

Bruce Bromley

What the Burning Says

After reaching the height of his mid-thigh, having grown distant enough from the ground to realize that you can connect the closely seen and the far away, the detail and an extension of details, I began the dogging of my father.

But the problem remained that Andreas—a name my father preferred to any smaller sound, one which he had always instructed his single son to use—was so rarely there that the determination to pursue him might be answered by nothing except its own abrupt, kindling charge. Even so, now that I was sufficiently remote from the grass that continued to support me, I saw how the six year long dilemma of my father's scarcity gave out a range of possible solutions. And, leaning against the front door, both feet on the slate walkway that bordered the wide rectangle of the lawn, I spotted one of them in the form of a trail whose contours I started to trace around the cherry tree, strangely de-petalled by the thicket of storms that had burred village and sky together all this May. I accompanied it up, over the rock garden, while it seemed to slow in the willow's stooping green; I noticed its golden rippling; I thought I could smell the ghosts of my father's cigarettes and hair cream, as though the ripples were exhaling. Yet, unaware if the ghostly were capable of exhalation, I resumed following the trail into the backyard, through the screen door, past the denim shirt I imagined to be growing, somehow, out of the stone floor beneath it. I discovered myself in the bedroom that my mother had left to Andreas a year ago, when I overheard her saying that she was going to live with another director whose films would give her face the exposure it deserves—and will repay. Because I did not know how to seek for her, I obeyed the obligation to accept her loss. Now, however, standing over the bed, undone, finding the trail's collected stuff in my hands, a near yarn of hair which my father's head declined to go on threading, I learned that though you can hunt after a man in need of reassembly, you may not spy him, summoned, on the other side of that effort. I wondered, nevertheless, what it would mean to carry on trying.

It meant, this struggle over time to amass indications of my father's presence, not that Andreas should be restored to perfect wholeness by virtue of their gift but that he had been there at all and could be memorialized by a son adept at gathering the tokens of him together. I arranged them in little heaps in places where Andreas would be sure to see them—on his pillow, on the shut toilet lid in his bathroom, on the computer in the study. I came to understand that these repeated accumulations assumed an Andreas who would lose a button, for instance, along with the boy who committed himself to returning it to him, exchanges which could only confirm the two identities engaged in them. Yet this was before the imperative that seemed to descend on me, requiring me to hold tight even to those remnants of Andreas which others would call impalpable. I stood in the driveway, just after Andreas and a butter-colored woman had propelled the red convertible into it; they vanished behind the study door. I was listening to the engine's heat as it pushed into air with a prolonged keen, my right hand straining over the hood to concentrate its upsurge, cupped inside my palm. But the front door thumped, and Anna, the woman with whom Andreas intended to replace a mother gone elsewhere, at least in terms of meals and housework, was maintaining that you could not keep what must always disappear. While she spoke, I knew that the car's heat, having poked through skin, was moving in a wave up my arm; I identified Andreas as its source; I knew that its intensity would be mine, for the short time that my flesh might contain it. Perhaps that was what they were for, the buttery-haired woman lying with Andreas on the study's sofa, or the Anna who sometimes swayed underneath Andreas in her room off the kitchen: meant to stoke a fire of blood and bone until it vaporized into the breath which you cannot keep. Anna went on talking about dinner, about bedtime; I felt myself watching the memory of a late-night moment in which Andreas, hesitating in the doorway, a grooved V between his eyes, looked hard at the son he took to be in bed, asleep. I memorized that look. Through the distance between us, it taught me that the father did not know what the son was for.

Two years later, when I was eight, Anna informed me that Andreas would permit me to visit the studio in the city, so long as my attendance verged on the invisible. And, from the first of those visits, I understood how you could speak well of distances, since the sighted see, the unsighted move, because of them. The crew busied themselves in setting up a shot in which a woman with cropped, almost jagged hair was staked among hurling flames; they popped; they hissed, but she made no sound. From where I waited, in the shadows at the rear of the sound stage, I heard something wheeze and slide as it shouldered a weight that it did not choose to carry. What I will soon learn to call a dolly had the camera and its operator on top of it, the whole angled diagonally towards the woman who remained on fire, stopping short of the flames themselves, leaving a space that would equal the length of Andreas, if he could be laid on air and hover 5 feet off the ground. Stepping in closer, pausing just below the cameraman's back, I watched the monitor whose image focused on the woman's head, on

her pupils, inside which burning jumped and bobbed, as if the gap between camera and woman had been flattened out, rubbed out, wiped away, though that interval allowed this picture to be born and to lie about its birth. Beyond the monitor, opposite the cameraman, Andreas detached himself from instructing the woman to hold her face so that the light could leap across it: he was staring at the boy who had come too near and above whom a klieg-lamp fizzed, warning me to re-angle the direction of my eyes. Afterwards, many years afterwards, it will seem that I saw the figure of a man whose hair retreated quickly from the sternness of the face beneath it. But, in that moment, the baking gulf between father and son guided me to see that I would burn, and the burning must mean that you were found.