

Burn Barrel

By Margaret Flaherty – Takoma Park, Maryland

(In memory of Brigadier General William St. John, 1909-1993)

It's against the law now, but in the 50's, we had burn barrels behind our houses for burning trash. Rusty & black, they sat on concrete platforms set back a safe distance. Now & then, sparks escaped & set something on fire, but mostly they pricked & flecked the mild suburban air before they disappeared in harmless puffs; nothing above us but weather & the rare plane that roared overhead from Pittsburgh, forty miles east & left faint contrails of white exhaust. We kids could be reckless, but we knew to keep our distance until the trash fire burned down. As the oldest, I was first to stretch on tiptoe & peer inside to inspect what was left. I learned then fire doesn't leave just ashes. Some things refuse to burn. Before fire smolders out, it streams, blood-red, between blackened remnants, like the glowing arterial rivers that flooded Tokyo's streets after U.S. bombers dropped incendiaries, a sight most Americans have only seen in aerial photographs from World War II. My Uncle Bill fought in that war. I was told he walked through fire in Burma. Post-war, he sold men's clothes in Connecticut & never spoke of Burma, until the year of his death when he heard bombs again, artillery fire, the crack of pistols & tried to speak, but couldn't stop weeping for friends he'd lost, what he'd endured to survive; what burned to ashes inside him, what wouldn't.