

**On the Verge Writing Contest 2018, First-Place Fiction Winner
By Rachel Lallouz**

The Mountain Burning

I could not turn from the window. I could not will that movement. The view was so neat in its contained, simple square. Sidewalks met at each corner. Trees were planted one directly across from the other. Around each was a curled wire border. Traffic heaved forward, single cars slowed for stop signs. People moved in little clusters and by themselves. I was looking into a little urban tide pool washed over with bright, colourless light. There was a measure of orderliness to it all. Everything had its place. There was no deviation. People would move and leave the periphery of the window, but the view stayed the same. Cars drove beyond the border; leaves were carried by the wind out of the cut patch. Rays of sunshine must have carried on past the frame, too. I followed a man in blue carrying an umbrella. He walked and walked, past a grocery store, along the cement pathway. He walked and slipped right out of the square. I almost missed him leaving it. Past the four, equal lines, the sidewalk would carry on before fading into cloudy whiteness. Less than white, more dull. The people who left the window would continue on, but they would eventually fade too. The colour would leech from their clothes and from their hands. They would melt into the light grey.

I was still afraid to turn away. There were monitors beeping behind me, soft breathing and gentle gurgling noises, almost inaudible. Muffled calls echoed out over the intercom.

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The forest fires chased me that summer. They drove me from one evacuation centre to another, warning after warning crackling over radios everywhere I stopped. I raced along the highway winding around the Okanagan Lake. *Somewhere in the depths a serpent is coiled in its watery nest*, or so my neighbor said. *Watch for it late into an August night and you'll see the moonlight shining off the humps*. The lake was deceiving, she said, acted like a mirror but concealed too much.

I remembered the first time you'd come home after your longest stay in the hospital. You wouldn't be back to the house again, but we didn't know that. You did,

though, somehow. I watched you cook pasta sauce, *bouillabaisse*, lentil soup, ladle everything into Tupperware containers. You were frantic, and our freezer was stocked.

Behind me, the monstrous hood of the mountain was violet in the sunset. I couldn't seem to free my little red station wagon from its silhouette. Saw the helicopters buzzing like flies as they dipped their tarpaulin catchers into the lake, surrendering white blurs of falling water to the flames. Took me a while to realize that strange excitement I felt was fear, knew the insides of the burning trees were boiling with sap under the flames.

I stopped for roadside pies as the car made its way from town to town. Locals staking it out until the last minute. Cherry and peach and strawberry, I had, warmed in the sunshine. Most places were ghost towns by the time I passed through, not a car to be found in the streets. Rooms behind lowered blinds and drawn curtains sitting still and useless. But it was the silence —yes, the silence—that unnerved me most. I couldn't put my mind at ease in such quiet. Gave me the same feeling I had swimming in the Belcarra bog at summer camp, watching my submerged white legs suspended above the darkness, tips of my toes saved by the last fingers of sunlight reaching down.

I kept on southward, past a dilapidated red barn pouring forth the chaos of bats for the night sky to feed. Sometimes it looked like I was driving straight into the fire, echoing in my mind all the while Frost's soft chant: *the woods are lovely, dark and deep...* The air was cleansed with the incense of burning trees. Smoke fine as the inside of a seashell. I understood, then, the heaviness of the word *decay*, why it took so long to leave the tongue. How the rest of the world would always hurry.

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Don't ever use too much saffron, you say, facing the stove. *It's the most expensive spice in the world.* I'm watching you cook *bouillabaisse*. Without a recipe, from the hands.

During the seven days of Shiva, the wailing of my aunties did not stop. I watched them press their hands together, their thick golden rings clinking. *Eat, you must eat*, they

said. *Your father is finally at rest.* Lines of relatives came to the room, deposited platters of food, cried, and then left. At the end of the seventh day, I walked out. On the icy street, the sun seemed refracted a tenfold off infinite angles. I felt drunk in the light.

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The air was heavy with smoke, and I understood that I needed to drive faster. But the aftermath of the fire, I knew, promised its own kind of macabre beauty. The great cathedral of firs would be a graveyard of blackened stumps, ground littered with tiny white bones. Wind no longer pulsing with the bite of fresh pine. Acrid.

Turn around.

Turn around, go back to the lake.

I could not ignore it.

Park on the shore. Unleash the canoe from the rooftop. Row through the shallows to the very center.

I did not want to ignore it.

Can you feel the paddles pulling heavy through water lily roots, like fingers in a mass of knotted hair? The waves from your boat will ripple to the shore and praise the hot ground for you. You will not run. You are going to watch the mountain burn. And then you will find home.