

SURFACE: MINE

by

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(Under the Direction of Andrew Zawacki)

ABSTRACT

This essay and collection of poems explore how the semantic, sonic, and formal texture of language—the roughness around its edges—is deeply connective and thus ecological, and how attention to the material and ecological qualities of poetic language can forge immediate, meaningful connections between a reader/writer and the world, and bridge the disjunction between sign and signified, art and nature, lover and beloved, presence and loss. The poems make pathways through linguistic landscapes, in which loss and the unknown are variously abstracted and concretized. The poems find a formal model for the paradox of connection in the figure of a mine, which is both an impasse and a joint between the human, natural, and industrial. Drawing from a diverse array of primary texts, the essay investigates the way language plays/splays across the gaps between public discourse and more private and idiomatic expressions and manifestations of grief, loss, and absence. Specifically, the essay engages with the language of the coal mining industry—a language of power in Appalachia—to understand how language, not just negligent mine safety and engineering practices, contributes to disasters and what we make of them.

INDEX WORDS: Poetry, Essay, Ecocriticism, Eco-poetics, Documentary, West Virginia, Appalachia, Coal mining, Industrial disaster, Elegy, Mourning

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014

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May 2014

## DEDICATION

To Brian, with all my love. We were standing right there.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the editors of the following publications in which several of these poems first appeared, some in a slightly different form: *The Tusculum Review* (“Glint” under the title “—but what light catches it throws”), *Connotation Press: An Online Artifact* (poems i, ii, iv, and v from “The Tide Pools”), *Field* (“Ginseng” and “The mountaintop refuses his advances”), *RealPoetik* (“Glossary: Mn- Words”), and *Country Dog Review* (“The mountaintop as an opening and an opening”).

Thanks to Perugia Press, publisher of my book, *Gloss*, in which the poems on pages 79 through 111 first appeared. Thanks also to Ohio University Press and editors Karen McElmurray and Adrian Blevins for publishing the essay (under the title “Between, Beneath, Beyond: Tunnel Vision in Coal Country,” and in a slightly different form) in the forthcoming anthology *Walk Till the Dogs Get Mean: Essays on the Forbidden from a New Appalachia*.

I am ever grateful for the guidance of Andrew Zawacki, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Susan Rosenbaum throughout my doctoral studies and the writing of this manuscript. Special thanks to dear friends Elizabeth Breese and Natalie Shapero for closely reading early drafts of many of these poems. Thanks again to Karen and Adrian for asking the questions that sent me sailing all the way to the right margin and back again. And endless thanks and love to my sweet family for everything, always.

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## SECTION 1

### Surface: Mine, an essay

I have a coal mine for a heart, and my heart is in my throat, and my heart is sinking because the ground, dark as a dream, deep as a dream, is being hollowed out beneath us while we sleep. So I can't sleep. I am wide-eyed in the dark. I mean, I can't sleep because it is too late, always too late. I mean, I am writing poems.

I mean, I am between the lines. In a tunnel. See a mantrip shuttle car carrying nine miners back up toward the surface at the end of their shift. Seven of them—and twenty-two others—will perish in the terrible explosion that has just been triggered over a mile deeper into the Upper Big Branch coal mine behind them. They are in the time between. Soon reporters will descend on the scene. Dateline, Comfort, West Virginia: “If you don't have tunnel vision, if you don't have the day-to-day, you will totally lose it,” one woman will tell a reporter as she waits on the surface for news about the rescue and recovery (Bluestein and Smith). She lost her grandfather in a coal mining operation years before this disaster and has learned how to be a survivor. Tunnel vision, or else. Later this day, after the explosion, there will be a surge in sales of spray paint used to spell out the words “Pray for our miners and families” on bed sheets soon to be removed from linen closets and hung from front porches. There are cardboard boxes somewhere full of plain t-shirts about to be printed with the image of a miner in silhouette making his way through a tunnel so narrow that he must crawl on hands and knees toward the light that pours from his headlamp. Someone will design, purchase, and distribute these shirts, which will be worn like veils or uniforms in churches and

community centers, where people will put their arms around one another, so that even the images on the shirts seem to embrace, and say, “There are no words,” and from where I am currently caught, snagged, suspended in between the lines, looking back upon this upheaval from years and miles away, I have to agree. There are no words. Just the spaces in between, even the narrowest spaces between embracing bodies. See the lover pulling the dreaming beloved closer in the night, skin against skin: “You’re still not close enough.” Just the hollows, like the intervals in a suspended chord, and what forces weigh on those hollows, and how hard, and for how long.

I say there are no words as I dig into words—see words under my fingernails, staining the knees of my jeans, tracked inside the house with leaves and dirt. I’m trying to make some sense of the Upper Big Branch disaster and its aftermath—to get my mind, like hands, around it via poetry. I’m trying to find a way in through the cracks and crevices between voices, words, facts, and stories. I’ve been reading the interview transcripts from the state and federal governments’ official investigation of the explosion, as well as other narratives of the disaster, which are still even now unfolding in newspaper articles, photos, videos, blog posts, song lyrics, and so on. Thanks to the memory of the Internet, one can trace the evolution of these narratives the way investigators traced the source of the explosion back to the face of the mine’s longwall, a thousand-foot-wide seam of coal that is mined using a “shearer,” a massive machine that grinds back and forth across the seam. At roughly 3:00 pm on April 5, 2010, the shearer struck some sandstone and a spark was released, which ignited methane gas that had collected in the area. The explosion tore throughout the mine for miles, fed by highly flammable coal dust that, against the most basic of mine safety regulations, had not been rendered inert.

Upper Big Branch was owned by Performance Coal, a subsidiary of Richmond, Virginia-based Massey Energy. Massey's CEO, Don Blankenship, testified before a U.S. Senate subcommittee that safety had been his number one priority at the company. "I felt that other safety programs were too reliant on slogans and signs. So I designated safety as S-1: Safety First" he said (McAteer 94). See the *sign* inside designated? Rhymes with excavated, devastated, desolated. Countless safety violations and the testimony of numerous miners suggest that Blankenship doth protest too much, that Massey had an unofficial policy of sacrificing worker safety for increased production and profits. I write *countless* violations, for the investigation revealed that many went unrecorded, and the company would often notify miners using "code words" when an inspector appeared on the premises so they could quickly correct or hide deficiencies. As the Department of Labor and the Mine Safety and Health Administration wrote in their report to the President, "In short, this was a mine with a significant history of safety issues, a mine operated by a company with a history of violations, and a mine and company that MSHA was watching closely" (McAteer 94).

Stanley "Goose" Stewart, a miner who survived the blast, testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor that the mine was a "ticking time bomb." When he began to distrust the company's commitment to S-1, Stewart decided to keep a private record of the safety problems he observed. "I told my wife," he said, "If anything happens to me, get a lawyer and sue the [blankety blank] out of them! That place is a ticking time bomb.' Only I didn't say 'blankety blank' to her because I was so scared—and mad! She told me to write down things that were wrong because she wouldn't know specifics or the terminology to convey what was happening" (United States 35). See language as a wall, and a window. Hear the ticking blankety blanks.

