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Things I Have Not Told My Father about the Archer Mountain Fire

I.

One early morning before I moved west,
my father shuffled into the kitchen and sleepily said
Em, just promise me you won't fight forest fires.
Why? I'd never expressed an interest in firefighting.

After two summers as a guide on the Wisconsin River,
another outdoor job seemed to him
the sort of thing I might do. And it was fire season.
And he'd been watching the news.

Ten years later he watched Eagle Creek burn
from his air-conditioned living room in New Haven,
wanted daily updates on the smaller fire, "my side" of the Gorge.
This year's Substation Fire already has him spooked.

Me? I may have visited
East County Fire and Rescue's Volunteer Opportunities page.
I may have started looking at burn maps,
and found out Archer Mountain is open to the public again.

II.

There lingers a stale campfire smell
on the trail climbing up the mountain from Archer Creek.
Where there aren't switchbacks,
I wish there were.

And so I breathe deeply, remembering the day last September
when we turned off the smoke detectors.
First one and then the other started screeching
and wouldn't stop, though we had closed the windows
two days earlier.

How bad was it?
We'd mostly stopped going outside. We wore N95 masks
while we watered ash-coated vegetables.
We couldn't sleep, couldn't switch off
the most ancient part of our brains—it still knows
what that much smoke means.

The closest evacuations were eight miles east
on Smith-Cripe Road,
where the hike begins. The forest trail is narrow and overgrown,
only maintained by the odd hiker even before the fire.
Then, suddenly, the chest-high brambles and shrubs give way
to a much shorter and treeless band
of new growth.

On my map the dozer lines are depicted by strings of stout Xs
many times thicker
than the pipeline and trails and roads they follow.
So it is with some surprise
that I kneel in a space perhaps fifteen feet across
and give thanks to men and women who stood here
between us

and a fire started by an ember
that crossed a river
a mile wide.