

A photograph of a large, rounded granite dome, likely a volcanic cinder cone, in a forested mountain range. The dome is the central focus, with a smaller, similar dome to its left. The foreground is filled with dense evergreen trees, and the background shows more forested hills under a clear sky. The word "Burn" is written in a cursive font and underlined in the center of the image.

Burn

On a Pilgrimage to the Promised Park

O, with tired eyes and ever-burning thighs
On onyx wheels arrive to the promise

The pilgrims flood thirsty through the Valley
Rewarded for their long labored journey

Lines like ants march towards sacred sites of
Times before, signs and plaques marking honor

Yosemite, they chant in clashing tongues
Through the din of shuttering photos and

One crash upon the next of waterfalls
Echo through the giant stone temple walls

Finally, the coveted and crowned park
Jewel of travel magazine clippings

Steep climbs, one after another, breathing
In the pure pine tree air and campfire fumes

Treks through water, trails across burning earth
All lead toward this same burning relic

A blessing on fire as we walk through it
And with our ardor, set it all ablaze



Burn. 18" x 24". Oil on Canvas



But Look Out. 9"x12". Ink, graphite, and oil on oil paper.

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

From Glacier Point in Yosemite National Park, you can see the majority of the valley spread out before you like a book on the shelf, begging— *dying*— to be read. The words sprawl across the page of the landscape in all of these meandering streams and rivers, punctuated by an endless sea of trees and absolute green that seems impossible but there it is, existing, entirely possible. It's almost celestial, really, the way that the near-glowing blue and gray and gold rock formations reach up to the heavens, the pale cerulean of the sky stretching to meet them. And at sunset, when the parking lot of this lookout is overflowing and the rangers come out to give an instructional talk about the ecosystem of the park, the sky is *indescribable*.

Because it's not even nearly the best sunset I've ever seen. Growing up and taking pride in Southern Arizona, it would be almost blasphemous to call this sunset beautiful, to ever even hint that there could be something better than the rich oranges and purples habitually painted above the desert. But it *is* so beautiful— not for the intensity of hues or contrast or anything objectively true like that, but for the way it makes the valley *glow*. And looking out, it's like the setting sun is giving a gift to the valley for the way it shimmers. Saying thank you for being there, the valley always waiting patiently for the sun to do its magic as it traces its way across the sky at the end of each and every passing day.

I really wish I could say thank you. Because this sky and these rocks and this place is something more than just another sunset. Because here I am, in the middle of dozens of people, so uncomfortable and fidgety, but *so* thankful. I wish I could come up with a way to say thanks to this beautiful ~~sky, place,~~ planet for creating a night where I'm perched on the most uncomfortable rock in the world, my teeth chattering in the cold, one of the most wonderful nights of my life. As in

actually filling to the brim with wonder. Overflowing with the feeling of experience, real and raw and bright.

But it isn't even the sunset or the landscape or the magnificent phenomena of Half Dome in front of me— reflecting the color of the sky like I could only dream of projecting the colors of this night— that makes me feel something magical and universal. But looking at the sherbet colored sky, countless languages are flooding my ears and I can't understand any of them but I can *feel* the excitement rolling off their tongues like I can *feel* that this is something really special happening, that everyone is here for the same experience and we're all just watching a day end like it's never happened before.

Because it *hasn't* ever happened before.

At least, not like this.

With these exact people all brought together by the lure of another national park crossed off the bucket list, or these same clouds floating across the dome of the sky, or this same collection of memories and experiences floating around the rocks in so many different languages that it almost blends together, one collective and uninhibited *WOW*— like an exhale.

And so now I'm thinking not only about the "*wow*" and the *wonder* and the *magic*, but about what brought everyone here, now. Because there are people— rather dangerously— dangling their feet over the rocks, and couples taking selfies, and families laughing together, but there is this *togetherness* that gives me the sense that they all feel like this is important too. And I'm not the only crazy person sitting on a freezing rock imagining the way the valley glows like an ancient god, asleep for now.

I can't help but think about how different tonight is from this morning, the peace and quiet in spite of the din of that mixed voice that makes up this group. And how heavily in contrast this is with the shrill touristy exclamations from dissatisfied campers in the early light.

