story mine,
my ghost, the shadow in my marrow bones,
smoldering behind my wall, hovering
in the corner of every other story's eye:
Birmingham, Alabama, September 16, 1963;
Addie Mae Collins age 14,
Denise McNair age 9,
Cynthia Wesley age 14,
Carol Robertson age 14.
Money, Mississippi, August 28, 1955;
Emmett Till age 14.
"ASHES, ASHES, WE ALL FALL DOWN!"
Nils and Thomas Thompson ages 9 and 6,
Dorothy Lillian Hart age 10,
Rudolph and Caroline Kern ages 12 and 10,
Anna Kern age 9,
Gretchen Puppel age 6,
Fern and Wanita Robinson ages 12 and 7,
Glen Barber age 11,
Henry Schultz age 9,
Elmer and Elsie Markushatt ages 12 and 10,
Emma Jane Phillis age 14,
John, Erma and Elizabeth Sodoma ages 10, 9 and 7,
Hugh McIlrath age 14,
Russell Newsberry age 13,
Marguerite Caravona age 12,

Helena, Ida and Walter Hirter ages 15, 13 and 8,
Gretchen Dorn age 12,
Meta and Arnold Woodrick ages 11 and 7,
Pauline Skerl age 13,
Frederick and Ruth Paul ages 13 and 7,
James, Norman and Maxwell Turner ages 14, 9 and 6,
Edna May Pahner age 13
who told her mother
as she left for school that day
 "I had an awful bad dream last night.
 I thought the school house was on fire
 and we could not get out."
Yes, the shadow. Hovering
in the corner of every other eye.

My first dog was a mutt with big black and white spots.
I named her Coco. I got her for Christmas
and that summer she was hit by a car.
I still see the blood that came out of her mouth,
such a bright surprise of red. Not much
but more than enough to remember by.
Coco was dead by the time we got to the vet
so we took her, daddy, mommy and me,
to the open-pit incinerator;
clean, concrete, very modern, very grey.
There was a low curb at the edge of the hole
and i could see little else from the car
where daddy made me wait with mommy.
Daddy took Coco, still in the rug we'd wrapped her in,
to the very edge of that pit,
braced one foot against the curb and threw.
I watched her soar up and out
then down, forever. It was a good throw.
Daddy in his white t-shirt, still young enough
to have a child my age, still young enough
to throw like that without strain or stumble.
It was a good throw. No smoke,

no flame, no crackle or roar, no smell.
Nothing more to remember by.

Daddy moved out when i was 5 years old.
I cried once, that day, a few minutes.
Then i helped him pack and move.
I wore my yellow pedal pushers with the matching top
to pack his U-Haul and move him out of my house.
Yellow is daddy's favorite color.
I was so grown up that day; nothing about me
wild and hungry, nothing out of control.
When my folks tell me many, many
many years later all the wild and hungry
hurting things that happened before,
that got said then, that day, i hear the telling
but not the things, still not the things.
Though i imagine them in excruciating detail.
What i do hear after that day is the silence
of my house, the cool quiet under the cartoons, under
mommy very busy in some other room. Under
the songs on the 45s i learned to pick out
and put on the box and sing along with all by myself:
"Saint James Infirmary," "Busted,"
"Walk Right In, Sit Right Down," "Kiddio,"
"Heatwave," and "Cool Water."
Underneath was a way in, was a way around,
was the only way out.

Our daycare driver was lean and quick and wore a fedora.
He came by our houses to pick us up
in his Ford station wagon and take us
to the Phillis Wheatley Association Day Care.
From there we'd walk to R.B. Hayes at 40th and Central.
After school we'd walk back to daycare
and the same driver would take us home.
I remember how he reached across my lap one morning
quite sudden, grabbed

the handle of the car door and yanked it shut
before i even had time to notice that it had blown open
as we were riding down the highway,
before i had time to be surprised or afraid
or do anything more than feel the suddenly brisk air
full of the scent of Lake Erie pulling at my t-shirt.
The one other ride i remember well
i rode all the way home in one of the rear corners
of the wagon, my back to all the other kids,
not speaking unless spoken to. I rode home
with my whole body curled like a fort wall
around the picture i made that day just for mommy.
Afraid, so afraid, that something bad would happen,
that one of my carmates, not understanding,
would hurt the gift. I rode all the way home like that,
my stomach knotted and acid, utterly certain
that to lose mommy's present
would be the most terrible thing
that could happen in the world.

