

Stone, The Forest Fire

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The Forest Fire

John Stone

Piero Di Cosimo, ca. 1505
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Before the least
flame, before the blaze
transformed this glade into a pyre
a prehistoric fear of fire
stalked the dark and days
of every beast

except the lion.
Swaggering like a king,
he may now be poised to learn
the lessons of beef and venison.
A possum and her young
are set to run.

Small birds discuss
the danger. They settle and surge.
The news is grave. Many will grieve.
Even the lioness turns to leave.
And from his perch, a large
black bird conducts.

The early smell
of burning has led some birds
to rise toward safety in the sky --
their mothers taught them how not to die
though none of us know their words
for heaven or hell.

A human snout
floats in the face of a swine.
A bearded man-deer nudges his doe.

The herdsman driving his team must know
the truth: all are being
driven out.

Until today
this grove was most like Eden,
until its trees began to glow,
until, like God, Di Cosimo
conjured up a reason
to take it away.

Piero Di Cosimo, The Forest Fire (c. 1505)

Oil on panel, approximately 28 inches x 79.5 inches. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

