

CENTRALIA, PENNSYLVANIA

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They say we are a ghost town, but we are not all ghosts yet. We are the unshoed, unshorn, we are the sulfurous. We know the smell of carbon, our boreholes, our highway's gashes. Our feet are warm. We remain.

The fire began as a blessing. For years, we burned our trash outside the city, the places where our fathers and our grandfathers and their fathers had opened the earth for mine shafts and then abandoned. But the fire spread to open coal, lighting anthracite seams that ran like veins under summer skin: lifeblood, invisible, easily forgotten.

We tried to stop the fire's clot. We piped water through the mine shafts, making inky clouds of steam; we drove bulldozers, held dragline shovels. We dug for burning rock, covered the fire with fly ash, the residue of coal-burnt power plants. And the fire continued to burn.

And the burning made life better. Underground, the rocks and the soil leached away heat, and under our feet, the asphalt was like barely broiled anything. Mrs. Hubbard's tomatoes grew ripe and red even in winter. Snow melted when it touched our ground.

And so we sold our snowplows. We paved new pools, filled our home-made hot springs. We were the world's first sauna city. We put bells on kitchen tables and called our houses B&Bs; we brought in tourists. We read books about beauty; we learned how to give facials. Our smell was eucalyptus oil and new-tarred highways. We grew our town into a city. Markets and theaters and shopping malls and restaurants, side streets, housing tracts, spas. Our sidewalks were clean and white and we did not feel what was

underneath our pumiced feet, below the soles of our calf-leather shoes, our alligator skin boots.

Ten years passed before the bark-stripped trees told us their roots had been cauterized, their tops too heavy. We learned the smell of bonfire; each felled tree coming up tangled and charred. We planted new trees. They died as well. Mrs. Hubbard's tomatoes shriveled, clung sundried to their vines. Our pumpkins: only shells.

We'd forgotten that the fire was spreading still below, eating our fuel acres. But the fire had not forgotten us. It ate miles of anthracite, burned hard without air. By then, its smallest veins had been exhausted, coal turned to ash.

And so our hot springs buckled, sunk into the earth, inch by sodden inch. We slicked over earth with cement, trying to pave the pools higher, but the cement refused to harden. The silt slid from the pool's sides and into the water. We added and added. The water took the gravel and set, our hot springs turned to blocks of mortar and sand. They sunk down farther. They left hard-finished holes.

The tourists left us after Mrs. Hubbard suffocated in the attic bedroom of her B&B, her visitors still in their beds, all dead. The fumes held tight to the wallpaper; everything cleaned away by men in plastic jumpsuits. They installed gas alarms in our buildings that warned us of our smothering. We slipped in sinkholes, in sidewalk cracks split wide enough to hold us.

They came then for our neighbors. They traded checks for our homes and drive-ins and grocery stores. They took our zip code, they razed our fume-bleached trees. They bought our broken highways.

But the six of us traded our shoes for our neighbors' houses, and they left us, holding boxes full of leather. We turned off their sirens and lived in our silence. We broke their windows, pulled doors off hinges, and let the inside out and the outside in. We share each room with one another and with nested bats and blue-tailed lizards, pink lemonade moths and green-winged butterflies that lay so still they look like leaves once healthy, until they leave our trees. With bees big enough to knock on the sides of our houses, waiting to be invited in. With ants big enough to carry us away. We have no doors to close to them, no windows to shut them out.

When we are gone, they will unearth our burning. They will shovel it away, and they will keep what remains. We are not yet gone.

There is time to die. And we *will* die, our last six souls. But for now, we light our stoves with ground-touch matches. We wear gasmasks where fumes smoke through the splintered ground. We paint our nowhere roads with the names of those who left us. We leave tomatoes for Mrs. Hubbard; they roast themselves on granite graves. We groom our cemeteries for older ghosts. We shred the curtains to our windows and sleep in every bed of every home left except ours. We watch storms hung heavy over the hills of other places, we watch lightning strike the other mountains. The bottoms of our blistered feet are bare and we are hot-stepped; still, we dance with fireflies through the gouges and the gullies in the ruins of our town.