

LAURA MULLEN

Torch Song (Prose Is a Prose Is a Prose)

"That's the way fire does, it don't have no rules on it." (Anonymous fire-fighter, summer 2002)

"I think her words were, 'You're going to be really mad at me.' I don't think I was mad at her, I was just more shocked and saddened." (Forest Service Ranger Sara Mayben, describing former Forest Service Technician Terry Barton's admission of responsibility for the Hayman fire)

Story #1: She smelled smoke and discovered fire.

Proverb: *Where there's smoke there's fire.*

Perverbs

(homage to Harry Mathews)

All roads lead to fire

Where there's smoke there's a way

A rolling stone gathers no fire

Where there's smoke wait for no man

The road to hell is paved with fire

Where there's smoke must come down

When the cat's away there's fire

What goes up must...

in flames

It Speaks: A failure of belief is often figured as a problem of incorporation: *No one would swallow that*, we say, or, "it just doesn't smell right." It stinks. Sometimes that's as close as we can get to it. To "burn" is also to deceive. Given the distance and the wind direction... this scent of smoke (clinging to cloth and skin, tangled in hair) vanishes into the air we insist is "thin." As any excuse.

Story #1a (her own words): "I saw the fire and tried to put it out."

Hayman Fire “at a glance” (updated from the *Coloradoan*, June 21, 2002)

Size: About 137,000 acres

Evacuations: About 8,200

Damage: 133 homes destroyed.

On scene: 2,508 personnel.

Cost: \$29 million.

Discussion Topic: Technologies and Gestures: In a transparent sentence the subject sees and comes to knowledge and then action, though the imbalance of verbs as well as the syntax (note the distance of the “I” from that final, failed effort) alerts us to her sense of powerlessness. Before she got there, the fire, before anything—before the speech it sparks, or the writing she’ll later claim started it—“kindled by a person unknown.” “I saw the fire”: “I” is a shifter. Do you see her seeing (a face at the edge of the frame, registering—in slightly too-lurid color—shock and increasing dismay) or do you see yourself in her place? “I tried to put it out.” “I tried.” Repeat at least 2,500 times.

Re: Vision: “Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object.” (Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*) “Mosaic”: the term for the varied and broken patterns a fire traces, comprehending a landscape, “burning at different intensities in different places and . . . burning different places in different years.” (Margaret Fuller, *Forest Fires*)

Story #2: “She reported that she looked at a letter that she had received that morning from her estranged husband. She became angry and upset and tried to get rid of the letter.” (court doc.)

Advice from a fiction writer (dead): “You’ve got to sell your heart, your strongest reactions, not the little minor things that only touch you lightly This is especially true when you begin to write, when you have not yet developed the tricks of interesting people on paper, when you have none of the technique which it takes time to learn. When, in short, you have only your emotions to sell.” (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

(Back) Story #2a: At one point we're told that our heroine's two teenage daughters put a letter of their father's into their mother's day pack before she went off to work. Their goal: repairing the marriage; her job: protecting the wilderness.

Re: Vision: A woman enters a forest with a letter. The letter, a love letter, never mentions the forest but some people can look at a stand of trees and see nothing but paper. The sweet, rank, cloying stench of the pulp mill fills the air a thousand miles from here. Some people can look at a line of words and see nothing but reference—or the lack of it—most of the sentence seems like a by-product, a way to get there. The defendant declared she “stayed with the burning letter until it had burned completely.” Most people, visiting the national parks, never go more than 250 feet away from their cars.

Back draft: “*Darling I can't live without you,*” etc. Before they fold the letter into their mother's day pack, the girls read the trite phrases over to each other in awed, hushed whispers punctuated by—on the part of the younger—fits of uncomfortable giggles. In short they read it like teenage girls. They *are* teenage girls: we know what that means.

Questions for further study: *What does that mean?*

Questions for further study: Are you thinking here of the book or the movie, the original or the remake of *The Parent Trap*?

Questions for further study: How did the girls get their hands on the letter?

