

CAMILLE DUNGY,
"TALES FROM A BLACK GIRL ON FIRE"

THE COLORS OF NATURE

Culture, Identity, and the Natural World

Edited by
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Lauret E. Savoy

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To the voices that remember and those as yet unheard

TALES FROM A BLACK GIRL ON FIRE, OR WHY I HATE TO WALK OUTSIDE AND SEE THINGS BURNING

Camille T. Dungy

I have always loved to be outdoors. From a young age I've enjoyed hiking with a goal, or just ambling, exploring. Even sitting still in one spot can be relaxing. I've hiked alone. I've hiked with strangers. Without a care in mind, I've wandered through fields, trying my hand at identifying the plants and animals whose paths mine crossed. It never occurred to me that I would desperately fear an entire landscape, until I tried to duplicate this pleasure in an old plantation state.

The first indication of trouble was a hike I attempted along the Cumberland Gap, where Tennessee borders Virginia. Earlier that summer, while an artist in residence at Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park, I'd taken a three-to five-mile solo hike nearly daily. Still, not one mile into the Cumberland Gap trail, I was forced back by fear. The trees were so thick around me it seemed I could see nothing, and every snap and shuddering branch sounded like an assurance of approaching danger.

Perhaps I'd read too much pre-Civil War history. Why would I, with both

feet in the twenty-first century, fear dogs or malicious white men? Of course, I also read the contemporary news and so had current reasons to fear dogs and malicious white men. Still, I was bemused and somewhat shamed when I jumped at yet another squirrel, turned my back on the dense rows of pines ahead of me, and headed toward the comforts of a couch and air-conditioning.

During the years I lived in Virginia, I occupied several historical planes at once. I lived my personal experience of a community that was legally desegregated and essentially welcoming; but I also lived my mother's and grandparents' pre-civil rights era experience. I knew I was free to pass wherever I chose, but I retained the legacies of the centuries before, when liberty was not a given. I heard and saw each creaking limb and trotting hound I encountered through one lens and just as easily another. Living in that old slave state, I regularly fought my fear. How dare the past keep me huddled up inside? To resist these imagined restrictions, I worked to ignore my trepidation each time I received an invitation to join a group outside.

And so one night, I drove deep into the country. Thick-branched trees grew densely on either side of the road, absorbing all peripheral moonlight. Wind shook limbs until they waved, although I didn't recognize these gnarled and night-blackened trees. Now and then something startling broke loose and knocked hard on my rear window, my moonroof, my windshield. An acorn, of course. Maybe a pinecone. A twig. Dead ropes of kudzu dangled here and there, and all my people's horror stories worried through my head. Didn't I know better? The path illuminated in front of me seemed to lead directly to a cemetery. I could see the crosses staked throughout the lawn, the cut flowers, some newly upturned dirt. A white angel guarded the entrance, but as I approached I discovered the road turned sharply. I passed the churchyard, the church, more woods. Then, behind the big house, I saw them. Though they'd seen me first. Seven or eight revelers, beer bottles in their hands, an old-time country tune still on their tongues, were pointing in my direction. Their bright skin glowed pinkly in the light of a ten-foot fire. They'd been expecting me. Now I'd arrived. In the broader light I could see bats the bonfire had disturbed. These were their hours to consume.

I came to associate open fires with historically informed terror. Many of my new Southern white friends enjoyed hosting bonfires, but I started to decline

their gracious invitations. Though their gatherings often began with a pleasant hike and a lovely dinner outside, I could never relax on these outings. I knew the woods we walked through would reveal their malice because I was so guarded, so conditioned to fear. I knew eventually the fire would be lit and my friends' faces transformed. There had been plenty of lynching parties in this part of the country. I couldn't help wondering, while wandering through these southern woods, if one such event might have happened on the ground where I stood. I knew the acts of history could not be denied, and I had no interest in living them again, in memory or experience.

Fear limited the scope of my experience. Campfires and bonfires represented a conflation between the natural world and the human. The wood in those piles was innocent and yet acted out a role. Because I was afraid of what humans had done to other humans in those woods and on those tree-provided fires, I'd come to fear the forests and the trees.

Whenever the opportunity arose, I left that neck of the woods. I found myself spending the summer at an artist's colony in Maine. There the legacy of racial violence didn't haunt me the same way. I could hike solo again. Deer in the distance filled me with wonder, not fear. Ravens warned me off their path and I felt no sense of personal foreboding. I could spend hours hunting for wildflowers, losing myself in the dense forest, and never be afraid of whom or what might find me there. I was, again, at liberty in the wild.