Clay Mullins testified on behalf of his brother, Rex, who died in the explosion. I read Mullins's prepared testimony in his own handwriting on two pieces of notepaper that have been scanned and preserved in the House committee's record of the hearing (United States 31-32), and illuminate it with the Charleston *Daily Mail's* account of the proceedings. During his testimony, Mullins went off script. He wore a t-shirt with Rex's photograph printed on it where you might expect to see a slogan, or logo, or nothing at all. At one point, he stood up and pointed to the photo. "This is my brother. I don't have him anymore," he said. As the article describes, "He removed the shirt to reveal another beneath with the names of all 29 miners who were killed. 'This is my other family of brothers I lost,' he said, remaining standing before members of Congress" (Rivard). No words.

I watch a computer-simulated reenactment of the explosion, and I compare it to an interactive map that marks the bodies of the deceased. I hover my mouse over each little red X to reveal a picture of that miner and a few sentences about his life. At first so many of their stories seem the same—these men loved their families, loved to hunt and watch football—but the more time I spend with them by way of these maps and other artifacts, the closer I seem to be getting to something authentic, hard, and real. But then all I have to do is ask, *What is that something? What am I looking for?* and the sense of clarity blurs, escapes my grasp like a silvery minnow flipping out of the palm of my hand, or a mountain ridgeline gone to fog. I have no idea. I don't know yet. I don't know.

Again and again, I watch a CNN interview with Pam Napper, whose son Josh died in the explosion, along with her brother and nephew. Josh had been working at Upper Big Branch for only eight weeks. With incredible equanimity, Napper says that losses like this are commonplace in

mining families, including her own. “It’s their living; that’s how they make a living,” she explains. “That’s just West Virginia, and when something bad happens we come together” (CNN). Her words seem to keep her anchored in an expanding universe of grief, but on what ground do they rest?

I hear this saying—“That’s just West Virginia”—again and again in response to the disaster, and I feel my head start to spin, nodding *yes* and *no* at the same time. “We come together,” folks say, and I imagine a human chain in the form of the state’s jagged borders. I feel a pulse in the first two letters of West: *we*. In the wake of Upper Big Branch, the grief I feel is not that of a coal miner’s daughter, but rather that of a daughter of the state of West Virginia. Often when I tell a new acquaintance that I’m from West Virginia, he or she will mention having a friend from the state. My first impulse is always to ask, “Oh, where from? What’s your friend’s name?” assuming that I might know the person—or that the person I probably do not know is akin to family, part of that *we* to which I will always be bound. If our conversation lingers on the subject of West Virginia—the winding roads, good whitewater rafting, history, politics, beautiful mountains, awful coal mining disasters—I’ll inevitably end up saying something like “That’s just West Virginia,” claiming while displacing the bitter and the sweet. Later, I’ll feel disappointed in myself for not being able to offer a truer, more complete defense or explanation of the place. And even later, I’ll realize that minutiae about West Virginia is lousy cocktail party conversation in the first place; forget poems, I really need to work on my small talk. Most people don’t go around acting like unofficial ambassadors for their homeland. I believe my impulse and struggle to sufficiently explain the place is a uniquely West Virginian trait, reflecting the value that this place puts on community and connection, a value which probably has a lot to do with why and how I write.

\*

The first poem I ever wrote about West Virginia was in immediate response to the aftermath of another mining disaster, the explosion at the Sago mine in Upshur County on January 2, 2006. This explosion, which killed twelve of thirteen trapped miners, was exceptionally devastating, for during a brief bubble of time from around midnight to 3:00 a.m. on the morning of January 4, news outlets reported the opposite ratio of deceased to surviving miners. The ebullience of that time is preserved on the front pages of many major newspapers. A headline on the front page of the January 4 *New York Times* says “12 Miners Found Alive 41 Hours After Explosion” (Dao). I read the article now and feel a small unspoiled ember of joy flicker in my heart like the light from CNN that illuminated my dark living room in Ohio during the wee hours of that morning, years ago.

A correction ran later that day: “False Report of 12 Survivors Was Result of Miscommunications.” The International Coal Group’s CEO, Bennett Hatfield, struggled to explain the false report. “In the jubilation of the moment, the rules didn’t hold,” he said, and apologized for having “allowed the jubilation to go on longer than we should have” (Dao and Newman). The article uses the word “jubilation” no less than five times to describe that ecstatic time between. In the original article, an MSHA administrator described the protracted and disorienting experience of waiting for news: “every minute seems like an hour” (Dao). One wonders how many minutes those three hours of false jubilation must have seemed like at the time, and what quality of space or time they still occupy in the grieving families’ hearts. In a number of photographs accompanying the corrected article, women clasp their hands tightly over their mouths, as if something terrible and

unknown might slip out of their bodies. A whole dream-life, a whole universe, might fill such a window.

My love for language and curiosity about what poems can do had never felt like a deep *need* to write until the vertiginous displacement of watching Sago unfold. Distance allowed me to truly understand the place I came from as “home” for the first time; yet I also felt like a voyeur, seeing its raggedy borders, its limits, as both an outsider and an insider. The message I heard in the miscommunication—through the tangle and transformation of signals between my living room in Ohio and the place where the men came to rest in the belly of that West Virginia mountain—offered clarity about what poetry does, clarity that I only felt in my gut at the time and have been refining ever since by writing and reading poems. For the first time, I understood poetry as a tool (similar to, yet exceeding, a hammer, scalpel, microscope, magic word, lullaby, threaded needle, drum, explosive) that I wielded not in my hands but in my voice, between my mind and my heart. For the first time, I saw the page as a kind of space beyond space where language, a material beyond material, could answer a phone I suddenly heard ringing off the hook.

I’ve found the first draft of that first West Virginia poem and I am glad to see that it is more interesting than I was capable of realizing when I wrote it years ago. The poem’s central metaphor is about direction and orientation—the difference between using compass directions and using landmarks to navigate a landscape and, thus, through an *ars poetica* lens, the difference between the abstract and the concrete. Here are the first few lines:

In West Virginia, we use landmarks  
instead of compass direction. Turn

on the gravel road just past the barn.

If you pass the church you've gone too far.

Despite that too-cute-by-half joke about religion, the poem recognizes its inability to comprehend the depth of the disaster. The poem lingers on the surface, and when I revised it and then eventually abandoned it years ago, I thought the poem's problem was its reliance on clichés, but that's a more complex problem than I realized at the time. The last line of the draft—"churches, pickup trucks, and gravel roads"—seems to suggest that although these "landmarks" may be cliché from the outsider's stereotype, they have real significance and meaning to the people who drive those roads in those trucks. Regardless, I chickened out by pointing to the grain of the surface without digging beneath it. The poem reduces opacity to blindness, and it fails or refuses to try other senses or angles:

Watching this  
from Ohio, I notice the hills  
and the way people from back home look  
on television, the familiar  
texture of the grass and the voices.