And the Word Was Light: Reread Jacques Lacan on Edgar Allen Poe's story “The Purloined Letter”? Reread Poe—the letter is set out in plain sight so it can't be seen; the letter must be recovered and can't be read, ever; the letter is replaced by another letter which *can* be read: but the words are not the words of the letter's author. Reread Walter Benjamin (“The reader warms his shivering life with a death he reads about”: “The Story Teller”). “[S]he was so upset after reading the letter that she burned it inside a campfire ring but it escaped, accidentally igniting Colorado's largest wildfire.” (Note from the *Coloradoan* [6/22/02].)

Questions for further study: What work is “accidentally” doing in the above sentence? And, “largest wildfire”?

Questions for further study: In the phrase “burned it...but it escaped” is the pronoun’s reference secure?

Re: Vision: As if made for a made-for-TV-movie the already tired scene played over and over: “She was so upset,” etc. (Question: How upset do you need to be to burn 137,000 acres?) The print is grainy. Did you see her, “in your mind’s eye,” with matches, crying so her hand shook too much to strike a light at first? Or do you picture her standing there, resolute, raising a lighter aloft like a concert-goer during the encore? “The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything,” Gertrude Stein repeats (“Composition As Explanation”). The Russian filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky dies in exile, his countrymen having refused his vision; even now some people say of his movies that there’s not enough story there. In *The Mirror* a drenched woman appears in the charred room of a gone house, a dream or memory, haunting the narrator. *Homage*, as if the word had a home in it. All the elements the filmmaker loved and lovingly reassembled are here: the woman, the forest, the tears...a letter on fire.

Out-Takes, or Everybody’s Ex: June 21, 2002: The stuff of the event burns so fast—there’s no time to establish or absorb any single story, or to see a previous version be fully replaced by another, so that all the possible truths seem still to be in play, though only able uneasily to acknowledge each other. Remember the zero story? Something about a car spotted fleeing the scene. Was a male figure mentioned or did I make that up? Some guy...boiling water for coffee, or noodles or? Ready in an instant, as if he were himself a reconstituted soup mix, this character: the beer in his hand, the car radio blaring “Smoke on the Water,” the story he tells himself in half-phrases, “Shit, she used to love it here...” the way he roughly brushes at his eyes with the back of his fist, and tosses his cigarette butt at the campfire pit—“ah, goddamn it...”

Notes on craft (fiction): A false line of dialogue can ruin an entire scene.

Notes on craft (forestry): Old burns tend to stop fires.

Story #2b (“What’s this paper doing here?”): Our heroine pulls her ex-husband’s letter from her pack, alone in the forest, and breaks down, deciding to burn it at once, which we are meant to ‘understand’ or be understanding about—although she is in fact on duty, in her role as a Forest Service Technician, enforcing a ban on fires, in her probationary year.

It Speaks: A failure of understanding is often figured as a failure of grasp. We say, “I don’t get it.” We say, “The meaning completely escaped her.” Anne Carson remarks Paul Celan’s idea of language as net or grillwork—*Sprachgitter*—in whose limits and meshes we are “cleanse[d] of the illusion that we could talk.” (*Economy of the Unlost* 33)

Story #3: Her husband has “told investigators he never wrote her a letter. Prosecutors also said there was no evidence of burned paper at the scene, but they are still conducting tests on the debris.”

Discussion Topic: Technologies and Gestures (or: The Company Bar-B-Q): Unquestioned understanding: of course you burn a *love* letter (historical and literary precedents: *The Wings of the Dove*, etc.), but—even as we imagine the tender words (had tears splotted the paper?) turning to ash—a question occurs. What if, as is so likely now, the letter was written on a computer? (Reread Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” etc.) Oh, not a *love* letter! Our desire to allot specific technologies a certain range of emotional gestures is itself worth a paper. Discuss the differences in texture-of-event between burning a love letter and shredding documents. Why *don’t* we shred love letters? If it comes out that Ollie North and Fawn Hall sat up late burning the Iran-Contra evidence together do we think they were in love? And if it turns out that employees at Arthur Anderson *burned* papers relating to the Enron account? What if the papers were used to help the coals catch beneath the stiff suckling pig on its spit, as full of righteous indignation as any accused executive?

