

Sweet Just Yesterday

JOANNA MANNING

I could smell the char before I even noticed the scorched field: a controlled burn had left the site of the old Western State Cemetery uniformly crisp, and the acrid smell was an irresistible curiosity to my dog, who sniffed along the fence line half crazed.

The smell transported me. Years ago, my parents would periodically burn the fields of our Pennsylvania farm to clear and rejuvenate them. As I surveyed the burnt field this morning I remembered—no, that is not quite right—I *was with* my mother in our field, watching her as she beat back flames with her shovel at the firebreak, in her denim overalls that were a few sizes too big. The wind had begun to pick up, and I felt a momentary panic before it died down again. My father was nowhere in my memory of this scene, but I know he was somewhere just out of sight, setting fire to everything.

A controlled burn. Is there such a thing? Winds change. Fires jump the breaks. When a spark ignites, we are not in control—we are always at risk of being consumed.

I walked along the edge of the cemetery and took note of a mature apple tree that appeared to have been spared by the fire but had dropped all of its fruit from the stress of the burn. The image was beautiful but incongruous—a shock of red amid so much black earth. I know that nature wastes nothing, that even rotting fruit nourishes. But for a moment, I wished I could have tasted the apples that were sweet just yesterday.

