

Mother Nation

Tom Gogola

The following is the prologue to Gogola's debut novel Mother Nation, out in 2018 from Stormy Day Books. Journalist and musician Gogola lived and worked in New Haven for a number of years and now does so in northern California.

I

Reporter's Notebook: Mother's Day, 2018

I just went through the indictment and before I call my lawyer and turn myself in, I've been advised by the Media Congress that I should try to capitalize on the experience, get a jump on the next crisis. My civic duty, they say. Now I smell smoke and a local crisis brewing. Check it out, commanded the Media Congress. I've been promised a new identity if I agree to position myself as the latest iteration of whatever they need. I'm indicted, I'm inducted, so let's get on with the fiery beheadings already.

The undersub head-hunters say I'm uniquely qualified for the job, and yet the *Mother Nation* editors wouldn't respond even to my most hostile, taunting emails. I delivered the pitch of pitches to set the record straight about the faked D-Day landings and it's funny how that part of the story never made it into the indictment, though who knows, maybe it did. The indictment is *heavily* redacted.

Next on my reading list is *Righteous Rules for Alt-Radicals*, the best-seller from the book division at *Mother Nation*, whose editors have now been elevated to positions of high power in the Media Congress. The un-redacted version is fertilized with nitrogen. Don't ask me how I smuggled it in here. I'll only cop to Brock handing it to me over blackmail coffee before I was arrested, which is where you sit in a diner and make caffeinated threats to a fellow broke-beak reporter to get in line, or else—"This is embargoed until I say it isn't"—and then dime-drop him for felony possession of classified

demonologies, as applied to technology. I'm talking of course about the Honor Tax app created by my late father, Randy Mehrmann.

This investigation is also redacted at various points, given my easily traced location in the political culture and the demands and exigencies of a Freedom From Information Request. On that note, and at the insistence of the Media Congress, there are three words that you will not read in the pages that follow. Their presence is indicated by a Trigger Censor Redaction notification. The redactions are applied to underscore the surrounding vulgarity that is not subject to review by the Media Congress. For clarity's sake, the Media Congress has given me a one-time exception to utter the unforgivable words. Now the press release says jailbird pancakes will be deployed as gas masks before this is all over, and that I'll have to answer for my grammatical elisions. Prison will do this to a man. Or, to a man. Prison will do this—to a man.

You buried the lead, the editors always said that when I filed my story.

I buried my source, I muttered so they couldn't hear.

I'm trying to stay grounded in facts and this one's true I swear, this story, it is true. I'm not going to tell it right away because of the lawyers, but bear with me, please. It was the mid-summer Mardi Gras and an African-American chef in New Orleans told it to me a few years ago, going on several. I conspired to make his story my own and after the *Mother Nation* betrayals, set out to write a pitch for *Armed & Liberal* that was bulletproof insofar as the facts. I would go blackface again *if* they accepted the pitch, to try and keep up with Brock as we groped our white way through the identity trenches. I gave them what they wanted to hear, I thought. But the timing.

The timing was all wrong, and the editors recoiled at the abrasive frankness of my pitch. I swear it was the pills talking, as mingled with the ghost of Al Jolson, why couldn't they see that? And accept it, too? We white guys, it's our job to go out there and tear flesh apart for no reason. We are born to disrupt.

The crisis moment passed again. I failed to keep up in my media career, and the politics blew past me. Black lives had ceased to matter, just as I had the online degree which upgraded my expertise in John Brown throat-clearing. Now the magazines and thought leaders wanted long-read stories about white lives, and how they matter too—and perhaps more. “Pitch us again, though,” the editors cooed icily through underpaid intermediaries with offshore paychecks. I accepted the routinized blow-off yet unlike Brock, struggled to embrace the gross totalism of our times and watched *Mother Nation* feign resistance, on the editorial pages of a glistening tablet—and with a close eye on the market. Brock was right there on the Johnny scene with the Brown to Birch switch-out. He pounced as *Mother Nation* embraced new priorities in the pivot to a government by, of and for the media. Nobody could editorialize like Brock when it came to the advent of legislation as spectacle. I admit he was master at the under-sub racket, his disruption via transition, as the lies circled the globe and returned to Washington long before the truth got out.

