

## To the Fire Susan DeFritas



## To the Fire

In those long, hot days between diagnosis and surgery, I wandered the streets as if stoned. Prescott, Arizona, that high-desert town where I'd landed for college and never really left—its familiar sights seemed unfathomable: the proud Victorians lined up down Mount Vernon, the run-down trailer parks of the barrio, the Craftsmans of my own neighborhood, and above it all, the ruthless blue of the sky. I'd always thought that I'd travel, learn Spanish. I'd thought I'd have a child. I'd thought that I'd publish a book of poems—a chapbook, at least. Now, at thirty-eight, I'd done none of those things, and who could say if I ever would?

With school out of session and Jack gone to the fire, I was free to fill the days as I desired. Which was largely to ramble around town on foot, thinking back on things I'd seen and people I'd known—how the years had passed there—kicking at pine cones and old soda cups. The ravens were always talking overhead. Some days they sounded sinister; some days, melancholy.

I walked the way my Guyanese grandfather had, to investigate and to pass the time, to think and to keep from thinking. They returned to me often, my paternal grandparents; what horrors they'd endured on their way out. How complicated it was to die in this country, so intent on extending the inevitable.

My husband hadn't wanted to leave me alone here, but I had insisted. Two weeks fighting the blaze in the White Mountains meant three months of what he made as an adjunct, teaching CPR to teenagers, and though the college had bumped me up to full time that spring, our insurance coverage was spotty at best.

Until then, I'd been a strictly alternative medicine type of gal, a lifelong avoider of transfats. Now here I was, headed straight for the heroic intervention, on the part of one Dr. Amhad Mahmoud, whose name reminded me of the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish: *The siege is a waiting period / Waiting on the tilted ladder in the middle of the storm.*

That day, the phlebotomist and I—and the senior nurse on staff, and her assistant—had discovered I had small veins, shy of needles. Through the IV, the contrast had hit me like an electric shock; I endured those excruciating moments in the maw of that great machine the way I imagined a rabbit endured being trapped between the jaws of a coyote, by disappearing.

That night, shaken and dissociated, I could not sleep. The CT scan would reveal no more than my gross internal topography—until Dr. Mahmoud removed my womb, no one could say what lay within it. But the image that had come to me that day had lodged itself in my mind's eye. I'd seen it once, while hiking—a coyote stood on the path before me, a rabbit in its mouth, limp but unbloodied, blinking.

I rose, slid open the sliding glass door, and stepped out into the night.

The warm summer air brought with it the sweet tang of immolated sap, and with it, thoughts of Jack. I wondered where he was camped with his crew tonight—if he was looking up at that same smoky red moon.

I set off out down Park and took a right, toward the Pioneer Home, then circled back again, some time past midnight, on Glenwood Avenue. Just a few blocks from my own front door, I noticed a little trace of a path that led up through the boulders off to my right, between two houses. I'd walked the same way a thousand times, almost certainly, in the ten years I'd lived in this neighborhood, and yet somehow I'd never noticed this trail.

I followed it up through the boulders and then stood atop them, amazed. Clear as day in the moonlight, just down the path—behind those houses, in the middle of the block—lay a perfect little dry-grass meadow.

Had the granite here proven impenetrable back in the 20s, when Mountain Club had been platted? Or was this little park someone's idea of a memorial, set aside in memory of a loved one? If so, it bore no sign of its provenance. Despite the warmth of the summer's night, I felt myself shiver in the breeze.

The meadow was shaped like a heart—not like the symbol but like the organ. It had four chambers, separated by two bouldered outcrops and connected by trails that fed into and away from it in roughly ventricular directions. One trail led the way I'd come, back out onto the street; one extended to my right, south, down the hill, to a white house ringed by white gravel; another path extended ahead, toward a tall pine, and ended in a seam that ascended a steep granite slope. The final trail led to my left, north, to the red house at the top of the hill.

