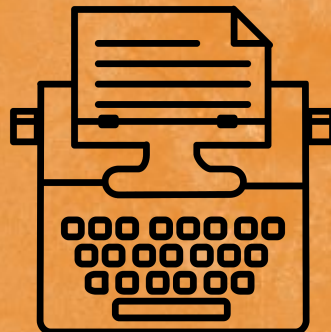


Title:

Author:

Occupy Climate Change (OCC!)

*Creative story
entry*



FORMAS



A time for fire

Dejasunappadi

The bottle arcs over the white marble steps of the New Francisco City Hall, turning end over end in the clear morning, and shatters on the wood-paneled doors, scattering pieces on the floor.

The news crew is edging through the crowd, jostled by elbows and raised signs, the camera tilting crazily. Televisions at home play fragments of speech mixed in with the garbled static of yelling. Most of New Francisco are hearing this, are huddled in the quarantine of their homes, doors locked and barred, worried glances thrown over shoulders and then fixed back to the ongoing protest.

More bottles hit the City Hall doors, bounce off them, and shatter on the marble flooring. The glass of the door windows has been replaced with plexiglass since the 2188 riots. Behind them, the security guards watch as waves of thrown trash cover the doors, recede, and then cover them again.

Further down the halls, rustling with the New Francisco Police Department and private security, urgently waddling and muttering with fingers pressed against their ears, past a series of closed tall, antique doors carved from redwoods planted in the early 2000s, is the chamber where eleven people sit in silence, the light from the chandelier casting their faces in a dull pall.

The board of council members cannot hear the chants outside--no cries of "*help us*" or "*save us*," or "*beat the heat, beat the heat, beat the heat*," no litany of names of the refugees and homeless that have died under the heat of the New Franciscan sun, no cries of the flesh baking in the asphalt or the the sounds of the trash they throw splattering and shattering on their doorstep, or the gunshots and screaming that will follow them. But they are aware despite their best efforts. The copies of the executive legislation lay before them. The automated court reporter records their halting speeches in text, as they each sit up and speak, eyes cast down to the floor. When they talk, they must face the automaton; its screen faces them, a mirror, as the transcript rolls out of its printing slot and coils on the floor.

“H.R. 359,” someone begins. “Crisis Housing Act.” A throat is noisily cleared.”Given the recurrent outbreak of H5N8 among New Franciscan residents, quarantine will be extended another 6 months. Any and all storefronts excepting essential goods will cease function.”

A chorus of yeas break the silence.

“Masks will be mandated as essential.”

Another round of yeas.

“All current refugees from the Northern Fires will have accommodation in Golden Gate Park. Forced relocation will no longer be NFPD policy.”

The assent is more hesitant this time. The punctuating silence is undercut by the whir of the air conditioning, the brisk cold settling in the room.

“All New Francisco residents and refugees must abide by quarantine and remain in the areas of their accomodation. NFPD officers are able to enforce this policy.”

Yes.

“NFPD officers will be stationed around Golden Gate Park to enforce this policy.” Yes.

(Now is when the gunshots begin and the crowd outside begins to scream, although the people in the room cannot hear it.)

“In order to maintain the state of quarantine, no further refugees from the Northern Fires will be allowed entry to New Francisco. All current refugees will await deportation in Golden Gate Park.”

Although they cannot hear what is happening in this cold room, sequestered away from the summer of 2208 and its blazes, the remnants of the crowd outside are chanting “*fire,*” “*fire, fire, fire, fire, fire,*” and continuing to throw the detritus of their convictions at the doors of the city hall, and this time the security guards chant it too, urgently under their breaths, “*fire, fire, fire,*” and they spread it between each other, running down the halls until one of them

throws back the doors to the chamber and shouts it to the chamber.

“What?” the council members say.

“They’ve set City Hall on fire.”

The news team has seen it all happen.

They edge out of the crowd that populates the wide stone street in front of City Hall. Around a fountain they point cameras and hoist mics at a man sitting on the fountain’s stone rim, as people bathe themselves behind him. He pulls the mask a little further up his face. It seems like he won’t talk to them, or at least that the frustrated look in his worn eyes is a sign that he will say something to them, but when the reporter hands him a cap to shade his sunburnt face the lines that have etched themselves into his skin ease somewhat.

