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PRESCRIBED FIRE

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Moira J. McAvoy

May 2015

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Moira McAvoy
(digital signature)

05/01/15

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ENGL 470
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5/1/15

Prescribed Fire

In areas considered vulnerable to wildfire outbreaks, such as the Great Dismal Swamp, prescribed fires are strategically employed burnings used to reduce the risk of an ignition.

I hadn't spoken to Smith for 10 months when I got the texts. The cancer was fatal, as we thought it would be. The chemo had failed, as we thought it would. The chemicals flamed through her, obliterating her organs and white blood cells but not the malignant growths which had began colonising innumerable outreaches of her body. Her sister had died from the same cancer decades before; to memorialize her, Smith and her remaining sisters got tattoos of the brain cancer ribbon on the top of their feet, which she wore proudly in the face of our Catholic school dress codes.

It was the Saturday before the start of my junior year of college and I spent it setting up my new apartment and listening to summery, if not melancholy music, like The Decemberists and Vampire Weekend. I was not outwardly upset; the news seemed to come out of nowhere, and because it was so surprising, I had nothing to compare it to. As far as my actions had been concerned, Smith existed in a liminal space for the past several months--not dead nor accessible, but an other that needed to be summoned or transformed to see.

A strange sort of sadness tinged this all, a lingering sense that something was waiting to flood me around the corner. But the corner is wide, and my day was long. I thought a lot about mourning that night. I wondered if it was appropriate to post something on instagram for a woman who loathed social media to the point that she would not let us make her a facebook, laughing to myself at the maudlin eulogy I put below the photo as I imagined her sniggering at

me to cut the crap and say something funny. I thought back on the months that had passed, the silences that crowded me when people asked me how Smith was and all I could offer was uncertainty. I wondered about what right I had to sadness when I had not spoken to Smith for the entire duration of her illness. I fell asleep as soon as I laid down, my slumber dreamless and thick.

Usually managed by trained fire personnel and requiring an approved permit, prescribed fires follow a burn plan to assess risk factors such as dryness of vegetation, soil moisture level, wind, humidity, and the presence of firebreaks. According to their website on fire prevention, the operators and rangers of the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Reserves and State Parks conduct an average of nine controlled burns a year, spanning over 35 days of smoke and ash, ignition oil and water.

My family lives almost exactly five miles away from the boundary of the Dismal Swamp. In 2008, we knew very little about the bog other than the fact that it's a wildlife reserve and refuge and there is an entrance near the beach we like to visit near the Oceanfront. From our neighbors, though, and the news, we'd been told that there's a fire in there, and a big one. By the time the smoke stopped billowing and the flame retreated into the peat, the inferno will have burned for 121 days. It caused millions in damage, displaced communities, exhausted fire crews to the point that lawsuits were discussed. The disaster made national headlines and has been ominously named South One, but we never saw a single flame or charred tree in person. All we sensed of its four-month wreckage was the consistent media coverage, the occasional caterwaul

of returning fire engine sirens, string-like wisps of smoke tangling with frayed late-August storm clouds.

The Great Dismal Swamp, as with all bogs, is heavily composed of peat, an acrid soil-like material mainly formed of partially decomposed vegetable matter. Often harvested for fuel due to its carbon content and flammability which manifests as a slow burn--almost tedious and incredibly hot--its abundance is largely credited with the duration of the Swamp's recent fire disasters.