What is "the way," and can I account for what happens in the gap between the appearance and the real thing? Between the surface fiction/friction and the truth gasping for air miles beneath the coverage?

I read the final revised draft of the poem and see that I did try to push beyond that ambivalence. Instead of explanation, the revised poem begins with connection—an imperative and direct articles that attempt to break down the fourth wall of the page and sidle up to the reader. In

the revised first line, I command the reader to “Take the gravel road next to the barn.” And this version of the poem ends *inside* the mystery space between the surface and the unknown:

They ask miners  
to explain how dark it is inside.

I notice the hills, the familiar

texture of the grass and the voices.

*Just wave your hand in front of your face,  
ma'am, and you can't see nothing at all.*

I was getting there.

I see mines everywhere. I see poems everywhere. One of the essential challenges in coal mine engineering is preventing collapse of the roof of the mine. In “room and pillar” mining, the style used at Sago, up to sixty percent of the coal in a seam is left behind in the form of pillars that support the roof under the weight of the mountain. In “longwall” mining, the style used at Upper Big Branch, no pillars are used. The roof is allowed to fall into the expanding, unstable void that is left behind, called the “gob.” The coal miners operating the shearer are sheltered from that collapse by an awning of hydraulic supports that jack up the roof above them. Another challenge in mine engineering is ventilation, to provide the miners with sufficient air to breathe and temperate working conditions, while dissipating the flammable gases that are released from the earth. Sago had a history of roof fall violations, evidence that the mine’s support system was insufficient. And miner after miner testified about the terrible ventilation at Upper Big Branch and the company’s chronic lack of

concern, its normalization of deviance. The mine was cited every month during 2009 for improper ventilation, including citations for redirecting airflow when men were working underground—a “cardinal sin” in mining (McAteer 60). Gina Jones testified that her husband, Dean, who died at Upper Big Branch, would sometimes fall asleep at the dinner table after work, his body so exhausted from working in such low air (McAteer 59).

One of my final revisions to the Sago poem involved breaking the first draft’s single block of text into a series of three-line stanzas. Though the effect was similar to that of cutting more facets into an ersatz diamond, my intention must have been to put more air in the poem, to carve or engineer more room for movement, slippage, and breath, in its mine/mind-space. I can also see those breaks as a way to stabilize the poem—the white space like a skeleton undergirding the text. Over the years I’ve used different metaphors to account for how poems work, including the poem as a word-sculpture and the poem as a machine made of words. Those metaphors now seem too inert and cold. Poems, as I’ve come to understand them, are inhabited spaces. A poem is more like a house or a body or an embrace. A mine and a yours.

I see mines and poems everywhere. Mines as dark, volatile, and breathless as a word as it is being spoken. As ink. As Josh Napper’s handwriting in the notes he left for his mother, fiancée, and baby girl before he went to work on April 5: “If anything happens to me...” (CNN). As dark, volatile, and breathless as what he knew. As what happened. As dark, volatile, and breathless as the handwriting in Stewart’s journal and Mullins’s testimony. As dark, volatile, and breathless as the tunnel a word cuts into the infinite unspoken. As dark, volatile, and breathless as the space in which words are suspended. As the substance from which words are chiseled. As dark, volatile, and breathless as the silence that holds us in place. As the silence between the lines in all the poems ever

written. All the silent and elided sounds and letters. All the darkness. All the breathlessness. All on the verge of collapse.

\*

Roger Toney was headed out of the mine when the explosion happened. First he felt it in his ears. “Intense pressure,” he told interviewers. “And instantly you couldn’t see anything. It just—dust just blew overtop of us. And there was a lot of debris in the dust....And you could hear signs—like in the mines there’s signs that say like Plumley Switch this way and rescuer chamber this way. There’s signs all through the mines, and it sounded like every one of them came overtop of our mantrip” (41).

Not heard, but *felt* in the ears. *There’s signs all through the mines*. Explosion as poststructural nightmare: sign unbolted from signified and whipped around in a narrow space overhead. Perilously literal and beyond comprehension. This is the poem the explosion wrote, which I read by writing other poems, the way a miner might feel his way back to the surface. Find the patterns that make the structure, inside and out. The poetry is in the process is in the body.

I’m surprised by how much of the “poetry” part of my mind I need to make sense of these interviews from the state and federal investigation. The transcripts are on the Internet for anyone to access, but I feel like I have my ear pressed to a door when reading them. The interview subjects are mostly Upper Big Branch miners and their family members. Their words vine through the rhythmic lattice of legalese. The attorneys and the miners are both fluent in the language of mining. I am not, but I do know the language of compression. I read along, mostly lost on the trail of Q&A, Q&A,

Q&A, till I get snagged on pieces of language that connect me to the latent universal mystery.

Mining terminology is rich with connotations; each word could be a poem unto itself. I imagine a book with one term per page: mouth, gob, rib, face, brow, vein, overcast, continuous miner, self-rescuer, black damp, mantrip, burden, break line. So many of these words attach the body to the mine, and as I read, I feel myself pulled in and under.

I'm between the lines. The signs fly over my head. I feel the danger in my ears before I know what it is. Michael Ferrell testified that he worked for Massey Energy for the whole of his thirteen-year mining career, and most of that time at Upper Big Branch, until he was let go in February 2010, just a couple of months before the April explosion (Ferrell 13). Some people might say that he was let go because he has a mouth on him, that he gets out of line, but of course that just depends on who's doing the drawing, how many miles deep, and how much value they've ascribed to the bottom line. Ferrell frequently received written reports from the Upper Big Branch president, Chris Blanchard, telling him it was "critical" for him to work faster. "And, you know, a lot of people can define critical in a lot of ways," Ferrell said, "but I knowed what that meant. That meant if I didn't get this stuff in to suit him, he was going to fire me. But I was not going to break rules or regulations to do it" (44). Ferrell saw the writing on the wall. "I was not going to be the man that they wanted me to be," he said. "I mean, I made it abundantly clear in more than one instance that I was going to do whatever was right, it didn't matter what it cost me or this company" (46).

"Massey speaks code," Ferrell said. "They will never come out black-and-white until you do something wrong....But they speak their sign language to you. Anybody that's worked around the mines knows, you know, what's going on" (43). Ferrell recalled a time Blanchard took him aside to express his disappointment in how long it had taken Ferrell's crew to do a job without cutting

corners. “I think you use safety as a crutch here,” Blanchard said. “I’m not going to lie to you” (46-47).

I see the abstraction of safety nailed into a piece of wood and tucked under a man’s arm. He gives it his weight, propels his body forward, out of the darkness. See him squint into the sun, exposed, like a piece of language decoded, turned out from between the lines and suddenly in the clear. Like a piece of coal, spent, exhausted to ash—that pallor, that light.

