

Smoldering

Even four years on, any poem about the fires
still smells of smoke. Some of the words glow
with embers that haven't yet died: memory has its own desires.
Turns out everything burns—valleys and houses, cars, clothes.
Kate had just tied my tie when the text came.
No school. I went anyway and checked in with the principal
when he got the call, the word, the name
of the student I knew well, the girl we'd later lose in the hospital.

Poems are like magic baskets—you can shove into them
more than you'd ever think they could hold: her name, Kressa,
the wall of smoke I saw over Redwood Valley, the friend
who said she saw asphalt flow like black lava,
and always more. The poem still smolders. It breathes the oxygen
we use to blow on those last coals, remembering, again and again.

—Michael Riedell

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