I am nine years old and laying on the library floor, the sun setting rapidly through the warped glass windows to my left. My mother is in a faculty meeting and my brother is playing football with the other fourth grade after school CARES kids, leaving me alone in the stacks. The air feels thicker this close to the ground, like the blankets my mother wrapped me in when I needed to break a fever last winter. Like then, I'm sweating again, but there is no comfort in this heat, and I can feel every single bug, particle, and germ that has ever lived in the carpet upon which I've situated myself burrowing into my skin and suddenly it feels like I imagine it would to suffocate--everything rushing and colliding in my throat until I am crushed by everything in the observable universe, the space around me threatening to engulf me with every movement; I lay perfectly still and count down out loud from ten, offering each integer like an incantation.

t--t-ten, nine, eight-t-t, seve-, seve- sev--

The numbers trap themselves on my lips, and I try to lift numb hands to my mouth to help tear them away, all to no avail. The bookcases grow taller, seem to leer forward--hungry

and merciless, poised to devour me in a deluge of their precariously shelved texts. Closing my eyes, the darkness behind my lids swells and settles over my vision. It's deep and calm, the light pressure of freshly fallen snow or mud settling in a marsh. I imagine I'm buried but breathing, the air slowly widening a bubble around me. My pulse slows down and one by one, my fingertips regain their feeling in a series of pin-pricks and burning. My legs are shaking--I wonder if they had been doing so all along--and I run my hands over my bare forearms; there don't seem to be any noticeable wounds or intrusions, but I can't be too sure, can't be too protected, and run full-force to bathroom, scrubbing--sheering--my skin for five minutes under scalding water.

A good deal of my classmates wrote Smith emails or letters and a group of students still at the high school started a bracelet campaign in support of her treatment soon after her diagnosis. I did none of these things; it all felt impersonal, like an afterthought or a too-early reckoning. Instead, I vaguely commiserated with friends and past forensics teammates and made plans to visit her over Spring Break. Those plans turned to May, then June. Finally, the time of her health had passed completely, as did the summer, and we resigned ourselves to seeing Smith when we all returned for Christmas--visits which, of course, would not happen.

One night, months after her death, I try to call a friend about a party. My finger slips and I begin dialing "Hollis," Smith's name in my phone. I hang up before I can hear the answering machine.

On August 4, 2011, two separate strikes of lightning hit the dense, drought-ridden marsh in the center of the Swamp, miles and miles from where I live. These swift charges of heat and energy lingered in the unusually dry peat, spreading its sparks like roots through the subterranean matter. The ignition started a chain reaction and soon acres of the Swamp are smoldering slow and low, like a whisper in a canvas camp tent, like a promise made to the dead. Unlike the 2008 blaze, the flames were not what first drew attention to the soon-named Lateral West fire, but the smoke, thick and dark, billowing in thick tendrils into a night sky. A pilot noticed and alerts the Parks Service, who deploy crews early the next morning.

On their own, peat fires are difficult to extinguish, but do not often pose immediate, mortal threats. They fester just below ground levels for days, months--even decades, in the case of a several infamous mine fires. Peat often catches fire instead of its covering soil because of its high carbon content, making it more flammable than its less organic surface vegetation; this results in fires that both burn for longer periods of time and with much less noticeably to those monitoring the ground level for warning signs.

I'm 13 years old and the following articles of clothing have ended up strewn around my room in the past fifteen minutes: three pairs of underwear; four camisoles; one uniform polo shirt; nine different socks--all unmatching. Once, when I was in elementary school, I read two stories: one about a girl who died because a man soaked her clothes in embalming fluid, which then absorbed into her skin when she perspired, and another about someone who got pregnant, then died, from a man ejaculating into her panties before she wore them. Against all rationality,

these stories seemed true: something bad gets inside and lurks, preys, waits, and then attacks all because I was not watching the for the right ways to notice it. Despite not understanding the medical fact and mythos surrounding either of these tales, something deep in my stomach, churning with bile, tells me these are the ways I will die.

To make sure none of these insidious something--embalming fluid, antibodies of AIDS, nameless but fatal contaminant I've conjured--get inside, I have developed a daily ritual. First, I select my ideal choice for what I want to wear that day and the piece of clothing rest against my skin. Then, I wait to see if I can detect its level of contamination--whether it has touched this skin since last being washed, whether it has touched the floor, whether it has been touched by the person I'm convinced breaks into my room every day when I'm at school to pour embalming fluid or semen on my clothes. More often than not, I confirm that one of these things has happened, leading to the garment feeling off--like every inch of me is being poked all at once, a sensation which lingers long after this rite has ceased. Then, the contaminated clothing is relegated to the mound on my floor that has become an untouchable altar where it will lie until cleansed in the laundry once more.