*This is the way remembrance survives:
under the years, by catching whatever
will ignite. There is the flash of sudden recall,
or the slow hazy smoldering
of a persistent dread, a flickering image,
a whiff of rage
behind the wall. For years. For decades.
Then one day it breaks through.*

“ROCK-A-BYE BABY IN THE TREE TOP.
WHEN THE WIND BLOWS THE CRADLE WILL ROCK
WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS THE CRADLE WILL FALL,
AND DOWN WILL COME BABY, CRADLE AND ALL.”

★

The Cleveland Plain Dealer hasn't changed all that much since i was a kid, or even since that day.

The headline for March 5th 1908 reads

"Victims Of School Fire Number 165;

Stern Hand To Fall On Those To Blame."

The shock, horror and outrage

take up all of the first page and all of the second

that is not taken up by the ads. The Sterling & Welch Co.,

seller of carpets, rugs, and curtains in large widely-spaced letters

is having its semi-annual sale of ruffled muslin curtains

immediately to the right of the cramped rows

of blanket-covered bodies in the temporary morgue.

Brown Bros. informs the *PD* readers

that the new go-carts are in and that with their full line

of carts and carriages they "are ready

for the baby's first outing." Next to the go-carts

"the fire swept through the halls and stairways

of the building like a whirlwind, laughing

at the fire drills and the attempts at discipline.

Ten minutes would have cleared the building

of its population. But the ten minutes were lacking."

On the following page those suffering from "Heart Pains"

are exhorted to try Dr. Miles' Heart Cure. Page 4

of the Friday, March 6 edition announces that

"a benefit performance for the Collinwood sufferers

will be given at Keith's theater at 10 o'clock this morning."

Featured attractions include Houdini.

Another article on the same page makes this observation:

"A year from now, if reminded of the Collinwood disaster,

you will perhaps say, 'Oh yes, a schoolhouse

burned down—did it not?—and some children

died in those flames,' in the same questioning tone

that you would today recall the Slocum disaster,

the Iroquois disaster or any other great disaster

that has shocked the world in recent years.

You are shocked; you feel a real, if impersonal grief
—but it is so easy to forget.”

The Sunday edition of March 8 discloses
the official verdict of the fire investigation team:

“Cheap wood construction, inadequate fireproofing
and steam pipes set so close to the woodwork
that they burned out all the moisture
leaving them ready to burn like tinder—
this was the probable cause of the fire.”

The same edition tells us that 11-year-old Glen Barber
died early Saturday morning of his injuries,
bringing the Lakeview death toll to its final figure.

Delirious, his last words are “I am standing
on a large rock, larger than all the world.”

Tuesday, March 10, page 8 reports on the Monday burial
of the 21 unidentifiable bodies

in a common grave at the Lakeview Cemetery.

The Rev. G.F. Patterson of the Collinwood mission
of the Church of the Incarnation at Glenville
where i was baptized is noted for his inspirational leading
of the Lord’s Prayer. Page 5 informs us

that Calvary Presbyterian Sunday School teacher
Mrs. Amelia Warren “is in serious condition
from nervous prostration due to the catastrophe.
Almost her entire class met death in the fire.”

Page 2 of the same issue marks the first appearance
of the ad for the Wheeling Flexible Ladder.

The manufacturer, out of Wheeling W. VA, insists that

“The Collinwood Disaster could have been averted
had the building been equipped
with the new Wheeling Flexible Ladder.”

Ashes. Ashes. We all fall

“DOWN WILL COME BABY, CRADLE AND ALL.”

Some say they tried to rebuild Lakeview
on the same spot. Some say the mothers
would come each night and tear down
that day’s construction with their bare hands.

Lakeview Elementary was never rebuilt.

But in 1909 the Ohio legislature did pass House Bill #140 declaring the site on which Lakeview had stood to be dedicated forever as a memorial park.

That same year Collinwood did build Memorial Elementary on an adjacent lot, a “three-story state-of-the-art fireproof structure, steel and concrete throughout, with accessible fire escapes and doors which led directly out from individual classrooms.”

Where Lakeview had stood a garden was installed and a horticultural center established, a living memorial to the “souls there” which was to serve all the Cleveland public schools. The Cleveland Board of Education closed Memorial Elementary in the late 70s as part of its desegregation plan.

