

FIRST HOUR

I press the mirror against my chest.
A wild wind billows and blows
on this mountainside perched
on the edge of the world.

A mule deer passes with her fawn;
a red-tailed hawk calls to its mate;
shadows blanket a pocket of snow.

“Gran!” I shout.

“Gran, I’m coming.”

If only I’d kept searching last evening.

I follow the river, the speedy trout,
their slick sides shimmering gold.
Towering trees forever the same
line the riverbanks.
I follow until
the moss-covered stones
lead me across the river again,
the stepping-stones from yesterday,
my path through swirling water.

I’ll stay out here until I find Gran
if it takes days and days.

SIGNAL

Before I enter the shadowed woods,
I tilt the mirror toward the light.
Sun flashes from the glass.
I move the mirror
side to side, up and down,
hoping Gran might see.

SMOKE

It must be because I'm watching the sky,
checking the sun, catching its light,
that I see the drift, a finger of white
beyond the base of Wolf Mountain.

It could be smoke
or swirling dust.

For a moment my heart
forgets to beat.
If only
I had
the binoculars.

Gran taught me smoke rises
gently or fast,
twirls or puffs,
floats or climbs.
Unlike a cloud of dust,
smoke holds together,
it doesn't spread.

This isn't fog
in the canyon below.

This time I know
the smoke is real.

A pile of brush or a layer of duff
struck by lightning last night in the storm.

One strike and a fire ignited.

WHAT IF

it burns
what if it rages

what if it
comes for Gran?

THROUGH THE WOODS I RUN

calling for her
pine needles slick under my feet
calling for her
birds fleeing their branches
I check behind trunks and stone
calling for her
needing to find her
Gran, my gran
lost and alone
trees creak in the wind
branches sway
has anyone seen the fire yet?
I run through the woods
calling for her

BURN SCAR

The trees clear, the river curves.
I stop to catch my breath.
I'm far from where I entered.
On the racing water's other side,
the woods have thinned to blackened sticks,
a stand of quiet witnesses
left from the Wolf Ridge Fire.
Trees like cemetery stones,
reminders of the past.

I check beyond Wolf Mountain's base
and see the single wisp of smoke.

My fear rekindles, burns again.
My palms are slick with sweat.

That terrible day four years ago,
before the fire crew came,
before the helicopter saved us,
the skies alight with red-orange haze
as flames leaped tree to tree—
crown fire in the canopy.

The wildfire crept so close
smoke poured through the tower stairs,
seeped underneath our door.
A cloth tied around my face,
I ran outside with Gran.

Ran and ran terrified
I'd lose Mom to fire too,
so scared Gran and I
wouldn't make it
out alive.

The winding trail
the slippery stones
the heat, the haze
the crackling
the smoke
the blaze

Was Mom okay?
my throat raw
from screaming
her name

until

the fire's roar was lost
in whirring helicopter blades.

Mom appeared
through the smoke.
She pressed me to her side.

As the crew trudged toward the burn,
one man stayed behind.
Helmet, mask, a yellow shirt,
the friendliest of eyes.

He helped us on. I ducked inside.
He listened to my searing lungs,
gave all of us a drink.
The helicopter flew.
The tiny crew unequal to
the raging wildfire.

Farther up,
higher still,
below
us
smoke
and glow.

I leaned my cheek
against the glass.
My heart,
my home
reduced to ash.

THAT DAY

Mom watched the blaze,
Gran held me close,
we flew to Silver City.

There
Ramona met us,
cups of water in her hands.
She drove us back to Cielito.

That day
Vince and Jacob knew
I didn't want to go outside,
where I might see
that smudge of smoke
close to my tower home.

We played Monopoly,
watched old shows,
made cupcakes,
washed them down with milk,
raced little cars
around and around
a twisted plastic track.

"Contained," Mark said three days later,
dark circles underneath his eyes
from hardly any sleep.
"The fire's been enclosed."
Mark touched my cheek.
"Steve says they'll do their best
to put the fire out."

“Steve?”

“The medic,” Mark said.
The one who listened to my lungs.
The man with friendly eyes.

The fire was contained,
still I wouldn’t go outside
and hurried past the windows
afraid of what I’d see—

the glowing sky
above Wolf Peak.

Days later, the fire was out.
Soon we’d be heading home,
back to the wilderness.

Fear seared inside:

What was left?
Would it happen again?
It was only a matter of time.

CROSSING OVER

Water washes over stones.
The river's a natural barrier
that helped the crew contain the blaze
during the Wolf Ridge Fire.
My bank, the side still forested,
the other stripped of living trees.

I flash the mirror to signal Gran,
hoping she's nearby.
I jump to cross from rock to rock.
Nerves thrum beneath my skin
and then
I'm on the other side.

NOT SINCE BEFORE

the Wolf Ridge Fire
have I been to this spot.
Though the trees are mostly gone,
new grasses sway in the wind,
wildflowers grow.

I've missed this piece
of mountainside.

Down below a stand of trees
now and then a curl of smoke.
I can't see much more.

Someone else will notice,
someone else will call it in.

A FLASH

a flare of shining light
beyond the blackened trees!
Beyond the scar
where spruce still grow,
a rocky overhang—
a perfect spot to shelter
from a thunderstorm.

“Gran!” I shout, and start to run.
The flash sparks again.