\*

Sometimes writing feels like trying to tear the stars from the firmament, then finding dirt under your fingernails and realizing that it was really earth the whole time. Sometimes I sit down at the page with lead in my stomach. Sometimes light. Sometimes my heart chokes my throat. Sometimes I nearly write myself out of time and space—go so far in that I’m out. Sometimes I start so far out, that I can’t get in past the surface. When I sit down at the page, I am making my life, my living. But no matter how strong these forces feel, I am not risking my life—“It’s their living,” Pam Napper said. And the feelings I have when “mining” language are simply not the same as what a miner feels when he goes underground. They’re nothing like the weight that miner Gary Quarles carried to make his living. Quarles was a shearer operator on the longwall of Upper Big Branch. On Easter Sunday, the day before the explosion, Ferrell was working in his yard and noticed his best friend Gary—“he was like my brother....And I mean, his kids was like my kids”—driving back and forth on the road in front of his house. Ferrell could tell Quarles needed to say something. “And when you’re around somebody enough, you kind of know something is wrong, you know.” Ferrell

signaled an opening by taking a break from his yard work, and Quarles finally stopped by. Ferrell recounted their conversation:

Man, he said, they got us up there mining and we ain't got no air. He said, You can't see nothing. Every day, he said, I just thank God when I get out of that coal mines that I ain't got to be here no more. He said, I just don't want to go back. He said, When I get up in the mornings, I don't want to put my shoes on. He said, I don't want to make myself go to work, because, he said, I'm just scared to death to go or, he said, something bad is going to happen. (83-85)

Ferrell told Quarles that the conditions he'd found at his new mining job were vastly better than at the Massey mine. He offered to ask his new boss if there was an open position for Quarles. Sure enough, first thing the next morning, Ferrell got him a job. That day he must have felt in possession of the kind of news that begs to be printed in bold type on the front page of the *New York Times*. "Well, before I could make it home," Ferrell said, "I passed all the ambulances and fire trucks" coming from Upper Big Branch (86). Quarles was gone.

Writing is satisfying because it doesn't satisfy; it fills the writer only with the desire to write more, leaving resolution perpetually out of reach. The desire that keeps me coming back to the page is different from what motivated Quarles to overcome unspeakable dread and reenter the mine each day. But I imagine that the feeling of finally hitting upon some words that sing, closing the laptop, and saying "Enough. Done for the day" could be something like the satisfaction a miner might feel after a day's work—feeling that empty space inside the mine like a fullness inside his own body. Enough, yet never enough, to keep him coming back to that same mine, day after day, for decades. So much of poetry happens on its surface—rhythm, sound, structure. I remember the illusion I felt

after finishing the first draft of my Sago poem—that my neat and tidy poem had righted some small part of the tremendous chaotic wrong. I imagine there might be a similar feeling in the body of a miner as he surveys how much of the mountain he has moved in a day’s work. But, of course, that one poem was not enough. And as I toss and turn, unsettled by unfinished, unfinishable poems, I know that “Done for the day” is never “Done forever.” See my imaginary miner climbing into the mantrip, riding to the surface, then washing up in the bathhouse. He heads home to dinner and sleep. See him wake the next morning to find coal dust in his bed sheets. Years later, coal dust in his lungs. You can’t shake it.

I am not a miner. I am not a miner’s daughter, wife, or mother. I am imagining all this from the comfort of great distance. I hope the distance can become a point of entry, but I worry about how I might mishandle, mishear, miscommunicate. And though I am suspicious of the news stories that seem to feed on the surface of this loss without ever getting close enough to feel the vacuum pulling not just on the heartstrings but on the actual body, I have an insatiable interest in such stories. I hope my interest is not voyeuristic, but rather rooted in the desire to dispel, puncture, expand, and complicate any false closure. But I confront those lines from my failed poem—“the way people from back home look / on television...”—and feel how hard it is to get to the real. You must allow yourself to become lost in a place that might collapse. You must feel the way out, which is only deeper in.

There are no words, but there are poems. The material of poetic language can, like a threadbare glove, put you in contact with the unknown while reminding you of the forgotten tenderness of your own skin. It is the threshold that enables empathy and understanding. *Understanding*, not *overstanding*: standing under the same mountain as another person.

Understanding requires the courage to come into contact with an unknown so real that it might take your whole being as you know it and never give it back. Understanding is immersing yourself, allowing yourself to be changed.

\*

Nine months after the disaster, Upper Big Branch miner Tommy Davis bared his back for the *Wall Street Journal* to reveal a massive tattoo memorializing the three members of his family who were killed in the explosion: his son Cory, his brother Timmy, and his nephew Josh Napper. The name *Cory* is inked in cursive script between the nape of Davis's neck and the top of a large, ornate cross. A stylized version of the crawling miner is silhouetted in the horizontal crossbar that stretches between Davis's broad shoulder blades. Flanking that large cross on the right and left sides of his back are two smaller crosses, each topped with a halo and draped in a banner, one reading *Timmy* and the other *Josh*.

Davis has taken reporters to Cory's tombstone, a teardrop-shaped monument that seems to be made from the same granite as the Upper Big Branch monument in Whitesville. It is etched, front and back, with words and images. One side reads "CORY BOY OUR BELOVED SON AND BROTHER" beneath the image of a guardian angel like one Cory had tattooed on his own neck, and next to a full-body image of Cory, shirtless and mugging for a camera. The other side holds a crisp close-up of Cory's smiling face centered above his full name and the dates of his birth and death. A nature scene is etched below, along the base of the monument—a majestically antlered deer collaged with an image of Cory drawing back a bow and arrow.

Davis now drives Cory's Ford F-150. "I feel like it keeps me close to him when I take it out for a ride," he told a reporter (Vest). A photo of the back of the truck shows the words "CORY DAVIS GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN" emblazoned on the tailgate and a sticker for "Bare Knuckles Tattoo" on the bumper.

Patty Quarles bared her left leg to the *Washington Post* to reveal a tattoo of her late son Gary's face. The image seems to be drawn from a photo of him in his Massey uniform, his eyes and headlamp directly facing the camera.

The article accompanying the photo describes how Patty fervently read her son's autopsy report while sitting in the parking lot outside her lawyer's office. Though her husband was reluctant to read the report, Patty did not want to be spared any details. She wanted to close the distance between herself and her son when he died. Gary had lived right next door to his parents. "He was our whole world," she told the reporter. "He ate here. He'd been sleeping over here. He'd come to the door and say, 'Hey Mom.' I can almost still hear him. He was a 33-year-old man who never left home. His house was 40 feet away. It's unbearable to think about what's actually gone" (McCrummen).

These news articles detail the dilemmas the families faced when considering various settlement offers. The article on the Davis family ran just nine months after the explosion, as they and the other families were weighing whether or not to accept Massey's initial three million dollar settlement offer.

"I'm in no hurry," Davis said, waiting to decide. "I don't think it's justifiable that they want to put a dollar sign on my boy" (Maher). Davis bared his back again, a year after the disaster, for

ABC World News. A video shows a tattoo artist inking more crosses onto his back, bringing the total to twenty-nine (Dwyer).

