

A History of Fire

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BBC NEWS ONLINE, Monday, 12 November 2018. Today's news is black with ash. A wildfire burns in Malibu, the town of Paradise is razed, and the California sky is dark with smoke. In a Mexican city, two men mistaken for kidnappers are set alight. An article with the headline "Judgment Day" tells not of fire and brimstone but of incendiary politics. There is crossfire, too, another kind of kindling, which does not so much burn as inflame: "Israel-Gaza Violence Erupts after Covert Op Killings."

Add to these fires words like *nationalism*, *disinformation*, and *fear*, phrases like *fake news*, *terror threat*, even *strawberry needle scare*, that the flames might glow brighter. Add too an article on immigration for tinder, another on Trump to make the smoke more acrid still. How incandescent the front page appears. How momentarily insistent and significant its headlines—magnesium bright and as short-lived.

The news is formulaic, its themes few. Beyond the fires, today's front page records a rising death toll and a missing journalist. The expected players follow—foreign leaders from foreign countries pictured in suits and sensible dress, shaking hands or standing behind podiums. Further down are articles about disasters that have not yet happened but are no doubt imminent: political frictions, rising sea levels, epidemics. It is understood that the news will turn on such familiar elements, circling forever that which shocks and scares, offering the reader an encyclopedia of tragedies in a voice coolly rational and distant. But something about the bland language, the *balanced* reporting, obscures the reality of the events described. Such language, as the political theorist Richard Seymour suggests in *Caedmon's Dream: On the Politics of Style*, "allows one to write up a motorway

pileup, or gruesome multiple murder, as if it made sense. Suppressing dissonance and disturbance in the text is part of the way it achieves authority, conveying the impression of objectivity.”

Which is to say, such news is seldom shocked by what it reports, seldom astonished or amazed. For the most part, its tone is consistently affectless, the text deadpan, stripped of feeling; the cautious wording rendering every story of human suffering strangely far away. Bad things, this distance suggests, happen only to other people. And they do, for the most part. The remote narratives told in the news rarely collide with our own lives. It wasn't us, the news affirms, not this time. We are safe for now. We read the news to count our blessings. Yet our relief is only momentary, and soon our apprehension grows. What disaster will happen next, and how close to home? With something approaching dread, we return to the news day after day, even hour after hour.

We have come to believe it is best to expect the worst, to feel justified when it arrives. And it does arrive, each day, the news having the whole world to comb for catastrophe. Magical thinking allows that our anxieties spare us from similar tragedy, as if imagining the worst might stop it from happening. How often have we imagined our own deaths? How many ways of dying have we overlooked?

Last week, on Wednesday, 7 November, there was a mass shooting in Thousand Oaks, California, a small town some forty miles outside Los Angeles. Twelve people were killed by a gunman at the Borderline Bar & Grill, in the country's second mass shooting in as many weeks, and the 307th mass shooting in the United States this year. The following day the same town was evacuated as a wildfire, the Woolsey Fire, moved toward it. Among those forced to leave were survivors of the shooting, bereaved relatives of those killed, visiting journalists, and law officials investigating the scene. The news coverage moved from one drama to the next, the first forgotten soon after the bodies grew cold.

What does the news give us but names and numbers? Thousand Oaks, forty miles, twelve dead, the Borderline Bar & Grill, two in two weeks, 307, the Woolsey Fire. Need we remember them?

The news is made up of such details, details that announce that *this is fact*. We are fooled by them—by the photographs of the dead (pictured very much alive), by maps, direct quotes, diagrams—into thinking we have some understanding of what happened. The details provide the time and place and names, the caliber of weapon, the wind speed, but not the more poetic points, like what song was playing when the gunman opened fire, what people left behind when they evacuated the town. The details stand in for more emotive words, for more empathic retellings. There are few asides, few sentiments, just the barest of facts.

Today's article on Thousand Oaks offers only a series of events, with connections in equal parts meaningful and senseless. That one tragedy followed a second has become news in itself, and to the reader with no firsthand knowledge of either the players or the scene, the article reads like a parable with an unclear lesson. Something happened somewhere to people you and I have never met. But in the end, the article is not so much about individual lives as it is a cautionary tale that confirms our fears. The moral in this particular story: lightning strikes the same place twice.

