*Postcards from Fire*

Michael McLane

Mom,

I am driving. The night bursts. Stars explode millions of years ago and flood the front seats of the car. Stars explode a hundred thousand years ago and ping off the hood and windshield. Stars explode sixty years ago and flurry in little ground storms around the spinning tires.

*Yggdrasil* was the name of the tree that bears the weight of ancient Norse cosmology. Scholars argue over the etymology of its name. Some insist it is a proper name; others translate it to “Odin’s horse,” and still others to “tree of terror” or “tree of gallows.” It is one of many trees of lineage, of memorial, a means of tracing. As you come down a rise on Highway 50 in central Nevada, there is a tree covered in shoes. It is old but very much alive. No one seems quite sure when passers-by began crowning it. There is no plaque or commemoration of the strange ritual. We can only guess as to the intent of the first to make a sacrifice. Were the shoes no longer necessary? Did they not have far to go?

Dear Mom,

I pull off the road near the gate. No services. No people. Nothing to spare. They call this place Bravo. One of the most bombed places on Earth. One of many Bravos. Pitted sandbox. Playground of those far removed, unable to walk this crust. But I walk it, at least what I can. A photographer and others want to make this a national park. He
documents it tenderly, an imperfect lover. Calls the series Cantos — a nod to Dante, a wink to Pound. We are in deep here. Bravo, bravo.

There are places to match this desert’s intensity. There is a town called Centralia that has been burning for sixty years. A ribbon of coal tucked just beneath the crust was accidentally ignited by a fire in a garbage dump. This was the oops that set the minotaur chasing its own tail deeper and deeper in the earth. A town burns, and its people go on with their lives, told it will burn itself out in a year. The earth swallows a bicycle and then a pet, and they are told it will burn itself out in five years. A subsidence opens and a child tumbles into it and is hospitalized by the fumes. They are told it will burn itself out in twenty years. One year ago, the last remaining residents were forcibly evacuated. The name no longer appears on maps. Centralia is like this place but is honest with itself. It burns, it trysts right out where everyone can see. Here, the fire is cold, windswept.
Mom,

At ground zero, the heat is so intense that the sand turns to glass. There are mirrors dotting the desert that are so large that no matter how long we stare, we will always disappear. By now, they are all covered in sand. In a million years, when some far-off descendant stumbles upon one, what will he think? Will he look up at the sky and wonder who was so vain, who was looking down?

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A region of sacrifice. Erogenous zone of faith. We hold a federal wafer to our lips. Take it into the body. Transubstantiation of all things beyond the naked eye. And though we walk in the valley of death, we fear no light. We will rise from the ashes, sweep them from our children’s hair and go about their business.

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When I was young, we walked deserts. You held my hand, pointed out the deep geometry of the cracking terrain. Salt flats and playas bent and poised so delicately. Thirst metastasizes perfectly, one pattern juxtaposed onto one ever larger. You could follow these lines on to the
very end, pace the logic of time until overwhelmed. Of course, there is interference. We cluster and dig and hone intention and cannot help ourselves. Tandem acts of violence—one silent, one so loud as to interrupt the course of the planet ever so briefly. Just as we walked, others paced the linoleum of their offices, following things through to the end.

Your thyroid will be quickly forgotten. There will be pills, but that is charted territory. Your voice will change a little, become a bit rockier, but will have a certain gravitas that will endear you to us all the more. Be glad the doctors insisted. Be grateful that other people canceled appointments. Be sure to thank them for their speed.

Dear Mom,

I am thinking about Teller, Oppenheimer, and the others, how obsessed they were with walking, their pacing slowly shifting the spin of the earth, wearing away at the soil. When a problem presented
itself, they found solutions in motion. The pressure, the weight of their feet. Did it churn the soil to glass? Oppenheimer lobbied hard for Los Alamos as the site for their work, partly because of its beauty. He loved to lose himself on its mesas. There is no mention of him venturing out to take a look into Trinity’s mirror. Perhaps at night, alone.

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I’m told that correlation does not equal causation. That phrase is too much an aside, too slippery on the lips. Too many organs have gone missing. Too much iodine substituted for questions. Too few miles to justify comfort. I can’t prove anything and you choose not to think this way, but out here, it is quiet. Out here there is no one to tell me I am wrong. Out here is red-handed.

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Mom,

We take our cartographic knowledge for granted. If an X is present, we say there, we say something. If it is missing, we jump to conclusions, say there, nothing. This is the origin of the term region
of sacrifice, the designation given to the Great Basin, an area that encompasses wide swaths of Nevada and Utah. The missing Xs denote low population densities and areas of few resources—in other words, wasteland. Nonetheless, if you are brave enough or foolish enough to cross the bombing ranges that dot the Great Basin, you will see not only enormous targets painted haphazardly on the earth but also huge X’s splayed in the sand, pocked and waiting on the next pilot.

I am writing this postcard at the foot of your bed. The desert is behind us both. You are sleeping. You are whole, though your throat will be sore. You will want ice when you wake; I have a cup ready. My fingers rest on the top few cubes. The tips are burned ever so slightly. You see, I did not want you to see yourself here so I took the mirror out of the bathroom and hid it beneath the bed. When I grabbed it, it was hot to the touch.