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Firestorm: San Diego 2007

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FIRESTORM: SAN DIEGO 2007

There is a presence in what is missing.
— Henry James

A wind-blown river of embers flows across a field, swirling, bright, a current of transformation beckoning with fingers of flame that whisper, *Come... see... touch... learn the secret of fire, the ultimate consummation.*

I've seen this before: as a child, my grandfather's farmhouse in flames; a mountain burning in San Bernardino; Vietnamese hamlets, hooches like torches in the night; and the worst: a foo-gas detonation along the concertina wire of a base camp near Phu Bai, its mixture of explosives and napalm an eight-foot-tall wall of flames thirty yards long that roared into existence between one breath and the next. Fire that captures unwilling stares with images that never fade, like floaters swimming through the vitreous humor of the eye, tiny twisted things that, with concentration, leap into fierce, exquisite detail.

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I've picked through piles of ash, seeking: here, my desk, there, my files and books, a vase, a painting, greasy smears of memory, resistant to soap or time, like some phantom limb, forever itching.

"It's just stuff," people say, "just possessions," as if walking naked through the world should be our desired state, as if all those things our clever ape brains have created—shoes and jackets, eyeglasses and hammers and tables and pans, TVs and telephones and all that paper: records of births and deaths, paintings and novels and poetry and photographs (those tiny icy leaves of time)—have nothing to do with us, as if our essential being is pure spirit, our bodies merely meat.

Whitman had it right, I think: "I sing the body electric...the body... includes and is the soul." We are flesh, the things we collect, our garments. They embody us, define us, at times enthrall us, but like our memories, the things we cherish and choose to gather around us make us who we are.

I've seen fire, felt flame. And the stinging in my eyes is from the ash of the fire, and from what was lost to the fire, and from what is always lost to the fire, and from what is always lost, and the fire.