I figured the sturdy and patriotic folks at *Armed & Liberal* would accept my pitch, but they turned me in and accused me of being an incel insider, rabid dog variety. I couldn’t deny it. I had the rejection letters that rationalized murder, I had created a cloud of collateral self-destruction to mask the larger task at hand. There were pills everywhere to stimulate the vengeance. I regrouped and resisted, despite the financial risks as a middle-aged white man defying his historical moment.

I pitched the story again, this time to the mirror of the Fresnel-lens philosophies, the steam-punk throwback lens whose politics were up for grabs but racially motivated. I reframed the storyline into the inevitable parable about my victimization at the hands of the media, and in particular *Mother Nation*. I stood at the window and sketched a pop-up performance piece about the encounter with the man with the karma tale into the camera, rendered it bloody and feral and solo-webcam style, complete with the Jungian dance moves. I need to jump

the shadow if I'm going to get a jump on the next crisis, or an advance on the story of my final dissolution into a politics of rolling betrayals. Fragments of memory. A falsified trip to the foreign land.

But the story *he* told, not *me* told, began in a strip club and so I did my part to honor the women, the girlfriends in the story, the dancers. TMI-TV was interested, but only on spec, as I rifled through the buried stash of undersub gear in the bureau, selected some choice garments, changed into them and stood in the kitchen in a gold-flecked micro thong, riffing pseudo vagina, the tucked-in style, and swinging a bottle of indecent red. I painted my toenails orange and told the story from the strippers' perspective. I attached the metal clamps to various appendages and adjusted the clamps for maximal discomforting pleasure as I attached the leads to the car battery, and adjusted my tie. The sudden one-frame appearance of a BB-gun AR-15 was the necessary plot twist. I rolled film and offered a pay-per-view option of suicide by cop.

Why are you telling us this, the *Mother Nation* editors demanded, with memos to the authorities as cc'd attachments. I ignored their questions and renewed my subscription to the magic bolus theory of resistance self-immolation, a miracle of colliding disasters and impulses. Who can deny the ecstatic moment when a desperate fifty-year-old white man shoots up while shooting home pornography, of by and for the Media Congress masses, and then blows his brains out.

I'm telling you this because I have complex feelings about my old friend Brock and respect that he found a way to exploit the libertine fascism that made him at once hilarious, brilliant, and excruciating. His extremes collided like many jolly galaxies and it took a president like Orange Sunshine for his value to our Republic to be fully revealed. And it's because of him that for most of my life I appropriated stories and lives for a living, suckled at adaptability and considered the contours of *resilience*, which has emerged as a new national buzzword. I resent it.

To set the record straight, I fell into a trance-act webcam show

which came to bring this story into light. The sheer clandestine fabrics made their way to my barren flesh which twitched at the near-memory of a politically charged touch. Patriotic ranks of the involuntary celibate, those incels, crept up to the windowsill, voyeurs in the night who offered support. The clamps bit harder and blood squirted from my you know where. A slow-cooker turned the corner with the chicken in the kitchen, a hissing of steam, and I tightened the tie.

I gave the nips a quick car-battery shock, yet they rebelled at the jocosity of my delivery. I ripped off the clamps. *I'll show you.* All their lives they had been victimized by sexual violence, the girls—not my clamped-down nipples, who had issues of their own—and I made sure the crime they participated in was seen in that light. The after-action report says the clamps were redeployed to the nether districts. I knew right then that there was no way this story ended without bloodshed or a meeting with Human Resources.

But I'm resilient. I set out to represent the point of view of the boyfriends as described by the black chef. Those men were possessed of wisdom and fatalism and street genius. Those were men desperate but not groveling for empathy purchase in the hot urban environment where so many in the culture were inured to the violence—who yet embraced patriotic volatility coming through the projects and the nasty nabes. I changed costumes, sweat-suits and faux gold teeth, Saints football regalia around the neck, beaded stuff to go with the red tie, and for authenticity's sake, gave myself a grease-paint applique of the blackface, despite the risk of various thin-skinned diseases. My insurance should cover it, I thought. *You can dish it but you can't take it*, and the stewing chicken agreed. The camera rolled and I told the story again. The boyfriends were rough and ugly-beautiful, they had cruel mommies and hard-case daddies, and the through-line was how to beat poverty by any means necessary. *Roll a bitch.*

I motioned in the direction of antic disregard for consequence, and grabbed the bowie knife from the kitchen rack as I prepared to tell the tale as told from the perspective of its teller, who had a wild if

unrelated scar circumnavigating his scalp, to go along with his parable.

