Fire Season

David I. Gross

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The book you are holding is a study for a book about wildland firefighting in California. The final book will be mostly photography, but it will also include interviews, documents, maps, and shorts essays. The goal is to show the reality behind the words, “firefighters are working to contain a wildfire.”

The firefighting photography in this book was taken at the Basin Complex Fire (2008), the La Brea Fire (2009), and the Station Fire (2009). The nature scenes are from various burns, including the Gap Fire, Lightening Complex Fire, the Antelope Fire, and the La Brea Fire.

Most people I meet really have no idea what it means to “fight” wildfire. Many believe fires are “put out” by dumping water or retardant on them. While they know that wildland firefighters exist, they have no idea what the firefighters actually do in the field.

Basically, most people — and apparently many politicians, who should know better — have taken the war metaphor too far. They believe that we can control fires using short-term displays of overwhelming force, that the preferred method is aerial bombing, and that our superior environmental and economic morality minimizes collateral damage. Then, when a fire gets out of hand, as it did during the Station Fire, people wonder why the helicopters and air tankers did not put it out. Perhaps a revolution metaphor is appropriate. Fire suppression does not work forever, and eventually, the forest will burn.

There are forces beyond human control, and wildfire is one of those forces.

Fire

Wildfire is like a childish spirit: playful, destructive, unaware, yet enormous, powerful, and indifferent. It shows personality, whim, volition, desire, yet pays us no mind. We play with it, we trick it, we guide it. We do not defeat fire — we humor it and put it to bed for the winter's rest, knowing it will return.

The thing about wildfire that makes it different from most anything else you have experienced is the awe-inspiring enormity of the heat, sound, and scale. The fire is no more than a huge chemical reaction, the oxidation of fuels. Of course, it is more than that to us — we naturally think of natural forces this large and complex as living things, with moods, intentions and desires.

None of our thoughts about fire can begin to simulate the experience of the fire. First, there is the invisible wall of heat, a force field of pain that keeps you far away from the actual flames. Then, the hot, lung-searing smoke that can blind and confuse you in the instant of a wind shift. The noise is much louder than one expects — there is the crackling and exploding brush and trees, the whoosh as a bush flares in oily flame, the hissing of burning sap. Finally, the flame is so much larger, brighter, wider, and wilder than the largest fire we see in ordinary life. One cannot simply mentally enlarge the biggest fire one knows (a beach bonfire, perhaps) to comprehend the twenty-foot flame lengths of burning brush, or sixty foot flames crowning through a forest. The size of the wildfire makes it a different thing than anything smaller, and nothing can substitute for the experience of the fire itself.

Man

The ground crews, with their Pulaski tools, shovels and rakes, look like workers from the 19th century. Only the details tell the difference — chainsaws, fire-resistant clothing and boots, nylon packs, fire shelters, radios and GPS devices — and those details are incidental to the real work, which has not changed because, so long as wildland is to be kept wild, only the boots on the ground can work the fires without destroying the land. Finally, water does not put out fires. Dirt puts out fire. Only a person on the ground can uproot burning undergrowth and bury smoldering embers.

The best of the ground crews are also skilled and knowledgeable, able to work with in a dangerous environment as part of a complex organization. For the most part, the work is a lot of waiting, walking, digging, scraping, cutting, swamping — hour after hour, in heat, smoke, and dust. Only someone who likes physical exertion can do this work — the camaraderie, beautiful scenery, and the rare rush of danger are only icing.

The ground crews are one of the three main forces employed to fire wildfire. The second force is made up of helicopters and airplanes — air attack. The helitack crews drop water or flame retardant to cool hot spots and to slow down the rate of burn. Air tankers make bigger drops, with the massive Boeing 747 dropping 24,000 gallons along a three-mile strip. Air attack is also very expensive, but the bright red sprays make great TV. The truth is, rarely can even a small fire be drowned from the air.

The bulldozers are the third force. They can quickly scrape away the fire's fuel, and only a wide break can stop an advancing fire. Cutting a break in rough terrain is not easy — the drivers can cut roads on almost 45° slopes, working in darkness and smoke, but there is always a risk of rolling over or being engulfed in flame.


