

In the Path of Mary

by Lori Lou Freshwater

She walks ahead,
dropping matches as she goes.
Grassland is consumed by flames
and when I arrive, all is wasted.
A Swainson's Hawk dives
to scour singed ground,
finding a squirrel left without
the waving brown to blend into.
Another takes a grasshopper
rendered unable to escape
by its blackened wings.
I am forced to follow my mother,
even though the smell of sulfur
pulls my stomach upward into
my throat and left-over air clogs
my lungs, making each step
more difficult to bear.

But under my feet the fire has given
phosphorus for orthophosphates;
black ash has settled. A rattlesnake
crawls over white rock; charred leaves
fall softly from a sky I can no longer see.
Behind me, rich mineral soil. Life will follow
if I can walk slowly, manage the burn,
be the time, make sure the Quaking
Aspen is left alone and permitted to grow.
And then a flag of kaleidoscopic wildflowers
will unfurl on the side of a hill
behind my daughter.

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