Hodgdon Meadow Campground is not even remotely the best campground in Yosemite. In fact, it's dusty, the ground is uneven. The squirrels might have the plague. It very well could be the *worst*, actually, but that's to be expected when you try to book a campsite in one of the most heavily frequented national parks only three months in advance. With over four million visitors coming from around the world to just *exist* in this protected land, it's no surprise that the most coveted campgrounds located within the valley itself are usually greedily snatched up immediately once they go on sale. It's a reckless and somewhat horrifying of process, and the process of constantly refreshing my browser to find a canceled reservation is pretty directly in contrast with everything I think of when I think of Yosemite. Because here are these tame deer and squirrels and other woodland creatures, but to see them you have to go through an online fight to the death. I guess it's earning your peace and quiet, some form of proving yourself as the most efficient camp-booker, a Darwinian test of who actually *deserves* Yosemite. I don't know that I passed.

Regardless, Hodgdon Meadow isn't great. It's fine, there are bathrooms and bear lockers and how much more can you really ask for in a campground? As a bonus, it's near the Merced Grove and the gas station, essential for any possible practical or aesthetic urges I could ever possibly need to fulfill.

But waking up peacefully, my final day in this oasis of beauty that we call Yosemite National Park, the birds chirping blissfully in my ears, isn't like I thought it would be.

Because the birds only sing and the world is only still for a precious moment until an earsplitting "*No, I'm not staying here another night*" invades my ears, sneaking into the tent with a "*this campground sucks*" and a final, decisive, "NO."

And as the zip of the tent pierces whatever silence was left in the cold dewy morning air, the image of a couple and their two young children frantically packing their minivan is the pinnacle of American National Park tourism. It's like the plot of the *National Lampoon's Vacation*, all

dysfunctional and it's like I can hear the quirky music at a steady crescendo as they careen out of control. And the kids are begging to stay, and the dad is packing the car, and the mom is throwing a cataclysmic temper tantrum so heated and fiery that I'm worried for the forest around us.

And I can't believe someone would be willing to act like this in the first place. Among the trees and the wildlife that she's so unabashedly decrying, around other people who are just starting to build their own fires for breakfast. And I think it's the most measly display of emotion I've ever seen in a place so *big*. And not big in size or distance, but in the freedom and openness and *fullness* of it all. I wonder how this family couldn't be filled up by it, could be willing to push past the discomfort of their situation to just absorb the *everything* that surrounds them in every direction. And I wonder whose idea it was to come here in the first place.

When they finally pull out, tires groaning against the uneven dusty road in protest, protesting their choice to leave maybe, I can't help but think about where they're headed from here.

Will they drive past the towering trees?

The gigantic rock formations, glimmering with water and joy?

Will they see a deer— hit a deer?

Or will they pass the countless patches of scorched forest, like a graveyard along the side of the road. And everyone is constantly leaning out their windows, taking pictures and videos of the massacre of this landscape. It's impossible not to think what this family will think about that expansive blackness that dominates the vista, the ash and bone that represents the life that's gone.

Will they cry? Unlikely.

Will it scare them? I'm not sure.

But maybe it's because they aren't the ones loving this place to death— or loving it at all.

It's people that have done this to the trees, burned them down with the desire for greener forests, thicker woods, a mystical place to explore. But what is the exploration worth when everything

we do to make the park more beautiful destroys it bit by bit? Because trees should not be that dense, claustrophobic and starved for air or space. And when they burn, they need to burn.

I think that endless burning is a good metaphor for what is happening with a lot of our planet. Because it's being destroyed and ruined and we're all standing around willing it away, as if we had no part in it. And our firehoses can't put it out and it's growing and growing into a monstrosity that we made because we wouldn't allow nature to be itself. And I know it's not that young family's fault that this forest is burning, but I can't help but think that if it weren't for the demand of less dirt and more trees and better parks, we wouldn't be striving so hard to keep our planet alive.

But isn't it so alive, lit up by the end of day?

The sky is pink and orange, fading into the blue like its melting, and that fear of burning melts away too. For now, at least. I can see that fire in the distance of time, that destruction that always lurks on the edge of the park, on the edge of all the places we revere the most, but with this sense of everyone together I feel something like hope. Like when Pandora let out everything out of her jar, only hope remained for us to clutch onto for dear life. So all those blights on humanity are swirling around like flames, trying to consume us, threatening us with the promise of an end, but here we have hope. We have each other, and I think that that hope is something we can use.

Do all these people care enough to let this place, this planet, build itself up again like a phoenix from the ashes? I hope so.

I can't help but also think about how judgmental I've been up until this point. How I've been here condemning ecotourism and ungrateful visitors, the petty stand-in for the American consumer, and letting myself fall into this sense of superiority when here, there is me and my friends and the sky and everyone.

And we're together.
