

XX PREMIO DE TRADUCCIÓN FRANCISCO AYALA

Prologue

Just as silver is a supreme conductor of heat, summer woods are the most excellent conductor of darkness. The moon is the shape of a severed ear, thrown down on a blue cloth, yet light does not fetch far inside the broadleaf border. Beneath the canopy, the bright pink petals of campion gutter; the luminous blue towers of bugle are extinguished, too. There are leucistic fallow deer in this wood, almost white, a herd which drew King John to hunt this ground in the thirteenth century. Yet such is the dark, they would be barely visible, even at twenty feet.

What am I doing here? I am a charcoal burner and the wood is my place of work. During the summer I spend most of my time inside its green walls, harvesting the timber I cut over winter, turning it into coal. I have two kilns. One, at the western end of the wood, sits under a broken crab apple. The *Malus* is disfigured, its leader ripped off by a summer storm. The kiln beneath has been cooling since early morning when I closed it down, killing its fire. Tomorrow I shall open it and shovel out the char, bagging it in brown sacks. My second kiln sits on the edge of a woodman's ride, which cuts east-west through the wood. I loaded it with batons of hazel this afternoon, and rammed a flaming, diesel-soaked rag down one of its vents, just after four. The fire in its centre quickly took: there has been no rain for several weeks and the material is bone dry.

A charcoal kiln may seem out of keeping in a wood. A large, steel, industrial barrel, it is bold, even rude, the nosecone of a Steampunk space rocket fallen to earth. Yet despite this incongruity, the kiln is most certainly a thing of the woods. Loaded with coppiced hazel and set alight, it becomes almost alive.

In the settled dark, I put my ear to one of its vents. There is a pitter-patter, like soft rain falling on the earth. Crouching low and peering down the inlet, I watch the wood tar smoking on the ground, a satanic, black ooze. As night deepens, the light from these vents project glowing beams across the woodland floor. It is as if the kiln has swallowed a small sun. The sight is both irresistible and terrifying, for inside the steel oven there is no mercy.

During hours of burning the wood inside is transformed, reworked. Water and hydrocarbons are expelled in what seems like slow torture, the process of pyrolysis. With only a small drip of oxygen entering the kiln, the hazel inside does not burn away, but is forced to keep its shape and take the pain. I sometimes think burning it to ash would be kinder. Yet this cruelty has history behind it. Charcoal was the smelting fuel of the Bronze and Iron Age. It propped up the Romans; forged their weapons; put fury in their armies. And although we mainly use it to brown sausages now, that darkness remains.

But beyond blood, charcoal burning has always been magical, a kind of dark trick. A piece of tree miraculously reduced to carbon, atomic number 6 on the

periodic table, one of the building blocks of life. Open a cooled kiln and one's eyes fall on a dusty black ossuary, glittering bones of trees. A nugget flashes silver-grey like a jackdaw's mantle; another is painted with a cobalt flare, edging to purple, then gold. Pick up a piece and it weighs next to nothing, the wood from which it came released from the dead weight of its water and tars.

There is a bump inside the kiln. It is the wood stack dropping as the material in the bottom burns away. The sound draws me back to the present. For most people, being alone in a wood at night is not normal behaviour. The dark rattles us, dredges up primal fears, even if it is two-and-a-half centuries since anyone in these islands had to worry about wolves. Now all the old poachers are in their graves, who in their right mind lingers in woods after sunset? But, for me, these dim precincts offer a comfort, not a threat. The smell of woodsmoke and the kiln's gentle song, settle me. On such a night, every tree becomes sacred, a pillar of stillness. Standing under them, the dark bleeds in, then a quietness comes upon you.

I came to the woods over a decade ago. I came to the woods because there was a fire in my head.

Ben Short, *Burn*, Sceptre (2022)