The Quarles family rejected Massey’s initial offer, calling it a “slap in the face,” and sued the company for wrongful death. They finally reached a settlement in 2012, for a sum that legally must remain undisclosed (McCrummen).

An analysis of the publicly available information regarding the merger of Massey Energy with Alpha Natural Resources determined that the value of the payouts and benefits packages allotted to Massey’s executives and board of directors for 2010 through the conclusion of the merger—a complicated math including salary, severance, pension, retirement, and deferred compensation—totaled one hundred ninety-six million dollars, of which former CEO Don Blankenship’s share exceeded eighty-six million (Cypress).

Coal dust can permanently mark the flesh by entering an open wound, or being ground in by years of contact—

*The ground ground in.*

*The grind ground in.*

*The rind, the Tide.*

*Kiss the over-under*

*on my paper-white hide.*

—leaving a bluish tint called a coal tattoo in tender skin around the wrists, collar, or forehead.

Juliana Spahr: “The tear refers to an ideal circle that is / not met.”

Patty's husband, also named Gary, is one of the many miners and family members who were interviewed in the joint state and federal investigation of the explosion. At the beginning of each interview, the lawyers stated their goals: "to investigate the conditions, events and circumstances surrounding the events that occurred at the Upper Big Branch Mine-South on April 5th, 2010." At the end of his interview, Quarles was asked whether he had any additional information to share or a statement to make on the record. "I can't see how anybody can make their decisions on what happened on this whole mines right there without putting it all back together just like it was April the 5th, nothing more, nothing less," he said (47-48).

To do so, he said, the holes that were drilled into the mine during the rescue efforts would have to be plugged. Anything that had been dislodged would need to be replaced, plastered back together. "Now, how could you make your decisions on what happened, exactly what happened and where it all happened without putting it back together?" he said. "I know how they—. I've heard them say that they can't. Well, that's beyond me. I don't know that. Which they may be able to, but I can't—I don't know without putting it back together, every stopping" (48).

Quarles began to spin his wheels. I've spoken this way after a dream, stammering to explain my vision as the logic binding its fragments dissolves faster than I can put sentences together. He tried again. "[H]ow are you going to not know for sure how—what happened if it ain't put back together, you know?"

The investigators recognized his frustration, and tried to ease him out of the interview.

"I know for it to be put back together it would take a long time," Quarles said.

"Uh-huh."

“And I don’t think nobody wants to take that much time, but to make it right, to make for sure exactly how—” Quarles said, and began to express his distrust in the records the company had been keeping.

The investigators thanked him again for his cooperation.

“Me and my wife both want the answers,” he said.

“We don’t care if it takes time,” he said.

“She wants it as bad as I do. And this is all I can think about,” he said.

“I can’t think about nothing else. I can’t,” he said (48-50).

Maurice Blanchot: “The circle, uncurled along a straight line rigorously prolonged, reforms a circle eternally bereft of a center.”

In the rubble, the explosion resounds.

I hear the double negative undulating, canceling itself in and out, when Gary Quarles says “I can’t think about nothing else.” The sentence tosses like a boat on a body of water. It’s an unsettled stomach of a sentence.

Of course he means *anything* else—he can’t think about anything other than reassembling the pieces of the broken mine to locate the bud of the problem that should have been nipped, to find the sleeping giant and wake him gently this time. But *nothing* is also true. For what would he have even if the pieces could be reassembled? “—*Nothing has changed*,” writes Blanchot,

—*Except the overwhelming overturning of nothing. —Which breaks, by the smashing of a pane (behind which one rests assured of perfect, of protected visibility), the finite-infinite space of the cosmos—ordinary order—the better to substitute the knowing vertigo of the deserted outside. Blackness and void, responding to the suddenness of the opening and giving themselves unalloyed, announce the revelation of the outside by absence, loss and the lack of any beyond.*” (115)

The explosion is so often described as “massive”—I’ve written it many times myself—that the term almost becomes a proper noun: The Massive Explosion. The Massive Massey Explosion. But what scale measures mass of this kind? A modifier seems necessary. It’s not enough to say “the explosion.” But other words seem at once too precise and vague—*horrific* explosion, *dreadful* explosion, *unimaginable* explosion—and bely the fact that the explosion killed anyone who would have been close enough to accurately describe its force. Yet writers and reporters still feel the need to cushion the explosion in some humbled language. To get matter and gravity involved. The sentence needs a running start if it wants to clear the hurdle of the noun, so we use “massive,” inadequate though it may be. I believe we’re inclined to use “massive” rather than just *big* or *enormous* or *tremendous* because of the word “mass” embedded inside it, connoting substance and invoking material. The explosion *was really something*, as they say. It matters. Again, Blanchot: “We constantly *need* to say (to think): that was quite something (something quite important) that happened to me. By which we mean at the same time: that couldn’t possibly belong to the order of things which come to pass” (9). But what the explosion yielded—from upheaval to cash settlements—didn’t create new matter. Neither did it destroy matter. The autopsy report that Patty and Gary Quarles read in the parking lot outside their attorney’s office listed the weight of their son’s heart. Even that could be accounted for in the aftermath.

The explosion did not amass or destroy. It destoryed. See Picasso with a pickaxe dislodge the *o* from *now* and begin moving it around some canvas. When asked if she had any additional statements to make in her interview with the investigators, female miner Bobbie Pauley tried to explain what she had lost, beyond just her fiancé and friends: “That’s more than enough, but you know, you lose your future, you really lose your present. And I won’t ever be the same person I used to be, I know that” (180-181). And yet she is. And yet she isn’t.

And so, when saying “massive explosion” is not enough; when saying “Massive Explosion” is not enough; when saying “Massey Explosion” is not enough; when destorying a massive undisclosed amount of what matters most to Massey is not enough to be touched, ever again, by the being who matters most to you in the universe, and so it feels as if there’s a hole in the universe, even though there isn’t a hole, no new nothingness, just grave, grave gravity, and the feeling of your own dumb weight resisting forward motion, your life being thrown back in the seat of your body while the world spins—when even that destorying is not enough, you eventually realize that there was never enough to begin with, and the only holes that matter are the ones you look through, breathe through, cry through, sweat through, and sing through, and so you open them wider and wider to close the gap between what you can and cannot connect to; you take the world in, to heart, because you know that’s impossible; and you try to make something new because you know that’s impossible too.

Describe and express; string together insufficient words; draw insufficient shapes. Burn those words and shapes into flesh. Dig them into stone. Make a little pain. Make a little joy. Clean. Cultivate. Put your humble mass to work.

Think and don't think about nothing. Cradle your mind like hands around that precious  
nothing

—*fool's ore*

—*fool's err*

—*fool's air &*

—and in doing so, bear it, bring it to bear, bring it to bare. “It’s unbearable to think about what’s  
actually gone.”