“I’m from Yolo county,” he says. “Sacramento,” he says, after the look of incomprehension they flash him.

“Was the Sacramento area hit badly by the fires?”

The man looks the reporter in the face warily. They both know the answer to the question. Large swathes of Northern California lit up as long heat waves and little rain dried the vegetation. Mendocino, Napa, Santa Clara, Sonoma, Fresno, Yuba, Ventura, Alameda, all singed by brush fires and power failures, lightning storms and fallen power lines that heralded 2208 as the hottest year on record and the longest summer. There had been fires on Christmas.

“How did you get here?”

The man looks at the reporter even more warily. “Route 480.”

The cameraman stares at him.

“I’ve seen pictures,” the reporter says. “It’s a line of abandoned cars all the way to the

Palace of Fine Arts.”

The man shrugs. “I left my car behind and walked.”

“For how long?”

The man thinks for a second. “A day.”

“Why?”

Silence.

“I have nowhere else to go.”

“But why *here*?”

The reporter and most of the people watching at home know it is because of the Golden Gate Encampment, the biggest refugee camp in the California area, or at least the most welcoming. Perhaps the rumor New Francisco might hand out the H5N8 vaccines. Or maybe it’s just because they have the most consistent supply of water and running electricity in the region.

But the answer never comes because the police line the far side of the street behind the crowd. There is shouting and the wave of projectiles slowly rotates from the building to the line of uniforms and guns edging forward. And then the gunfire starts and the crowd becomes again what it always was. Refugees.

In the midst of it all, the cameramen holding their equipment like tattered white flags floating above the screaming and the occasional guttering sound of a gun, the reporter sees another bottle fly and hit the City Hall doors. In the back of his mind, far removed from the chaos, he notes that there is a white cloth, almost, sticking out of the bottle, and that it is on fire. And then City Hall is on fire. They all point themselves at the building as the flame licks the doors and creeps inside, beyond the marble, and smoke begins to billow out of the windows. In the back of his mind, again, the reporter thinks that the imagery of the trash burning up in the fire

on the floor outside the doors is worthy of a Pulitzer.

They run.

When they reach a safer place, a small plaza sandwiched by boutique shops, salons, and lingerie stores, they take off their masks, set their equipment down, and inhale. One of the three cameramen start coughing. Deep coughs, that claw out from his chest. They all look at him with expressions of two different worries.

“Not sick with anything,” he says, in a raspy, uneven voice. “Just the smog from the desalination plants. Plays hell with my asthma.”

They wind their way back, taking care to avoid the patrols of NFPD as the sun sinks lower beneath the horizon. The reporter knows a few colleagues that have been detained for violating curfew, journalist privileges be damned. The footage they have plays over and over in his mind, burning a hole. “*Fire, fire.*” they shouted.

By the time they arrive at his dingy flat it is late into the night. He walks up five flights of stairs, creaking underneath him, and presses his hand around the doorknob. The biometrics of the complex haven’t been renovated for at least thirty years, and so it usually takes him a few grips to walk inside.

In the morning, he begins his daily routine of coffee and the internet. He opens the Conservatory app on his phone and lets it read aloud the queue of posts that have accumulated since the past day.

“New fires torch the Sacramento region as the Folsom Wildfire begins to stretch--”

“Next.”

“Worries of viral spillover in New Francisco’s industrial food supply abound, amidst continuing fear of H5N8--”

“Next.”

“Planned New Francisco refugee deportation vote is protested, and, following an emergency evacuation due to a fire hazard, has been postponed. For more information--”

“Search: user submissions.”

Garbled audio plays as he flicks through fragments of recordings of the fire from different angles. None of them are as clear as his. The posts read out from the phone.

“Thor_24487: dirty smokies. Throwing trash--”

“Golden_Gate_Park: All fire refugees, please proceed to the encampment at Golden Gate Park. You will be placed in Golden Gate Park if found outside after curfew.”