Q. What would you save from a house on fire?

A. The fire. (Cocteau)

Back draft: For days we'd been reading, beneath the dry news reports, the easy clichés this letter would have had to include, a fire beginning, "I love you"; a fire beginning, "I want to start over." The tears in the reader's eyes give the air a heat shimmer. Okay. Now you have two hours to go back in and bring out everything you want to save forever. As is so often the case, the words had a powerful effect, though not the one intended by their author!

What We Talk About When We Talk About Creative Writing: In those contemporary stories which still function, despite appearances, as instruction manuals for if not *good* then at least *better* behavior, our heroine brusquely crumples the letter, thinks for a minute, unfolds it again and, putting the offending document on the seat beside her, drives home. If she doesn't have the almost requisite fender bender (late 20th century epiphany territory: a chance for some sudden intersubjectivity and necessary soul searching), she arrives home—lowers the blinds, pours herself a drink and plays something like "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes" over and over. It's as if what she's read has seared itself into her memory, the rhythm of those terse sentences with their focus on physical details, e.g.: The sound of the ice against the glass made a cool noise which soothed her.

Advice from the tribe's piece of tale: "Sometimes trying to rekindle an old flame works, but frequently the best advice we can give a woman who thinks she's still in love with her ex is *Next!*" (*The Rules II* p. 25)

The Plea: Innocent

The Sentence: "We have yet to take our thinking about fiction to the level of the sentence." (Kass Fleisher)

Story #4: "In the custody," as Maurice Blanchot puts it, "of the third person," a report lists our protagonist's age (38) in the sentence describing her as "dry-eyed as she entered the plea." And continues, "But after Thursday's hearing got under way, she wiped away tears and reached for a tissue as one witness, US Forest service special agent Brenda Schultz, said it appeared [the defendant] had moved rocks from a campfire to allow the fire to escape and ignite surrounding brush." (*Coloradoan*)

Advice from a poet (dead): “No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader.” (Robert Frost)

Discussion Topic: Gestures and Technologies: An acid trip allowed Anaïs Nin to discover that women weep because “IT IS THE QUICKEST WAY TO REJOIN THE OCEAN.” Loyola’s journal traced his spiritual progress by recording his degree of responsiveness to the act of worship, noting the absence or presence, while praying, of tears. Recall and discuss instances (from life or literature) in which this bodily function marks a ‘dissolve’ between public (exterior) and private (interior). In your own experience, is this a gender specific technology? In the report above, why is the defendant crying? What do tears stand for here?

Questions for further study: What are the social benefits of a legible body or a body perceived as legible? What costs might be involved in the production of such bodies, both presently and in the future? Who pays and how?

Story #4a? Or 5?: She dreams of being a fire inspector, a debris-sifter, one of the experts called in after the whole thing’s over. She can tell you everything that happened there, in order. Just one glance and she knows how this one began. She shakes her head. We can’t see her eyes behind the sunglasses but her brow is furrowed and her lips are firmly pressed together. “You see what I see?” she asks, but we never do, not ever, not until she tells us what to see. She shakes the evidence into a carefully labeled plastic bag and we notice the tan line on her left hand’s ringless third finger.

Debris or Not Debris: “It was expressing John’s feelings for Terry that he loved her and wanted to get back together with her...” (Connie Work, family friend). These blank skies and astonishing, romantic sunsets. Static in the background heavily amplified to stand for the sound of the fire. Heavily overgrown forests, residential construction in so called ‘red areas’, an increase in the population of wood-eating beetles, and almost no snowpack: *Now you’re getting warmer*. A friend—out west for the canceled family vacation—stays until the fire is over, to go through the ashes with his parents, looking at what his grandparents (who built the cabin) can’t bear to see. Some people would say there’s nothing to see here: a blackened

rubble full of strange shapes it takes hard observation and sessions of guessing to remember, to place, to recall the use of, to restore to meaning. But that thin line of lead might be a pencil, those shards of metal the exploded lamp, maybe. What's left of the mirrors and windows these twisted, gleaming, stopped flows of melted glass: these frozen tears. "Fuck it," the poet's tattoo says, "burn everything." The problem of breathing in this atmosphere.

Questions for further study: Do you think we could just start over?