I repeat this cycle until everything feels right, except nothing ever does. Every pair of underwear feels like a second layer of crawling flesh over a stretch of too-tight skin, every shirt now hands hovering menacingly over my shoulder. I look at the pile and the mirror and the clock and my sweating neck and realize I'll breathe heavy all day. I will cross and uncross my fingers hundreds of times and be sure to wash my hands with three pumps of soap after touching anything that doesn't belong to me. I will mess this up, as each iteration is a new offering as opposed to a repetition, and then I will wait for the inevitable stopping of my heart, blackening

of my vision, end of my thoughts. Only the inevitable never arrives, and instead I sit in my bed at night, eyes closed and hands clasped over ears, sinking into a muffled and darkened void--floating, senseless.

When I get older, I will learn that there is a reason for these rituals and terror: this is essentially a textbook example of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, a cognitive misfire in which an individual experiences intrusive, cyclical thoughts (obsessions) which are then warded off or appeased by actions or rituals (compulsions). For now, this is the breathing of the man who haunts my closet, the tightening and solidification of my arteries, the absolute and eternal promise that something is about to happen.

We sat around Smith's kitchen table, talking with her husband about his newly renovated mancave now that their last child is out of the house. Smith took it upon herself to throw a party for us graduating seniors of the forensics team, complete with snacks, homemade cake, and a gift package of college essentials--laundry bags, detergent, and dryer sheets--for each of us. We spent the afternoon reminiscing over the past season, the last four years, the time we were almost late to a competition because we felt the need to dance on the side of 64, last year's trip to Omaha when we tried to convince her to let us go cowtipping, the upcoming trip to Nationals in D.C.

An edge of finality rang around the balmy May evening, as nostalgia makes it seem to most things that happen in things like senior year of high school, and our conversation stuck on the maudlin business of wondering when we'd all be reunited. We promised to come back and visit during breaks (a promise I generally kept). Smith, in turn, promised to take me out for

drinks three years later on my 21st birthday, regaling me in a low, sly voice with stories of her daughters' friends escapades on the same occasion.

That afternoon also marked one of the alleged days of the Rapture, and at one point, my friend runs into the street to scream about Jesus' rudeness in trying to pull him into the sky. Smith shakes her head and begs Him to just take him already, her words hollowed with amusement as the rest of us play a game of manhunt, hiding among yardside bushes, fallen branches, a broken shed--avoiding each others' hands and the waning sunlight with ineloquent pivots from ankles and darting words in conversation.

It is important to note that the Wildlife Service's policy is to conduct controlled burns regardless of the presence or absence of fires the previous season, instead seeing the disasters triggered by a single stroke of lightning or a shorted-out logging equipment as an inescapable certainty.

While South One was the longest burning, the 2011 fire caused more damage--and more smoke.

When asked to give interesting facts about myself, I often mention that I live in the liminal space between Virginian suburbia and the Swamp. If you were to go on Google Earth, you could see the neatly delineated plan of my neighborhood--a housing development of mostly concentric circles surrounded by logically gridded streets--next to a few miles of sparsely populated farmland, a small flyover before the impenetrable miles of swampland. This space between seems both impossible and necessary; it is the barrier between the ancient hum and snap

of the marshlands and the soft buzz of this sequestered corner of late-90s socioeconomic comfort. It's a barricade between the Virginia that was--a land before Virginia, a land then of more blood than tobacco, and then an unbearable oasis as a stop on the Underground Railroad in the state's remaining racist wasteland--and the Virginia that is--boxes of history condensed to several miles of historical sites, cigarettes that are cheaper just over the border with North Carolina (and indeed, they are sold on that side of the store at the Border Station), the state's last operating chapter of the KKK just miles out from the Swamp's protective boundaries.

