After the Flames

KELLY BOUCHARD

A wildland fighter witnesses an old burn's second act

I was a wildland firefighter for the Government of British Columbia for five seasons spread over thirteen years. I spent all of them on a twenty-person unit crew stationed in Burns Lake, a small town in BC's central interior. My first season was in 2009, when I was a twenty-one-year-old wide-eyed rookie. My last was in 2022, when I was thirty-four and served as Assistant Supervisor. I grew up on the crew and loved every minute, but at the end of 2022 I knew it was time to call it quits for good. I was getting older. My body was breaking down. I had a girlfriend who didn't want to miss me another summer. There were other things I wanted to do. But it was still tough to leave.

High on the list of the many things I miss about the job is the relationship it fosters with wildfires themselves. Like a boxer spewing vitriol before a fight and embracing his opponent afterwards, I began fighting fires filled with antagonism and left the job with feelings of respect. I don't think you can fight fires for any length of time and not come to respect them. Not when they have flummoxed and outfoxed you. Not when they have frightened and nearly killed you. Not when you have watched them devour hillsides or light the night with their hellish and beautiful glow. Most firefighters I know speak about fires in the same personified manner that sailors use to talk about the sea. We give our fires gendered pronouns, comment on their temperaments and moods, and argue with them in our heads. Somehow over the course of the struggle, they turn from insentient obstacles into living adversaries.

Firefighters tend to think of the extinguishing of a fire as the end of its life—a death signalled by the fact that once a fire is out, we drop the pronouns, and it becomes just another number to write in our logbooks. But from an ecological standpoint, the dousing of the flames is better understood as the start of a second phase. In this sense, we firefighters are treated to only the first act of what is really a two-act play.

We know the second act exists. In BC, we were taught about it at basic training, our instructors trying to hold our attention as they droned on about the nitrogen cycle and species like jack and lodgepole pines, whose cones require the fire's heat to seed. If a fire's first act is destruction, its second is renewal, and there's no objective reason that one should be more compelling than the other. Firefighters just never get to see act 2 up on its feet. At intermission, we pack up our tents and away.

I didn't want to leave firefighting without having a chance to see the end of this narrative arc, so near the end of the 2022 season my fellow crew member Ryan Skinner and I revisited a fire I'd fought back in 2014 to see what had become of it

Image: Sara Angelucci, Arboretum *(Man/Maple), 2016, inkjet print. Courtesy the artist and the Stephen Bulger Gallery.*

eight years on. The Chelaslie River Fire's first act was about as explosive as they come. It started in early July when a lightning strike ignited a stand of beetle-killed pine about 90 kilometres south of Burns Lake, and went on to burn for months, sweeping hillsides, hopping lakes, and resisting all attempts to contain it until it had consumed over 1,300 square kilometres of forest and become, at the time, one of the largest fires in BC's recorded history.

As an exuberant third year, I was on the fire for a total of six weeks. For a big chunk of that time, we got our butts kicked. Our first fourteen-day deployment was particularly fraught. Two of our crewmembers were nearly entrapped when the fire jumped our line and burned over our hose, leaving them in a shrinking green pocket they escaped only by sprinting through a less active part of the burn. I spent ten days guiding a bulldozer and excavator to create what remains the largest fireguard of my career, only for the Chelaslie to hop it like an elephant over a stream of ant piss and go for a kilometres-long run. Even in mid-September—when the fall cold had arrived in earnest, and we had to drain our pumps and hose nightly to stop them from freezing—we would look up from our work to find a sky bedevilled by plumes as the fire churned stubbornly away toward Tweedsmuir Provincial Park. The Chelaslie, more than any other fire I fought before or since, seemed to have something akin to a will, one that despite our best efforts refused to break. Eight years on, it remained the biggest, longest lasting, and most memorable fire of my career.

Skinner and I headed out to the Chelaslie from Burns Lake in late August 2022 during mandatory days off before what we both suspected would be our final deployment of the season and, in my case, my career. We'd wanted to get our hands on maps from BC Wildfire Service that would tell us the exact locations of old fireguards, pump sites and crew locations, so we could revisit these sites of battle and see how they'd changed. But after weeks of back-and-forth emails, we'd been told that to get those we'd have to submit a Freedom of Information request and by then it was too late: the season was nearly over, and Skinner and I would soon go our separate ways. In the end, all we had to go on was a final fire perimeter publicly available on BC Wildfire's website, some maps purloined from the Burns Lake fire attack base, a backroads map app, and my own murky memories—Skinner started fighting fires after the Chelaslie.

