

Maxine Hong Kingston

THE FIFTH BOOK OF PEACE

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Alfred A. Knopf New York 2003

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TO VETERANS OF WAR,

VETERANS OF PEACE

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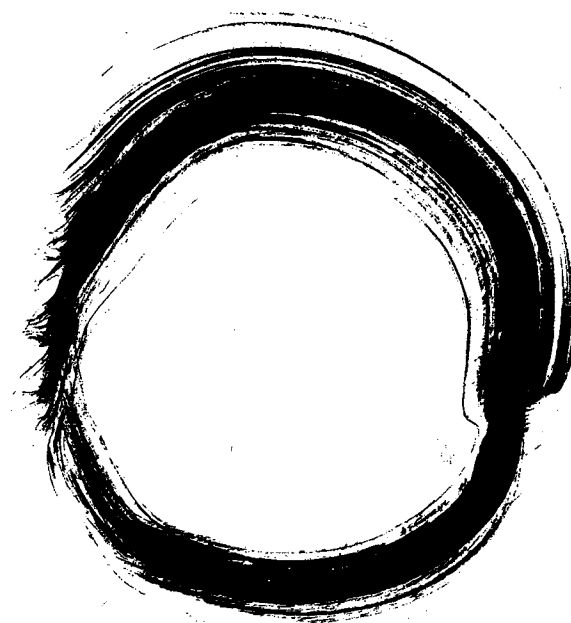
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FIRE

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If a woman is going to write a Book of Peace, it is given her to know devastation. I have lost my book—156 good pages. A firestorm blew over the Oakland-Berkeley hills in October of 1991, and took my house, things, neighborhood, and other neighborhoods, and forests. And the lives of twenty-five people.

I almost reached my manuscript, typescript, printouts, and disks in time. I was driving home from funeral ceremonies for my father. I have lost my father. He's gone less than a month; we were having the full-month ceremony early, Sunday day off. Never before had I driven by myself away from Stockton and my parents' house. I turned on public radio for the intelligent voices, and heard that the hills were burning, toward Moraga, toward Walnut Creek. It's not my poor sense of direction, I told myself, but the newscasters in confusion. The perimeters of the fire were different from station to station, from taped news to live news. North of the Caldecott Tunnel, south of the Caldecott Tunnel, east, west of the Warren Freeway. I pictured wildfire far up in the hills—ridgelines of flame spilling down, then running up sere-grass slopes. I have seen it at night—red gashes zigzagging the black. Impossible that it cross ten lanes of freeway and take over settled, established, built city.

Behind me, my sister-in-law Cindy was chasing me at ninety miles per hour. My family believed that I didn't know about the fire, and would drive into it, and not be able to find my way out on the altered, burning streets. Like all the Chinese members of our family, I have an instinct that left is right and vice versa. Too easily lost. Cindy, who is not Chinese but Arkie, ran out of gas at Tracy.

In a half-hour, halfway there, forty miles to go, I was speeding over the Altamont Pass (where there be ghosts and accidents; it is the ground

upon which the stabbing happened at the Rolling Stones concert, after Woodstock), and through the windfarms. Some windmills turned, and some were still. Here the winds and all seemed normal; I had no evidence that hurricanes of fire were storming on the other side of these hills but for the radio. "Forty-five houses have gone up in flames." "About a hundred homes." "A hundred and fifty structures have burned." The numbers would keep going up—nine hundred degrees, the temperature of molten lava; twenty-one hundred degrees, the temperature of kilns; thirty-five hundred houses. "Winds of forty-five miles per hour . . ." " . . . sixty-five-mile-per-hour firewind . . ." " . . . record heat and winds . . ." "Foehn winds." "Northeast winds . . ." I would have to look up "foehn," which sounds like "wind" in Chinese, as in "typhoon." "The fire has jumped the junction of Highway Twenty-four and Highway Thirteen." It's blown over and through ten lanes. Ten lanes are not wide enough firebreak. It's on our side of the freeway. " . . . dynamite College Avenue." " . . . draw the line at College Avenue." " . . . helicopters and available cropdusters chemical-drop the Claremont Hotel." "If the Claremont Hotel goes, explodes, the fire will burn to the Bay." "No cars have been trapped in the Caldecott Tunnel." Once, a propane truck had exploded inside the tunnel—a giant flamethrower pointed at Oakland.

NO TANK TRUCKS  
WITH HAZARDOUS MATERIALS  
ALLOWED IN CALDECOTT TUNNEL

A police car was parked sideways across my exit, Broadway Terrace. I drove fast to the next exit, which was blocked by a Highway Patrol car and flares. They are setting up the roadblocks moments ahead of me, I thought. If only I had driven faster, I might have saved the book, and my mother's jewelry, and my father's watch, and his spectacles, which fit my eyes, and his draft card, which I had taken from his wallet. "This card is to be carried on your person at all times." He carried it safely for over fifty years.

When I got off the freeway, I was somewhere in downtown Oakland, and driving too slowly through complicated traffic. It was the middle of the afternoon, about two o'clock. Too late. Too late. The sky was black. The sun was red. Leaves of burned black paper wafted high and low

among the buildings. Ashes from a forest fire were falling and blowing in downtown Oakland.

In the middle of my U-turn, the radio said that Broadway and/or Broadway Terrace was on fire, and that there was looting on Ostrander Street. Parallel streets—big Broadway Terrace for cars, little Broadway Terrace for walking—eucalyptus and pine trees and apple trees between them—a tree-high, two-street-thick wall of flame. Mass fire. I said out loud, "No. No. No. No." Ostrander is—was?—a one-way road through a small woods on a hill. On my walks to and from the Village Market, families of quail would surprise me. They walked ahead just so far, as if leading me, or as if I were giving chase, then took off running into the bushes, and flying up into the lower branches of the oaks and pines. Once, on Ostrander, I stood amazed at the center of a storm of birds—hundreds of robins, jays, and chickadees—flying touch-and-go, on and off treetops and roofs and grass, circling and crisscrossing singly and in schools, and never bumping into one another—better than the Blue Angels. I love looking out at Oakland and seeing a crane extend itself over the city. So—their flyway can sweep this far west, and they rest at Lake Merritt or Lake Anza or Temescal. Anne Frank saw cranes out the sky window. Another time, riding BART, as the train came up out of the Bay into Oakland, I saw twelve angels wheeling in the sun, rays of white wings and gold light. "Swans!" I said loudly; the other passengers had to see them too. "Look. Swans."

