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Searching the Site Fifty Years After the Fire

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Mountains prop up the afternoon sky
as I walk the fret-edge of timber, stalked by
familiar longing that gathers sentiment to itself
the way carded wool fibers grab and hold their own.

Imagined whiffs of lanolin and sheep manure swirl
into the clean scents of sage and green grass
hinting at the phantom-sound of a thousand
bleating ewes and the bellwethers' toll.

New growth obliterates history.
No sheep in sight.
No trace of the outhouse.
No sign of the hillside of sawdust from the sawmill.

The old springhouse that evaded capricious flames
still leans into willows
though rot has gnawed the plank where I knelt
as a girl to settle bottled milk or watermelon

in among stones in the cold creek.
I used to linger amid coolness
to watch water bugs skim the surface
as if testing Biblical mystery.

At last I locate the rectangle of ground that held the cabin,
its four quartz cornerstones identifying place.
Logs of air still emit ephemera of bonds
they have released for fifty years since they crackled to ash.

Through the center of a rusted bed-frame,
a sizable pine rises, its trunk wedged
by the force of growth tight among the few iron springs
still dangling from a solid rim.

Art deco spirals design a chunk
of the cast iron Franklin stove
that contained its flames to warm the room.
I pick up amorphous forms of glass

made molten again by the blaze,
pine needles captured inside like bugs in amber.
A broken shard of grandma's blue ceramic bowl
recalls her yeasted nourishing.

Purged ground is fertile
as it always was.
Timber thrives in it.
Walls of wind disperse the scent of pine sap.

Discussion questions for the poem *Searching the Site Fifty Years After the Fire*:

1. Why is understanding the personal history of rural clients important to the rural social worker?
2. What could a rural social worker learn about the background and values of a client who shared this kind of history with his/her worker?
3. Do you think people in rural communities who have lived there for several generations internalize their roots and family stories in a way that influences their behavior in the present? Explain.
4. Do you hear nostalgia for what was in this poem? Explain.
5. Do you see fatalism as an acceptance that things are as they are in this poem? Explain.