I had hoped that, despite the lack of detailed maps, I would find some places on the fire where I could be certain I had stood back in 2014. However, after we had driven hours on washboard dirt roads and taken two ferries—first a government-run one across Francois Lake, then a barge across Ootsa Lake operated by the Cheslatta Carrier Nation who generously let us ride for free—we arrived at a lookout above the old burn, and I was reminded of the scale. The naked, sun-bleached stems of burned trees stretched interminably in all directions. From our direction of approach, we had access to nearly 26,000 hectares of the burn, an area representing less than a quarter of the total fire but which was still twice the size of Vancouver. We spent hours in my little '08 Ranger, raising dust clouds on kilometre upon kilometre of logging road. We walked down to the edges of the various lakes that dotted the region, thinking to locate old pump sites or hose-trails that had been cut into the forest with chainsaws. Nothing.

I was sure we would at least find the remnants of my doomed bulldozer guard, but the rapidly expanding fire had meant many such guards were made, overrun and abandoned. Over time, they had all come to look alike and blended indistinguishably with decommissioned logging roads criss-crossing the old burn. We stopped the truck again and again to walk various machine-made slashes covered over with clover and waving grasses. Maybe we did find my guard. Maybe not.

Even things from my memories that seemed indelible had been subsumed by nature. The ATCO trailer for instance—where our crew had stayed during our last fourteen-day deployment on the Chelaslie and one of many such wilderness outposts maintained by the BC government—had been broken into and looted of furniture and appliances. We entered through an open door that sagged and flapped on rusting hinges, and rustled around in the remnants of the trailer. I remembered our crews' sleeping bags unrolled neatly on the trailer floor, watching old VHS tapes in the evening on a tiny television that once sat in the corner, and the smell of meals prepared in the little kitchenette. Now, the place smelled of animal droppings, mould and decay. Outside, we spent nearly twenty minutes searching the tangled forest for a pit toilet I'd helped build and were thrilled when we found it, broken and moss-covered but upright. In an environment that appeared intent on erasing all trace of me, even a broken toilet seat felt significant.

Instead of the legacy of the fight, we found the story of what came afterwards. Beneath the trunks of the burned trees, on a forest floor invigorated with nutrients and exposed to the sun, pioneering plants had forged upward through the blowing ash of the new burn. In time, they had been joined by slower species and the resultant mix was lush and lovely. Raspberries and lowbush blueberries rubbed shoulders with clovers, lichen, bunchgrass, poplar saplings, tiny blue and white wildflowers and the tall, waving blooms of the ubiquitous purple fireweed.

As we high-stepped through rosehip brambles, a brood of young grouse

fluttered into the trees, their mother eyeing us warily from a branch. A red fox bounded away from us over the charred stumps of a cut block, and everywhere we went we found deer droppings and bear scat. Most encouraging to a BC native like me who remembered when the mountain pine beetle wiped out most of the province's mature pine, the burn was littered with young lodgepole saplings. Their spiky branches danced in the wind beneath the looming presence of their burned forebears. We drove and walked and drove, settling into an altogether more staid rhythm than the kinetic one we'd embodied on the fireline. My driving speed gradually slowed. Skinner dozed intermittently in the passenger seat.

In the late afternoon, we pulled over beside a lake near the centre of the old burn and went for a swim off a dock whose existence out in the middle of nowhere felt completely unaccountable. The water was so clean that the dock looked like a balcony jutting out into thin air from the shore. The lake was cold but bearable, and we floated on our backs, looking up at the blue sky. It's perhaps quintessentially human that we came to the burn looking for evidence of our crew's past deeds. The focus on act 1 of a fire is not unique to firefighters alone, for it's in the flames and destruction that we humans most readily see ourselves. We tend to view today's wildfires as a natural threat to people and property, lent unnatural ferocity by human-caused global warming: it's a story of humans within and humans without. What's lost is that a big part of a wildfire's story involves no people at all.

I turned myself slowly in the cold water as memories of the Chelaslie and other fires washed over me. I remembered near misses with falling trees, strategic withdrawals before walls of advancing flame, and long days patrolling endless blackened moonscapes. I recalled moments of humour and catharsis shared with fellow crew members, many of whom had long since moved on. I placed my own halting timeline atop our crew's twenty-one-year history. To me, five seasons had felt like the whole story, but it was only a tiny part that was now nearly over.