It can't be too late. All I want is a minute inside the house—run to the far end of the living room, to the alcove where my book is in a wine box, take one more breath, and run upstairs for the gold and jade that my ancestresses had been able to keep safe through wars in China and world wars and journeys across oceans and continents.

Where Broadway meets the start of College Avenue, at the California College of Arts and Crafts (where Wittman kissed Taña; but I'll get to that), only a few feet from the sign pointing up to Broadway Terrace, the police were herding cars down and away to College Avenue. I stopped at the light, left the car, and ran over to talk them into letting me through. Even though the light turned green, the line of cars I'd blocked did not honk; nobody yelled. I wished for a hand gesture to communicate Sorry, to use in traffic situations. Sorry. Thank you. I asked a policeman, "Are you absolutely sure I can't drive up there?" He answered that no cars were allowed past this point. I thought, May I go

to my house on foot, then? I got back in the car, drove diagonally across the intersection, and parked in the red-curb stop for the College Avenue bus. The police shouldn't write tickets on this terrible day. Twenty-eight dollars, worth it. Have mercy on this car that could very well have been left here by someone who had escaped the fire and was getting a drink of water, parking as close as she could to home.

I stood at the curb plotting how I was going to fade past the police, and got in step with an African American family with many children crossing the street. I told them I lived on Golden Gate Avenue and was trying to go up there; where did they live? They lived on Brookside, which winds around Golden Gate. I asked, "Were you officially evacuated? Has our area been officially evacuated yet?" They didn't know, but they had been back to their house. The father said, "The police will escort you home if you tell them you have a life-and-death situation." The mother said, "They drove us to our house." I asked, "What was the life-and-death situation you told them?" "We couldn't find our son. Our son was missing." The kids, all about junior-high age, were smiling and safe; I couldn't tell which was the one lost and now found. An unfinished book is nothing as important as a child. I told the family that I was trying to save the manuscript of a book I was writing. Said out loud in the open to actual people, who did not get excited, my plight did not seem to have enormity. "I've been working on it for years," I said. About one and a half to two years of pure writing, not counting thinking and imagining. Is one and a half to two years much? It depends on which years. Didn't Rilke write *The Duino Elegies* in six months? Or was it six hours one wide-awake night? He did it about ten years before his death at fifty-one. The happy family and I wished each other Good luck and Take care.

While the policemen—the Oakland cops aren't as big as during the Viet Nam demonstrations—were busy, I walked through the barricades into the defined fire area. Householders were staying, hosing down roofs and dry lawns. A flare of fire fell out of the sky and landed behind a man intent on watering his property. I motioned to him that he should look to his rear, but he stared at me as if I were a crazy woman, pointing at my own butt. I didn't try to shout over the helicopters; they chopped up sound and the air, and whupped up heartbeats. Anyway, only now, as I write, am I coming up with words for the things that were making wild appearances and disappearances. That flame went out; another fell out

of nowhere onto his roof. Even if he saw it, he couldn't have reached it with the spray from his garden hose. I ran on.

I felt afraid when there was not a person in sight. I ran up the center of the street, between the houses, locked up tight. I wanted to run faster, through and out of this deserted place. But I was trying to breathe shallowly. The car radio had said that poison oak was burning; I coughed, thinking of breathing poison-oak smoke, which must blister lungs. The air smelled poisonous—toxic polymers, space-age plastics, petrochemicals, refrigerants, Freon, radon. I am breathing carcinogens, I will die of lung cancer. I held my long white hair as a filter over my nose and mouth and ran at a pace that allowed me to control my wind. I passed side streets without deciding to turn left into one. Many streets end in culs-de-sac, or loop around. I would lose time backtracking out. I wished for a photographic memory to recall the map of this area in the *Thomas Guide*. But the *Thomas Guide* only blurredly indicates the snarl of these streets, lanes, paths, and steps; they curl around boulders and oak trees and Lake Temescal and hills. From now on, wherever I live, I will pay attention to which streets go through exactly where. Pages of ash were floating high up, and also skimming along curbs. I did not stop to try to read them. Someone once told me about a child who lived at the time of the burning of a great library. He caught pages of burned paper, and read Latin words. At Margarido, a long, wide street, I turned left toward the heat and fire. I hoped that I would see again the enormous old ginkgo tree that fountains up and up—wings, gold, autumn. I passed a man and a woman leaving their house, and a homeowner on his rooftop wetting it down. None of them could answer me: whether or not this street was officially evacuated. I arrived at the edge of the golf course, which was lined by a row of eucalyptus trees. Their tops were on fire. This is crown fire, and flames jumped from tree to tree. I imagined myself running under the eucalyptus trees, but, before I reached the open field, the trees dropping fire on my head, and me exploding. More eucalyptus trees lined the other side. (My husband, who should be at my side helping me, would tease, You're always afraid that things will explode. "Be careful," Earll mimics me. "Watch out. It's going to explode.") But I have seen and/or heard for myself the explosions of an automobile motor, a sewing-machine motor, my electric typewriter [a cat pissed in it], a toilet, mother spiders, tules. In Phoenix Park in Dublin, I made Earll get away before a dead cow, its big stomach



expanding, blew up.) Eucalyptus trees have big wood-cells filled with eucalyptus oil. The bangs I was hearing were houses, cars, and trees blowing up. If I made it across the golf course (Private Robert E. Lee Prewitt, the hero of *From Here to Eternity*, was killed on a golf course), I would come out at the corner of Broadway Terrace and Ostrander, amidst the fire and the looters. I turned about. Is this retreat, then, and am I giving up on my book? I let the possibility that the book was gone—my book gone—enter my ken. I did not feel bad; I did not believe it was lost. I had not stopped trying to rescue it. The same men were still watering down their houses, which their wives and children must have evacuated. The sky was darker now, and the air hotter. The sun was ugly red. (“Ugly red” are Judy Foosaner’s words; she’s a painter, we’re “friends since girls.” She was down in the flatlands, and watched the cars exploding up on the hills. I’d thought until she said “ugly red” that to a painter all colors were beautiful.)

