

Meditations on Paranoia

It's 9:30 PM in mid-May. I decide to walk to the corner store.

It's still cold at night, so I put on my jacket. I put on my headphones as well, even though the walk is not long. I prefer the sounds of music to that of the night sky.

As I turn a corner I see a firetruck: lights flashing, parked. I smell it immediately, something smells burnt.

As I get closer I look to the apartment building on my right. There's a man on the grass talking to a man and a woman on a low balcony.

I don't know what he's saying, I presume he's talking about the fire. There's no fire here though.

I look to my left. There was an ambulance hidden behind the firetruck.

I look back to my right, still walking, slower now. I look at the next apartment building. This is where the fire is.

The door opens, I walk very slowly. I'm too curious. They're coming out, they're carrying a stretcher.

I need to know what's on that stretcher.

As the stretcher leaves the doorway I get a better look at it. Everything smells burnt.

The stretcher is empty, except for a white sheet over it. They still carry it as if it held a corpse.

Next, they push out an elderly man in a wheelchair. I look at him intently, my eyes widen.

He's burnt. His face, his skin, his everything. He has no skin. He has no clothes. All burnt away.

My pupils stretch across my skull.

The door closes behind them. There's a "Wet Paint" sign on it.

Where's the fire? I can't find the fire. I smell what's been burnt, I see what's been burnt, but there's no fire.

They pick up the elderly man from his wheelchair and help him onto the stretcher.

The man cries, but his tears burn away immediately.

The man is terrified. I've never seen someone so afraid.

I notice that I'm standing still. I don't know when I stopped walking. I'm staring at the elderly man, at the stretcher, at the "Wet Paint" sign.

They notice me. They're walking towards me.

I'm shaking. This is true fear. This is what the burnt man felt.

They're saying something to me, no, at me. I can't hear them. I still have my headphones on.

I think about who knew I was coming: just my mother. No, I'm a bystander. Wrong place, wrong time.

First, I'm hit in the gut so hard I fall to floor.

Next, I'm kicked in the head with unbelievable strength. I'm losing vision.

I scream at the top of my lungs, "Where's the fire?"

One of them reaches into my mouth, tears out my tongue.

I can't scream. I have no tongue. I'm afraid.

They walk back to the man in the stretcher.

I want to scream, "Let the burnt man go!"

How can I scream when they have my tongue?

The last thing I saw was the ambulance fading into the night sky.

What does it mean to be safe?