



four kinds of

one

The diarist Samuel Pepys describes London's Great Fire, during which King Charles II, besmirched with soot, made sure he was seen helping put it out. Large swathes of San Francisco burned down following the 1906 earthquake, although a few landmarks survived. In 1968, the tenements of Newark were set aflame by rioters and then left as burnt-out shells, much as the corpses of the condemned were displayed at the gates of medieval towns.

Tokyo burned in the wake of the 1923 earthquake. Rebuilt, it was destroyed again by U.S. bombs. German cities were whipped into firestorms. The Italian journalist Curzio Malaparte filed a story on the aftermath, when those left for dead were shot pointblank by the authorities. A man who survived the atom-bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki died recently. In Nagasaki, he was describing the light the bomb made to a friend when the other A-bomb fell. "Like that," he said.

Napalm rained down on hapless villagers in Vietnam. Lately in Gaza, phosphorus is the rain of choice. Each storm has its screaming child. That a generation separates them shows how little we are moved by these images to put a halt to the barbarous calculations that engender them. Smart bombs and drones now personalize the delivery; instead of the countryside, it's an apartment in Belgrade or a schoolhouse in Pashtun. The replies, too, are personal, wrapped around the body.

two

"Give tongue" is the phrase that my father's book of World War II photographs uses to caption an image of an English battleship engaging a German foe. "Fire!" belongs to the sphere of warfare but has spread to terror and judicial murder. German firing squads used machine guns in France. French firing squads, as Goya depicts, used muskets in Spain against loyalists fighting for their king.

Gary Gilmore chose a Utah firing squad rather than the noose. "Let's do it," he said. Spies and deserters, once hanged, were by World War I mostly shot. Until recently, in China a .45 to the back of the head was the means of dispatch for literally thousands. Someone told me that it's the quickest death, more humane than the poison drip that's replaced it, even there. The drip puts some distance between us and the condemned, but his or her consciousness agonizingly persists.

Sometime in the 1990s, "Ready, fire, aim!" emerged as a business buzzphrase. Marx's "MCM," as explained by Giovanni Arrighi in *The Long Twentieth Century*, describes how capitalism goes back and forth between a money focus (M) and a commodity focus (C, like China now). "Ready, aim, fire" is a commodity formula; whereas "Ready, fire, aim" describes money's endless innovation. *Fire* is the key word in both phrases, however. It connotes a commitment to action that, once taken, is hard if not impossible to undo. "Fire sale" is a potential outcome for either C or M, although (as Nassim Nicholas Taleb points out) neither is very willing to admit it.

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three

The oil crisis of the early 1970s led me to stay in graduate school, as job prospects for architects dropped off drastically. Arriving in the Bay Area in 1971, I found work quite readily, but was also laid off twice—once because the client didn't pay and then (in my own opinion) because I was too slow. I would count the second layoff as a firing.

Firms staff up and use downturns as the occasion to pare. Tough times are when they're forced to pare more than they'd like, making "hard choices," as they like to say, among the deserving. It's not anyone's favorite process, but firing and being fired are the truest expressions of the nature of work in these United States, which is always a mash-up of trajectories—yours and theirs.

As with any relationship, expectations abound and delusion is endless: the territory of ego. We are exhorted to "work on it," too, making ourselves "fireproof" by constantly upping our game. Yet the bigger picture of the workplace is fuzzy at best. You specialize and find there's no more demand. You refuse to specialize and are penalized for failing to be team player. Similarly, you decline to move to where the work is—or you move and they decide the market isn't worth it.

Being fired can be liberating. It invites us to wonder about them and us. Even if our being fired was lunatic, what do we do with that—seek out new lunatics? What if the whole field abounds with lunacy? As Rahm Emanuel put it, "A disaster is a terrible thing to waste." And keep I.M. Pei in mind. "I retired from my firm in 1990," he told Fumihiko Maki in 2008. "I decided then to devote the rest of my life—I didn't know at that time it would last so long—to do projects of interest only to me. It's very selfish." Emerson called it self-reliance: Hitch your wagon to a star.

fire

John Parman

four

In the mid-1970s, I read some 120 building-fire case studies. This left me with a lifetime habit of noting exits and an aversion to IKEA stores, which are designed like roach hotels. (Casinos also fall in this category, and they encourage smoking!) Another takeaway: The best thing you can do in a fire is get out as fast as possible. (So the best thing you can do beforehand is to simulate getting out quickly until it becomes second nature.) The principal victims of building fires are the old, the infirm and the very young—anyone likely to become disoriented by smoke or to be incapable of saving themselves in a hurry or at all.

Fire is an accompaniment to domestic life. Clothes dryers are a frequent source of fires in nursing homes, while still plugged-in irons, pots left burning on the stove, etc., also do their part. Candles on the Christmas trees of my father's childhood burned some neighbor's house down often enough to be a distinct memory for him. When my daughter lights candles in her room when she meditates, and then forgets to blow them out, my father's stories come back to mind.

Sometimes I wish I'd never read those case studies. My father-in-law used to set up a barbeque in front of our front door—a hibachi, actually, that sat on the walk, the kids circling around him. He was usually having a drink at this point in the party sequence. When I was a kid, a neighbor squirted lighter fluid into his barbeque and it blew up the can. Or so I heard. I must have a genius for storing away these events. In Barcelona, when my oldest son was two, every affordable hotel had the only stairs and the elevator joined to form a single "chimney" with no second exit. I took the front room closest to the ground, figuring we'd escape with our lives if we had to jump.

When my father-in-law died, he was cremated and his remains were buried in a box about the size of a concrete block. He'd been an All-American football player in college, so it was odd to see him so diminished. I have a theory that there's a certain amount of residual consciousness once you're dead. Fire, once again, puts an end to it. I think I'd prefer a .45 to the head.

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