I'd noticed that house on my rambles in recent weeks; the shades were always drawn, no matter the hour, and I'd thought at first it had gone vacant. But now and then I'd seen an older man out in the yard with a pump full of poison, blasting away at the weeds.

He had a wife, that guy—sometimes I saw her pulling into the driveway and stepping out of her car, always with a shopping bag in hand. They had a teenage daughter, adopted. At least that's what I assumed she was; the man and his wife seemed both too old and too white to be her parents. If this surgery saved my life, Jack and I had agreed we'd adopt as well. We'd talked about it in bed before he left, speaking in whispers—as if anything out loud might jinx it. I'd been careful not to let myself dwell on the possibility, but when I caught a glimpse of that slender brown girl one day at the door—she'd considered me for a moment before turning away—it had occurred to me that perhaps our daughter (I had always imagined a daughter) would look like that girl, her eyes dark like mine. Hispanic, maybe, as people always imagined I was.

I wondered, did the girl in the red house frequent this meadow? The place had no picnic table, no bench on which to sit. The thought occurred to me that perhaps, if the surgery didn't manage to contain the fire in my womb, if the prognosis wasn't good—if the story of my life turned, at the last moment, laughably tragic—if the poem I was writing turned out to be no more than a fragment, such as we were given by Sappho: *So we must learn in a world made as this one / a human being can never attain their greatest desire*—if I had no choice but to break my husband's heart, my parents'—perhaps I would have a bench donated to this little pocket park in my name, so those I would never know, whom I would never have a chance to meet, would sit here, touched by gentle breezes in this perfect little dry-grass meadow.

I awoke the next morning convinced I had dreamed the whole thing, but when I returned to that stretch of Glenwood Ave., there it was—the trace of the trail through the boulders, and beyond it, the dry-grass meadow. All these years, there'd been this unoccupied spot at the heart of the block, half a mile from my house. How had I managed to miss it?

By the light of day, I saw that this meadow contained the usual profusion of yucca and barrel cactus in its boulders, as well as tough little pinyon pines. Beside the granite seam at its back was that tall ponderosa pine, and beside it, a flat boulder. Not a bench, but it would do.

As I walked toward that tree, my vision blurred. Or rather, as I watched, the ground beneath the tree blurred, and this blurring rose and lifted off again, warping the world with its radiation. Someone, I found, had recently smoked one cigarette after another and stubbed them out in the dry pine needles at the base of that tree—rather ineffectively, and many of them were still smoldering. Whoever this person was, they'd arranged their butts in a perfect circle.

My neighborhood, Mountain Club, was famous for its ponderosa pines, which, as suggested, extended up into the mountains, into the National Forest. Central Arizona had seen no rain to speak of in four months, and with the White Mountains on fire to the east, this ring of smoldering cigarettes, as far as I was concerned, might as well have been the eye of Satan. How could anyone have been so careless, so ignorant, so downright idiotic as to leave their cigarette butts burning at the base of this tree, when my husband was risking his life even now to battle a blaze?

The pine duff was smoldering deep down, as dry as talcum; it took me a good ten minutes to stomp the whole thing out. The butts were mostly cloves, pink with glittery lip gloss, their filters stained a deep brown.

I turned to my left, to the red house on the hill, where that teenage girl had stood in the doorway and regarded me for a moment before turning inside.

Was I mistaken, or did the curtains in that house sway, just a bit? Did a hand lift that curtain, and then, just as quickly, drop?

That night, the meadow appeared in my dreams, transfigured as a greenhouse; it was part of a mansion that had been gutted by fire, though its grand facade remained intact. The house's greenhouse had somehow survived the disaster, and it was a perfect replica of the meadow, a wonder of scale, with that tall ponderosa pine beneath its high glass ceiling and barrel cactus in bloom amongst its boulders.

I wondered, who had built that astounding house? And who had burned it down? Big pieces of it were still smoking, and I knew the story was that some faulty wiring was to blame, but I also knew the truth: this fire was an act of arson, and an egregious one at that.

