

In China, it is normal to cremate the dead. *There simply isn't enough space to bury everyone*, my mother explains to me, and I think of the corpses beneath the earth, suffused and gasping the same air that inevitably makes its way back up to the living. There are those who rob the dead; there are those who feast on it; and there are those like us who trample over it, unaware that the soil beneath our feet is likely more dead than alive. Each day spent walking above the dead, whether an inch or a mile below the surface, until you collapse atop the pile. No one should be sentenced to that fate, least of all my grandfather, who has already spent a lifetime as part of the natural cycle of life and would hate to do it all over again.

When I learn that my grandfather is to be cremated, it is with a sigh of relief. I think of the words he's etched into his skin, how he burned into his lifeline with his cigarette, and come to the conclusion that it is only fair that he gets to experience the glorious finality of it all — relive all the times he's burned over the course of his lifetime. My grandfather was a glorious, long-burning flame; not many could withstand his fire, not even himself. I think of the fire in his eyes as he lit a cigarette and sweat pooled at his forehead in beads and I told him *you're burning* and he said, simply, *I know*.

Burning is the process of creating more abstract things. In chemistry, a simple combustion reaction might look like this:



A burning cigarette is an incomplete combustion system. (*Incomplete*, my grandfather would bristle. It burns enough.) A shortage of oxygen only enables partial burning of the fuel; carbon monoxide is produced; adverse health effects result. Yet if you told my grandfather about the thousands of chemicals involved in the reactions that take place inside both the burning zone and the combustion zone, each with their own reactants and products that burn briefly, incandescently for their short lifetimes, he would tell you: *the best scientists all believe in God*. And now, through fire, he must have found him.