The Swamp, while preserved, remains an other. And yet, during the Lateral West fire, the land reminded the people, like me, trying to desperately to ignore its hushed crackling of itself.

An acrid smell began to leak in through the cracked window in my bedroom. I went downstairs to find my mother smoking--not unusual--and heard her mutter a comment about the fire, going on for a few weeks now. I walk onto the front steps and see the rolling clouds of smoke billowing down the street, disseminating through my yard, and the yards next to and behind and in front of mine, the minivans and college mailbox flags fading into a dense, pungent haze.

In July before my freshman year of college, my parents and brother spent two days at GMU for his orientation, leaving my home alone with my aunt. They were gone for about 24 hours, and my chest has been aching since a few hours after they left. An echo in the back of my mind recalls the more common symptoms of a heart attack: being unusually sweaty; soreness in the left arm, back, neck, chest. and jaw; shortness of breath; feeling pressure as if needing to belch but being unable to do so; a sense of impending doom or anxiety. Although a separate,

quieter echo tells me that these are also the symptoms of anxiety, the first one wins. I spend the next 24 hours in which I'm essentially free to do as I please sitting in my bed, reading Catch-22 and ruminating on how quickly I would drop dead from the heart attack I'd been having for nearly a day.

This is typical of a pattern I've developed; I exist in neither the world or the living nor the world of the dead, instead running constantly toward either boundary only to return suddenly when either comes too clearly into focus.

I end up in an emergency room for alleged heart problems, only to be released with a clean bill of health hours, innumerable bruises from IVs, and several hundred dollars in formality bills later. When I journal about the incident two days later, I will write that I knew all along it was nothing, but could never be too sure.

Smith's funeral was the first Saturday after fall classes started, one week exactly after her passing. I left for home that Friday afternoon, opting to take the long way down Route 17. The trees were just starting to turn, and the sun sank low and slow, leaving me with a melancholy warmth like the deep harmonious chords of an old bluegrass song. I had driven this road up just a week before, in a new-to-me car, and I had tested the speed limit, then broke it, with each cresting hill. On that drive, I listened to Fall Out Boy; on this one, I listened to The Weepies, an ethereal refrain of "thought of you and where you'd gone; let the world spin madly on" echoing and booming in the suddenly too-small space of my car. I pumped the gas, I drove down a hill, I challenged the narrowing treeline as I feel the first tears stream down my face. I got pulled over; I was handed a reckless driving ticket.

Nor for grief for Smith, but out of fear of my mother's reaction to the ticket, I cried incessantly for the next 24 hours. I sobbed into the steering wheel, shaking unrelentingly for the rest of the three hour drive. My mother looked at me pityingly when I finally arrived home, long after dusk, and we barely spoke before I rushed up to my room. I can't stop worrying and crying the whole next day--into the bosom of an AP English teacher who taught lessons on the importance of stoicism, next to the steel gaze of a younger teammate during the inurnment, on the drive home as Springsteen croons "I'm On Fire" on three different crinkling radio stations. I deserved to be concerned over the ticket because I did something to earn it; I had done absolutely nothing to deserve the release of acknowledging my grief over Smith.

Because of the lack of carbon and the slow, relatively cool smolder of peat fires, they rarely break through effectively to the surface. When they do, the overlying soil and vegetation is so moist that it does not easily ignite. The only evidence of their livelihood manifests as the occasional puff of smoke, the mushy warmth of the ground, and the parched blackness of the surface. Outside of the moment of ignition, the heat of a swamp fire hollows out the Swamp's guts while egrets mill in the marshes above, both digging, both searching. The structure of the Swamp's fires negotiate the liminal, are enlivened only when the subterranean and the observable connect with the exactly correct conditions of dryness and momentum. Their real danger comes when the ground collapses due to the hollows of burnt out earth left when the peat is finally burnt up.