Gravity sped me downhill, back to crowds and industrial-strength buildings. I found my red car—no ticket—and drove down College to Chabot Road, which was barricaded. Chabot Road was my familiar turn home. It was not right that it be an impasse. I left the car there, surprised at the free parking. Again, I became invisible to the police, and walked for home. This way seemed almost normal. I should have come up these known streets in the first place. As always, there was a stillness at St. Albert’s College; either the monks had evacuated the seminary, or they were staying hidden. You hardly ever see them in the garden or out on the tennis courts anyway. The atmosphere feels full of prayer. The row of elm trees—grandmother tree, grandfather tree—stood unharmed. This was the first tree seen by me as a child, and is more magnificent each time I find another one. Some people call them Chinese elms, some call them American elms. Here was a stand of nine elms, here before I was here, and meant to outlast me. I do not remember touching them, each one, the elephant bark, the horned-toad bark, the crocogator bark, as I usually do; I must have rushed past. Their jigjag leaves were a strong green, though October was ending, and my fiftieth year was ending.

The strange shifting light—the winds were blowing the weather and the time of day crazily up and down the street—stilled at St. Albert’s and started up again at Chabot Elementary, shadows swinging across the asphalt and through the cyclone fences, backstop, and jungle-gym bars.

Why do we raise children on ground barren of trees and grass? We are teaching them to endure a world like a cage, a jail.

Chabot Road tails up and off into hills and forests, and Golden Gate Avenue, my street, starts to its right. This corner—I am traveling northeast—is a natural border between man-built city and wildland. Flats and hills, chapparal and forest also meet here. All influenced by underground rivers, and by fault lines. The wind changes its blowing; the climate turns. At such a place, you enter and leave ecosystems. *Leina-a-ka-uhane*. I was at a border of the fire, the built city behind me, and ahead black ground. I walked onto it. I could disappear, I thought. If I had continued walking northeast, up the hill, I would’ve come to the place where the fire killed nineteen people. The slopes on either side of me had just burned. The ivy, dill, vetch, pampas plumes, and coyote bushes do not exist anymore, except in my mind.

I have been at controlled burns. Farmers weed fields by burning them down to fertile ash and black earth. The harvest fires in the cane fields run at you, and suddenly/stop. The burning kansaa, the prairie grass of Kansas, smells like baking bread. The Forest Service clear-cuts trees, then napalms, then seeds. Storms of wildfire are as normal as timely rain. The reason for this fire is five years of drought.

Golden Gate, my street, begins with a small cement bridge marked “Narrow Bridge,” which goes under a steel bridge for the BART train. It’s a wonderful surprise when, overhead, up in the air, the train appears out of the trees. The Concord line was not running today, the radio had said. The girders were smoking. Were they usually this red? Was the bridge rusty, or red hot? I stood still and thought about whether I should go under it. The metal could melt or crumble, the loosened structure break apart, drop, and hit me on the head. I only worried for my head, had not a thought for other parts of my body. The head looks out for itself. I needed to see around a bend to look for my house. I didn’t see any houses on the other side of the bridges, but wasn’t sure if you ever could from here anyway. I threw myself straight forward, and felt the heat from above. I ran through a gigantic kiln, which has since recurred in nightmares: I am flying up into the hot ceiling, and can’t wake up. The concrete walls that support the trains and the freeways boxed me in. I was a long time under the BART rails, then under Highway 24 West, then Highway 24 East, then Broadway—immense wide slabs of con-

crete and steel that could fall and squash me entirely, like the Cypress Freeway, which “pancaked” thirty-five cars and the people inside them during the earthquake two Octobers ago.

I came out into a changed world. Its color had gone out. Its dimensions had stretched away here, shrunk there. New mountains and canyons vistaed as far as I could see. To my left, close beside me, a mountain appeared, terraced with streets on which burning cars sat on every level. To my right, below, opened a canyon; I could see its entire contours—a black, defoliated wedge. The canyon contains just the College Prep School, has held it from harm. Clean two-by-fours at roof angles poked up to the canyon’s rim, where I was standing. The frame of the gym or auditorium they were putting up had not burned; they could keep on building it. Suppose I were to go on, take myself farther into the fire scene—might I see my house, earn it, cause it to be, after all, there? What with the tricky distances, beyond the next turn could very well be my house. Walking in the center of the street, I stepped over power lines. I was entering a black, negative dimension, where things disappeared, and I might disappear. The only movement and color were flames. I sidestepped burning logs that had flown here; they must have been chunks from houses. The houses cast off logs before falling into ashes. Suddenly, I saw a whole two-story house with high-peaked roof—I have never seen this house before, not from this side; I was looking at it through invisible, gone houses—an enormous house standing squarely inside a flame. A red-orange diamond enshrouded the house, the crystal within a crystal. So—a house can burn all at once, not simply be eaten away corner by corner.

I kept looking down at my feet to puzzle my way through the tangles of power lines, and looking up at a wavery, flickering, blinking scene. What I wanted to see, what used to be, popped in and out of sight, alternated with the real. The hot ground was reeking mirages that cheated the eye with bleary illusions. A thing would appear—a chimney, an oldened wrought-iron gate, a ceramic pot—but it did not cue the next thing, the thing that should be attached to it (house, fence), to appear. Things were out of the order that was in my mind. Memory was off. If only I had paid better attention—I have to be more awake—I would not be losing the detailed world. One more bend, and yet one more bend, but my cedar-shake roof did not rise into sight.

I came upon and recognized a tiny white house with wood siding,

which looked water-stained or chemical-stained. The poorest house in the neighborhood has survived. I hadn’t met its latest owners; it was always changing hands. This small house on a corner lot was affordable entry into our good neighborhood and the housing market. The houses to the side of it and in back of it were gone, and it now seemed to have a huge yard. Happiness rushed back and forth between it and me. The tiny house nicely fit its place in my mind, and gave me my bearings. My house, the next smallest, should be at the other end of this curving, winding block, with only the crest of the hill in the way.

