

KATELYNN MILLS

Screen, 2018
Tempera on paper, 60 x 42 in



JOHN MOIR

A Flash of Fire

The dilemma
of four thousand
pages of memories

Each December my family gathers for dinner with a small group of friends to celebrate the winter solstice and to enact a ritual that allows us to symbolically release our regrets, our mistakes, and the things we wish hadn't happened in the past year. We do this with flash paper, which magicians sometimes use to enhance their tricks; when lit, the four-inch treated squares ignite in a dazzling flash. We write on our paper a private word or phrase referencing something we want to let go. I've scribbled about blunders I've made, things I'm afraid of, the names of friends who have died. Then, one by one, each of us touches our paper to a candle flame and flings it in the air, and whatever loss or sorrow we wrote vanishes in a flare of light.

Our solstice tradition came to mind while I was taking a course based on Stephen Levine's book *A Year to Live*. Levine asks readers to consider what choices they would make if this were their last year of life. Doing this, he says, helps us to live more fully right now—no matter how much time actually remains.

Levine's premise raises provocative questions: What have we left undone? Is there someone we might want to forgive? What do we *not* want to do? In one session, we discussed the physical things we wanted to leave behind—and what we wanted to let go. A class member recounted how a friend burned his journal in his final days, not wanting his private thoughts to cause misunderstandings after he was gone. Several of us in class had kept journals, but I had not considered what to do with mine. Should I burn my old journals and watch the past combust like flash paper on solstice? Or were my journals a window into yesteryear and worth preserving?

For most of my adult life I have been an inveterate journaler, writing frequently to process my thoughts. But when I finish filling a notebook, I stash it in a storage box with all the others, where they have remained unread for decades. What would I find in all that writing? I decided to have a look.

The first journal entry begins on Sunday, July 4, 1971, when I uncapped a black felt-tipped pen and on an unlined sheet of paper wrote, *Decided to start a journal today*. I was twenty-two years old, a journalism student living in a run-down, ninety-eight-dollar-a-month apartment in the smog-shrouded San Fernando Valley.