You Are Here: How to Grieve for a Place

There's no template for mourning the loss of a family home.

BY LAIRD HARRISON | SEP 16, 2022

BILL DEMPSTER

A couple of years ago, I fished an eggbeater from the ashes of my family's 114-year-old cabin, which had burned to the ground months before. I turned the smashed implement over in my hand for a minute, wondering how difficult it would be to replace. It was the old-fashioned manual kind, turned with a crank. Such objects, both useful and outmoded, quotidian and evocative, had filled our cabin. In the pantry, we still kept the tent-shaped toaster that toasted bread on only one side at a time. On the mantel lay horseshoes and clothing irons of the sort that need to be heated on a wood stove. The basement held buckets carefully marked "won't hold water." A story clung to each of these things.

My great-grandparents had built the redwood cabin in a wooded canyon alongside a creek in Sonoma County after the 1906 earthquake had damaged their house in Oakland. When their new home in Berkeley was finished, my great-grandmother still brought her children—my grandmother and her brothers—for summers at the cabin. They dammed the creek and splashed in the swimming hole they'd made. They hiked in the forest and napped on the porch swing. Five generations of my family returned for long weekends with friends or for family celebrations. Then came the inferno.

ALTA

The Tubbs Fire in 2017 burned within a few dozen yards of the cabin, until a crew of heroic firefighters cut a break and lit a backfire that saved it. We'd hardly had time to rejoice in our good fortune when the Glass Fire of September 2020 consumed our cabin along with seven neighboring ones.

LAIRD HARRISON

Laird Harrison's family's 114-year-old cabin was destroyed by the Glass Fire in 2020.

Months later, I went to the site to survey the damage. Only the cabin's chimney still thrust up from the ash. Windows had melted to globs of glass. The porch swing had twisted into a parody of a Calder sculpture. Picking through the cinders, I found one ceramic mug almost intact, shards of Fiestaware dishes, and the eggbeater. I couldn't make much sense of the other scorched artifacts. What I recognized was the welling behind my eyes, the squeezing in my throat.

When a person dies, we hold memorial services. We tell stories, pore over photos, sometimes view the body of the deceased. We stay up for an all-night wake or sit shiva. We wear black, cover mirrors, tear our clothes, cut our hair. These rituals give our communities the opportunity to express their support, reassure us that others have endured such loss, and provide a template for mourning. Those of us grieving for a place lack these guidelines. We fumble for closure, sometimes unable to move on. Once the disaster has passed, do we sell or rebuild? Do we leave the home we loved or stay to create something new?

HE HAS COLLECTED BOXES OF SHARDS FROM THE RUBBLE, NOT SURE WHAT HE WILL DO WITH THEM.

A few miles from my home in Oakland stretches a blocks-long encampment of battered vehicles, tents, and piled-up furniture that its inhabitants know as Wood Street Commons. More than 200 people reside there, each with a story of losing shelter. Tom Fulton and his wife, Martha (not their real names), live in a small van. When he thinks of home, Tom pictures the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, site of the last outing the Fultons took with their kids. They lost custody of their three children after Tom's mother kicked them out of her house and he skipped probation for a marijuana

charge. Now he's afraid to go back to North Carolina, and depression makes it hard for him to hold a job.

Tom's voice breaks as he describes the silent forest along the wide Pigeon River. He remembers how well-behaved the kids were, content without their electronic devices. "I miss it there," he tells me. "It's like paradise." In their makeshift community, Tom and Martha struggle to envision their future, but they've found comfort among so many others who feel cast out. The encampment has no flush toilets, but the Fultons can always find someone who understands their pining for the places in their past.

Unlike the Fultons, Marc Pandone, an art professor, can afford the house he rents in Yountville, California. But two years on, he is still grappling with the loss of his home in the Hennessey Fire, 30 miles away, near Lake Berryessa. Over the 23 years he and his wife, Wendy, lived there, they lavished their creativity on the horse corral, the cisterns and wandering stone paths. The place housed his paintings and drawings, her ceramics. In the four years Pandone lived there after Wendy died, it became a kind of memorial to her. Then the fire left him untethered.

"So much of my identity had been connected to this property, this land, this living out there, that without it, I felt naked and unknown," Pandone says. He has collected boxes of shards from the rubble, not sure what he will do with them. In March 2022, he took a dozen friends to the site. They sat in what would have been the dining room and shared memories of the place. "Tears were shed," he says. The poppies were blooming, and the sun made the lupine give up its fragrance. It felt like a step forward. Now Pandone is groping for the step after that. "How do people bounce back?" he asks. "I don't have an answer."

WHERE DO YOU PUT THE MONUMENT FOR A HOUSE THAT BURNED?

Objects, we tell one another, are replaceable. But restored spaces very often lack the resonance of what they are meant to replace. Even if my family rebuilds the lost cabin, the kitchen won't be the one where my grandmother baked apple pies. We can fill

another box with new toys for the children who come to the cabin, but they won't carry the memories of the battered little metal ambulance my father, I, and my sons, each in our turn as children, pushed around the floor. Of necessity, we will design our new cabin to meet our needs for the future, not as a replica of the one we lost.

The lost Temple of Jerusalem has its Wailing Wall. New York's World Trade Center has its memorial and museum. Bronze plaques mark a few other famous spots. But we have no tradition for commemorating the loss of our private places. Where do you put the monument for a house that burned? More and more of us can expect to undergo this shapeless grief in the coming decades. In the changing climate, rising oceans and hurricanes will obliterate more houses. Drought-parched forests will keep bursting into flame. Spiraling rents will continue to force people into tents on sidewalks. While we struggle to address the causes of all this dislocation, we must also learn how to mourn.

My family cabin burned when the pandemic still constrained us from gathering in person. We couldn't share a toast to the old place. We couldn't put our arms around one another. Instead, on one Zoom call, family members reminisced about growing up there —the games of badminton, the swimming and bird-watching. On another Zoom, writer friends gathered to thank me for hosting them there. We talked about the poetry and fiction we had typed all day and the margaritas we had sipped when the shadows deepened. Through this storytelling, we at least understood our shared loss. In acknowledging our sadness, we honored the happiness we once created for one another. Even if there was no easy way to mourn, we assured one another we would gather again someday, somewhere, and find a way forward.

You Are Here is a monthly column that examines ideas about place and places in the West, written by members of the Writers Grotto.

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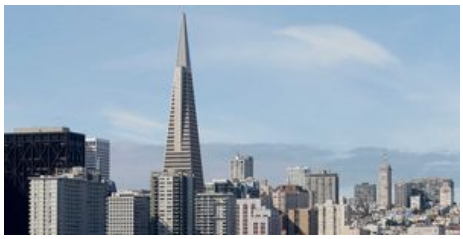

You Are Here: A Tower to Show You the Way Home

BY LAIRD HARRISON

Laird Harrison lives in Oakland.

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