A fireman was pattering with a long yellow fire truck, parked beside the stone retaining wall that held an upswooping street and a hillside of houses. I could not see if any houses were still up there. The fireman did not warn me from stepping through the mess of wires and cables and flat hoses, black serpents and white serpents that had fought, and lay slain. I tiptoed amongst them. Jackstraws—one touch, misstep, trip, and be zapped. I made it across the street—a wire did not wake up and jump me—to say Hi to the fireman. It takes this much upheaval for me to get over shyness. I thought of saying but didn’t say, “What a mess, huh?” or ask, “How’re things going? Is your truck broken? Where are the other firefighters? Do you know where the main fire is? Why are you here all by yourself?” He might feel embarrassed. I did not bother him with inquiry after my address either. We stood quiet together awhile. I asked, “Which direction did you come from?” He said, “It came down that way, very fast,” pointing northeast, up at the hills. “And blew back up, then down again from over there.” At my house. The firefighters had taken a stand at my intersection. The fire almost surrounded them, fire in back, then in front of them. They retreated to this rampart. We were standing at the wall of our devastated city. “We didn’t get water up here.”

The fireman did not stop me. I went on. A bicyclist got off his bicycle to walk alongside me. We hesitated at a maze and thicket of power lines, some piled waist-high and others dangling eye-high. Where to straddle over, where to limbo under? The street was webbed in knots and nets of lines. I remembered learning in Latin class that the triton-and-net was the most dangerous weapon, the one to choose for war games and war. In dreams where I try to fly, I am halted by electrical lines, which shoot ahead of me and cut off the free sky. Where had such a plethora of lines dropped from? Our utilities weren’t buried under-

ground, but the sky had never seemed hatchmarked and crisscrossed. Through the knot, I saw Mrs. Fessler's Karmann Ghia. Its paint had been seared from red to white. Tears of melted glass hung from the windows, the eyeholes of a baboon skull. Cables draped like black hair over its low forehead and weeping eyes; the interior was a black hollow. The tires were gone, burned off. Where is Mrs. Fessler? She is all right, please. She was at church; or her son came for her, and they drove off in his car. The simmering ground was flat, no mound of ashes that could be a small human body. There—another recognizable house: the house-in-the-gully—how many lots away from mine is it?—crouched under the flames, and had made it, alive. So—firewinds blow over the top of the earth. You can see why people lived in tunnels in Viet Nam and Okinawa. (But months ago we bulldozed the desert sand into the trenches, and buried Iraqi soldiers alive. I had read an impossible number—seventy thousand. “A turkey shoot.”)

The fire had reached from the foot to the armpits of the phone poles; crossbars were hanging by a burning arm. Atop its white metal flagpole, higher than the utility poles and away from trees, on a mound in a clearing, was the American flag, limp and singed, but still there. Its primary colors (which don't occur much in nature) had dulled, scorched in the dark air. The wind stopped; I might have been in the eye of its swirl.

I have ambivalence about the Flag. It is a battle flag, a war flag, and I don't like being patriotically roused and led to war. The Red, White, and Blue stands for competition and nationalism. I want it to stand for peace and cooperation. I get scared of my fellow Americans' going crazy as it waves. Because of that dramatic unburned American flag, our part of the fire would keep appearing in the news. A CNN reporter called our area a “picturesque burnscape.” A reporter for a college paper interviewed me, and translated my burbling: “So, you saw the Flag, and realized that you transcended the fire.” I was dismayed—he was a writer, yet locked inside the Flag symbol: You have the Flag, you win.

I did not have a sudden moment of knowing that my house and all that was in it were no more. I stood there reasoning, If I can see that flag from here, then I am also looking through the place where my house was. I was laying eyes on it without registering which piece of blackened land amidst all this blackened land was exactly my piece. The landscape

was utterly changed. I had come to the ash moon of a planet that passes through the sun.

I had flown a flag too, a white dove on a sky-blue silk field, UN colors plus orange beak, green leaves, brown branch, brown eye. I appliquéd and embroidered two peace flags at the beginning of my country's continuing war against Iraq, and hung one out the upstairs front window, the other out the side, toward the peaceful neighbor, to hearten her. Christina Simoni was the only other neighbor who put up peace signs, made on her home computer: across the top of the picture window, EVERY SOLDIER IS SOMEBODY'S SON; and across the bottom, OR DAUGHTER. She was answering President Bush, who made a speech—“our boys”? “our sons”? “our side”?—that didn't make sense, wasn't true, so I forget it. He kept ejaculating, “Euphoria!” On another day of our country's mad fit, Christina hand-lettered a new poster—WAR IS NOT AN ENERGY POLICY. We were two households with such ideas, amidst neighbors who tied the trees and poles and gates with yellow ribbons. The giant eucalyptus tree at our crossroads was tied. Some middle of the night, it was untied (not by me), and never retied.

My Book of Peace is gone.

Suddenly, I felt rushing at me—this fire movie is about to run in reverse; smoky ghosts will hurry backward into rising houses and trees, refill them, and pull them upright—I felt coming into me—oh, but here all along inside chest and stomach and all around me and out of the smoking ground—Idea. Idea has weight and life; I can feel it. Ideas are pervious to firebombs, which shoot through them without harming them. Americans own too many things. I can feel Idea because I am thingless, and because of my education, thinking, reading, meditation. I heard the monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh say the Five Wonderful Precepts, which are the moral foundation of Buddhism. Having ethics, even intentions and aspirations, turns you in the right direction, toward some lasting idea about good. I am a manifestation of Idea, food that makes blood, bones, muscles, body, self. I stood alive in the fire, and felt ideas pour into me.

I know why this fire. God is showing us Iraq. It is wrong to kill, and refuse to look at what we've done. (Count the children killed, in “sanctions”: 150,000, 360,000, 750,000. “Collateral damage.” The counts go up with each new report. We killed more children than soldiers. Some of

the children *were* soldiers.) For refusing to be conscious of the suffering we caused—the camera-eye on the bomb went out as it hit the door or roof at the center of the crosshairs—no journalists allowed, no witnesses—we are given this sight of our city in ashes. God is teaching us, showing us this scene that is like war.

