

All Of It Burns

My husband and I dig a pit in the earth. Out back in the clover I scattered by hand, where the fence is high enough so that we stay hidden, we have conspired to make a fire pit. What we're doing is illegal, but what does it matter now? We're stuck here, together, and the air has only begun to change.

We push our shovels through the clay and the loam, and I see through the lilac branches the tree stump. He doesn't know about it—that it was there, with her the night of our party and how we both leaned into each other, laughing, our arms and the edges of our hands touching. If he did know, I wonder if he'd want to get rid of the stump. But it's too heavy to move, and even if we did, where would it go? The indent in the ground would eventually fill, but we would both remember that it was once there.

When the tips of our shovels hit rock we stop. With gloved hands, we kneel and scoop out the remaining chunks, tear out the roots that poke through, and pat down the sides until they are smooth and even. I take bricks from the garden, three, four, five at a time, my arms strong and tanned from a summer spent in the open air, and arrange them on the small slope of the hole. I try to make a pattern with them even though they will be hidden underneath the wood, the kindling, our balled up bills. But still I do it on my hands and knees, gently tapping their edges with a mallet until they no longer move. My husband pats my ass through my overalls. He has not seen my body in months.

He builds the fire, even though I know how to do it. He's trying to be helpful. Here, he says, sit. Have a beer. But I do not wish to sit and watch, and so I walk the yard looking for small sticks and stems that have gone to seed—milkweed, aster, winged loosestrife. I bend to collect a handful of fallen leaves and my necklace slips from inside my collar. The gold catches my eye; the cursive letters, my initials, the name I was born with. I stand up and hold the small charm between my fingers for a moment before tucking it back underneath my coat.

Over by the playhouse, where she and I shared a cigarette in the dark the last time I saw her, I find branches fallen from the neighbor's dying weeping cherry. The limbs are leafless, and I reach up and snap a few more off. It won't be here next year, I say, might as well make the most of it. Just don't let them see you doing it, he says. They won't, I say, besides, what good is a dead tree to them? He stacks the wood in a teepee shape, and I think of Indigenous people and how in order to survive wars, they fought for the other side even though it meant killing their own. That they had to choose, so impossibly, between life and death.

The fire catches fast, and I sit on the old wicker chair we leave out even when it's raining. The mortgage and the car payment and the student loans and the vet fees turn to ash and land on my legs, my arms. My husband leans over and brushes my knee. Don't bother, I say, we can't escape it. And so he rests his hand on my thigh, and we listen to the logs catch and burn. It's a good fire, he says, we make a good fire. I nod but say nothing, watching the flames dance the way we used to.