Tragedy is understood to be news to the extent that it offers a lesson. We seldom follow it with attention paid to the particulars of its stories, looking instead for their more abstracted qualities, for universal truths. But pared down in this way, and stripped of details, the news offers few morals, its stories returning always to the same point. Humanity suffers; we are reminded with every breaking story.

We regard this fact with forbearance, with practiced indifference. What are we to do with all this suffering laid out before us? Hold it close? Disregard it? We cannot show each retelling of tragedy the attention it deserves, and it is just as well, as we might not otherwise survive the midday bulletin. Call it heartlessness or empathy fatigue, call it impossible. "Our failure," Susan Sontag writes in her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "is one of imagination." We have become accustomed to a certain horror, know now how to distance ourselves from the despair it describes; are guilty of what Alain de Botton, in *The News: A User's Manual*, describes as "globalized

provincialism whereby we at once know a good deal and don't care about very much; whereby a little knowledge of the wrong kind has managed to narrow rather than expand the compass of our curiosity."

Though the news continues to elicit a response, it is more often short-lived and soon forgotten. Some exceptions: the dust-covered boy pulled from a bombed building in Syria in 2016. A figure filmed from a helicopter running from the 2011 Japanese tsunami until it outpaces him. But even then, we remember only a photograph, a frame. We forget the names, the numbers, the details, save the single image that first pricked us. This is what we watch for when we watch the news: those rare moments transmitted to us from across the world that inspire something less articulate than ready-made sympathy, something more immediate and bare—a momentary understanding or the raw material of empathy.

The death of Princess Diana is among my earliest childhood memories. It was 1997—31 August, a Sunday—and I was five. I do not recall her funeral or the flowers laid at the palace gates, but I have yet to forget the image of the tunnel in Paris where her black Mercedes slammed into a concrete pillar. I now know it was the thirteenth pillar in the Pont de l'Alma underpass. The car was traveling at 105 kilometers at the moment of impact, the ambulance took thirteen minutes to arrive, and three of the four occupants in the car died. I give you only the simplest of details, some more significant than others, and few of which were of interest to a child watching the morning news.

The accident happened at night, and the scene as I remember it was illuminated by yellow streetlights. A photograph taken after the ambulance had left shows the empty car, with its flaccid white airbags and shattered windows. Though the mind resists placing bodies in that wreck of metal, their absence makes the image no less disturbing.

In the upper right-hand corner of the photograph, a foot, leg, and hand intrude into the frame. They belong to a man who, at first glance, might be mistaken for a passenger walking unharmed from the accident. But he is only a city worker, there to help load the car

onto the tow truck, that it might be removed from sight before Paris wakes.

I remember, as a child, that the footage around the event felt claustrophobic, as if the confusion that surrounded the accident was caused in part by the lack of space in the underpass, with its jaundiced glow and the night beyond. The cameras were too tight, the scene visible only in parts. If they would just step back, I thought, it might make more sense. There was, too, the interior space of the car that had been so reduced on impact, closing in on its occupants, pressing them to their seats. I do not recall being upset by the accident, but feeling only a bemused awareness that Diana's death was of greater importance than I could comprehend—this was not a story about a car crash, but a story about taking sides.

In the tunnel, the flashing lights of police cars and fire trucks and emergency vehicles seemed to multiply, reflecting off the yellowed walls and ceiling. And that twisted car in the middle of it all, the metal death trap around which all this converged, all those people in uniform, and the carrion photographers who picked over the scene. I had the sense that people wanted to be close to the car, if only to be close to Diana, to the crushed space that had held her form.

The princess was no longer there, of course. The news did not show the car until after the bodies were gone—a decency the newly dead are seldom now afforded. A decency, Sontag suggests, the living neither deserve nor want; our “appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain [being] as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show naked bodies.” We might satisfy ourselves that we do not read tabloids, that we disregard sensational stories and believe our conscience to be clear. Yet how many bodies have we seen dug out from rubble on the nightly news? How many weeping mothers have we watched in silence? We rarely look away.