I'm not crazy; I'm not unpatriotic. People who've been there, who saw Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the A-bombs, the Ong Plain and Hué after the firefights, compared our fire to war. Oakland Fire Captain Ray Gatchalian, Asian American, Green Beret, Viet Nam vet, Panama vet, said, "When I went up in the helicopter the day after the fire, I couldn't even film, I was so stunned. You have to remember, I went to Mexico City after the earthquake where hundreds and thousands of people were displaced, but when you see your own environment, people you know, whose homes were burned to the ground, I was stunned, in total shock. That day, one house burned every five seconds. Seeing it the next morning, it brought me back to the shock and horror of Vietnam. When I looked down on the devastation that day, I thought what an opportunity this would be to bring busloads of people and busloads of children and tell them where we, as a country, decide to go to war against somebody, this is what we are going to get. When we decide to send our military and our bombs into a country, this is what we're deciding to do."

My Book of Peace is gone. And my father is gone. Fatherless. And thingless. But not Idea-less.

My father is trying to kill me, to take me with him. At this morning's funeral fires, we burned gifts and provisions for him, but it was not enough, and he's angry. He wants more—my book, all my books, my house, and neighborhood—and is taking more—my cities, Berkeley, where I teach, Oakland, where I live. In the incinerator at the Chinese Cemetery, we burned blank paper to him, a symbol of everything, like money. He wants writing, and real things. (In the Ur-draft and again just now, I typed "tings," which is my name, Ting Ting, my father-given name.) This heat that covers me and my territory from hot ground up to the sun is anger, the anger that had been one man's task to civilize. Now that my father is dead, this energy is loose.

It discharged out of his too-old body, which had no illness but time, leapt sky-high, and divebombed earthward, me-ward. My father is now

part of the father-god of the Americas, who hunts his children, spears and fishes for us with his lightning yo-yo. BaBa is not focusing his terrible new death powers. He is carpet-bombing. He can't catch me, small and alone, driving and running here and there, Stockton, Oakland, back and forth across the Berkeley-Oakland border. I had taken belongings most full of his mana. He wants back his spectacles, which fit my eyes, his wristwatch, his draft card, the Cross pen that I had given him, the brass spindle for spiking gambling tickets and laundry tickets, the bamboo match extender-holder he invented for lighting firecrackers. His brass ashtray from the 1939 World's Fair. I had made an arrangement of these things on my kitchen desk, and they'd evoked him. But mostly he wants my book. "I have always wanted the life you have." My father started saying that to me when I became a published, paid writer. He was wishing to have many poems come to him, and to have readers. My mother—Brave Orchid—tried scolding him into poetry: "You used to be a poet. Where are the poems, poet?" He would wonder, "How is it that I can like poems so much, but can't write them anymore?" In China, he had written six tomes of poetry, "each one this thick." My mother held up her hand, thumb and forefinger wide apart. Poetry comes out of the country—the ground and the people—but he couldn't hear the voices so well in America as in China.

At the blanketing ceremony three weeks ago, we, his children and children-in-law, two by two, everybody married, holding a piece of printed cloth between us, walked up to the coffin and spread it over his body. We blanketed him with layers and layers of colors and flowers as in a fairy tale. I put the fountain pen my son had given me into BaBa's breast pocket. Then Earl and I pulled the coverlet up to his chin; it felt like being young parents again, tucking the baby into bed.

Today was the day for wearing red. I was wearing my new red carnelian necklace through the fire. MaMa had told us to spend about \$20—"a lot of money"—on something beautiful and red to wear on this day. Shopping, keeping an eye out for red, you see it everywhere you go, and get pulled back into life. At a death, you don't want to live anymore; you want to follow the dead, loved person. Finding and buying a red object, you leave the black and white of the grave. Get up, get out of the house, live. A ray of sunlight lit on the necklace in the gemologist's window, and I walked straight into the shop and bought it, though it was twice \$20. At this morning's ceremonies, we wore red blouses

and red shirts, red vests (vest, *boy sum* in Chinese, “heart protector”), red ties, red hats. We compared who bought what, for how much, and the shades that people consider red, such as hot pink. MaMa tied bunches of juniper leaves with red ribbon, the crinkly paper kind that squiggles and curls. They were for us, the daughters and daughters-in-law, to wear in our hair. My youngest sister, Corrinne, tied hers across the top of her head, and looked like a Santa elf. She has some silver hair; we all have silver hair now. I pulled mine into a ponytail, attached the juniper and red curls over an ear; our mother would not be able to scold me for having too much hair and wearing it wild. My other sister, Carmen, said that in her next lifetime she will have thick hair: the hairpins and juniper hurt her scalp. She got scolded for wanderfooting about the cemetery looking for the lost grave of our great-uncle the river pirate. Heeding the rituals argued out by the constantly scolding old women from China—wear hoods and sashes, black hoods; no, white hoods; no, black hoods; eat, bow, eat, bow; no, not toward the chicken, you stupid *ho jee* boy, toward your father; buy yellow candy; no, not lemon drops, you stupid *ho jee* girl, Brach’s butterscotch—turning in the directions that you’re pushed and pulled—you infer Heaven. Its distance from Earth is a month’s walk away. Kneeling in the grass, my kind cousin-in-law from China instructed us, who were standing, “Say bye-bye to BaBa, *la*.” The movements of ceremonies indicate the direction and timing for escorting BaBa on his journey away from us to another, farthest-away home. For twenty-seven days and nights, he has been climbing and clambering up a steep mountain, the back of a dragon. He scrabbles forward, turns about and walks backward, and sees us again, eats with us, and looks down at the earth and the trees that he planted. He is lonely, missing his body, and us. Our every wish against his leaving makes it hard on him. We have to persuade him on and on. Climb the mountain, go through the double door into the sky, all the great nothing.

