*“Youth tries to fill the void, an old man learns to live with it.”*

* *Mark Z. Danielewski.*

Jana taught me letters with her hands busy, when the fires stopped and the sky turned blue. “A, for Apple.” A seed in the hole. “D, for Death.” Wheat ground in water. “H, for Hunger.” A little white sewing needle pricking through cloth. When her hands were free and the air was clean, she had me write with my fingers in the dust, B for Burning, V for Volcano, F for Family. “You can use words now that you’ve got letters. Corn. Mama. Papa. Try it now.” The first words I wrote meant nothing, scratchy and thin as dead tree branches, Cat and dog and useless, Mama’s favorite word, which I can write forward, backwards and upside down. It took rainstorms and lots of “Useless!” for the dead trees to bloom, and now they are words, words and more.

Papa calls me Historian. I write on the Rain Days, when the ground is soft and quiet, I write on the dry days when Mama does not look, I write on the wrong days, the right days, the everyday. I write the nights, the days, every storm and shadow and kernel of corn. I write Papa’s smile and Jana’s scowl, the howling and rain. Papa calls me Historian, and so, I remember.

Today is Tomato Harvest Day. Yesterday was also Tomato Harvest Day, if you remember my record. Jana said it was a very good record, because I mentioned that we cut one up and ate it in the sun. I didn’t like tomatoes before the fire but now I think they are very very good, because everything is very very good when you don’t have anything else to eat. This is a fact. Papa told me to write that we have no pots and pans, only the bowls we found in the broken house. When we find a pot he will make tomato sauce. I do not know when we will find a pot. I do not know when we will have tomato sauce. There are many things I do not know.

It rained yesterday, and the dirt is quiet. I am writing this next to what used to be the Tomato Harvest Record before it became a muddy puddle. I will rewrite it after I write the facts. Unless Mama makes me go lookseeing again. I’ve decided to make a list of facts, to make sure I still know all the facts. Sometimes we forget but I am not we. Here are the facts. There is Jana, Mama, Papa, and me. There used to be Grandpa, Auntie, Cousin Lee. Mama doesn’t talk about them anymore. When the fire began we drove, when the roads stopped and the yelling started, we ran, and when we got to the mountain, we stopped. I have not seen anyone else, but I have heard them. Papa brought a gun. He says not to worry. We have a little house. We are farmers now. We do not share our food. This much is true. Everything else, Mama says, is an evil lie or a silly dream.

The roof almost fell today, because the roof is a pile of scraps and sticks and branches. I know, because I watched them build it. Mama yelled at Papa about it and I told her to stop and she told me to stop and there was more yelling there is always YELLING. There wasn’t yelling before.

I want to go Home.

We kept a calendar in the kitchen with the coupons and report cards. April was the best month because it was the cat in the garden month (August was the worst, lawn mower in the garden month). April was also my birthday month. It’s warmer now, and there are purple flowers on the ground. I think my birthday passed. I told this to Mama. She told me to shut up.

I wonder how my history would look with paper and pencil instead of sticks and mud.

Today Jana is being Mini Mama. It’s a bad day, cloudy again, there’s rot in the garden, and the howling is close. Jana’s hair is all tied up in rope, the circles are back under her eyes. “These beans won’t pick themselves!” Yes Jana, because I will not pick them. “Stop writing!” No Jana, I don’t want to. She’s walking over. Oh no.

Today I told Papa I was going to be a writer when I grow up. He laughed so hard he cried.

I remember the white backyard fence, summer grass cut on Thursdays and my backyard sprinkler, hot cold hose water and sticky grape popsicles melting on my fingers, and Jana never told when I licked off the juice. The air stayed warm when the sky turned blue and sleepy, daytime saying “I’m here!” even as the stars came out. Papa brought back logs those nights, stacked them in the metal grate and flash! Orange fire and melty ‘shmellows, crackling sparks flickering and fading in the night time. I remember, even when everyone else forgets. It’s hard, sometimes, but it’s my job.

Today I am in trouble, even though Jana started it and I only told her to shut up and it’s ok when Mama says it but nooo not me nope no way not today. So now I am stuck with Mama while Papa and Jana are berry picking. Oh, Mama’s calling, she says stop writing. Be back later!

I did not go back later. Mama took my hand, and we walked up the hill into the trees and the thorns and rocks and we stopped far away, with scratches on our hands and rocks in our shoes. “We’re going to play hide and go seek, can you do that?” Mama asked, I nodded. “You will hide, I will seek.” I said ok and Mama started counting and I heard her through the trees, One, Two, Three and I jumped over a log and ran through the leaves. Four, Five Six, there! Under that bush. It was a good hiding spot. I’m still under the bush. Where is Mama? She never found me. She must be very bad at this game.

It’s getting cold.

When we still had a yard and a sprinkler and a calendar on April my best friend was Louise Vane with the raven hair. We would walk around the block when blocks were real and she was real and her mom would give us ice cream and old movies and one day, under a zillion blankets, we watched Godzilla and I said the fire didn’t scare me I said the screams and the broken glass was a- ok until bedtime, then the room got dark and the shadows spooky and I had to sleep in Jana’s bed but I never told Louise. I think she had a nightmare too. I don’t know. Godzilla got her.

There’s howling tonight.

I heard Papa and Mama talking about me last night. Mama is very bad at hide and go seek, and at being quiet. I’m a mouth, and I am hungry. It’s better this way.

Last year, we had strawberry shortcake and chocolate ice cream on April nineteenth. Papa hung red balloons and streamers over the kitchen cabinets and Mama lit pine tree candles on the cake. It used to be my favorite smell but now smoke makes me sneeze. For my next birthday I will say I am ten, and I will have a great big cake.

Mama didn’t think I knew the way back. I do. Maybe one day someone will look under this bush and find my history and wonder whatever happened to me. I hope they wonder something good.

I found a berry bush but Papa said not to eat the berries, but I am vey hungry, but Papa said no, but he also said ok to Mama.

My belly is berry full. The forest is thinner now.

This was the second Tomato Harvest History, which is gone even though it did not rain. Mama screamed when I came back. Screamed like she saw a ghost. Papa cried and he let me see, cried and his tears hit the ground like a tiny storm. I haven’t talked to Jana, she hasn’t talked to me.

When we had a yard and a sprinkler and an April garden calendar we did things, things that made us a family, a real one, a family that built sandcastles and made macaroni, a family with stories and a recipe for cherry pie. Mama was Mama and Papa was Papa but now I think about strangers with paper faces and storm cloud eyes, and when I see Mama and Papa they are nothing but strangers to me. Stranger Danger. Strange.

We cried ourselves to sleep last night.

I can write all I want now. Mama doesn’t give me jobs anymore. I sit with the tomatoes and write in the dirt, but I don’t like it anymore. No one reads my histories. They’re scratches in the dirt, not words, not trees, not anything I have said before. History is supposed to last a thousand years, but mine only lasts until the next rain storm.

Papa doesn’t call me Historian anymore, and Jana was right. Without Home and without Family, It’s D for Death and H for Hunger.