

ON FIRE

—for those in Paradise, California, who lost their homes and businesses in the 2018 Camp Fire

We who have the luxury are living like prisoners inside our houses, keeping busy watering houseplants, reading fire updates, and burying ourselves under covers while looking through a bedroom window to see beneath the toxic layers of smoke a woman in a black suit trudging up the steep street wearing a face mask.

126 miles away, an entire city (not counting one wing of the high school, the scorched nubs of someone's washer and dryer, your 79-year-old stepmother's fireplace, your dead father's old bar) has burned to the ground. The death count and the missing continue to rise. Who named it Paradise?

In southern California, Malibu is on fire, too.

Everywhere, the dying, on fire. On battlefields, in civilian hospitals, and in prison infirmaries, hospice workers, fellow inmates, hold the dying prisoners' hands, tell stories, give parched lips sips of water and the sweet taste of ice cream on the tips of spoons. They comfort family, or become family, standing deathbed vigil.

A war zone, fire photographs are described. *Like a war zone*.

In the Paradise hospital, nurses and orderlies gather patients and carry them to their own cars and trucks, all praying to make it out safely. Not all will survive. Ash and smoke. The newly displaced and the chronically homeless. Searchers look for the missing among the charred bodies.

How do we find the strength to leave our beds, to move our grieving bodies towards one another, seeking comfort and light? Strangers become friends, loved ones more fully loved, all of us stripped of the trappings we typically mask ourselves in, exposing our vulnerability: our need for one another.

—Robin Michel



Judith Skillman, *Heat Dome*