We shouldn’t have let them push him screaming into the MRI machine. I hope he was not hallucinating that he was being tortured, that Immigration had caught him. The tube for wafting oxygen under the nostrils, then the light plastic mask had been enough; we should have declined the loud respirator, which pumped air into him. How to breathe like Buddha when the machines are forcing you? They tied his wrists and ankles with strips of cloth to the bed rails. He had been racing

in and out of doors, from room to room, up and down the basement stairs, back and forth and around on the paths of his garden, unconscious of us and this reality. He was searching for something, lost money that he himself had hidden. He said, “I don’t understand where I could have put my birthday money—ninety gold pieces.” Carmen had given him a silver dollar for each of his years; he called this treasure “gold.” A White nurse said, “It took three of us to hold him down. And one was a big Black man.” His eyes were shut tight. With a foot of slack in each rope, he kept moving, arms rowing, legs pedaling. I held his right hand; my brother Norman held his left hand; he pulled us both along. My hand covered his; when he taught me to write and draw, his hand had covered mine. I said to him, the last words I said to him were, “Okay, okay. You rest now, BaBa. Rest. You have been a good BaBa.” Too late to discuss any bad fathering. Norman also said, “Rest, BaBa.” We didn’t know the Chinese word for “relax.” Maybe there isn’t one. I considered “I love you,” but that would be an American sentiment unnatural for me to express, and for him to hear/I should have said: “Thank you, BaBa, for working hard for us. We love you.”

These ideas—that the fire is to make us know Iraq, and that my father caused the fire—came to me when I stood still in the center of devastation. For 360 degrees, everything was flattened except chimneys, columns of chimneys two and three stories high. Each burned-away house had left its tombstone. (In the earthquake the October before last, chimneys fell into piles of bricks beside standing houses.) Hearth-and-flue out in the open looked like the incinerator for communicating with the dead. All around me, in valleys and on the hillsides, were hundreds of entrances and exits between worlds. The way to the other place is wide open, and it has many, many mouths, consuming our things, and us, and issuing visions and thoughts.

You can send messages and gifts to people who have died. My mother, Brave Orchid, says to write the deceased’s name on the package, and “c/o Seiji Goong Goong.” Seiji seems to be everyone’s grandfather, a kind of postman who delivers mail in Heaven. “Send whatever you like,” she instructs. “You can even write letters and poems.” Then you burn them in the incinerator at any Chinese cemetery, not necessarily the one at French Camp. Your addressee doesn’t have to be buried there or be Chinese. Postmaster Grandfather Seiji will know where to find him. My mother most approves of sons’ sending things to fathers

and grandfathers. Women's offerings seem to get routed to in-laws. She scolded me and my sisters for participating in the burning of the gold-and-orange leis that we had origami'd and strung. "You shouldn't have burned the paper. It's not your business to burn paper." Behind Mom's back, Corrinne, who is a lawyer, and I passed the spangly train hand to hand into the fire. The boxes of air whiffed into flames.

It was a mistake to have the red ceremony today—too early. We did it just because Sunday is convenient. We shouldn't have hurried our father. BaBa had three more days on this side of the sky door, and so he set fire to Oakland and Berkeley. We burned paper in a small fire in the walkway in front of his house, and jumped over it; he was not to have followed us. The Berkeley-Oakland fire will burn for three days.

From a side street rode another man on a bicycle. Now a bicyclist was protecting me on either side. "Are you all right?" this one asked. I must not have been looking all right. How to answer him? I could not tell the news that my father was dead, and what's more have to explain that he had not been killed by the fire. Nor did I feel like pointing out the black space—right there—that had been my house and possessions. It would make me cry to talk about the neighbors and our *communitas*. We had blind-chosen one another at random, and were not trying for it, but we'd gathered a community. It is over. No more chances to improve on and appreciate what we were. Too late. I never joined the Christmas caroling organized by peaceful Christina next door. I hadn't gone to any of Randy and Sue's Halloween open houses. They went door to door inviting one and all to come trick-or-treat and party. They carved three dozen jack-o'-lanterns, flights of jack-o'-lanterns that lit every step of their cement stairway, which is that pyramid next to the flagpole. Last year, vandals knocked, kicked, threw the pumpkinheads into the street, where cars ran over them. I hoped that Sue and Randy and their kids had been planning to set up the Halloween House next week. Los Días de los Muertos. Ching Ming in October. The wind that came with me out of the Valley and over the hills and Mount Diablo was the east wind, the Diablos.

I answered the bicyclist, "I was working on a book. It's lost." How strange, the book was the loss bearable to say. "I lost my book," I said to a

stranger, just met. He tapped me on the forehead and said, "You're alive, and it's up here." I decided to take this touch of a human finger to be a blessing upon me, and his words to be testimony. I can trust a bearded man with silver hair like mine, a veteran of my own age and times, to tell it as it is. But he wasn't right on. It's not up here in my head; I feel Idea at center, heart, stomach. And it is all around and underfoot.

The other man, who had been walking his bicycle alongside me, asked, "Do you want a ride on my bike? May I give you a ride?" I reached for the Coke cup attached to a handlebar. He said that the water was dirty, and proffered me a wet facecloth, and again a ride. I covered and wiped my face, wanted to suck on the cloth but did not. I got up sidesaddle on the crossbar; we did not wobble and topple like kids pump-riding. The bike turned heavily back toward the way we had come, and I rode face forward, carried through hot wind, coasting downhill above the Bay and the white city at its edge, like a mirage. I was above the devastation. So—these streets were named Golden Gate and Ocean View because there was a time, and now again, when you could see the bridges, the islands, the ocean, Mount Tamalpais. I felt high up in the sky. It was full of birds and helicopters hauling bags of water, like storks bringing babies.

The bicycle ran over power lines. The tires rolled over them without a sizzle. We did not get electrocuted. The rubber tires were good enough insulation. The power was off; the firefighters couldn't get water up here because the electronic pumps were burned dead. Transformers had blown up. I felt safe, going back over territory I'd already explored. And nothing left to burn. I looked for but did not find Olde English "A"s painted on the street. Two World Series in a row—it's a tradition—neighbors painted green-and-yellow "A"s in the middle of the road and on garage doors.

Moving easily past my neighbors' property, I thought about dead bodies; I looked at the ashes for shapes of bodies. The ashes were flat, and the chimneys and black trees stood bare. I heard the ground crackling and simmering. Twenty-two people were murdered days ago in Killeen, Texas, and twenty-five people would be killed in this fire. My mind was already working out the numbers, and the morality of fire vis-à-vis massacre. Even if the number of people killed is about the same, our fire is not as bad, not tragic, because not evil; fire is morally neutral,



an accident, a storm of nature. But what about that poor soul who shot twenty-two people in Luby's Cafeteria? Could he help it that a firestorm raged through his brain?

