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The Hearth

C.K. Williams

February 2003

1.

Alone after the news on a bitter evening in the country, sleet slashing the stubbled fields, the river ice; I keep stirring up the recalcitrant fire,

but when I throw my plastic coffee cup in with new kindling it perches intact on a log for a strangely long time, as though uncertain what to do,

until, in a somehow reluctant, almost creaturely way, it dents, collapses, and decomposes to a dark slime untwining itself on the stone hearth.

I once knew someone who was caught in a fire and made it sound something like that. He'd been loading a bomber and a napalm shell had gone off; flung from the flames, at first he felt nothing, and thought he'd been spared, but then came the pain, then the hideous dark—he'd been blinded, and so badly charred he spent years

in recovery: agonizing debridements, grafts, learning to speak through a mouth without lips, to read Braille with fingers lavaed with scar, to not want to die-

Though that never happened. He swore, even years later, with a family, that if he were back there, this time allowed to put himself out of his misery, he would.

2.

There was dying here tonight, after dusk, by the road: an owl, eyes fixed and flared, breast so winter-white he seemed to shine

a searchlight on himself, helicoptered near a wire fence, then suddenly banked, plunged, and vanished into swallowing dark with his prey.

Such an uncomplicated departure; no detonation, nothing to mourn; if the creature being torn from its life made a sound, I didn't hear it.

But in truth I wasn't listening, I was thinking, as I often do these days, of war;
I was thinking of my children, and their children, of the more than fear I feel for them,

and then of radar, rockets, shrapnel, cities razed, soil poisoned for a thousand generations; of suffering so vast it nullifies everything else.

I stood in the wind in the raw cold wondering how those with power over us can effect such things, and by what cynical reasoning pardon themselves.

The fire's ablaze now, its glow on the windows takes the night even darker, but it barely keeps the room warm. I stoke it again, and crouch closer.

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