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When I was a fireman

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When I was a fireman

A shovel on my shoulder,
I followed a greasy yellow D-9 Cat.
Its blade scraped rocky ridgelines;
the diesel roared, steel tracks shrieked.

Wildfire raged below, forty feet per flame,
climbed up full-tilt toward
our craggy hogback
while the D-9 and I

stripped away burnable life,
eradicated foliage, bunch grass,
that could carry flames
across the windy ridgetop.

Midnight flames glowed in the gully below,
grass smoke stretched gray
in firelight like wraiths warning:
here comes the big burn.

After a twenty-four hour shift,
I slept beneath a two-ton truck,
baked in its oily shade, thirsty, tired,
ate cold stew from a military can,

excited, ready to go home or fight wildfire,
whichever – it didn't matter;
I was sixteen, making good money,
yet afraid to be a man.

Sixty years later: seas of flames – firestorms –
sweep Siberia, Australia, California, Oregon,
British Columbia, the world,
and this valley of orchards.

My history prepared me for this,
but I'm still not ready.

- *Tito Titus*