I first met Smith when I enrolled in her World History 1 class my freshman year of high school. An overachiever then, I spent hours and hours doing vocabulary assignments that should have taken at most fifteen minutes. A few weeks into the semester, she kneels next to my desk, breath heavy with stale coffee, and grips my arm with a warm palm.

“You don’t have to do this much work, kid; you know that right?” She looked me in the eyes as she said it, walking back to the front of the room to begin a lecture on permafrost and its advantages to the Russian empires throughout history.

It’s the first week of college and I don’t sleep anymore for fear that I will never wake up. The Lateral West burns near home, and a hurricane approaches the entire eastern half of the state. I don’t think about these things now; I think about the feeling of a pulse stopping, the minor hiccups in heart rate that must signal the beginning of the end. I tap the wood of the closet behind my head three, six, nine, twelve times, then three more rounds over. I think about a boy I read about whose muscles turned to bone without warning. I think about bodies who enter autopsies to be suddenly full of tumors. I think about dropped defenses. I try to tell myself that if I can be awake at the exact moment before the end of my life, I will be able to stop it, to make it bow to me, to go on my own terms.

Instead of sleeping, I lie in bed and repeat what I would want my last thought to be. It changes every night, and I rarely remember it come morning, but the idea of the constant struggle and shift appeals to me. Tonight, the thought is that simply that I will go on my own terms. Last night’s was that I could always know what was coming, so that when someone spoke of my death, I could ghostly echo with an I told you so.

I've come to realize that this lies at the heart of all my fears--a sense of control and authority, and a deep terror at losing that. There's no way that my knowing the way and time of my death would stop it, nor would some ethereal version of myself appear to clarify that I tried my best when someone spoke of my eventual demise in later days. And yet I give agency to what my efforts send out into the universe, that the Big Something that dictates when my hands have been washed enough times or when the mound is tall enough for me to be clothed will also be able to see the time I spent worrying over death stealing me in the night, and upon seeing it, give some of that time back. I don't know what this Big Something is--I used to think it was God, then karma, and now I wonder if it's something in me, or of me. I wonder if this is something I want. Fires need fuel. Stress sustains itself.

I sent Smith a text once, I think, or I typed it and forgot, or I typed it and refused to send it. In casual remembering, I chalk this negligence up to my tendency to procrastinate, and friends shake their head with demure mixes of amusement and concern over my laziness. A lot of my avoidance did stem from a place of laziness and forgetfulness--I was in the midst of the busiest semester of my first half of undergrad and I have a problem for getting caught up in the moment--but more than that, and regarding more than that one text, it stemmed from a place of deeply rooted fear and an obsessive need to counteract that fear. As much as I worried about my own impending death, I more frequently agonized over the hypothetical deaths of my loved ones. If father wasn't answering phone calls or my brother was late coming home from basketball, I would start mentally writing their eulogies, imagining what I would do for the first week following their absence, vividly conjuring the way I would talk about the loss with my mother.

On some level I truly believed they were dead; but, deeper, I thought that if I put enough faith, enough energy, enough of an emotional offering into these imaginings, the universe-designed need for their loss would be fulfilled. So much of my mentality was dictated by a need to earn and control and preemptively destroy anything that would destroy me that I believed death was something the universe would let me bargain. I thought that if I burnt enough of the underbrush, if I so viscerally believed someone to be disappeared, if I kept putting off contacting Smith while still intending to do so eventually, some vibration would get sent out into the universe and I would continually buy more time, my guilt the appropriate payment until I was finally able to see her.

I don't remember if I composed a text at all, but if I did send it, I never received a reply, and I'm not sure if I ever would have wanted to.