I clutched the bowie knife and cut a long, arcing moon across and around my forehead to about where my upper ears started. The blood dripped down, burned my eyes and mingled with the *coq au vin* vapors burbling off the slow-cooker.

I'll let the chef himself tell it in a minute, his is the only version that matters, but my profession requires that I represent all sides, lest I be accused of harboring a bias, let alone a Syrian refugee or, God forbid, a Mexican one. I opened the icebox and unwrapped an ancho-rubbed pork loin from its butcher paper and then changed into all-white attire to denote a spiritual shift from an esoteric metaphysics of American syncretism, into Yoruba Fundamentalism and its transactional spell-cast dogmas. I present a roiling goddess, Yemaya, who can be quite unforgiving at times. The veil was thin, the *mis en scene* was holding steady, and the establishing shots were in the can. What did I have to lose?

In the final act I guzzled a second bottle of the red decadence, and postured for the cameras as a sort of ferally incomplete metro-sexual stumble-bum in electrified nipples clamps and tight bondage home-wear, tweaked with meat slather—and the re-deployment of the clamps, a particular style. I filmed it all and got on the phone with who knows who to share the news of total artistic emancipation, and set the camera on auto-fellate.

I rejoiced with the broiler raging at an engorged pork loin, I dipped into the simmering on the stovetop slow cooker as counterpoint while I fed reams of Honor Tax documents into the stew. Nearby, a ripe pineapple was chewed to its reptile husk, fruit-yellow drops flecked with blood as I played the sticky crime victim in the tale. Dead flies on the sill. I dreamed a final reckoning with online infamy.

I woke into a sun coming through the big window and lay on the cold kitchen tiles in a pool of blood and *coq au vin* vomit splatter, broken glass everywhere and a message blinked on the machine. I ignored the blinks but reviewed the footage with an eye toward poten-

tial virality, a monetized and fully immersed journalism of national exhibitionism, a poetry of investigative intent met with the clarity of absolution in dissolution. Would you rather die hugging a tree or humping a stump? It's an open question, needs answers. Nude reporters in clothing-optional last resorts, county style, trading info and hand-jobs on the Arm.

I watched and despaired that the various versions of the story did not match up in the plot-line convenience I had cultivated in the recapitulation. The stories were wildly at odds. The strippers lied about their complicity in the theft and said *I never seen this motherfucker*, the boyfriends exaggerated the bounty in his pockets, the splayed victim denied he had a drinking problem in the first place and this was a total aberration. I deleted my version of the chef's story as told from his perspective, too graphic.

I was aware that my efforts were undertaken at risk of Media Congress damnation. I was firstly concerned about the potential for scandal insofar as the tone and inflection of the color commentary, the headline fervor and reaction. Can't worry about it. I took a breath and stepped away from generalized immediacy, and grabbed another manila folder fat with old papers and dumped the rest of the Honor Tax documents into the slow-cooker.

I had thumb-painted a bloody reminder above the couch the night before, signaling the final tweet: *First thought worst thought*. Now I listened to the morning news drone, public radio human-interest features whose birdsong sings a sponsor-pleasing doom. And here I was, making news. I didn't mind rolling blackface around the house, it was kind of fun, a closet-case blues cracker who pined for dreadlock acceptance. The key is to appreciate that there is no single-word antonym to dreadlock in the English language, and rejoice in the knowledge.

By late morning I had cleared up the mess and changed the station. The federal marine-weather station spit out a repeat performance of its own. It cycled through the regional forecasts in a metallic tone that soothed the California angst, now a hopeless home-

grown empire of dope-out policy advances headed straight off the final electric cliff, but not before a few Governor Brownouts or Uncle Jerry Brownshirts have their say. Who will it be?

