



RALPH JOACHIM

Sunburst, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 in

courtesy: R.Blitzer gallery

DALY WALKER

Fire

in shades of red and yellow. I wrote one of my American haiku to express what her painting evoked in me:

Unafraid maple leaves
flutter onto the pond
I am part water leaves and decay

I could feel the change of seasons in my bones, a sense of incredulity. Was it really this late in the year? Was I really this old? But I didn't fear or regret the prelude to winter. Nor did I fear old age as much as I once had. I welcomed a new time of year. And I was finding that the same thing was true with my life. Each phase brought me something unique and pleasurable. As Solomon had said in Ecclesiastes: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." Although I'd heard it a thousand times, I still thought that this was a great piece of writing.

I particularly enjoyed fall because it was football season and a time to gather wood and light a fire. Monday, October third, was a day of sunshine and leaping winds. The conditions were perfect for harvesting firewood. I dressed in frayed khaki shorts, an old T-shirt, and a sweat-stained ball cap.

I had spent a lifetime trying to look good in the eyes of others. I feared rejection, and was too concerned with the approval of those who saw me. I dressed well, joined committees, and met with people. I sought out offices to hold, events to attend, and parties to give. I was afraid to be left out and alone. But in recent years, I was coming to the realization that if I couldn't be happy with and by myself, then happiness could never be within my reach.

At Little Creek, I don't worry much about what I wear or how I look to a passerby. In fact, I can only remember two passers-by at Little Creek: one was a young fellow from down the road who had lost his coon dog; the other was an old man in a station wagon who was looking for a cabin where Hoagy Carmichael had written some of his music. I hope that by embracing solitude I am not just hiding. Yet, I know it is wrong to be selfish and aloof. I don't want to end up a loner who doesn't participate in my community.

When I was a practicing surgeon, I refused to use a chain saw because I knew one slip could amputate a finger and put me out of business. Not that I don't still like my

Aristotle argued that everything beneath the moon was composed of four elements—fire, air, earth and water—and everything beyond the moon was aether and imperishable. Of these four elements, the stoics believed that fire came first, and that eventually everything else would be consumed back into fire. I agree that Aristotle and the stoics were right metaphorically. What follows is about fire.

* * *

As autumn approached, the days at Little Creek shortened. Restless lamb's-wool clouds appeared high in the sky. The leaves of the sumacs turned saffron, the maples ruby and gold, all brilliant as they prepared to die and drop. V's of geese honked their way south. Fewer birds appeared at our feeders because they had begun their migrations to the tropics. As the angle between the earth and the sun narrowed, the strength of the sun's fire weakened. The air became too cool in the morning for me to go the bench and read. In a jacket and jeans, I sat in a porch rocker and listened to acorns thud to the ground. Toni painted a watercolor of two maple leaves, veined and variegated

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fingers, but being retired, a missing finger wouldn't matter nearly as much now. In search of a saw, I drove to Bears, the local hardware store, where I get plenty of advice for all my projects, along with a free bag of popcorn. John, the power saw specialist, recommended a Stihl saw. I chose a lightweight model with a fourteen-inch guide bar—small enough that an aging woodcutter like myself could handle it safely, yet big enough to fell a decent-sized tree.

After coffee, I went to the barn. I found a pair of safety glasses and leather work gloves. I lifted the saw from its orange carrying case. With my hand, I brushed acrid-smelling ladybugs from the workbench and placed the saw there. To a woodcutter, his saw is a serious matter, the way a scalpel once was to me. I tested the amount of tension on the chain, because I knew a loose chain could derail and whip around dangerously. I made sure the oil and gas tanks were full. I carefully felt a length of chain. The saw's sharp teeth pricked my finger. I placed the saw, a heavy mallet, and a splitting wedge in a wooden cart that ran on bicycle tires. Pulling the cart like a coolie, I set out on the gravel lane through the woods. Acorns and hickory nuts rained down like hailstones. Leaves sifted down and crunched underfoot. A cold tailwind blew behind my ears and on my neck. I kept looking up, hoping to see that barred owl who nested nearby. Fickle Mother Nature wouldn't allow me a glimpse of him.

There was no reason to fell a live tree, because there was enough down wood in Little Creek's forest to heat the entire Indiana town of Nashville for a winter. Before long, I came across a hickory tree of the proper diameter. The shagbark had been on the ground a couple of years. Its wood was well seasoned but not yet rotting. Being hickory, it was guaranteed to burn with a nice scent. I was glad

to find the tree near the road. I wouldn't have to carry the logs far.

I checked the stability of the trunk to be sure it wouldn't roll as I worked. Even though I found it well anchored, I stood on the uphill side of the log just in case it moved. I pulled the starter rope and the saw roared to life. The exhaust belched blue smoke. I disengaged the chain break and revved the motor like a motorcyclist revving his Harley. I felt red-blooded and virile with a chain saw in my hands.