Nothing like this place would ever exist again.

I returned to the meadow the next morning, despite the summer's heat, to sit on the flat rock beside that tall pine. I was trying, in a half-assed way, to meditate—trying not to think about the surgery, two days hence. What would Dr. Mahmoud find in my womb? There was no point dwelling on it, so of course I thought of little else. Even as I sat there, supposedly thinking of nothing, I was probing that space inside my body with my mind, as if perhaps having cancer had made me psychic.

What if the fire inside me had spread? What if I was like that house in my dream, no more than a hollowed-out facade, still standing? Dread seized my gut, the way it had the day of the diagnosis, and my eyes snapped open on the world.

There was the meadow, real and reassuring, its granite wall sturdy behind me. There were the silvery heads of its dry grasses, nodding in the gentle breeze. There was a raven, circling overhead. As I watched, the bird alit atop the tree beside me, and I thought of Ted Kooser: *The pigeon flies to her resting place // and her shadow, which cannot fly, climbs // swiftly over bricks to meet her there.*

Perhaps when we die, that's all it is, a meeting with the shadow—something that's been trailing us our whole lives, unseen. As strange a thought as it was, it comforted me to think of it that way: not so much a parting as a reunion.

Some white stones, I could see, had been arranged in a circle on the meadow's south slope. Had they been there before? If so, I had not noticed.

Not stones, I discovered, but bones—old cow vertebrae, bleached by the sun, pitted and porous as pumice. Someone had laid these bones in a ring on the pink gravel at the base of a boulder, and within that ring they'd arranged another, composed of razor blades. Their sharp edges pointed outward, as if to defend the thing stuck in the middle: a green plastic vial, such as florists use to provide cut flowers with water.

I pulled the vial free from the hardpan beneath the gravel, popped its rubber cap, and tapped out the piece of paper rolled up inside it. On one side was a doctor's prescription for Zoloft. On the back was a poem:

*A thicket of shadows is a poor coat. I inhabit  
the wax image of myself, a doll's body.*

*Sickness begins here:  
I am a dartboard for witches.  
Only the devil can cast the devil out.  
In the month of red leaves I  
climb to a bed of fire.*

Again, I turned to the red house on the hill. Again, the curtain seemed to sway.

Here, I thought, was a brown girl in a white neighborhood—a girl like the girl I had been, after my parents' divorce, growing up with my mother's people in the Midwest. It had to have been this girl who'd made these three circles, three rings—one of fire, one of bones, one of shiny new straight razors surely not intended for shaving. For who but a teenage girl chain-smokes cloves and reads Sylvia Plath? Who but a teenage girl would create such a dark artwork, in a place where no one ever went, where no one would ever see?

That afternoon, back at my kitchen table, I wrote to her, perhaps inappropriately.

*Dear girl,*

*Please, spare us the drama. You're not dying. You're just stuck with people who don't understand you right now, and moreover, at this point in your life, you are wholly beholden to hormones.*

*You won't understand this until you're older—until you really are dying, the way maybe I am—but what you're going through right now only feels like a big deal because you have no idea yet how much bigger the world is than you are.*

*Sincerely,  
A friend*

*PS. For fuck's sake, don't put out your cigarettes in pine duff. You could have burned the whole town down.*

I wrote this note on the back of the latest bill to arrive, for that grueling CT scan, and enclosed it in my dog-eared copy of *Diving into the Wreck*. Adrienne Rich, I'd always felt, knew better than to indulge in her own darkness. She'd plumbed its depths but held her breath—she'd lived to tell the tale. Which was more than you could say for poor Sylvia. I returned to the meadow and left the book of poetry in the middle of that girl's creepy medicine wheel and then walked home again, up the hill, my head pounding in the heat.