I got another look at Mrs. Fessler's Karmann Ghia, and saw her chimney from basement on up; the wide firebox was held by a narrow column of bricks above and below it. The floors are gone. The grove of Monterey pines and redwoods is gone. Mr. Fessler died some months ago; he did not have to see this. Vera Fessler was born about eighty years ago in Turkistan, raised in China, and educated at Berkeley. She and her husband, chemist and oenologist, also at Berkeley, used to take walks many times a day. The quality of life is high where elders can walk as they like, and bid everyone Good morning, Good afternoon, and Good evening. Mrs. Fessler wore her ancestral jewelry, which featured words, Chinese pictographs and Finnish runes, wrought in jade, gold, and seashells. She flew the black-eagle flag of the Romanovs. Her floor had fleur-de-lis tiles in honor of her French ancestors. My neighbor on the other, Ocean View side, Eva Varga, was also a "widow"; she came from Austria or Switzerland, and was often calling my attention to my trees branching over and dropping needles down her chimney. Next to the old couple lived a young couple, whose baby girls were born here—twins! The first time they came trick-or-treating, they saw me—long white hair, Chinese face and skin, black dress—and gaped, eyes and mouths wide open. One twin asked, "Are you a real one?" The other twin, speechless, handed me her bag of candy. She was propitiating me, a witch. I answered, "Yes, I am a real one." Halloween is for the children to go out and meet strangers. "A good one," I added, "I am a good one," and gave these identical baby chicks lots of candy and smiles. We were integrated in a way that I've not seen in other places: rich people and not-so-rich people lived side by side. Big houses were hodgepodged with little houses, a villa next to a cottage, a mansion next to a bungalow. Some of us were owners, and some were renters. We did have a go-around once with a petition to zone out renters, but few people signed it. Now I am passing the empty site of a house where many African American adolescents lived and visited. Another Black family, also with many relatives and friends, lived on the other side of the big eucalyptus tree; their house was famous for its Julia Morgan roof, yellow tiles arranged like snake scales, like sea sand. Counting me, we were at least

one person-of-color per block. Not bad for Rockridge, which had once had a law: "No person of African or of Japanese, Chinese, or any Mongolian descent will ever be allowed to purchase, own, or even rent a lot in Rockridge or live in any house that may be built there except in the capacity of domestic servants of the occupant thereof."

With my back to the bicyclist, I did cry. I was proud that no other loss but the community made me cry.

I saw again the house that was a flame inside a flame. The house was prey, wholly swallowed by an orange translucent python.

Now that I'm on the move, the bicycle moving, the wind and the scene moving, is Idea still here? I'd forgotten to keep noticing Idea. Yes, it's here, I can feel it, a solidity at the center. But would it exist if I were killed? What if "Idea" were just my life, me feeling my life? (Be extra careful of my life.) Can ideas really exist as cloudsouls, hovering, waiting to be breathed in? I'm the only one who knows about and works on the Book of Peace. Its idea depends on me—small, slow, forgetful. Things gone, Idea remains. Old Father Williams said, "No ideas but in things." I'm saying, "No things but in ideas." The bicycle wheels went round and round, birds were circling, and my thoughts were going around. "No things but in ideas." "No ideas but in things." Things—red wheelbarrows, white chickens, rainwater—all gone, Idea remains. Ideas *cause* things. I am alive because of Idea. A book exists before its words. Remember. An actuality surrounds and permeates words and things, and exists in their absence.

Needing instruction—a law of poetry—on how to bring into being word and world, one of my hands let go of the handlebar, and reached for my *Collected Williams*, which had been on the right side of the middle shelf of poetry books. I keep making that reaching gesture toward books that aren't there anymore. Another of my post-fire symptoms is that I can't read.

Very high up, in the good air, birds that seemed entirely black or blackened were wheeling in tight circles and wide circles, clockwise and counterclockwise. The birds were of various sizes and species. Turkey buzzard, hawk, crow, pigeon. The straight-flying birds, goose, mallard, are behaving weirdly, whirling. Aristophanes' Whirl. *Whirl is king*. What happened to the birds at Lake Temescal—the great blue heron that stood hunch-shouldered on low branches, the red-faced goose-duck, Big

Red, who lived under the willow tree, the cormorants and the wood-duck coots? I pictured mass fire sloshing up and down the basin, and the lake boiling.

We rode through a black-and-white *Guernica* of trees—black skeletons; negatives of trees, caught in poses of agony, killed and reaching for air. Unable to run, they clawed upward, begging, praying. They died in fear. The fire had filled all this space; it had covered the trees. It was now racing wherever the sirens were screaming.

I passed again the little house that changes hands. A side had burned off of it. From my perch, I saw through the balusters on top of the retaining wall that the houses on the hill had not burned. I waved to the lone fireman with the truck. I said, "Thank you. Goodbye." He said, "Good luck. Take care."

Here I come—Samantabhadra, bodhisattva of contemplated action, charging on her flying elephant, bicycling out of the smoke—out of dreams and thoughts into action. Right action is effortless. See? No pedaling. You get help. Samantabhadra crosses the wide boundary from imagination to deeds.

I was returned to College Avenue and my red car. I appreciated the unburned city, its hard planes and solids, the straight lines, the bright logos that label and advertise each thing so there's no mistaking what it is and what it's for. The loud artificial colors excited happiness in me. I shook hands with the man who had given me the bike ride. He was Ed Murphy, an employee of the city of Oakland; he had red hair, and his bicycle was red with whitewall tires. Baskets, clips and clamps, and brackets were attached to the bike both back and front, accessories of his own invention.

I drove to friends' houses. Nobody home. I drove back and forth across Berkeley, North Side, South Side, and told myself the L.A. joke: You can always live in your car; you can't drive a house. I had a bag of funeral food in the back seat. I sat waiting on friends' doorsteps; nobody came. Two men with beards offered me their studio: "Come inside. Make yourself at home. Use the telephone." They left, trusting me with their place and valuables. The TV was on loud; the fire in cool red-orange miniature was on every channel except one, which was broadcasting a football game. The on-off power button was nowhere to be found, nor any wire from TV to wall plug. I muted the volume.

