

URSULA O'FARRELL

Age of Light, 2014
Oil on canvas, 72 x 54



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MICHAEL CROLEY

Smolders

The fire burned bright. The flames climbed to the height of a small pine and sent smoke to settle in everyone's hair and clothes. This was the last party of the year. The last time Wren Asher figured he might ever see any of the other bright-pink faces standing around the bonfire. They all drank from large cups filled from the Dairy Mart soda fountain down the road and spiked with vodka, bourbon, Mad Dog 20/20, and whatever else they'd been able to score the night before graduation from Swafford's Auto Body Shop—the front for the local bootlegger. Some still wore their red mortarboards with the gold tassels brushing their cheeks as they laughed and talked. Wren held no drink in his hand. He wore a pair of cutoff khaki shorts and a Che Guevara T-shirt he'd spotted from a street vendor on a school trip to New York in the fall. In his car was a mason jar full of moonshine his uncle had given him as a graduation present. When Wren had reached for it, his uncle had not immediately let go and looked the boy in the eye. "That stuff there will knock your dick in the dirt," he told him. "I don't doubt it," Wren said, but he had never had a drop of alcohol in his eighteen years.

In a week he was leaving and he had come to the party more out of obligation than excitement. A rite of passage, really. He wanted to be here because he had known these people all his life but he had never truly felt like he belonged with them because he was half Korean, different from everyone else, the lone minority. But Lucinda was here and that was always enough reason to attend. To call her his crush seemed too immature and to call her more than that was false.

Someone walked to a pickup and grabbed a wood pallet out of its bed. Skids, they called them at the shipping warehouse where Wren had worked the summer before. Presumably, he thought, for the way the forklift just slid right underneath them and lifted the cans of shrink-wrapped soup, cereal, or whatever else they held. The boy lifting the skid over his head was Danny Jackson. A big, strong kid slated to head to Georgia next year on a football scholarship. Wren hoped his friend wouldn't be back home by Christmas. The town had seen it all too often. Once Danny got down there with all those preps and blacks and got his ass whacked a few times on the field, it wouldn't matter how damn strong he was or how fast he ran. He'd cry homesick and miss being the big shot he was right here in the middle of the same