\*

Five a.m., the lunar eclipse of dream. Sun, earth, moon. I’m a miner, I’m his grieving wife,  
I’m poet-me. Clutching a pillow, I’m clutching the space between the longwall face and the gob and  
a line break. Light sifts in, like earth, like ink blotting— *Hold this. Stay here*, poet-me thinks, trying  
to sleep the moment back together as it pulls itself apart. It slips away, like a balloon or a fire ball or  
a heavenly body under earth. Too late. I’m back to my old senses again.

I dreamed a mineral line of questioning. I put my mind into the space between.

“Why,” no one asked in the interviews, “do we do this?”

By this I mean bury our beauty alive. By this I mean breathe dirt.

I was in a mine, which was a poem, which was a problem, which was a heart, which was a  
bottomless hole, which was a closed loop pulsing, constantly, I suddenly realized, beneath my  
consciousness.

A spark touches combustible gas and becomes an explosion, leaving twenty-nine dead men in its wake. I write by, and try to do right by, the light and energy of such contact and connection. I strive to write poems that are as integral as the human chain of one hundred men who carried out the deceased from the belly of the mine. They didn't make anything resembling the shape of West Virginia; they made a line. That is a poem—one man, one life line, carrying a burden, and then turning it over to another. What is more simple, clear, and difficult to understand than that? That is how we recover, how we mine, how we mean.

## SECTION 2

Surface: Mine, poems

## Surface Mine

Some trees in extremity.

Some branches like a woman's arm bared

on the tattoo table,

her skin an ink sink

gone here to kin, here

to spirits, here to dread.

Some trees shed

like it's nothing,

bestowing by the trunkful

even as the weather's coming

scarves of bark

that look like the wind might

were it dried and

cured of itself.

## Surface Mine

You might imagine,  
try it with me now,  
that each of these  
ink gnarls  
on white space  
is just the tip of a  
branch—see  
the first moment  
of crocus—that runs  
deep to or from  
a source beyond  
in some other  
dimension. For the crocus,  
earth. For the branch-tip,  
ether. For the print,  
paper; turn it  
to find another poem  
on the verso,  
but that's not all  
there is. Make no  
mistake: this is not  
a religious poem.  
I'm just saying, imagine  
what might be  
nourishing us here  
on the breath-edge  
of space. See

love leave  
till it's gone, then  
feel a forest  
root down. The heart,  
a trailhead. I try  
to get through. I break  
a branch to write  
in the dirt. See sap  
in its splintered end.

## Underground Spring

### *i. Coalescence*

Seasons in the sound barrier. Surround,  
son, song, sonic boom laid down over  
like a lead vest, like a memory quilt and being held  
under it in the wake. Air,  
if you really want to get into it,  
like a pushed-up sleeve. Say we flattened this place  
like a note or a flyaway strand. Say each one of us  
grabbed a season and lit out for ever. Say we  
turned to look through the space  
we'd squirreled away for a time like this.  
Please say we came back together  
as if folding a bed sheet fresh off the line.  
There's no sound inside the jet plane. But inside  
the mountain cracks like a bullwhip.

*ii. Maia Myth*

Seasons, ink. Seasons, his face  
pulled from the old Olson Mills through  
a needle and buried in her skin. Seasons  
tattoo, as in echo, as in chamber, as in the descender  
on the letter *g* in the word *together*, all seasons turning  
inside it while she's stranded on the escarpment  
of the *r*, her feet dangling out into what is only  
her own life. Seasons in the socket-hollows,  
in the bridge, in the strong jaw. Seasons in the family  
resemblance, a boy growing more and more  
like himself, like a broadening circle on a pond,  
as if she made him by throwing a stone  
into a small body that she assumed was limitless  
as the sea. Seasons in the shadows of such stones.

*iii. At the Remove*

Seasons at a loss, a father at a loss to say where  
the water keeps coming from. Not run-off,  
not this time, but up from within the dirt or the body—  
the distinction collapses. Seasons on the verge,  
idling in the driveway. Seasons furled in the buds  
like every little baby that ever was. He's gone soft  
with the land. He sleeps on the edge of a crater.  
Tearing up and tilling, untiling. Tilling, untiling—  
one of those dreams where you just can't get,  
but not for trying, dirt filling the hole  
before you put the flower in, only deep down  
in your cells. A season is a great big earth mover,  
big as a son, big as light, big as the night shift  
feels, going down into it like the opposite of sap.

*iv. Starred Up*

Kin to the grain of sand, kin to the sea,  
kin to the fits and starts of foam,  
she is all of a piece with time,  
seasons woven in the rope of shore  
she wrests her moment of a body through  
by still being, being still, inside.  
The known world breaks against her skin  
and falls into its limits:  
the solid all, the liquid else,  
and present in the verge, the asterisk  
of her arms and legs and spine,  
as if there is an antecedent somewhere  
to which her body only refers and not only  
this coast—this long, longing, division—

*v. Glint*

—but what light catches it throws  
and the present falls to pieces  
before its time, it's time, placing  
him back in the living room, jetsam  
behind the storm window that holds  
no antecedent, just memorial decals  
meant for a truck tailgate and the reflection  
of the season's empty house next door  
through which all the world's light once passed  
when he wouldn't have known a goodbye  
if it kissed him on the cheek or the hiss  
and click of the screen door as a sound  
that meant anything, anything at all, the way  
a breaking wave articulates a piece of the sea.

*vi. Clade*

Draw every last orange lily, draw the shade,  
draw a bath, a breath, again another  
plan, the strength to draw the line  
on which to sign, to vine, your name out  
long and slow as if for miles  
from the dirt floor of a room inside the earth  
to your full height in all this splitting light.  
You're an eon if you're a day. You're a sea  
if you're a son. You, your own horizon, are a tree  
if you're a woman holding your own  
against the sky, reattaching what leaves to no end  
like scarves from your sleeves  
or your voice to the sounds you're leaving behind.  
Your branch trails smoke.

*vii. One Another*

She's being spoken to softly again.

The friend with whom she once shared bathroom stalls  
and every detail cradles her elbow with one hand,  
holds the other just below her own throat.

"And how are *you*," she's asked, as if  
they don't have nothing left to learn about one another,  
as if they are no longer the same person.

She says she's fine to keep the friend  
from knowing what she knows she knows  
about herself. If she were held under for long enough,  
she, too, would find the ember  
that you keep alive with your every breath.

To use its light you have to go so deep  
you find another surface of yourself.

## Riddled

What's worse, the sea or the terrible teacup,  
its gold rim and measured volume?

The sea or the painted bone overflowing  
all the everloving more you have to give? The overflowing thing

or the thing taking the shape  
you—as full of holes as the hearts long-gone

from your wall of trophy deer heads—give it,  
you sieve, then taking more? What's worse,

rescue or recovery, or what's the difference?  
The coverage or the cover-up? The coverage of the cover-up

or the coverlet slipping away in the night  
like a weight? Or a wait? What's worse

you or the underground stream? You or the guttural volume  
turned down to turned earth, streaming through and through?

