

## THROUGH THE SMOKE



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# Six homes in 30 days

I don't take the shoe box full of last letters and photos from family and loved ones. I will cry over that later. I grab some hand-made socks and candles and crocheted treasures.

"Where are mom's pearls and bracelet?"

I grab my teacher's short-story book by my bedside. I go to my worktable and include the three library books in my bag of things.

I sit at my desk and the muffling sensation sets in while I'm wondering what else to grab.

My sister intermittently announces the 20-minute countdown. We try and plan what-ifs and how-tos.

I simply cannot comprehend not being back here.

I take down one each of this year's canned goods. Bread and butter pickles, salsa, tomatoes, peaches, plums and two jams.

The last thing I grab are two handmade aprons.

One of my father's paintings is small enough to fit in the backseat.

We each have our car and will talk on our phones to inform one another. Pioneer Road is already backing up. We plan to find somewhere to stay in that place over there.

I take a picture out of the sunroof, looking back at the monster eating our neighborhood.

Applegate won't work. It looks like a mushroom cloud

## SMOKE

From Page B1

over there, not many roads out, turn, head back only to be met with darker skies and larger ashes. Stuck on 99 near Old Stage Road, everyone is fleeing in the opposite direction. Black ahead, blue to the right, hurricane wind everywhere.

The fire follows us.

Finally, we land in the Safeway parking lot in Grants Pass.

"You were smart to go to GP right away. At least you will find a place to stay," someone says.

An hour later with five family members looking for a place for us, the only room is a two-hour drive to Roseburg at the Motel 8:

Waiting our turn, we hear the cashier tell the line behind us, "These two ladies got our last room. I'm sorry." I can't look back.

I don't know how I fall asleep, but wake up paralyzed until someone sends a visual of my home. It's the kind woman who made my apron. They had hunkered down in their car in their driveway two streets over.

She sent her husband to bike over to our neighborhood. She said when he returned she had never seen him cry like that in his life. He took the pictures I needed to see in order to get unstuck from the bed.

The house is burned to the ground. Everything gone.

We stay another night in Roseburg.

We get conflicting messages about the roads back. A lunch truck shows up in the motel parking lot with homegrown goodies and hugs.

Someone finds us a B&B in Ashland. We can be close to our loved ones. Then a mix-up and we spend a night at The Ashland Hills Hotel instead.

The next day someone secures us two nights at a B&B. A washer and dryer. Friends bring warm food and garden veggies.

We have to be out by Friday, but it feels so far away.

I call upon SOU and they find two dorm rooms in the Applegate wing.

Miracles continue while I prepare to start the semester. Family joins together to witness what has become of our neighborhood and home.

At my dorm there is a welcoming for students with a tie-dye fiesta outside. I feel at home.

Then FEMA. Red Cross. School. My keys. Purse. Phone. Mask. Advil. Dr. (Vaughn) Bornet calling to check in on me and ask me to help with his phone.

At Sew-Creative they wrap us in quilts coming in from all over the country.

I see my dear Dr. Bornet only one more time before he passes away.

My neighbor Andrew calls and sends us to OSF where a woman says they will have us in an apartment in an hour. We fall to the ground, but an hour later open the door to another home where I actually unpack cardboard boxes and start accepting some items for the kitchen.

Two weeks in and feeling so much gratitude, I get a call during breakfast proposing another move.

Our sixth, but this time we sign a lease until the end of January.

Another home.

Home.

*Through The Smoke is a series of stories compiled by Southern Oregon University creative writing professor Craig Wright and his students about those who were affected by the Almeda fire. Submit your story to [cwright@sou.edu](mailto:cwright@sou.edu).*