

Day's End

After so much driving,
the fire seems far behind us,
but I still feel carsick from stopping and starting.
It's true

 what Uncle Charlie told us—
 that fire creates its own climate.

Because everything changes in an instant.

 Around the bend,
 the wind is waiting for us.

 It blows into the side of the truck.

The air gets thick, gritty;
I can feel it in my teeth.

STOP! Mom yells.

The truck jerks. Stuff goes flying everywhere.

LOOK OUT!

Ahead of us a fallen tree,
branches on fire.

Other cars stop,

 but Dad drives onto the side of the road,
the truck bouncing so much
Watermelon flies out onto my leg,
slips down to my feet.

I want to get him, but I can't,
my hands holding tight
to the side of the truck.

 Dad steers past the fallen tree,

flames,

flames burning the road.

The truck pushes forward against the wind.

Ashes swirl like scorched snowflakes.

FLASH.

Mom looks up

then over at Dad,

his eyes fixed on the road.

David, she urges.

He lets out a breath, nods

like he knows what she's talking about,

but I don't.

What's going on?

There, he says, and pulls the car

to the side of the road, an old rest stop

where other cars are parked.

The truck stops.

Dad hands Mom a blue bandana.

She pours water over it,

squeezes it so the whole thing is wet,

then hands it to me.

It's gonna be okay, Finn.

Put this on.

Get down, Dad says. *Lie on the floor.*

Mom unbuckles her seatbelt,

climbs over into the back seat

with me and Watermelon.

Outside, we hear voices shout into the wind.

We smash ourselves down
on the floor of the truck.
Love you, Dad says,
shrinking down behind the wheel,
 covering himself with a jacket.
Mom pulls the blankets tight around us
 like we were taught to do,
her arms around me,
 holding in my beating heart.
 Waiting for the fire to come.

Sound and Heat

The ground vibrates,
 shakes the truck side to side.
 Outside, the fire explodes.

Sudden rush of flames,
 rumbles, like a train off its tracks,
 a jet engine roaring.

Mom's arms tight around me,
 I press against her.

The fire,
 over us,
 a storm of sound and heat.

Sky

We wait,
slowly breathe
inside a space
where time doesn't exist.

I lift the blanket slightly
to look out the window,
but instead of fire,
I see something else.
For a moment,
the wind blows the smoke
away, just enough.
Green branches
dance in the air,
sudden sunlight through
perfect leaves,
against a vanishing moment
of deep blue sky.