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The Forks Fire—September 1951

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THE FORKS FIRE—SEPTEMBER 1951

“Like the breath of a thousand dragons, the fire crowned . . .”

The Forks Forum

Years later, I still dream a dragon who rushes through forest,
swoops down on the peninsula,
devours the sheep among the ferns.
I feel the heat of its wings, beating
against the air we breathe, and I, once more a child,
search the sky for signs of change.

That first morning we woke to a salmon sky.
The school bus came late. *There's a forest fire coming,*
the driver said, *It's gonna wipe Forks off the map.*
I ran down the gravel to Mama
who stood in the kitchen peeling pears.
A big fire's coming, I said. She nodded,
and dropped the fruit into vinegar water.

Daddy came home running and tripped on the top step.
His lunch bucket fell open, a Winesap apple
rolled and bounced across the wooden porch.
Jesus, woman, forget the pears. If this wind don't change,
the house will go. He dropped his hat, ran out the door, then
returned to a kitchen chair where he ate the apple,
combing long gnarled fingers through sparse hair.

We can go to the ocean. Mama packed pears into sterile jars.
We can go to the ocean, and stand in the water if the fire comes.

All day, burnt needles drifted down like wren feathers
to nest upon ash-covered ground. The wind wouldn't change,
so the dragon charged. Family gathered in the yard,
drank Coca-cola from glass bottles. Neighbor women
peeled pears in our kitchen, gathered in a tribe of fear.

In Forks, barns were burning all over town. A woman who'd
lost her cows had to lie on the ground to see
their feet in that one clear spot between smoke and earth.
Homeless wanderers dragged in to sit on our porch. Someone
brought a banjo. We sang "Rock of Ages" and "Bringing in the
Sheaves."

His great red eyes steadily rose over the hills of the Sol Duc,
until a great still settled upon the grass.
When the wind, at last, began to blow, it was wet as tears
and from the west. The dragon was dying.

But Mama, still standing over the bubbling fruit,
sweat rolling, drenching her blouse, stoked the cast iron stove
with a stick of wood, and promised me if I'd be good,
we'd go stand in the ocean anyway.