I called my mother. I couldn't call my husband; I didn't have Earl's

current number memorized. He was in Virginia doing Chekhov, playing Sorin in *The Seagull*. Typical: he's playing; I'm working. I shouldn't be calling MaMa with bad news; but upon hearing her say, "What's wrong?" I blurted out, "MaMa, my house burned away. My house is all gone. I'm all right." She reacted the same as when I woke her and told her BaBa had passed on. (I heard a man's voice announce in my sleep, "Your father has passed on," just before Carmen phoned and said, "BaBa has died.") MaMa had sat bolt upright, held body, hands, face tight, big eyes wide, and said, "I am so glad. I am glad." All is as she wills it. "He is a lucky, lucky man. He suffered for only two and a half days and nights. He didn't suffer. He was entirely healthy. His every drop of spit was clean. There was nothing wrong with him. He walked to Jene Wah and played pai gwut, and walked home. He played very well; everyone said so. Then he went unconscious. No use my accompanying him to the hospital." She hadn't seen him for his last two and a half days. He was already gone; he wasn't himself. "He did not die of an illness. He died of age. He died of time." She talked on and on, leaving me no room to say how I felt. "I am glad." O well-gone. Now she said, "I'm so very glad he didn't live to worry about you in the fire."

"The entire house, MaMa, and everything in it. Burned away. All gone. My writing too. My book that took years of work." People throughout the building must be hearing me yell Chinese. I yelled into the phone and her ear; her sight and hearing were fading. She's going deaf because she really doesn't care to hear me, or anyone. She likes to talk, not listen, even to music or Books on Tape. "Oakland and Berkeley are on fire, thousands of houses, cities, burning right now, MaMa, and the firemen can't stop it. People have been killed." Chinese don't say "burn up" or "burn down"; the idioms for "die" have to do with "up" and "down."

"I'm glad. I'm glad," she kept saying. "I'm so glad it wasn't you. The house doesn't matter. Things don't matter. Don't *hun* things." *Hun* is the very sound and word for pain at loss. "Hunger" must come from that same groan from the guts.

"I almost got there in time, MaMa. I tried to save everything. The books. My book. The jewelry, your jade bracelet, the one with the brown flecks." Like the age spots on her hands. "And the three jade bracelets Joseph brought from China." They cost pennies, but my son, her grandson, had bought them. "And the gold necklaces."

"Don't *hun* things."

"And BaBa's coins, and his eyeglasses, and his watch. And the jade heart." Jade pendants pacify the breathing, and jade bracelets calm and protect the pulse.

"Why were you keeping so much jewelry in the house? Money belongs in the bank, and the jewelry in the bank room."

The money was BaBa's loose change. "Any day now, I was going to roll it up, change it to paper, and bring the money to you." There had been \$300 in quarters, nickels, dimes, and Susan B. Anthonys. My father-in-law also had Susan B. Anthonys strewn and cached throughout the house and car. I hope toward the end I won't go crazy over money. Oh, I see: the Chinese for "buck" is *mun*, ten bucks, ten *mun*, as in "money." Must be.

I can't say numbers to my mother. No matter what the price, she yells at me, "Too much." No matter where I go, "Too far." I've been tricking her for years with small maps and globes. "See, MaMa? It's very near, less than one inch from Stockton."

I confessed, "Remember the pure true gold ring that Grandfather won at the Gold Rush?"

"You lost it."

"I had a plan, MaMa. My plan was: first, run for my work, run into the front room, save my book, then run upstairs for your jewelry. I couldn't accomplish any part of the plan. I took too long reaching the house, and it was all burned when I got to it. I drove and ran as fast as I could. But. It was too late." I said "but" in English. Chinese does not have such a strong adversative, or it's rude to use one.

"Your BaBa saved you!" she yelled. "He kept you busy and safe here. If not for him, his funeral, keeping you home in Stockton, you—I know you—you would have been in a cloud of reading or a cloud of writing. The house burns, the city burns, you wouldn't notice. Sirens go off, you don't hear, you don't wake up. Smoke and gas fill the air, you don't smell it."

"I was going to run inside the house."

"Wey! It might have fallen on you. And exploded. Your BaBa saved your life."

Now, that's the right way of seeing my father, not the father-god of the Americas who hunts his children and burns things with his anger, but BaBa, who used his funeral to save my life.

"Ah!" my mother continued. "I see why your sisters and brothers sat

quiet, not having conversations, not doing anything, sitting and sitting into the afternoon. They were worrying over you. I asked, 'Why aren't you talking? What's the matter with you? Everybody gone quiet. If you don't have anything more to say, leave. Don't stay in this terrible, barbarian, wild neighborhood. What are you waiting for?' They said they were waiting for Cindy. I saw her hurry out. She went to look for you, didn't she? They were trying to trick me. George's family went home, came back. Norman's wife left, visited her sister, came back. Joe came home off work, quiet. He knew about your fire. And his wife had driven off fast to catch you." My youngest brother Joe works communications at the Stockton Police Department, the same work that he did in Viet Nam, dispatching cop cars like deploying ships, planes, and helicopters. "They just now left, family by family. The little kids were also too quiet. It's not like them, and it's not like your brothers and sisters to be together and not talking."

My brothers and sisters and I started conversations nearly half a century ago, and are continuing them. When each one was born—another one of us!—we urged language out of him or her as soon as possible, to tell memories about the life and world before this one. So much to ask and say about this world too, we talk all at once, loudly giving one another our ongoing takes and views. In English, we discuss Mom and Pop, and protect one another. At parties, we get back in our huddle of siblings, leaving out everybody else, husbands, wives, parents, children, and friends. One of our children, Cher, said, "You're not just happy to see one another, you're really, really happy." Six like minds. All sane.

"They were sad from walking the mountain today," I said. "They were thinking of BaBa."

"No, they were thinking of you."

I liked very much hearing that my noisy family stilled in imagination of me. All along, I'd been held in their minds. It must have been terrible for them, having lost their father, and possibly now me, eldest sister.

"Where are you?" my mother asked. "Come home."

Simultaneously, I was saying, "So—they've all left. Are you alone, MaMa?"

"Of course, I'm alone. Who wants to be with me? Old dying woman. Who would stay with me forever? Nobody."

She's been going out into the garden and yelling at the sky, scolding BaBa for leaving her. She has called herself an old dying woman my