“S5igma: bro why is it so hot its like 120 today

“Northern California Power: All customers, please be advised, due to power congestion from mass users we will be halting power between 3 to 5 today. Remember to stay inside and away from the heat--” *“Stayathomedad44: my kids need food. The grocery stores are running out. Can we drop stocked grocery stores in the comments below?”*

“Prtyboyprty: hey everyone, here’s my donation link. As a trans and unhoused refugee in New Francisco, I need money to find shelter not in the Camp, where sexual assault rates for queer BIPOC--” *“User_56797788: the fires aren’t real. It’s fake we need to focus on the real problem--”* *“Traffic_Bot: Cars along route 480 are congested for the 88th day.”*

“User_89788377: i need water, i cant pay the desalination bills anymore, p lease dm” *“NewFrancRefugee: we need help. Come to the encampment at 4.”*

He turns the phone off. Puts on running clothes and a mask and a wide-brimmed hat. He can feel the grime of the previous day on him but he’s already exceeded an affordable water bill this month.

The last post rings in his mind as he bikes to the coastline. The streets are still filled with people--smokies, fire refugees with clothes caked in ash and dust and trash, those displaced by the rising sea levels and the new construction, the newly unhomed, unable to keep up with exorbitant bills--but already there seem less than yesterday. Farther down the street a line of police officers gaze at the refugees on the street and speak quietly. He lets the bike coast down the street’s decline and unconsciously relaxes his shoulders only when he is far past them.

Under the looming shadow of the desalination plants, built over the exploded ruins of the corporate buildings that had been reclaimed by the state once the sea level had begun to rise into the city, he takes his clothes off and washes himself in the water. His bike lays behind him on the sidewalk, chained to a streetlight. The street is empty, no cars, just huddled refugees moving around, and the black asphalt suddenly terminates underneath the water. Farther out into the horizon are a few skyscrapers, abandoned during the floods of 2150, after years and years of rising sea levels. Lamposts dot the tides, marking the ghosts of roads as they lead out to the drowned remnants of a city. It is why they call what is left New Francisco. Better than Dry Francisco, at least.

The sea is cool against his skin; his phone says the temperature is 121°. Once he gets out of the water he dries quickly. He decides to visit the encampment.

When he sleeps he dreams of himself as a child. For a brief moment, he is a small shape lying in bed, comforted by the oncoming night, safe and stable in the arms of the house. In this world there is nothing that is going wrong. Though the last polar bear in captivity will have died by his twelfth birthday, the world is fresh and innocent to him because he knows none of it, and so cannot remember how it has changed. He gets out of his bed, still in the dream, and walks with quiet steps out into the hallway of his home which he knows has burned down. There is no one there. He keeps walking. From the door where his parents sleep he can hear a faint sobbing. He is awakened suddenly by a notification. It is his paycheck.

Later, still groggy with sleep, he opens his cabinet shelves. A moth flies out. He sets out a few slices of bread and vegetable spread. No meat, but he has been paid, so maybe he can splurge for a taxi ticket to find one of the grocery stores still stocked and not ransacked. He puts some protein spread on instead. It's strange to him that he still thinks of bugs as something disgusting when he eats them nearly every day anyway.

He grabs a camcorder with him as he leaves. He takes his bike out on the streets again. There are noticeably less people outside. Most of the buildings with ground level windows have had them shattered. A small child and a mother are running down the four way intersection. There are a few officers huddled around a body. He bikes quickly.

It should take him an hour to reach the encampment but he takes frequent stops because of the heat. Biking through the interstices of streets he reflects on the skyscrapers that tower above him. Most of the remaining office buildings have become their own apartments. His news channel is somewhere near the financial district, and he thinks about his colleagues who've set up tents below their desks, weathering the storm. It must be a beautiful view from up there, he thinks. Scattered trash around crisp carpet, huddled men and women gathering around windows every night to watch the quiet city from their tower on the 50th floor.

There is a cordon of officers and men in camouflage uniforms circling the sidewalk around the park. Around the perimeter of trees that separate the arbor from the town is bright orange tape.

He considers briefly trying to use his journalist pass but he knows they won't care. He hangs back inside a shop whose doorknob has been blunted off, as if hit with a sledgehammer. He watches people with guns patrol the sidewalk, laughing to each other occasionally, and then disappear behind the trees into the park as others appear from between the trees to take their place.

His stomach is beginning to grumble. He shushes it out of reflex, and then almost laughs to himself.

In another few minutes that feel like hours, a military humvee rolls down the street. Soldiers jump off and open the trunk and a group of refugees trickle out, escorted two by two by the men. None of them resist.