They put rock salt in the drain traps and boarded up the building with the books, gym equipment, desks, trophies, children’s drawings on the boards, everything—except the children, of course—still inside. The school board installed the newly integrated classes in East Clark Elementary built in 1897, four years before Lakeview and almost identical to it in design. The horticultural center was abandoned though the electricity and water were left on for the next nine years. The garden fell into ruin but for a few souls every year planting flowers, carrying in buckets of water to keep them alive in the summer heat.

*The way remembrance comes home
down through the years, catching
whatever will ignite. The flash
of sudden recall, the slow hazy smoldering*

*of a persistent dread, rage,
hope behind the wall.
For years, for decades.
Then one day it breaks through.*

There are still Kerns in Cleveland.
There are still Skerls, Hirters, Turners who can tell it.
There are still children hearing that day
who know that it matters, even if not how or why.
The story is told them when they are their age,
told often without names, dates, numbers,
told as often as not by they cannot say who,
told in important details
which may, or may not, be the exact historical facts
but which make the story true,
which make the story tell,
which make the story mine,
which make the story ours,
our ghost, the shadow in our marrow bones,
smoldering behind our wall, hovering
in the corner of every other story's eye.
Mrs. Joseph Jones saves as many as 10 children
who leap from the school's windows into her arms.
Before he collapses Wallace Upton—
locally known as "Hercules"—pulls 18 children
alive from the burning building, discovering only later
that one of them is his youngest daughter.
5th grade teacher Laura Bodey, the newest
and youngest of Lakeview's faculty,
saves almost all of her class by leading them
down the fire escape from their 3rd floor room.
Lyle Marks age 8,
having already survived two other fires,
a train wreck, floods, three operations and the death
of his father, saves himself and a classmate
by heading directly for the window
rather than the hallway when the firebell rings.

R.B. Hayes is torn down in August 1969
after an early morning fire destroyed it.
School was not in session at the time.
The Memorial school and garden property
is purchased in 1988 by Cleveland businessman
and immigrant Peter Oroz who has leased it
to the Northeast Shores Development Corporation
of Collinwood for the next 99 years.
The Corporation's Memorial Garden Committee
has reconstructed the garden and in a public ceremony
officially re-dedicated it on October 1, 1995.
Yes. In the corner of every other eye.

When I was eight i transferred
to Ludlow Elementary, a much newer school
with hallway floors of cool tile
and a library where i spent hours in the filmstrip room,
among the fiction and science books, browsing
the encyclopedias. That is where i first saw
the woman in armor on horseback with her lily banner
streaming in the wind over her head.
Right then i fell in love
and read the biography i checked out
several times before bed that night.
I discovered how she liberated France,
helped crown her king and
at 19 was burned at the stake,
which somehow made me love her all the more.
Which somehow made her all the more mine.
I read how she heard Voices and saw a heavenly light.
How, in her fear of the flames, she denied those voices,
her mission, that light. I came to understand
how she could not live with this denial
and, repenting, chose the fire instead.
Afterwards, the executioner found her heart
in the ashes whole and unburned.

The best summers of my life were at Camp Hilaka,
the Girl Scout camp where as a young teen i learned
hiking, canoeing, sailing, trail building,
elementary lifesaving. And how to build a fire.
I was proud of how i could properly
choose a site, clear the space, ring it
with stones that would not burst in the heat,
how i could arrange the wood
so that it could be lit with just one match.
First the tinder, that extra dry, extra fine material
that catches with the slightest spark.
Next the kindling, the somewhat heavier pieces
used to build up the fire to where it can handle
the fuel, those great pieces of wood
which can not be broken with the bare hands
but have to be chopped or sawed.
I was so proud that i could make a fire
even in the middle of a pine grove
perfect for potatoes, or planked fish, or marshmallows.
Or simply warmth and light. A fire
that stays where i build it,
that does whatever i want it to. A fire
that i can put out all by myself.

The information and quotes used in this piece were gathered from the following sources:

The Collinwood School Fire of 1908 (1993) by Edward “Sonny” Kern
The Collinwood School Tragedy (video 1992) by Saul S. Friedman
The Great Collinwood School Disaster (1908) by Marshall Everett
The Cleveland Plain Dealer

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