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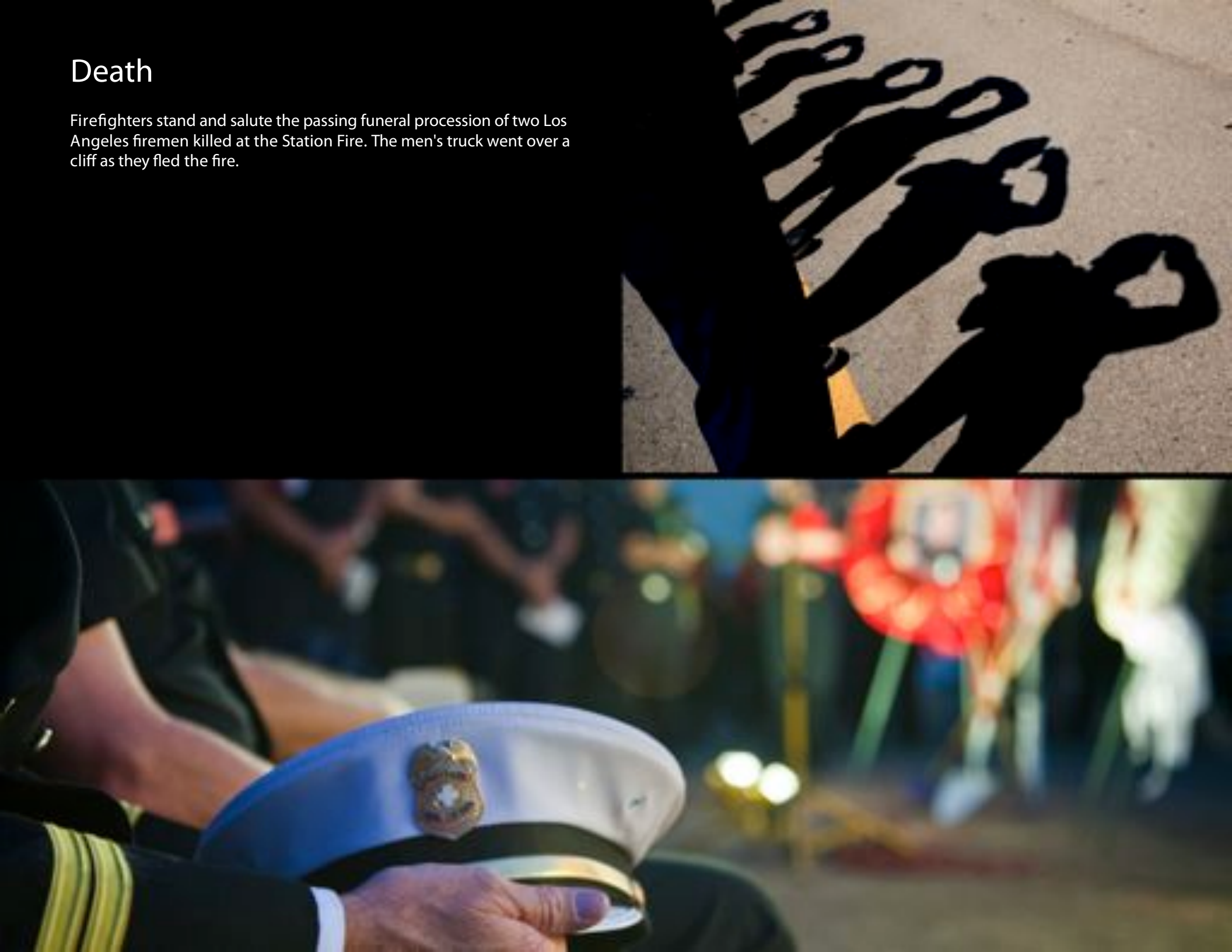
Death

Firefighters stand and salute the passing funeral procession of two Los Angeles firemen killed at the Station Fire. The men's truck went over a cliff as they fled the fire.



Land

Until the 20th century, the plants and animals of California were adapted to wildfires; frequent in the chaparral covered hills of southern California, infrequent in the granite strewn high Sierra Mountains. Decades of fire suppression, logging, road building, and global warming have dramatically altered the land, and what is called wildland often is nothing like what it was even one hundred years ago. We have dramatically changed nature, attempted to control it, and failed to do so. Without fire or man to thin the trees, the forests thicken. There is more fuel, and the natural firebreaks — thick bark, high branches, and sparse stands — no longer slow the lightening strikes (or arsonists).

A burned forest is beautiful in its own way — the blasted, bare earth, the black snags, and the bleached manzanita slowly overgrown by new green. The forest can be slow to grow back — it is thought that the tall trees take hundreds of years to return after a very hot burn. The fire changes the forest, too, allowing cedar to break through the conifers, or the Douglas Fir to take back from the White Pine.