Cutting a tree into lengths is called "bucking." I wanted to buck chunks that would fit easily into the cabin's woodstove. I eyeballed an eighteen-inch section of the log and began the first cut. I let the weight of the saw carry the bite through the wood. A rooster tail of sawdust spewed from the chain. A burnt wood scent came to me. The log screeched in protest. With a firm grip on the saw's handle, I stayed alert to the tip of the blade to avoid a dangerous kickback, which would flip the whirling chain at me. A man could lose his nose in an instant. The log was supported at both ends, so I knew the blade would be pinched if I used a single cut from the top. I cut downward one third of the thickness and finished with an upcut. My second cut produced a nice length of firewood that brought a slight smile to my face.

After I bucked ten sections, my shirt was damp with sweat. Sawdust clung to the fabric. Fatigue began to weight my arms. The saw grew heavy and harder to handle. I knew the chance of a mishap was greater when I was tired. Wary, I switched off the motor and set the saw down. I was careful to avoid dulling the chain by letting it touch the ground.

For a few minutes, I relaxed on a log, regaining my strength. I watched a gray squirrel gather nuts in his mouth to fuel his own internal fire. He scrambled up the trunk of a beech tree and leapt from bough to bough in a thrilling high-wire act.

"Quick, quick, quick," the squirrel chortled, warning me that he and I should hurry up and get ready for the cold winter days ahead.

But I didn't feel that sense of urgency. I had begun to understand that life was better unhurried. Especially in the woods.

When I felt rested, I finished by cutting five more sections and several lengths of small limbs to use for kindling. I loaded the cart with the logs and pulled it toward

the cabin. The road was uphill. The wood was heavy. My thigh muscles strained to keep the cart rolling. I felt like an old mule must feel pulling a plow. Although I had tried to keep myself reasonably fit, and took no medication, my body wasn't what it once was. Tennis elbow, lumbosacral strain, trochanteric bursitis, rotator cuff tear, an old football knee. Something was always inflamed and sore, but I tried not to give in to it. My daddy taught me that.

Life at Little Creek, however, is physically taxing. I worry about how long Toni and I will be able to take care of the cabin and the land. I often think that if we could just get ten more years I would be satisfied. I have to keep telling myself, however, to accept what today will give me and to let tomorrow and next year take care of themselves. I guess that is what faith is about.

I stacked the wood by the gravel lane away from the cabin so termites and carpenter ants from the logs wouldn't infest the house. When finished, I stepped back and looked at what I had accomplished. It was just a woodpile, not a piece of sculpture or even a stone wall, but it was satisfying to see nonetheless. There is an adage that wood you cut yourself warms you twice—once when you cut it and once when you burn it. I would add a third time—when you see your ricks neatly stacked.

Thursday, October twentieth. A gray nippy morning. Through the window over the sink, I checked the thermometer and saw that it was thirty-eight degrees outside. Toni was still asleep with a comforter over her and Oscar. I went to my bathroom in the back of the cabin. My nose was cold. My breath condensed on the mirror. I brushed my teeth and put a cup of dog food in Oscar's dish, the salmon anchovy blend that Toni insists he prefers to the duck. In the kitchen, I started a pot of coffee, made it strong. Now it was time to build a fire to take the chill out of the air and reap the heat of my labor in the forest.

The wood-burning stove sits on a brick hearth in the middle of the main room, so the heat that radiates from it circulates throughout the cabin. The stove is a simple and efficient machine with no moving parts except its door. It is just a rectangular cast-iron box on legs with a flue that rises straight up through the ceiling to the chimney.

While I waited for the coffee, I adjusted the damper to let in air for combustion. On a bed of cold ashes, I made a nest of newspaper and kindling. I went to the woodpile

and selected two of the hickory logs I had cut. On the dam below, two whitetail does wearing dark winter coats grazed on the grass. For a few seconds, they looked up at me with their big eyes, and I looked down at them. Then, full of grace and beauty, they turned and loped into the woods. Nature is sleight of hand: now you see it, now you don't. I was sorry to have interrupted their breakfast, but grateful to have seen these creatures—if only for a brief moment.

Back inside, I lighted the paper and waited for the kindling to ignite. Soon a fire began to sizzle and pop. I laid on the hickory. Flames licked the logs and danced up the flue with a roar. Although I could feel its heat, the fire wasn't matter as other elements like stone and water are. Fire is a manifestation of matter changing forms. Oxygen and carbon molecules unite, and are transformed magically into something gaseous that gives off heat and light.

A fire can be beautiful or frightening, can bring you comfort or do you harm. In Vietnam I had seen flames from candles in a Cao Dai temple and flames from napalm in a scorched village. To Dante, hell was an inferno. To Shakespeare, love was a fire.

That morning I sat on the couch in front of the stove with its door open. I could see the flames, scintillating yellow, orange, and blue. The dark warm scent of hickory smoke filled the room. Heat came slowly into my body. I started my day warmed.

Daly Walker is a retired surgeon. His fiction has appeared in numerous literary reviews and anthologies including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Southampton Review*, *The Sycamore Review*, and *Faith Stories* edited by C. Michael Curtis.

His collection of short stories, *Surgeon Stories*, was published by Fleur-de-lis Press. His work has been short listed for *Best American Short Stories*, an O'Henry award, and was a finalist in Best American Magazine writing. "Fire" will appear in a soon-to-be published collection of his essays, *Little Creek: Finding Elemental Life in Brown County*. Daly divides his time between Bean Blossom, Indiana and Boca Grande, Florida.