

Flame

By Brandi Hall, Second Place Winner, 2021 Writing Appalachia Contest

Imagine a tan house, a white two-car garage, a row of hedges just beginning to sprout. A mother freshly divorced from her high school sweetheart, a father whose oldest children have already had children, and their daughter, a toddler who looks at the world with all the enthusiasm of someone ten hours into a fourteen hour flight.

They move to the hilltop for peace, for nature, for space, for privacy. They move to have all their friends and family present at parties in the acre or so of cleared yard, the nearest neighbors hidden away by the other five acres of untamed forest. They move to start a new chapter, to build a new life, to distance themselves from their previous marriages and from the rest of the world.

Imagine there's trees, and silence.

Then, imagine neither of those things.

Imagine that twenty-some years have gone by. A small, but yet somehow too large portion of the trees have been cut down for a pitiful amount of money from a timber company. Others have fallen down from wind and lightning strikes and the weight of the slowly dying natural world. The serene quiet is now filled with the sounds of machinery whooshing, banging, sucking, releasing and, occasionally, exploding. The tan house and white garage are covered in a black slime from the plant by the river that a lawsuit still hasn't reached a verdict on yet. Imagine the road that the friends and relatives have made excuses not to travel for years now is full of holes, caving in, the threat of slamming into a semi and being pushed over a ledge looming around every turn.

Once, you would look up and see stars, galaxies, the universe.

Now, all you can see is a burning orange glow.

The fires were disturbing, the first few times they showed up. I was too young, too naive to know what they meant. I thought the wells were on fire, that something had gone wrong, and we would all soon be evacuated (again) or blown to bits (always a lingering possibility). From a distance, if you somehow don't know they're there, and it's a particularly hazy night, it looks as if the whole ridge is burning. Maybe it is, just not with fire, not with a physical flame.

None of it bothers me much, anymore. I've grown up learning to schedule around the additional twenty-five minutes it takes a truck of equipment to reach the top or bottom of the hill. I've become accustomed to the flames, first to the South of the house, then to the West, as well as all the booms, hisses, and vibrations that come with having them so near. I don't even ask people for rides or to visit, and instead plan to meet and go elsewhere, anywhere, away.

Maybe it doesn't bother me because I can barely recall the way it was before. All it is now is fuzzy memories and old VHS home movies. Maybe it doesn't bother me because I didn't have the silence, the privacy, the peace, taken away.

Maybe it doesn't because, through college, I have left. Maybe it does because, through the pandemic, I have found reason to return.



About the Author: Brandi Hall is a WVU English major from Proctor, West Virginia. Her auto-fiction piece describes a family encountering changes in their hometown caused by logging and natural gas drilling. Hall was inspired to write this piece while taking English 318: Topics in Creative Writing at WVU.