

FRANK PAINO

Centralia Mine Fire

(Centralia, PA, 1962–Present)

Gloaming. Late spring, 1962.
In the slanting light,
slow veils of steam swirl
above Centralia's
municipal trash pit
where volunteer firemen
set aside their hoses
and head home, content
the blaze they set
has been quelled—that,
come Memorial Day,
any breeze that drifts
downwind
through the cemetery
veteran's plot will
bear only the scent of
honeysuckle-laden fences
when flags are flown—
when wreaths are laid.

They do not know,
beneath the puddled ground,
something small as a
pie tin shelters a fistful
of embers that grow
brighter as they slip
down the open throat of
a forgotten coal mine
whose tunnels lie
under all that's been
discarded.

Soon—
where there was only
darkness
along rusted rails and
coal bins, there will come
a sudden shock of light.

Soon—
the earth, once wasted
and left for dead,
will wick into infernal life,
turning serpentine roots
of mountain laurel
and huckleberry to ash
before it rises
along Locust Avenue
in great blooms
of smoke and sulfur gas,
an insatiable thing
that will thrive below
ground—
that will give no
quarter to the onslaught
of sand and water
one hundred men will
pump into its boiling belly.

Soon—
the night horizon
will throb with the
slow pulse of radiant
sandstone, licks of blue
flame that will break
the black spine of
Route 61
while just beyond
the graveyard fence
young boys laugh
and dare each other
to leap over
the glowing gaps
between the tombstones.

Patient. Unhurried,
the fire will creep under
trenches meant to force it
to choke on its own
dark breath.
It will swallow air
through mineshafts
and subsidence.
It will push the citizens
of Centralia to despair
and reluctant exodus
to Mount Carmel,
Ashland, and Numidia.

In fifty years
and nowhere near
its half-life,
400 charred acres,
a city in ruins, will be
its legacy.
And still it will want
more. Voracious,
well fed on deep seams
of anthracite, it will
refuse to let go or
to forgive the ones
who brought it to life
in a place once used
and then forgotten.
The earth will hold
its smoldering grudge
for centuries.

Frank Paino's poem, "The Drowned Church of Potosí, Venezuela," was recently selected by *Crab Orchard Review* as a finalist for the 2014 Richard Peterson Poetry Prize. His poem "Dead Hummingbird" was chosen by D.A. Powell as the third-place winner in *North American Review's* 2015 James Hearst Poetry Prize competition. He also has work upcoming in *World Literature Today*.