I do not now recall why I watched the news the morning of Diana's accident. Did I believe the death of a princess might tell me something about my own life? Or did I only watch the news because reports of the car crash played on all three television channels at once? It is perhaps strange, in hindsight, that the breaking stories I most

clearly remember took place in another hemisphere and not closer to home. Back then, as a child, it seemed the events shown on TV always happened in places far away. I have only one early recollection of national news—not South Africa’s first democratic election nor the second, not its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but a bomb that exploded in a local pizza restaurant in 1999.

When I was nine, I watched the second plane fly into the south tower of the World Trade Center in Manhattan, witnessed the very moment the event shifted from accident to something far more sinister. I was alone in front of the television for the briefest moment, a moment I remember with the clarity of a childhood nightmare; watching in real time that metal bullet blowing through the concrete body, through all those real bodies. It was Tuesday, 11 September 2001.

It seems strange now to think anyone ever mistook the first plane for an accident in the eighteen minutes preceding the second, that the news anchor might suggest a navigational error onboard, on that clear fall morning with perfect visibility and perfect disbelief. That we did not, could not, understand what had happened, in the first hour when nothing was certain and everything was speculation. We tried in vain to impose sense on senseless facts, invented enemies, prayed for heroes; watched figures dropping from the windows, the towers dissolving into moiré patterns on the television screen, smoke rising above the city, and later the ghost-like figures appearing from the dust.

The attack was beyond language, beyond understanding. It was pure spectacle, *sublime*. The imagery of the event was no accident, but violence distilled to symbol: stark, indelible. “Like a movie,” people said, reaching for a reference with which to comprehend the destruction. There were no words to convey the shock of that September morning. “There are no words,” the CNN reporter said, as the second tower fell, and the dust went up, and what looked like sheets of paper went fluttering over the city.

My experience of that day's events was secondhand, mediated by media, but no less immediate. I remember the fear, the confusion, the dread. Even now, I cannot watch footage from that day without feeling as I did when I first saw it. It remains as shocking as it did then, cuts just as deep. The impact of the attack persists in its images, by the depth charge they still carry.

The attack on 11 September radically conflated reality and its facsimile; the image of violence inseparable from the real violence, so that the terror of the event could not be contained to lower Manhattan, to that autumn morning. It spread across the world in an instant, set it on fire.

Later, following the attacks, a series of actors came into focus. There was the man with the large brown eyes and fine hands, with the beard and turban: Bin Laden, yes. The *dramatis personae* of the early 2000s: Bush, Blair, Bin Laden, bigotry. The title: The War on Terror. The ending: inconclusive; the moral: unclear.

Another story from that era, which continues to burn bright in a dark recess of my mind, is the abuse of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib detention center in Iraq. An exposé of the American military's human rights violations was released in April 2004, and among the photographs published was a hooded figure, standing on a car battery, his arms held out in submission, a wire running from either hand. He is dressed in a ragged cloth, a hole cut through it for his neck, his face obscured by a conical hood of the same dark fabric. Ali Shallal al-Qaisi. That is his name, though I didn't know it then, and it seemed not to matter who he was, but that he was somebody, could be anybody.

What was so disturbing about the photographs was not only the scenes they depict, though unspeakably shocking—sexual abuse, torture, rape, and murder—but the destruction of the narrative America had sold the world. The story of good versus evil irrevocably undermined. “I have recurring nightmares,” al-Qaisi later told a reporter, “that I'm in my cell at Abu Ghraib, cell 49 as they called it, being

tortured at the hands of the people of a great nation that carries the torch of freedom and human rights.” Another flame, another fire.

There is no terrorism without image—this Al-Qaeda understood to profound effect, flying two planes into the twin towers and into our psyches. The attacks that followed 9/11, however, have proven less effective in their photographs, less refined in their artistry. I have no clear recollections of the 2007 London bombings, recall only a story about passengers using their cell phones to light the way back to the platform after a bomb ripped through an underground train. No single photograph has come to stand for the Boston Marathon bombing, the attacks in Melbourne, Manchester, Nice, Orlando, Paris. The list goes on. But though I do not remember the images of these attacks, there is no doubt that I saw them countless times, and I have yet to forget the threat they promised.

