

# To Burn and Still Grow



by Sarah Gilman

The second wildfire started in November. Nobody was sure how, save that it was the daughter of a summer blaze that had burned most of a California state park known for its coast redwoods. Firefighters cut a line around the new smoke and left it to put itself out, and so it did.

But it came again in June the following year, and this time they found its source. The fire had wintered inside the heart of a giant redwood, hollowing it slowly until the gathered steam blew the tree's top in a shower of burning embers — a volcano born of Seed and Spark.

There are names for the cavities that fire carves in trees.

"Catfaces," for shallow triangles edged by curling bark.

"Goose pens," for caverns big enough to stand within.

And "chimneys," for those like this.

Park botanist Tim Hyland often visited the burning chimney at night, not because it was most beautiful then, painting everything flickering red, but to talk firefighters out of cutting it down.

They decided someone would hold vigil until its flames died.



As the summer deepened, another redwood threw smoke, and another, and another, like matches struck on nothing. Redwoods can grow so tall (over 350 feet) and so massive (tens of thousands of cubic feet) and so old (2,500 years) that they collect deep drifts of forest debris along their branches. This can turn to soil that grows a second forest in the sky. Or in this case, feed smoldering flames that crawl into the wood to hide until the heat comes again. Hyland attended each time the flames emerged, used a slingshot to rig hoses to the trees' crowns.

In July, when I met him, he sat soot-smear'd below another chimney. He had slept nearby

the last three nights, had sprayed the inside with water until the pump failed.

A glowing fissure had opened along the massive trunk, the pop of flames resonant as a drum within.

What, I wondered, was here to save?



He pointed out another behemoth of improbable shape, touched by the previous year's inferno and perhaps dozens of others, and yet crowned with green needles. Old redwoods tend to bear such signs, he said. They even favor fire, their bark growing feet thick to insulate



their living parts while also carrying flames that help clear soil for their seedlings. Hyland held out a cone the size of a quarter, scales lifted where tiny seeds fell.

The beginnings of a giant.

Above us, the chimney, too, still held some green, even as it burned inside. It's not rare to see redwood chimneys alive long after the fire that scraped them out. And even if this tree does not live,



Swifts may roost in its hollow, pouring in at dusk, spilling out at dawn — a breath of smoke inhaled and exhaled.



In ways, the park around us looked dead: beige, white, black, many of its towering Douglas firs incinerated. Here was a grim harbinger of what happens as a shifting climate collides with a century of fire

suppression. But here also was a reminder of how stubborn life can be, of how much remains to love in a world that might seem hopelessly broken. Wildflowers and fire-following plants like ceanothus rose from the ash. And the vast majority of the redwoods persisted.

Just months after the fire, many trees were thick with new growth along their branches and blackened trunks; even if their trunks had fallen, great bouquets sprouted from their bases. New trees reaching from old roots, each flowing through time and change like a river — the same and different, ancient and reborn.

Below our feet, those root networks fanned in great haloes, tangled together like joined hands to hold against the wind, to hold against whatever may come.