I'm on the story, I'm in it
Sunday is weather-strong
With the variable whip of the wind

I walked to the cliff and God spoke to me in the voice of Mel Brooks. In 2015, the Honor Tax spread on Brooks was 417-1 for him to wind up as the last living veteran of World War II. Those were good odds but they've changed, drastically, thanks to the president's Calcutta initiative. In life as in dive bars, *The odds are good, but the goods are odd.*

I crawled off the cliff and headed home, where the marine radio is steady with news of a *dominant* swell, the auto-voice is clear and direct and a little playful in the top-end intonation and there are life-threatening long-shore currents, watch out. Gusts of up to twenty and with a *dominant* swell of a whole bunch of them. Gusts of ten. South by southwest at six with gusts to eleven. Synopsis. The inflection. The submission. Gusto. The weatherman says the wind is blowing and when he says it's *pleasant*, he's pleasant-toned. He's *dominant* and a bit louder when he says *dominant*. At least they haven't canceled this federal agency, yet, or that program, yet, even as the Great Leader tweets his preference and the agency scrambles to configure an acceptable weather sensibility.

Gusts of forty. Too much.

I should get back East but for that impenetrable heat dome which has put our middle-gut farm belt on high-red alert. Now come the hot gun mamas threatening to *fisk* the four-eyed editors back East, who are my general tribe or used to be until the *Mother Nation* betrayals. Celebrity sniper Demi Unmoored is on the cable news tube with the taunting rifle commentary, she's a crisis actor in coal-

black eyes and hair, waging American cold war on kids who just got shot up in a socialist public school. Ollie Oops to the rescue, North by Death and nobody's doing the contra dance anymore.

I'm working a few angles here, I told one editor, whatever your disaster, I'll be ready to report it.

The sky rained shredded documents and frittered through-lines, sent in response to a Freedom From Information Request and I scooped them up, into the pot. Let it reign. I did not tell the editors that I came out here to escape the last lash. I saw it coming. I set out to ride eccentric margins, but now I was narrowed to bare escapism and the walls were closing in from a bipartisan Media Congress committee of extremist agreement. The documents float pleasantly, menacingly, from the cloud, half-burned. They contain a serialized warning letter from Albert Einstein.

I heard a story once, almost forgot it. My compulsion to forget is met with an obsession with vengeance, which is why I skip a beat now and again in the blackout season, and especially with Brock's rise in the Media Executive trenches. I'd get back East and check in at the Rod Locker but I can't account for several years of jangled misanthropy, so that's a risky move for the moment. The nascent Free-Push Alliance has accused me of murder and I had to agree. The drugs were prescribed to me, I swear they were. Me and my drugs. What could I do but take them.

The point of the story is that not everyone gets the warning from on high, or wherever.

I'm getting to it now.

He was in a strip club in the French Quarter and got to talking with a couple of the dancers and their boyfriends. It was the 1990s and the chef was then on the cusp of a life of crime, a young man met with local opportunity, the familiar rituals. His story makes me want to read a poem. Don't be alarmed, there are a few of them sprinkled throughout this report.

We have formally closed ranks
with middle passengers
woke to the scam

He'd join the ranks
commit alacrity crimes
until reparations

Who stood and wondered
got mean in the prison pipeline
All ya'll think I'm a criminal anyway

Finally!

"After the club closed we were walking through the Quarter and we came on this guy, this guy who was passed out cold in front of a building, in the alcove, he was just laid straight out like that, cold. Them dancers and their boyfriends looked at each other, I was like watching them, I just met them and they were like, 'Should we do this?' And they looked at each other shrugged and said, 'Yeah let's do this.'"

He paused and shrugged and looked down at the curb and back up with a quick snap of a laugh.

"So they proceeded to roll the guy, I watched them right there, and they got his wallet, and it had a bunch of cards in it, credit cards, and they grabbed them, the wallet, and there was some cash too and they were saying look, we got to get to the K-Mart across the Lake, how we gonna do that they said, get across the Lake?

"And I said, I have a car. You know man I was getting in with them. 'Cool,' they said, 'let's go get your car.' And so we started walking, we walked to my car, it was a couple blocks away and I, when we got to the spot where I'd parked it, the car . . ." He started to laugh. And paused.

The journalist pokes Frank about it. The walk which traversed the slave walk alleys, slow chains clank a misery beat up the jagged

cobbles, the constancy of a low and wretched moan. The New Orleans music is sacrament offered to drown and baptize ghost wails from slave corners of Esplanade Avenue. The voices are everywhere but you need the ear for them above the melodic blare and punishing thump of the brass band where every member has been shot at least once. The inheritance isn't negotiable and the penance is to listen at long length. A Mother Of All Nations is democratic in the middle-class passage, a striver's POV. Frank scoffed. They have cheated your sons and daughters of their franchise and sent them to jail. "I ain't talking about no McDonald's franchise neither," Frank said. "The fine print. Read the damn fine print!"

