

The dark shadows of stained wood in the night contrasted perfectly with the flames. Lyle watched the grand house light up with orange fire with his hands in his pockets and his mouth in a tight, thin line.

The house was an old Victorian with grey siding and deep maroon finishing. Lyle remembered when his cousins would visit, and the kids would all run around the house, over and under the porch, like they were weaving their paths through the roots of the house, forcing them to remember. And how could he forget them?

The roof had long caved in, the wood now soft and lifted in the wind. The shutters were almost all on their last hinge, a creaking metronome to the flickering and licking of the flames, the crackling of the heating wood a constant reminder of destruction. Lyle let his eyes wander upward at the dark sky, the smoke spinning its way up, up, up, disappearing like his home.

The stars still looked the same as they did the night of his prom, when he stood in the same yard and watched the night sky after he had dropped his date off. He remembered finding the big Dipper then, and so he searched for it now. The sky was slightly harder to see through the smoke, and Lyle suspected that his eyes had tears crowding inside, blurring his vision. He focused on the sky, on the Big Dipper, and listened as the last of the maroon shutters dropped neatly to the floor beneath his house. He tried to imagine the eight steady breathes, but all he could hear was the crackling of the fire and the long-off distance of a police siren.

His house was far enough away from the town line that their house was considered secluded, and Lyle used to revel in it. He wondered now if he'd grown up in a house closer to town if they would have gotten here in time.

His mom used to read him stories on the porch when he couldn't sleep in the summer. Sometimes he would pretend he couldn't sleep just for those special stories. She once read to him a story about a big family that grew up to each make their own big families, one by one. He used to be fascinated with the paintings of each family, how one child grew into a father, who had a wife and their own children. He would spend hours counting the families, over and over, multiplying exponentially over and over.

He looked at the porch that stood before him, the railings leaning and sagging desperately. The old rocking chair that sat on the porch was hidden by the shadows, or burned away. Lyle squinted his eyes, focused on the spot under the porch where his cousin had accidentally kicked through and got his foot stuck. He couldn't see it, but he knew there was a children's shoe sized hole there. It's just another hole, he thought wildly, the police sirens growling into view. It's just another hole I have to remember when they're gone.