**After the Fires**
**By Devreaux Baker**

We were afraid to go back, afraid to listen to the stories
ash and bone might tell. We wanted to believe our lives
were untouchable by nature, fate, or disaster.

At twilight we skirted the base of the first burned hill, reclaimed
her scorched shoulder, her ruined slope. The ground beneath our feet
released puffs of smoke, rising like ancient ghosts
to disappear in wind.

We thought of Spirit Lake in the mountains near Shasta,
how some believe out of nothing a spirit may be reborn
into the physical shape of a tree, bush, rock or stream.

Is this what your grandmother knew, the morning she called for the healer
to bring the spirit back into the shape of you? How the healer came into
your grandmother's kitchen where you lay and began to sing a song

to reclaim your place among the living. There was so much loss
you had to travel through. She told your grandmother to make
a circle of salt, to open all the windows. Is this what I have learned
from you? How the soul of a thing cannot be destroyed by fire

but remains buried beneath ash, bound in a circle of salt
waiting to return to its physical presence? You returned
through a dark land with no signposts, only spirit songs and the rattle
of sacred bones to guide you.

You came in all four directions at once and startled your aunts
who placed their hands in a blessing on you. We stand at the base
of the burned hill and taste the left behind spirit of lightning,
the soft core of ash, the outline of smoke that haunts this body of earth.

At the edge of the road one tree persists like the spirit of a child
moving through a land of loss into the body of a boy
dreaming a new shape into all four directions at once,
returning to the land of his birth.