I tuned back in as the pause broke.

"We got to the place where the car was, where I'd parked it."

The chef stopped again, and laughed again and shook his head again.

"It was *gone*, the car was *gone*. Do you hear me man? 'Where's the car?' the strippers were yelling at me, and I'm like the car is *stolen*, there was no car, just an empty space where my car was supposed to be—," he said, grasping empty space.

"And you know what man? *I never even thought* about committing another crime, ever again. And after that, I mean it didn't happen right away, but I cooked, went on to travel, lived all over, cooked around the world, came back to New Orleans this year. Lived in Germany and cooked the hell out of Berlin. I loved it there—never even thought about committing a crime ever *again!*"

II

That's some story, no?

But wait a minute. Germany?—whose far-right return engagement is upon us as the last living veterans of WWII are counted up, rounded up, feted and disgraced? And glorified! And, perhaps, exaggerated.

The Great Leader takes his place at the podium.

Let the Honor Tax pass through the Media Congress without delay as we reform it to our new Calcutta America!

I tried to mainstream my opposition but came home from work one night and storm channels blared pornographies of grief and destruction. Given my high government position, total transparency is the ticket and so I have another urgent confession to make. I used to think as a pre-teen that France was the kinkiest country in the world. There was always this French implication of black leather and mass-cultural aloof sexuality that was dirty and intimidating, and possibly anal. Even as a proud descendant of Krauts, I had no idea until I was older that the Germans were much freakier than the French going in, where Aryan blitzkrieg perverts run amok with dildo tariffs these days, but let's forgive and forget if we can, for the sake of the veterans.

Nowadays, scarcity maniacs with maximum prejudice rejoice in their bully electorate, ride the *neo* into neo-nationalism. Neo-libtardism. Neo-Nosferatuism. Stick a *neo* on it and emphasize the phantom-limb pains, Frank. And Frank had to agree. Where the removal of extremities is viewed in some circuses as a measure of decency. For example: a thumb. Where I grew up, they sometimes fell off.

That reminds me. On a related front, here's another true story: I was sixteen when I went to the Navy recruiter. I went there to sign up, it was war. On the home front, my father was absent and my mother was nation. I didn't drive. One of the younger recruiters came and picked me up in the late morning and brought me to the office in Patchogue. It was the summer of 1984 and Orwell was my senior year project, and remains so. At the recruiter's office you could smell the nearby and perhaps adjacent pizzeria, especially on a hot day. This was a scorcher. I asked about a letter I'd gotten from the colonel. The recruiters were having a slow one.

I took out the letter and unfolded it and spread it like it a splashy executive order, for the cameras. Very deliberate performance, what about *this*. Back then I delivered the *New York Daily News*, and sometimes you'd read about this pouty-lip real estate developer from New York City with a Russian wife who rolled with

Michael Corleone— sorry, Roy Cohen—sorry again, Roy Cohn, the great and notorious closet-case killer of communists with those deeply soulful, hateful blue eyes. I also hated the communists, because my mother was dead and I had the letter in my hand which proved it. Back then I couldn't square up the Russian contradiction when it came to pouty-lip. Now it all makes sense, thanks, grudgingly, to Brock.

The recruiter paid the letter little mind as he gave the presentation and bellowed down at the form before us, "Just sign right *here*, son, and you'll be in the United States Navy!" Did I mention that the Navy had sent me a letter after I took the military proficiency test that said they would pay for college and I could wind up in an atomic submarine, I'd qualified for a six-year commitment?

I took out the letter and fondled it nervously. They said, just sign right *here*, son, and you'll be in the United States Navy!

For the last time: I brought the letter to the recruiter and asked, What about this letter? They said, Just *sign right here*, son, and you'll be in the Mother Of All Navies.

There were three of them on a slow day and they seemed a little fat to me, pushy, tight in their uniforms, and they ganged up on me. Wonder how you wind up sitting in a recruiter's office on a hot summer day in Patchogue instead of on a battleship. Pepperoni vapors.

Just sign right *here*.