It was time to go. We had a long drive home, and tomorrow we'd be headed back to the heat and frenetic cism of the line. We towelled off with our T-shirts and climbed into the truck. Skinner fiddled with the radio as I drove up the steep road from

Emetophobia

EM DIAL

The ride to girl scout camp
made me curse my father's
pickup truck and its back-seat
boardroom, two child-sized
fold-out chairs made for knee
-to-knee confrontation,
which is exactly what happened
when Naomi's lunch got
the better of her, the windy
road bonding our sneakers
together through a fluid
no longer hers but shared,
sparking in me a fear of
losing what is only partway
worked through, I started
colouring in the broadest
strokes, compulsively saving
my computer documents
lest some unexpected turn
pull from me like a magician's
fist around a chain of scarves.
It wasn't until I hit send
on the separation document
and painted the porcelain
a bile and egg-yolk blond
that I saw what I wanted
out of the rest of my life
was exactly a lemony dawn
dripping through fingers
into another day, and another,
slipping away when you feel
like you were just getting started.

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the dock. I looked over my shoulder. The lake reflected the blue sky. Hills rose from it on all sides, covered in an understory so distractingly green it took conscious effort to pick out the burned trees protruding from it at odd angles. I looked until a bend in the road took the view, then faced ahead and drove on. It was sad, it was natural, but out there in the old burn's second act it was above all clear: things carry on without us.

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The Academy of Profound Oddities

DAYNA MAHANNAH

The fish is a suspended phantom, its magenta skeleton an exquisite, vibrant exhibit of what lies beneath

Everything around Jo Lepeska is dead. The vase of flowers, dry and fragile, on a side table. The myth-sized insects collaging the wall. The Albertan coyote staring blankly in the corner, the stuffed goose that dangles from the ceiling. Mounted on the wall is the head of a stag. Next to the skeleton of some unidentifiable animal, anthropomorphically taxidermied rats in fisticuffs adorn the shelves.

"As a taxidermist, I'm only interested in the skin. I'm not interested in what's inside." From behind her desk, Lepeska smiles at me, swathed in a grey leopard-print sweater, her blond hair in a messy updo. What appear to be feather earrings dangle from her lobes.

The epidermis of all mammals, she explains, is attached to the body at the same points: ears, eyes, nose, mouth, genitalia. "I'm literally removing the jacket the best way I possibly can, and the rest of it just kind of comes off like a sock."

We're sitting in the unmarked studio of Pretty Dead Taxidermy, located in Vancouver's Mount Pleasant neighbourhood, tucked in an alley just off Main Street.

Lepeska leans forward and gestures to her assistant, who is arranging large, dead insects into picture frames. "If I were to take your skin and put it on Karen's body, it would look weird."

I nod, unable to agree more. To make her point, Lepeska hands me a piece of foam in the shape of a flying squirrel, one example of what she calls a "form," a foundational structure for a taxidermied animal. The foam templates are further sculpted if the form doesn't fit the skin. Lepeska's earrings swing as she talks. They are not feathers, I realize, but moth wings.

After moving from Finland to Vancouver in 2016, Lepeska ran taxidermy classes out of a local curio storefront. The business expanded, becoming Pretty Dead Taxidermy, which now hosts an online shop of oddities in addition to offering taxidermy services for private collectors and film and TV commissions. They also run workshops through their Academy of Oddities, "to teach others the amazing beauty of nature," Lepeska says. By simplifying the workshop procedures of butterfly pinning or taxidermy, the art and practice of preservation is accessible to beginners, even children. "If, out of ten students, two of them visit more natural history museums and do more studying, I've done my job."

In the Academy's "art classes with a dark vibe," participants learn about arthropods and skulls while drawing real specimens, or practice the art of moth-pinning. Occasionally, the Academy collaborates with experts. "We had the head fish scientist from the aquarium talk about wet specimen preservation technique, why it is used in scientific study, why they preserve something. I'll show you." Lepeska disappears into the next room and returns with two jars, one of which she plops on her workstation. She passes me the other jar, made of clear glass, containing a diaphanous fish. The proteins and muscle mass have been chemically altered so the flesh is translucent. Red and purple dyes have infused the bone and cartilage. The fish, smaller than my hand, is a suspended phantom, its magenta skeleton an exquisite, vibrant exhibit of what lies beneath. How Lepeska landed on the name of her business is evident.

The fish seems to emit its own unnatural glow. Before this moment, the association between beauty and death never occurred to me. Though taxidermied animals don't generally capture my breath in such a way, the fish is undeniably stunning. I eat fish, I've caught fish. Perhaps my food-chain relationship to this aquatic creature permits the sense of aesthetic pleasure I experience from the sight of its corpse. Or maybe the surreal pigment of its tiny bones, or the fact that it once had scales and not hair, put my own sense of mortality at a further remove than, say, the stuffed coyote standing in the corner—the mammal.

I tell Lepeska the fish is beautiful.

"That's what I want to do," she breathes. "If every single urban dweller would have a little piece of nature in their home, they would maybe appreciate it a little bit more."

I look at the other jar. A dead rat floats in yellow liquid—*a little piece of*