When I returned to the house, my cell was blinking; Jack had left a message, but I couldn't bring myself to listen to it, to hear his easy reassurances that he'd be home soon, that everything would be all right. The meadow, which had been such a comfort to me that morning, such a refuge, had once again been invaded by this girl's presence. Indulging in some drama of my own, I imagined myself ensorcelled, trapped in that series of rings—the ring of fire, the ring of bones, and the ring of blades.

That afternoon the wind shifted and the sky grew dark, choked with smoke from the fire, a hundred and fifty miles to the east now. The acrid smell was sufficient to keep anyone sensible indoors, but still I returned to the meadow.

The book I'd left was gone; in its place was a little white box. It was, in fact, a single sheet of paper, folded by some cunning craft into a cube, which fit perfectly in my palm. Surely there was a message for me inside it—but was it a message of confession or one of reproach? A hearty fuck off, such as I would have given a stranger at that age? I half hoped so, if only because everyone had become so very delicate around me lately.

I walked home with the box in one hand, shaking it now and then. There was something inside it that rattled, but only sometimes—at other times, it seemed to be holding still, as if seeking to avoid detection. What could possibly act like that?

Part of me wanted to open it and find out, but part of me did not. As long as what was in there remained unknown, it could have been anything.

I came in to find Jack home early, passed out in bed—so that explained his message. He did not stir when I opened the door; it was likely the first real sleep he'd had in days. I slid in beside him, though it was only four in the afternoon. There he lay, oblivious to the thing I'd placed on the nightstand beside us, that little box with its hidden heart.

What was he dreaming, my husband, with his eyelids trembling like water—with his hairy knuckles on the pillow? Sleep was as great a mystery as death, I decided, a country wholly unknown to us, and yet we crossed over into it every night.

I must have gotten up once or twice in those fourteen hours, but if I did, I do not now recall. I slept like I too had been keeping a great conflagration at bay; slept, as they say, like the dead. And awoke to the sound of rain.

"Jack?"

Jack was in the shower.

Slowly, without looking, I reached out for the box I'd left on the nightstand. But I did not find it there, nor on the floor when I bent to look.

"Morning." He stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped up in a towel, a big blond bear of a man with an incipient beer belly, my calendar hunk gone to seed.

"You're home early."

"I am."

There he stood—whole! Alive! Entirely unscathed! I should have gotten up to hug him, or at least inquired about the fire. Instead I said, "Did you move that little box?"

"What box?"

"I left it on the nightstand."

Jack combed his hair back into a neat twist at the base of his neck. "Didn't see it."

"Are you kidding me?"

"I am not kidding you. What box? Where'd it come from?"

"What difference does it make?"

"What difference does what make? Where it came from?"

"No," I said, "it doesn't matter where it came from." I got out of bed, stepping gingerly. "What matters is where it is now."

"Hey." Jack, my hunky smokejumper, crossed the room and enfolded me in his arms. I breathed in his damp, sweet shower smell and took a step closer to him—and, in the process, crushed a dry leaf underfoot.

Though it wasn't a leaf, I knew. It was that box.

"Are you all right?" he said.

"Fine," I replied. "Welcome home."

I looked up at him and smiled, but when he looked into my eyes, it was clear from his expression: he saw some place inside me that was beyond his reach now, some place I had gone in his absence. I wanted to reassure my husband. I wanted to tell him it was an actual place, not a metaphorical one—that little dry-grass meadow had come to feel like an extension of my body, my exchange with this unknown person there a kind of conversation with myself. But I couldn't tell him; it was as if the same spell that had kept me from perceiving the entrance to the place for so long kept me from revealing its existence to him.

If I breathed a word about it to anyone, I thought, it would vanish, and, in addition to losing my uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes as scheduled, I'd lose my damn mind.

The day was filled with shopping and filling prescriptions and, in the afternoon, confirming travel plans with my mother.