ISIS understands, understood, the power of symbolic gestures of violence. Fear has its aesthetics. They are, were, master image makers: their theater of cruelty pared down to its simplest element; the fighters confident actors, preempting the eyes of a global audience. They staged their films, curated their photographs. Red sands, blue sky, a kneeling figure in orange, another in black. A curved knife. The effect was total, outrageous—images made to multiply across a million screens, to be seen again and again, forcing their way into our nightmares.

Let the record state that I have never watched an ISIS video, have seen only still images published by the media. But the videos haunt me regardless, with their imagined content, their menace. The sound of a head falling on sand, the moment before the body slumps sideways.

There is no ethical code with which we watch the news, no guidelines with which we regard the despair of others. We might tell ourselves that being informed is a moral obligation; might confess it entertains us, distracts us, that it fills the time between dinner and bed.

The news gives us unearned insight into the lives of others. We witness the most intimate suffering of strangers knowing our gaze cannot be returned, that they will never look back. Nor would we want them to. We continue to watch because we cannot be seen. Our sympathy is not enough, has never been enough, yet it protects us against accusations of unfeeling voyeurism. We do not want to consider ourselves perverse in our intrigues.

I saw the other images from Abu Ghraib only once, briefly, on a television screen before my father could reach for the remote. I will not return to them, even after all these years. I will not read about the circumstances, will not look at the evidence. The man on all fours pulled by a leash, the naked bodies in a pile, the prisoner cornered by a dog, the guards. In part, I do not wish to recall those dark images more clearly; in part, I wish the prisoners of Abu Ghraib privacy in their most abject pain. I return only to the hooded figure, to this single image among many others, to that “accused terrorist, torture victim, anonymous clone, this faceless Son of Man, [who] will remain the icon of our time for the foreseeable future,” as the visual theorist W. J. T. Mitchell wrote.

Never forget, the familiar refrain intones, yet we cannot help but remember. The photographs from Abu Ghraib are written into the folds of my brain alongside family holidays and school plays and the childhood telephone number I will never again dial. Alongside poems and song lyrics, and the 9 times table. We do not forget but remember only parts of a more intricate whole. We remember but do not necessarily understand.

What are we to do with these images the news gives us, but archive them in our minds, alongside an assortment of things to which they bear no relation. Like entries in a dictionary, the unfamiliar words rubbing up against one another. What is he doing there, that crucified figure? There, where he does not belong, but cannot leave. “Let the atrocious images haunt us,” Sontag writes, that they might continue to warn against war.

Yesterday, Sunday, 11 November 2018, marked the centenary of the end of the First World War. One hundred years since we believed it was the war to end all wars. How many wars since? How many pages of newspaper given to conflicts, how many photographs, how many minutes of television coverage?

Today's news tells of a missed memorial, a light drizzle, traffic, a president's plans canceled. Above Paris the specters of hatred gather in the low clouds, threatening rain and the dissolution of tolerance. "There are too many powers that wish to thwart us," President Macron says, speaking at the Armistice event Trump has failed to attend, "that interfere in our public debates, attack our liberal democracies, and are trying to pit us against each other. And in this global order, which we have to take very seriously, our strength—our true strength—lies in unity." How familiar the speech sounds, borrowed from a film set in a nearby galaxy. *Star Wars*, perhaps, or *Independence Day*.

Below this article, a short obituary of Douglas Rain: the voice of HAL, the ominous computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, has died. The last wire has been cut, the plug pulled from its socket. Something has gone terribly wrong—who is flying the spaceship now? The Insight Probe will land on Mars in fourteen days. Its journey to the Red Planet is predetermined; it cannot change course, can never come home. *My battery is low and it's getting dark.*

The news is restless and relentless. No matter what happened yesterday, last week, last year, there is always new news. Stories fall from our screens, newspaper stands, and radio hosts' lips into a mutual forgetting. It is understood that most stories will be regarded only momentarily, that few will be of lasting significance. It is these remembered stories that become the narratives of nations, even the history of the world. The atomic bomb, the moon landing, the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory," Sontag writes, "but there is collective instruction." The news is not without its loyalties. It dictates which stories deserve our attention;

shows us where our sympathies lie; shows us what we most fear. It is selective in its silences, biased in its blindness.

When Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's second democratically elected president, resigned from office in 2008, my mother turned on the television that I might, as she said, witness history. But I remember nothing from the president's parting speech, only my mother's words. I remember the road I was on when I heard of the 2004 tsunami on the radio in my father's car, the same road where I would hear of Michael Jackson's death five years later. And though I cannot recall the news coverage from that day, I remember the summer light the morning Nelson Mandela died. All this to say that the news becomes ours, that it works itself into the fabric of our lives, becomes peculiar to each of us, even though we share it. That we remember its stories in relation to our own. *Where were you when it happened?*⁹ we ask one another, the international news marking the progress of our youth.

The fire began at 6:15 a.m. on the foothills of the Sierra Nevada in northern California. Emergency services logged the first report as Incident No. 181108-9002. It was Thursday, 8 November 2018. The wind was picking up, the temperature rising, the atmospheric humidity low. The brush, tinder-dry after a hot, rainless month, burned quickly.

Fire season in California begins in the fall. The Santa Ana winds arrive in October, bringing dry desert air from Arizona and Nevada to the West Coast. They are invariably followed by fire. In her essay, *Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream* (1966), the California native Joan Didion says of the season:

October is the bad month for the wind, the month when breathing is difficult and the hills blaze up spontaneously. There has been no rain since April. Every voice seems a scream. It is the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, wherever the wind blows.

That November morning the wind was particularly strong. Warnings had been issued, and the state was on high alert. But once the fire started, it could not be stopped. Within two hours, it had reached Paradise, north of Sacramento. Within six, the town had been destroyed; its neighborhoods reduced to the barest palette: gray ash, blackened structures, thick brown smoke. Power lines lie across the streets, and burned-out cars stand melted in their driveways. Firefighters continue to wander through the town, looking for embers and flare-ups, for bodies. The state has sent in emergency personnel to help the search, cadaver dogs, and mobile mortuaries.

The title of this particular news story: "California Wildfires: Death Toll Reaches Grim Milestone." A better title: "Paradise Lost." Another: "Paradise, a Picture of Hell." Even: "Inferno."

They call it the Camp Fire, though there are no sing-alongs around these flames, no roasting marshmallows, no Girl Scout chants. It is one of two fires burning in the state this morning. The Woolsey Fire, which threatened Thousand Oaks earlier this week, has continued southeast toward the wealthy suburbs of Malibu. Some celebrities have lost their homes, been forced to evacuate; there is an article dedicated to this in today's news: "Celebrity Homes Destroyed by Wildfires." That fire is indiscriminate in its victims is apparently surprising. Money can buy many things, but it can't stop the flames. Another lesson, a morality tale.

The Santa Ana, as Didion wrote, shows us how close to the edge we are, how unreliable all we take for granted is, how unpredictable the course of our lives. Horses have been evacuated to the beaches, the horizon glows a brilliant red, and the Pacific Coast Highway is choked with traffic. Above the haze, the sky.

We interpret the news as we wish, misread it if we will, and find in it stories that confirm our beliefs, however far-fetched. The California fires are divine retribution for gay marriage, the result of liberal politics, of migrant arsonists, of autumn leaves left unraked. We invent connections where there are none, impose false narratives on disparate events. Conspiracies fan the flames, religious fervor fuels

them, and the reality is lost in the blaze. The fires lend themselves to metaphors of political discontent; the ominous mood in the Golden Land when the dry, hot Santa Ana blows, to metaphors of our collective catastrophe. But a fire is also a fire; the unprecedented weather increasingly familiar.

And after the news, what remains? Apart from those images we cannot forget, apart from our unease, our anxiety, only a series of facts and numbers: 12, 307, 1997, 3, 13, 13, 1999, 9/11, 2001, 2004, 2007, 100, 1, 2008, 6:15, 181108-9002. They mean nothing, seen together, like smoke signals we cannot decipher. Still, we watch them for omens, for signs; and recognize in the fires something that reflects our growing sense of doom.