More humvees roll down the street and as the trickle begins to be a flood, a crowd of refugees walking into the trees, he lowers the cap on his head, rolls on the floor to get some dust on him, and then walks out to join them.

The soldiers flank them once they reach the perimeter of trees. He pushes away densely leafed branches as they thwack him in the face. Amidst the foliage he can't see how many people are ahead of him or behind him. He's lost in the stream of bodies, stinking to hell in the sun.

Once they're clear of the trees he places a hand on his brow to cover the glare. The

encampment is wide, has always been a beautiful grassy lawn. He remembers once as a kid playing a soccer game in the field they had. He always used to complain to his father about the lamppost being dim, who just looked at him and laughed. *In my day*, he said, *we just played in the middle of the day. We didn't have to wait until night. Lucky*, he replied. *Lucky*.

The grass is covered in brushstrokes of brown and grey from his vantage point, a hill a little higher than the park. It is dotted with people. As he approaches, he begins to weave through men and women and children and dogs lying sleeping or trying to sleep on dirty mattresses and trash bags and each other. As he makes way into the heart of the encampment, the people begin to be replaced by tents, crammed next to each other and crammed on the inside with people as well. A few of the soldiers break ranks to open the tents. Smoke drifts out, sometimes, or sometimes the soldiers will drag a few of the refugees off and place them in tents. A child screams for their mother somewhere behind him. The sound is quickly replaced by the dull chatter of the park.

He becomes aware of music playing in the background, bright loud pop music. They are reaching the center of the park, what was once a grand outdoor amphitheater. People sleep on the benches in the pit of the podium and the benches lining the audience stands. The whole theater is surrounded by a vineyard; he sees people planting things and tending and watering the soil. The smell of trash is unbearable but nobody seems to mind.

There is a tent close to the theater stage, well in the embrace of the vineyard, as brown, withered vines and trash bags created a thatched roof over what must be twenty people crammed into three tents. A soldier grabs him and pushes him into the mix. The other refugees stare at him. He stares back.

After a while they all begin talking. They ask him why he's there. He almost responds by saying he's a reporter, that he wants to record their stories, but he realizes that's not really true either. "I don't really have anywhere else to go," he says. Then thinks about it. "I don't know where to go."

Somebody passes him a flask and he gulps it gratefully. Listens to the chatter of conversations. "Hey, what was that song--"

"What song?"

“You know, the one that goes *nah nah nah, da da nah nah nah--*”

It takes a few minutes, but the conversation turns to reminiscing. From the way that the group brings up cheeseburgers and beef and salmon and others with frustrated, weary eyes he can tell that this is a common theme. And he doesn't blame them.

He does not usually talk about the past. *What's gone is gone*, his parents said. They never told him too much about the world they lived in. He would ask, constantly, and never realized until he grew up how painful it would have been to hold the knowledge of a better existence lost to you before you ever had the chance to cherish it.

But there is something pleasant about talking with the other refugees and so he does it together with them until the sun goes down. The smell of trash subsides, or he's gotten used to it. Somebody has brewed wine in a trash bag and they pass it around in red solo cups, water bottles, a mug. Anything. There's laughter.

Somebody jogs into their gathering, all warming themselves outside a small fire of receipts, newspapers, and trash. “It's time for the play,” he says, and then walks off. He looks quizzically at the rest of the refugees as they hasten to put out the fire and walk towards the theater.

Later, he finds himself wedged into the amphitheater's stone seats as men and women in tattered clothes and halloween costumes re-enact Romeo and Juliet. A few of the soldiers watch from the sides of the stages, hands brushing the butt of their guns at first but then they just chuckle and watch. The warm press of bodies in the seat row feels comforting. He laughs and laughs and even cries at the end. They all do, or maybe he just can't tell, that the sounds of his mirth and tears mingle with the crowd. It's like they're all one organism for that night, underneath the stars and the frigid wind.

He lies awake for a while in the tent after the play. And then gets up and leaves, early in the morning. Somebody stirs as he unzips the tent but nobody stops him. He lingers for a second, just in case somebody does. It is silent in the park.

He is walking the New Francisco streets without anywhere to go. His bike is in the abandoned storefront where he left it. The soldiers seem to have left the perimeter of the

park. He sits in the shop, sunlight beginning to stream through the broken windows and looks at the footage on his camcorder. It is the play. He watches it over and over again.