I smeared ketchup on my arm one time, from a fast food packet, in the mid-1970s and caused great distress to a relative who was looking after me and who later said, with knowledge (a brother had served, her father too, and her future husband): "You mess up, you're painting the deck. That's how it works, letter or no letter."

Two decades later I was working, briefly and sporadically, for a lobsterman on the East Coast. The winter was especially harsh and personally sloshy but one day we got out of the harbor, the ice had retreated and we had a hundred or so pots to pull and the hull pushed through crisp cold chop toward the fishing grounds to the north. As we skimmed across fresh whitecaps I saw the cap-

tain smirk and his brow curled when he spotted the atomic sub as it headed for Groton, which was crossing our path out there in the Block Island Sound a mile or so to the north.

The submarines create a massive wake, a tsunami roller, so be careful, and it hailed the captain on the radio as it crossed our bow and the captain sped up to meet it, mirthfully. He motored on and got closer, and then too close, as a Coast Guard cutter on the scene near Fisher's Island pinged our hull registration number from a triangulated position relative to us and the submarine. The Coasties were shrieking and I was finally the subject of a national security debate. The captain laughed and eased off on the throttle as we watched the sub cruise by and the Coasties yelled at him over the radio, "Do not approach the submarine any closer!" He eased off some more and then commented that, in his opinion, fat women always smelled like peanuts.

I was held in a clear and cold seawater closeness, finding the most uncomfortable truth and dwelling in a comfort of sick surrender. I had not signed right here son.

III

I was chasing Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Walter Lincoln on Honor Tax business, submerged in the anarchist right frontier with the subcontract from Brock's people and lost in thought as I jacked a fruit move for the undersub phalanx in a thrice-removed journalistic investigation whose corollary in the spy trenches was triple-agency. The phone rang. I turned off the blender. Undersub? Well, here is vernacular twisted from federal law enforcement slang where the "unsub" is defined as the *unknown subject*. The unsub is under the radar, killing hookers, maybe we'll figure out who he is someday. The undersub, however, is watchful of offshore accounts, perhaps of Panamanian inflection. The undersub is the unknown-unknown-unknown subject of unknown crimes committed out of patriotic necessity but whose motives are actually unknown. In the old days, a

successful undersub fruit move could see a Media Congress investigation evaporate into thin air as corrupted local lawmen are charged with the bias crime of putting the blacks in prison for the crime of, *I wouldn't put it past him.*

I thought of Lincoln, the Tarawa hero and again with the marines at Okinawa, back in his cell at San Quentin where the smoke had bled from raging fires and men screamed in the acrid, lung-piercing air, and corrections chefs deployed prison-issue pancakes as gas masks to filter the smoke. It was all they had, unless they privatized. *Frank had the quote through the school-to-prison pipeline, did you not think there was educational value? "They just plastered them fucking things on their faces and the smoke filtered through."*

I stood in the kitchen and tuned into the encroaching fires and the scorching air. Doomsayer cottage blues on the radio. A hummingbird hovered out the window. I picked up the phone to drown out the ringing in my ear. A voice in the smoking wreckage in the city burst into song, rich and crackling on the landline. *Join with the vainglorious*, she cried. *Join with the crisis-jumpers, whose life is a disaster chased with meaning!*

I jumped into the car. The three days which followed are not a blur but a moment. They reminded me of going under the knife after that time I got stabbed in the chest, the cracking compressed lost time of the surgical ribcage procedure as the anesthesia took over. Or the blank ride home on 9-11 after felling Building Seven from the Brooklyn Bridge, the unholy *bleeping* Whitmania, the blackout perils of an ill equipped all-embrace. The lesson from that day is, I never go anywhere without the duct tape.

Here again was lost time and destruction. I negotiated the secret folders at the office in town, but where a routine coffee break to the dead-drop is now up in smoke. I was told to follow the smoke to the money to the possibility of redemption.

I drove through the city outskirts to a big public park, now an evacuation muster zone. Evacuees watched the nearby burning mountain with binoculars and I bee-lined through the frumpy public

golf course over chain-link fences to the forbidden neighborhood where firefighters hurled wooden furniture off decks of threatened houses. One voice humming, “*Stay on the chord, Wayne.*”

I’m trying. I keep giving notice, why then am I still here? I resigned but they would only accept total capitulation. *You people are screwed*, I thought and marched up the melting asphalt, past houses where signs said, “Our pool got 5,000 gallons, boys. Take it! Take everything!” The fire martyrs have arrived and taken over the school boards.

