

A Fire to Build

About a century ago a Santorini man parceled out a piece of land and built himself a small winery and a smaller home. The man stole marble from Ancient Thira, a Dorian city inhabited from the 9th century BC until 700 CE. He stole architectural details from the Venetian stonemasons of the Middle Ages. He added these pieces of other buildings to his own. Perhaps he took the marble and the moldings to lend his modest constructions the weight of the ages. Or perhaps he hoped to lend his creations an equivalency; my buildings are as important as yours were and as doomed to obsolescence as yours have proven to be. Or maybe he took them simply because they were there, lying in open fields or adorning the entrances of weathered ruins.

When he was finished building up, he went beneath the buildings and began to dig in. He teased an opening in the soft pumice and kept going until he hit basalt, which was a long way back. The cave housed his goats and sewage from the outdoor latrine on the terrace above. The cave has cubbies for light sources, nooks for seating and anterooms not altogether necessary. Perhaps the man stopped, imagined and augmented. Or maybe, as the story goes, he simply had a lot of goats and went on digging until his hand tool buckled.

A Fire to Build was installed at the back of this cave. A meter or so in front of the scarred basalt of the back wall stood two, one-eyed beings, emitting green laser beams into the edgeless darkness around them. Between them, atop a small stack of upended breezeblocks, was a prism, deviating and dispersing the two beams. The beings were also producing sound, neither as concentrated nor as coherent, in the form of the voice of a man and the voice of a woman.

He is speaking English. She is speaking Greek. They are both telling a story, the same story, though not at the same time. You get snatches, “cold,” “feet,” “matches,” “ice,” but neither can be heard distinctly above the other until your body cuts through one of the beams, shutting down one rendition and allowing the other to play on, distinct. The story instantly gains on you, the reader acquires a character, you begin to imagine the room the sound was recorded in (surely so unlike this one), and then you get curious. You step aside and ignite the other, lose the distinction, the story, and the character, the circumstances of the recording. You play between them; you even silence them both completely to leave nothing but the dank non-sound of the cave’s depth.

I read the Jack London story, “To Build a Fire,” a day or two later. Then I listened to it, read by a Californian guy on YouTube, a week after that. One line hurtled out at me, when our hero (if you can call him that) is just beginning to lose feeling in his cold, wet, appendages.

“The absence of sensation in his feet left him unrelated to the earth.”

A Fire to Build forced you to sensate with your feet alone, as they felt their way back over uneven ground, past piles of dust and decay to the only sources of light. For some moments, at

the midpoint between the weak, ambient light illuminating the cave's entrance and the vague green of the lasers at the cave's end, you had only the sensation in your feet and only your relation to the earth to guide you.

Some weeks later I visited Santorini's only natural water source, in a cave in the limestone mountain that is also the site of Ancient Thira's burial ground. I was with a friend and we sat in the near blackness listening to the stream falling and pooling before us. He got up, climbed over the pool and held his hand beneath the stream. When it stopped we heard another stream, higher in pitch, coming from the right of the pool, in another smaller cave. I moved to position myself between the two, to try and hear them both, distinctly, but they blended into incoherence and sounded as a single source.

Apparently "To Build a Fire" is about the conflict between man and nature. I read *A Fire to Build* the very same way, at first, as a necessary reminder of our unrelation to the earth. My time in the other cave, where two natural springs of water and their sound created a perfect echo of the work, led me instead to think about instinct vs. consciousness. When both are at play, neither can be heard distinctly. The dog (our hero's companion) has nothing but instinct, a foreboding that tells him that he and his master ought to be going nowhere on the morning that they set out. His master, who, by the narrator's estimation, ought to assess the temperature and the distance of his upcoming journey in terms of his own mortality and relative frailty, only observes the facts of the matter—employing neither instinct nor consciousness. Our hero is neither fully animal, nor fully man, and the net result is his untimely death.

Moving through *A Fire to Build* I tried to listen to the man narrating the story in English (no matter that he is a man, or that he is speaking in English) and I caught only snippets. I tried to listen to the woman narrating the story in Greek (again, no matter her gender nor language) and I caught only snippets. I had to block one stream to hear the other clearly.

Is BUCON telling us that the constant jabbering of both instinct and consciousness, within all of us, spells our ultimate doom? If they are, I think they may be right.