The land does not care if it burns — only people care. Our problems are these: the public wants wild forests and working watersheds but it does not want wildfires. People living in the interface between the forest and the towns want houses among trees but do not want to pay for protection. The forests are too vast for the government to mechanically thin, and thinning is unsightly. Logging is ugly and destructive, and it does not pay for proper land management. Controlled burning is expensive and pollutes the air. Unburned land becomes overcrowded and disease-ridden, building up fuel so the inevitable fire burns too hot. The soil becomes hydrophobic, and the watersheds store less water. Damaged watersheds contribute to drought, which threatens agriculture, industry, and housing developments.

Firefighters

The Hotshot crews are the toughest of the ground crews. They march up steep hills carrying 50 lb. backpacks, heavy tools, and 25 lb. chainsaws to cut trees and thick brush, scrape clean thin fire breaks, and dig out burning roots. The ground may be a recent burn, too hot to touch. The crews march into the hills, work all day, and then march out. On a hot day, they might carry two gallons (over 15 lbs.) of water.

I got a taste of tough when I followed the Ukonom Hotshots as they cut a firebreak around a fresh burn. We slid down a twenty-foot cliff, then climbed up a steep, dusty hill through dense brush and poison oak to the burn. Where the helicopter had dropped water and retardant the ground was sticky mud. The rest was hot ash, leaving nowhere to sit and rest.

They went to work, cutting and swamping, digging and chopping and scraping. I took pictures.

I had only a gallon of water. By the time I stumbled off the mountain, four hours later, the waiting medics pronounced me severely dehydrated. I sat in my car and drank water until the crew returned, hours later, and I got them to pose for their portraits.

A Texas Canyon Hotshot (facing page)

Texas Canyon Hotshots

Texas Canyon Hotshots

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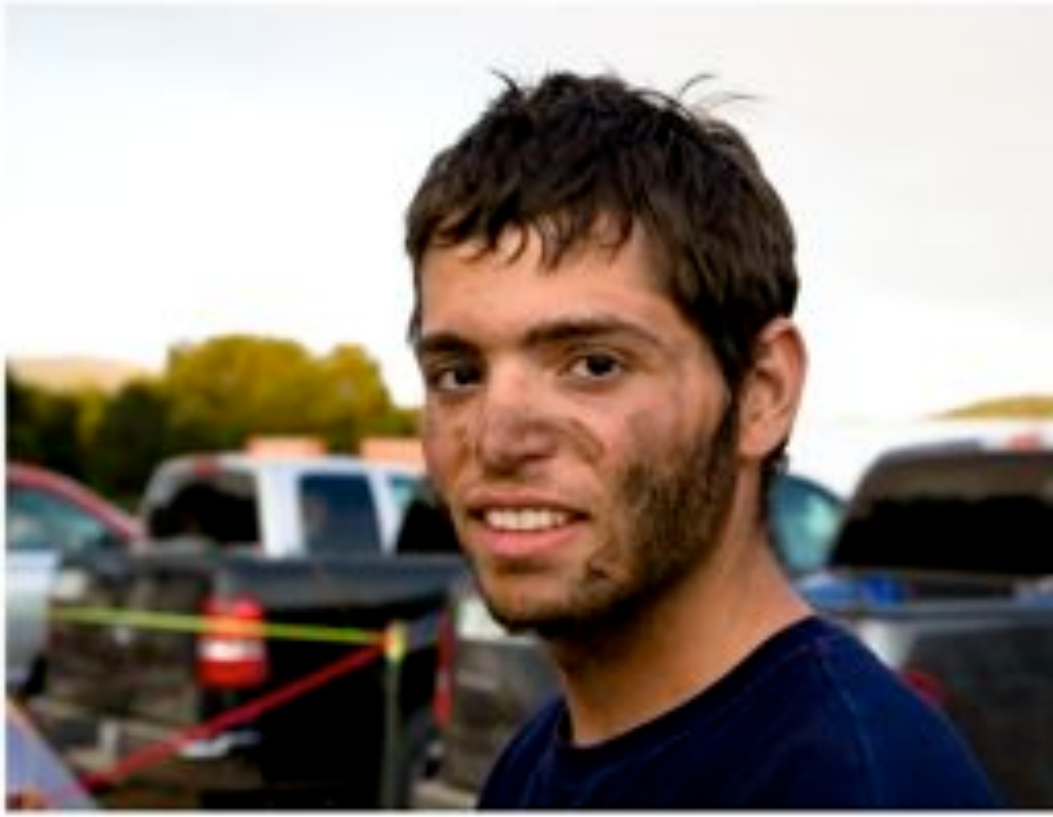
Groveland Hotshots

Groveland Hotshots

Taos 5 Hotshot, Smokey Bear Hotshot




DTSHOTS

Acknowledgements

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