After several days of such freedom outside, it began to storm. The rains lasted six days and all the residents of the colony were trapped inside. On the seventh day it cleared. After dinner, reluctant to return to the cabins we'd worked in all week, we decided on a party so we could linger outside listening to the birds, the rustling leaves, and lapping waves.

The bonfire pit, expertly dug by a sculptor, was perfectly safe. Still, I couldn't get comfortable. All the writers brought drafts to use as tinder. I torched the one about the wild iris's melancholy glister under the moon. The fire warmed all of us, even the dogs. The hound who ran the woods circled me twice before laying its head at my heels.

A painter found a log that looked like the torso of a man. It had a knot where the navel should be, a twig protruding from the juncture where the solid trunk branched in two directions. There was some banter about the facile ease with which certain artists impress human experience upon the natural

world. This was a log, we understood. Nothing but a tree trunk. Still, "Man on fire." Some of them laughed. I diverted my eyes from the limbs that reached out of the greedy flames. The hand that extended toward me, whiter than ever silhouetted by the fire, passed me some wine. Everything around the fire was still wet from the rains, so we leaned against each other, watching sparks join the stars, flying heaven knew where.

Calm down, it's safe out here. I had to repeat this to myself many times.

You've been taught not to play with fire. You've been taught to show respect. Your whole life, you've known the rules. When you live in this country, you have to know the rules. Yucca, ice plant, chaparral pea, bigcone Douglas-fir: even the plants here make provisions for hard times. There are those that hoard water, and there are those gamblers that reproduce best in scorched terrain. Don't tell me you didn't know. It's inhospitable here, dry and dangerous. A desert unless you own the water rights. Sudden Oak Death strikes and dead limbs litter the landscape. It's a tinderbox, this country. Now look what you've done. The whole family's in danger now. The whole neighborhood. Acres of wild country. All the beasts and all the birds. You had to look. You wouldn't look away. A child with a magnifying glass. That thin-waisted wasp caught beneath your lens's gaze and then those sparks and you too slow to quench the fire. And now, this terrifying blaze. You knew. You know. You've been taught not to play with fire.

I'd grown up in the semiarid hillsides of Southern California, where the spark from a campfire, a stray cigarette, or an insect burned under a magnifying glass could ignite a firestorm that burned a hundred homes, scorched innocent animals, and demolished thousands of acres of habitat. From a young age, I heard warnings about open fires. I was told to be cautious around anything that might ignite and people who find pleasure in starting a blaze. Just as I'd grown up aware of the historical dangers of being black and discovered outside, I knew to fear fire.

History is its own crucible, but that night in Maine, I realized African American history alone was not at the root of my fear of succumbing to flames. History and experience had linked my fear of violence against the body to those bonfires, the trees and the woods that permitted them, and the people who allowed them to blaze, but it was the sparks that erupted

from the fires and the violence they could visit on a whole landscape that I most fundamentally feared. The danger fire posed to a human body and the danger fire posed to the natural landscape: I had conflated these so that when I encountered large fires, these separate fears became one and the same. Concerned about my own well-being and concerned about the land, I grew up learning reason upon reason I should fear walking outside and encountering flames.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston

We are speeding along U.S. Route 395, my daughter Cori behind in the backseat, ready with video camera to film the first sight of the Alabama Hills. After passing the white crusty expanse that was once Owens Lake, our excitement grows. Lone Pine, a small town facing the portal to Mount Whitney, lies not far ahead, signaling that the hills will soon be emerging on the left—low, purplish, and magenta. They still remain in my memory as potent markers of Manzanar's southern boundary. How often as a child had I gazed at them, terrified by tales of Indian ghosts roaming the slopes, rattlesnakes writhing in every jagged crevice.

From the age of seven to eleven, I spent the World War II years—along with ten thousand other Japanese Americans—in a mile-square encampment of barracks surrounded by barbed wire. Manzanar ("apple orchard" in Spanish) was, from 1942 to 1945, the most populous city between Reno and Los Angeles. Looming to the west, a two-mile-high wall, the Sierra Nevada, separated the camp from California's Central Valley; eastward, the Inyo Mountains and Death Valley formed another natural barrier.

More than fifty years have passed since I left. I returned once, in the early