No, they never caught that guy

Yes they did

No, they only found his thumb

I cut through a shaded home lot with a rocky, domelike backyard, and rode a stone seam up between homes, quick-step huffing up the hill. Sound of breath. Pounding heart. *Fascistas vierten sobre el puente*. No water. Buzzing air with bugs as deer crash through the brush and branches, desperate for a legit defilade drawdown from this terror.

I saw the flame through a thatch of trees; it arced across the ridge and I came closer and finally was right up against, and with, the fire. The wind was favorable. The fire slowly crept down the hill while the smoke frantically blew up it. A thin and menacing line of fire-life curved down into the fringe money, the houses of lesser elegance down the ridge but still a million-plus, big cash views that must be spared.

Bulldozers in action down near a threatened house provided a latent rumble of catastrophe unloosed and deeply felt. Smoke blew above and beyond the scorched earth as I basked in the ash and deliverance, expired into a consecration of flame. The order of the day is blind luck and embers in the roof vents.

I straddled the flames, spent fifteen minutes with them and filmed an account that spoke from the fire, that interviewed the fire

and asked—*What do you make of this, in your uncontrollable urge to burn? We humans who gather and pivot into your circle of fiery, impish delights?*

The flames responded: *How dare you sing and laugh and dance when there are charred people and animals, obliterated houses in the smoke-gray aftermath of chimney defiance, new memories to build, new demographics of disaster!*

Now the American people in their greatness would have *their* say, they always did:

We're fire-and-earthquake folks from the West, plus throw in the mudslides and the nearby Yellowstone super-caldera. You?

Oh, we're a mangy pack of hurricane welfare cases who fielded the double-flood victim card given the coastal urgencies in the East.

The Midwest tornado crowd chimes in, red in the face along the new American front, and psychotic calm in the vertex—What about us? We were here before all this severe-weather bullcrap.

There's nothing extreme about an all-abiding extremism, which is why climate and the weather are the same thing, as the Great Leader reminds. At the same time, those tornado hustlers sure could run a game: Give us a say, a vote, or else no one gets one.

The fires raged and the wind whipped around the hill with its slippery dry grasses and gnarled stony surprises which gave no quarter. I sang to the fire and I stood inches from the fire and I felt the cold hand. Yoruba overseers ablaze. I tore down the slope and slipped and crashed a knee but not too bad as a bright red pumper, plump with heroism, rolled up to a house, the last house before the parkland ablaze.

I limped down the greasy hill and slipped again, shook it off and hustled toward the fire uniforms as they yelled and pushed away some barbed wire at a wooden fence-line, the concerned and ticked-off firefighters.

They haven't slept in days and now this snowflake in a hardhat with a camera. No ID, just in case anyone cares enough to ask. The valley cut down to my left, the seam of stones I'd ridden up to the

flame where if it did rain, here's the sluiceway down. I took the hard route up. Now I saw the fuller picture.

The firefighters were building a controlled ring of fire. They pointed the kerosene fire-squirters at me and said, *You are one lucky boy.*

It had been a little too quiet at the frontline, a ghost moment as forces gathered, contemplated, observed. You never go out the way you go in, it's the first rule of infantry and contact journalism. At least I got that part right. The firemen with their kerosene emblazons, ready to go, glared at me.

Who is this moron, where did he come from?

A reporter. A goddamned reporter. The firemen shook their heads as they lit up the zone I'd encroached. Crazy motherfucker. A little lucky. A *reporter!* The firemen hustled me to the out-of-town cops on borrowed hand to help out in the crisis, and one of them screamed in my face:

This is where the media goes, *here*. He pointed to the television crew parked near the barricades.

Not *there*, screaming and pointing up the hill. *This* is where you belong, this is where the *reporters* go!

I walked back to the car. The emergency response was in full effect, the high bustle was on. Vietnam veteran evacuees in the motor home sprawled with coolers and the dog rugs and donated cases of water and a gas grill. They smoked tense cigarettes, slumped in their picnic chairs, already primed for tailgate retirement as everyone watched the smoke on the mountain.

The car was where I left it but there was a blank space of memory. The sheriff's deputies were waiting for me.

