

## Third prize

### Forest of Ash by Cara McFarlane, Culbokie Primary

Once the forest was a place of beauty, joy and abundance, now all that's left is the burnt remains and smouldering earth that once was.

Everything was very quiet and still that day. Bird song filled the air and the smell of summer blossoms was welcoming and refreshing.

A tiny waterfall trickled calmly down from some fallen rocks into a small bubbling stream. I stopped for a drink, lowering my sleek gray muzzle. I lapped slowly. Raised my head to cast about for the smells surrounding me.

Same as before I smelled the fresh foliage and pine trees, but this time a different smell hit me. Smoke...Flakes of ash floated down from the sky like smouldering grey snow, setting fire to everything they touched.

I ran. The burning earth felt hot against my paws. The bitter smoke swirled around my head making it hard to breathe. Deer loped past me and I saw a squirrel scurry up a tree that soon went up in flames. I ran on.

Birds flew skywards in a desperate bid for safety first and seconds later came plummeting back down to earth burnt and charred.

I felt the thundering of many hooves as a herd of bison galloped up the slope of the ridge ahead of me.

I loped through the burning maze of death and destruction while dodging the debris. I yelped as a burning branch came plummeting down landing on my back legs. Scrabbling a charge earth I wrenched myself free from the burning branch.

A tree caught alight right in front of my eyes. I leapt back, terror hammered in my chest as I watched the tree go up in flames.

I ran on, it was getting hard to breathe. My paws sank into deep wet mud that meant there must be water nearby. Squelching slowly through the mud, I felt cool water swirl around my legs and leapt out for the river. Taking long strokes I set out for the other side of the river.

Panting I pulled myself onto the bank of the river and collapsed.

I woke to find myself half in, half out of the river. It was light, around midday. There was a gentle breeze that blew away any remaining smoke.

The charred earth was hot against my pads. The forest was a burnt mess of blackened trees and grey flaky ash. I trod carefully over the fragile ground, the forest was very quiet, no bird song, no fresh smells no wind only the dripping of a small stream.

A flash of greenery caught my attention. A small shoot was jutting out from some rocks.

And then I realised the forest is ever living. Always regrowing.

The forest endures.