What's worse than a mouth dissolving into the sea,  
and what's a mother to do with a well full of wail, a pail

being lowered forever? What's worse, a pail  
being lowered forever or recovered, full of the sea?

In the event of the sea, what percentage  
of one's heart is the proper gratuity?

If tomorrow is yesterday's ocean,  
where does that place now, now

that the sea takes the shape of a man  
or a man takes the shape of the sea—

whichever is worse? What is the shape of nostalgia  
for things removed from the realm of possibility? What's worse,

to never die or never live? To believe  
or know or unbeknow? To behold

or to be held? What's worse,  
to be riddled or shot through?

## Still

The wait, the weight, that wants to slip  
and how you must be to hold it.

Feeling gradually diminished

and enveloped as the sea  
pulls sand over from under,

as if you are a sapling or seed,  
as if you are Daphne, as if

you are, have been, mistaken—  
the banyan's aerial roots

for a torrent of water,  
the magnolia's sunken branches

for beauty and not beauty  
being buried alive

but beauty all but  
relinquishing.

## Transplant

*for a friend and her father, waiting*

This is the life. This is your life. These are the times of, these are  
the watched pots gone pocket watch gone old timer. Your sweet old  
tick-tock. The silver lining I dreamed you gone to lint and sateen

when sunshine eclipsed the starred-up sky, dust unto  
comet-tailed doves done lit out for the territories. What is it  
this time: space or patience? You light on some silence, fold in half

and in half again like the kitten in my lap, paw over  
her eyes. In half and in half again like this poem when it was a sonnet,  
with soft creases on *silver, sliver,*

*river, deliver, lost slipper,* and for the heck of it, *spittoon,*  
and laced with *life* and *line*, the wispy *f* curling into the sturdy *n*—a friend  
making a bridge of her back. *I got a line on a liver* is something I can say

in a poem or about a poem in/on a dream about a dream.

In a viable poem, the lines leave something to be desired, like shadow, snail trail,  
the kitten's warmth left in my empty lap, puffy eyes belying

a bright *hey-o!* A viable dream also creates a new hollow. When I woke up,  
I had it. I had had it—past perfected into oblivion. You write, *My dad, a dog dreaming.*  
And later, when you've had it, *Where the f- is it?* Who has it? Easing into a slow one,

the singer tuned her guitar and told about her dream of waking from a dream  
on stage: marooned in blue light and audience, the ravine-song bridge  
a tether materializing at her fingertips. She played it out as if on puppet strings,

woke up just this side of real. Just shy of a far cry, this paper, airplaned  
toward Wisconsin, lands at my feet. I try again—to make something  
you can unfold, crack into—origami fortune teller, pistachio, window

in the waiting. Life is just a breeze. Today is so everything,  
it's barely happening. Today is so going to be, it's barely happening. Today is so fine,  
it's barely happening, barely happening, barely happening.

## Surface Mine

Our way of life  
gets in  
our way of life

the way a feeling  
gets in  
the way of bones

or helium  
gets in  
the way of the balloon,

light and severe  
as a joke on the string.  
Some say,

to survive, leave  
the outside outside.  
Others say and say

and say it  
again in love notes,  
flyaway anchors

from which to hang  
on each descent  
to the face.

A pound of feathers  
in the mind, a pounding  
head in the hand.

Our way of life gets in the way  
the ache gets in  
detachment. The day always

breaks just above and beyond.  
We put in our all  
and it ain't no sacrifice.

My own life  
blooms like a stone  
from the clay.

## Surface Mine

Honey catches and keeps, but distance only pauses  
at the stays. Rolling

under my feet like a log on a river, each day  
parcels out into many little mornings.

That knot in the floorboard was once  
a branch. See how the tree flowed

around it. See *now* as a long piece  
of lumber, the *o* for the skewer

that it is. I could replace *mornings*  
with *moorings* or everything after *day*

with *jolts*. I blow my limbs against the sky—  
see paint from a straw, the topmost sheet of a sheave—

a hyperventilation of leaves. Outside out;  
inside in. *You are just in time.*

## Surface Mine

No map. This  
place like the  
weedy space between  
two radio stations.  
I cut through  
the haze, scape  
out the metaphor,  
trace the ridge  
then the uppermost  
branches to the  
roots, find the  
path fast becoming  
a ravine when  
the country takes  
hold of itself,  
sudden as a  
limb halting across  
a child's chest  
the way what's  
pronounced shelters what's  
silent in *fight*.

## Surface Mine

What is seen through not being  
seen through? Not being

finished, raw  
like furniture, raw like the trees

from whence, acquiring rings?  
Rapid to rapid under the bridges,

driftwood like a ball bouncing atop a jingle-lyric  
suddenly hits still water

—see the unbroken horse rearing—

like a welling lake, an adjacent sound  
like a Dobro torqueing melody

at once both upstream and down-.  
Like the word *efface*.

I mean that as a command.  
Find within yourself affection

for the way it attaches to the page  
like a splinter,

—*efface*—

like a whipstitch,  
like a body in the rip.

See the *f* and *f* as holes  
on the guitar with its wooden body

and metal core designed  
to get all that loud music out.

## Surface Mine

If you're sensing an undercurrent  
of violence here, you're close,  
but the rip is in the surf  
and it's really more of a seam  
in a kind of lace trim. The sea  
pulls itself together to break

again against its record, knowing  
precious nothing of the moon,  
nor gain and loss as pattern and consequence,  
nor containment, nor contentment,  
and none of what we read into it, reaching  
for the trees only because they're next—

either that or knowing  
precious only of the moon,  
only gain and loss as pattern and consequence,  
only containment, only contentment,  
and nothing about reading but reaching  
for another body submerged somewhere inside  
the way light loves on a body till it burns.

## Surface Mine

The paint fell as a tree,  
the word landed, a wound,

and I emerged an edge  
of anything I touched,  
a brush that is a knife.

I found myself lost in the inner  
landscape of a line snaking

around the center  
of someone's universe.

## Long Point

We're a contraction; our laced fingers,  
apostrophes,  
possessive. My love,

we've woven to  
a selvage quilt.

I crawl under you  
crawl under me.

You and I, all of a piece. You and I,  
integral as refusal,

as a cry of color or  
sugar blood  
drawn up through the length

to leaf—  
and the sapling,

as if a heart in a throat,  
splitting us, clutching at it,

into two words.

## Chestnuts Sweet

Ivy holds our house together. A voice  
snags and suckers. A line  
draws into a bird with little fangs.

Soap the seams of the contraption.  
Doctor up the juncture.  
Our favorite little man falls into this repair.

\*

All points bullet the scrawl space. You are,  
are you, a curer, a curser, a recluse  
securer come to sum so-

me of us up. Gig bag that body, gig its sound-  
wormy holes,  
so previous, so previously.

\*

In the mean, the prism and the rattlesnake.