The lore is that the only way to extinguish a swamp fire is with rain; some say the only reason Virginia was ever destined to get hurricanes was to make sure rain would come to the bogs. Three weeks into the 2011 fire, a warning was issued that tropical storm, then hurricane, Irene was forecast to make landfall over the weekend. As thousands along the Norfolk and Virginia Beach coastlines braced or evacuated, those inland in the smoky lungs of the fire held their breath close, whispered hush incantations to God, and the ocean, and the local weather man. A rumor circulated that a group of distant First Nation descendents suggested a city wide rain dance. The rain came in inches, feet, but still the Lateral West persisted.

It's winter break of my senior year of college, the night before I'm set to return for my final semester; all my friends are with family, or in the islands, or still at school, and I pass the time exploring the lost pockets of my childhood bedroom. I find a contract a friend and I made about Girl Scout cookie sales in third grade, a photo album of postcards I'd meant to send to PostSecret in 2010. I pile these next to the jewelry box Smith gave me as a sponsor's gift in my Confirmation. I burrow further in my packed drawers and I unearth my senior year forensics binder. Aside from my pieces from that season, it contained the following: an envelope from Chinese New Year my senior year of high school; a GMU Forensics bumper sticker; a Nationals program in which every single team member's name is misspelled; a schematic for the 2011 Grand National tournament; and a notecard for a religion exam on buddhism. Beneath the binder was a crumpled half-sheet of paper, the last page of my freshman poetry competition piece, Taylor Mali's "Undivided Attention." At the top corner, Smith had written "End/w this" in an urgent script.

Lateral West would go on to burn well into the controlled burning season in November, a type of unprescribed fire destroying marshland and underbrush alike, eliminating that which would prevent its descendents while fueling itself. All in all, Lateral West blazed for 111 days, destroying over 6000 acres and causing nearly \$12 million in damage. The smoke spilled as far as Anapolis until the holidays, and while the ground did not collapse, there are still whispers in communities close to the Swamp that the peat is still smoldering nearly four years after the external flames were extinguished.

It's been a year and a half since her passing, and nearly three years since I've seen her, and I still have not visited Smith's grave, although several of us had tried to make plans to do so. When we first heard of her death, we wanted to get together and drink her favorite red wine and leave the bottles under her name, but, as in the months of her illness, we could never find the time. I cross myself whenever I drive by her neighborhood as a sort of penance, an apology, a promise of doing better soon, which I have as of yet left unfulfilled.

I keep the funeral mass card in my wallet; over time, the wings of the angel on the front have begun to fray, appearing as undefinable masses of white moving towards her death date on the other side.

There is something to be said here about resonance, about authority, about guilt, about earning it--whatever it is. A few weeks before finding the binder, another mentor of mine passed--unexpectedly to me, for though I knew her cancer was back, I had once again failed to keep in touch. Nearly two years earlier, when Smith was in the early stages of her illness and I was in the early stages of my college writing, I sat in this poetry professor's office beneath framed pictures of birds and daguerreotypes of the dead and bounced off ideas for poems. I mentioned my obsession with the stars, my interest in unexpected speakers, the way the Dismal Swamp burns every year but how, a year ago, it went out of control. Her drawl thickens, her eyes brighten, and she urges me to pick the latter. I respond that I had also been fascinated by a scene from the previous weekend: I'm riding on a background outside of Amelia, Virginia, when we pass by what appears to be an old family graveyard. Every tombstone is sunken or broken, except for one near the exact center, stark and defiant against the February dusk, name

unreadable, ground cavernous beneath--a visual, undeniable reminder of the singular finality of humanity in nature. She told me to stick with the Swamp.

I didn't quite understand it then--and very well may not now--but there is a commanding slowness here, the way peat smolders for years after the fires have gone out--although I have not been back to check myself, a part of me believes that there is still a fire in the buried heart of the Swamp. But, I think this poet meant something more. The importance of prevention, of prescribed fire, is not in its presence, but in its effects--what comes during the fire beyond the flame: the way it burns the ground before it can be hollowed, the way the smoke over the course of months and lingers in hair and fingernails and long-stored heirloom quilts, the way that primal fog seeps into suburban yards, the way that it, too--even in prevention--is inescapable.