

GORDON GRIGSBY

Burning the Forest

You could walk for days without seeing the sky.
After nights black as a windowless room,
you woke to twilight that lasted
all day, that first and last gray
of uncertain shadows, ambiguous branches
not an arm's length away, in which your own hand,
brought up to your eyes, seemed
a foreign thing, not yet
completely formed or already disappearing.
Wolf light, they called it.

And, untethered, hearing cries in their sleep,
made fields, made light. For years
the smoke of burning trees
obscured the sun from Erie to the Ohio River.
For years they worked in a gray-yellow light
without shadows, as if in an eclipse.
A few used for building, the rest
burned. The large ones, thick as three or four men,
they girdled and left to die, waking
later to huge leprous shapes
that would burn standing. The animals
withdrew: bears, pumas, martens, elk,
timber wolves, eagles.

For a while they still knew the trees:
which one for dye, which one for tea
and liniment, which one for axe handles.
Dreamed of them. Then,
so gradually they didn't notice it,
they knew only maize, tobacco, vegetables.
And didn't miss the animals: stragglers were killed,
and others stayed. Other birds
came, the ones that like
the field's edge, a house not far away.
Hawks still circled overhead.

And still circle now and then.