She was nearly eighty now, still living in the town where she was born, to which she'd returned after the stint in the Peace Corps where she'd met my dad. She hardly traveled anymore, except to visit me, once a year, in Arizona. The connections were difficult, her health increasingly tenuous. But my mother wanted to take care of me. Who was I to deny her?

Still, I knew it was my dad who'd be helping Jack with me if it came to that—my dad, the immigrant, who was both younger than my mother and far more amenable to living out of a suitcase. My dad, who'd borne so much of the burden of his parents' long convalescence, their complicated deaths. On the phone with him from his condo in Florida, he sounded stoic, and for that I could have wept. I kept that origami box, my precious disaster, smashed flat in my breast pocket, through the errands and dinner and preparing my room. Even as I was consumed with guilt about what I'd written. Because what if that adolescent girl, with her official prescription, really was clinically depressed, the way Plath was? What if I'd pushed her over the edge with my bitchy note?

Finally, I wound up unfolding the box in the bathroom. The object inside it was nothing more than a book of matches; the box itself was the note:

*Dear lady,*

*You think I don't see you but I do.*

*I see your sadness and your quiet.*

*The way you always go to the same places, touch the same things.*

*Everyone does, who comes.*

*Everyone, I think, has a question they're asking.*

*Do you know what your question is?*

*Peace and love,*

*Sophie,*

*Queen of the Night*

*PS. Sorry about your cancer.*

*PPS. I don't think I'm dying. I just like to smoke cloves and read Sylvia Plath sometimes. (Adrienne Rich is cool, though.)*

*PPPS. Sorry about the whole cigarettes = cancer thing. I promised my mom I'd quit.*

*PPPPS. Sorry I put my cigarettes out in the pine duff. That was dumb.*

The night before the surgery, I could not sleep. The smoke from the White Mountains had rolled off to the south now, and the moon looked less apocalyptic, but standing on the patio in my robe beneath its gaze, I wondered if it was an illusion, this sense of reprieve. I considered Sophie's note: Did I know the question I was asking?

Eventually, some questions occurred to me:

- 1) Am I afraid to die?
- 2) How will I protect the ones I love?
- 3) What the hell was this all about, anyway?
- 4) What would our daughter have looked like?

And this:

- 5) Is there still a path from where I am now to where I thought my life would lead?

I'm not sure how I arrived back at the meadow in my bathrobe, with three fingers' worth of bourbon in a tumbler. I'm not sure how I came to be standing on those boulders at its entrance, bathed in the light of the moon. But in the shadows of that tall ponderosa, I could see a cigarette burning; a girl was sitting beside it.

This was not, I realized, the slender, brown-skinned girl who lived in the red house with her white parents. This girl was stocky and pale, as white as my own mother—as white as Jack, when he wasn't covered in soot, and broad-shouldered like the women in his family. Maybe this girl lived in the other house, the white house down the hill; maybe she lived elsewhere in the neighborhood, like me. Whoever she was, she was sitting out here smoking in a gauzy, old-fashioned nightgown. One spark, I imagined, and she would go up in a pillar of flame.



I had no idea if she could see me from where she was sitting, but I raised my hand in the air and held it there. After a moment she did the same.

Susan DeFreitas has never been able to choose between fantasy and reality, so she lives and writes in both. A first-generation American of Caribbean descent, she was born and raised in rural Michigan and spent fourteen years in the high country of Arizona before moving to Portland, Oregon, in 2009, where she serves as a collaborative editor with Indigo Editing. She is the author of the novel *Hot Season*, which won the 2017 Gold IPPY Award for Best Fiction of the Mountain West; her fiction, nonfiction, and poetry has been featured in (or is forthcoming from) *The Writer's Chronicle*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Utne Reader*, *Story Magazine*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Weber—The Contemporary West*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and more than twenty other publications. In 2017, *The Oregonian* named her "One of 25 Oregon Authors Every Oregonian Must Read."

To visit her website go to: [www.susandefreitas.com](http://www.susandefreitas.com)