In the mean, cows graze in the auto salvage yard.

Blam, blam, blossoms on the gladioli, in the meantime.

Put some hurt on the syllables. Swim upstream  
with the scruff in your teeth.

Release that great-dainty on the raveling shore.

## The Tide Pools

*i*

Blue-green to blue to  
violet, blue-green to blue  
to violet: ir-

idescent slug of  
a slurry lake like a jewel  
sunk into the cusp

of nature à la  
press-on nail, à la mood ring:  
the nacreous shell

of a hand fallen  
open, come to land on a  
shoulder, find it so-

lid as any numb-  
er of places full to the  
brim of offering.

I want to call this  
*rupture*: I want to say *up-*  
*heaval*, but it's rhy-

thm we set our clocks  
to: to blue to violence:  
to blue: to blue-green

to blue to time lapse  
film of the perennial  
gardens in the ghost

town seething up like  
jets of blood or ink were ink  
power that paper

had all along, just  
waiting to be coaxed or clawed  
or flooded or dug

out from within its  
fibers: peony, iris,  
azalea bursts

a gaze would cut, a-  
rrange into bouquets: *let me*  
*find a vase for these.*

*iii*

Would a man suspended  
in the infinite seem  
more or less edged? More

or less tender, tending,  
with a tendency toward  
his limits? To

violet, to violet. Would we be able,  
once and for all, to

see him as the man  
who he is and not the man  
who he could have been?

What about a man  
buried in the finite earth?  
What about a man

who returns the earth  
into the earth with his lungs,  
every day a gift?

Where does a person  
stop being a person? Where  
does a memory

end when it has stopped  
being held like the melo-  
dy of some word-worn

song? I know that all  
we have is falling open:  
dirt: handful of gears:

book: brook: broken-in  
ocean: space and being beck-  
oned inside and out.

*iv*

The sea shivers, foams  
up like alveoli: blue  
wisteria haze—

blue as a surfac-  
ing body—inhalés the bare  
spring tree like a breath:

blue mussel husks wing  
open at the sternum hinge  
to admit the tide:

as many redbud  
petals as days the sun shook  
loose: phytoplankton

bloom green to then dis-  
solve, interrupt water's breath-  
taking coherence.

*v*

Either that or the  
wisteria is the breath,  
wrung out and hung up:

impression of sky  
slung across impression of  
lung staked like a claim:

this spring's sprung, you see:  
you there, know that this portion  
is still viable:

either that or what-  
ever you're drawing and hold-  
ing within, now out:

that or an orna-  
ment—a blue shiner on your  
pride and on your joy.

*vi*

Voila to voila:

surf: face: a photographer

convexed on the film

of sea foam bubbles

he's zooming: weird cloud of eyes

returning his gaze

and the sky's clouds too:

abalone cameo

of a cameo

of a cameo

in one's own sci-fi horror

biopic: verti-

go: an astronaut

in training, thrown for a loop

to learn that he'll see

the sunrise sixteen

times a day: beneath the foam

a tethered mussel

drinks to live and lives

to live: one foot on land and

the other in dream:

how often are we  
caught so, unawares, taken  
in but not absorbed.

Tree bark and in it  
initials swollen with time:  
meticulously

cut sugar cookies  
refusing in the oven:  
the man in the moon

or a rabbit or  
whatever you think you see  
up there taking on

a mind all its own:  
the tide wools itself over  
the battered shore: spring

comes to the mountains:  
the mountains come to, smelling  
the salt in the bloom:

it's always over  
before you know it: *What hit,*  
you ask, *come again?*

*viii*

A halo of tin-  
ny sounds from under headphones:  
leaves the man pretend-

ing to be a tree  
tucks behind his ears: cool con-  
ditioned air and blue-

green television  
light limning the closed door and  
the ka-ching-ka-ching

accumulation  
of extra lives as loose change:  
dark circles form: lit-

tle escape hatches  
hacked from code coddle nest eggs  
in a clutch: *camou-*

*flage* comes from the French  
word for stifler, a sub-  
terranean cav-

ity bombed out be-  
neath the surface of the earth,  
undermining by

countermining a  
foundation—in other words,  
what lies in the wait.

Open sesame:

open season on thick skin:

a narrow hand as

good as snow melting

on the scruff: the neck as good

as the high field where

the men wait, having

divided from themselves all

traces of themselves

down to the antler-

velvet frost that dawn now burns

from around their boots.

*x*

Of coarse surfaces,  
of hackles up and bristle,  
of what cannot be

buried, of the rough  
through young men's chins, of green shoots  
taken by the hand-

ful, of dogged ad-  
herence, of snow chalking up  
another morning

for the season on  
the rock face, of where we are:  
some place that is sound—

that is, so under  
as to have become over—  
that is, sewn under—

that is as in, Nat-  
ive, gone under dirt or skin  
like blood or a blade.

Light the shade of that  
pollen sludge brightening up  
the gutters lingers

on the retina:  
rain makes our world a new eye:  
back when the snow was-

n't melting down fast  
enough, the air took it in,  
like a world-weary

adult child just sacked  
by responsibility  
into the basement

apartment: clean sheets,  
coffee, and too-small PJs:  
home is a safe place

to file your complaints  
and return when you need them:  
the sayings you em-

broidered on pillows  
read upside-down and backward  
on your sleep-flush face

when you wake in the  
violet dawn to shake blood  
back into your dumb

arm: seeds nerve-out in  
the dirt/night: *Am I a for-*  
*est? Am I dying?*

We didn't know what  
we didn't know: what drowned us  
*we can too breathe, yeah-*

*hub*: we can too breathe  
too deeply of the green in  
springtime: we can too

breathe when we're beyond  
our own atmosphere, our right  
mind, our skin, our gourd—

when we are fuming:  
when the sun, an awestruck coin-  
cidence, drops into

our valley it's ours  
to spend any way we wish,  
and nothing is worth

retaining because  
we can be made to believe  
anything, we here

where nothing amounts  
to something all the time, we  
know/we imagine.

All the ali-/lull-  
a-bies go to blue to blue-  
green, go to vio-

let before the seq-  
uin moon rhymes you, sweet inlet,  
sweet curvature ebb-

ing my horizon,  
sweet tangent thrown and falling  
back to center: wish-

es to ships to stars,  
my storm, my spooling mist, my  
constellating sea.

Turned out from the clink  
even as winter's placing  
fourth in pewter, spring

tenders its long shoots  
in petals—oh you know how  
nature's first green is—

gaudy-gold and gew-  
gawed out the wazoo—but law-  
dy gawd it is good

to be uninterred,  
unshucked, getting gone, wearing  
the year's last ice glaze

like a diamond cor-  
setting one's middle finger  
whilst waving wildly

from the deck of the  
Titanic: sayonara,  
suckers: change is good

and the water might  
as well be champagne, so drink  
it while it sparkles

and tear those oysters  
from the rocks that hold them: hold  
them pearls to your ears.

Editorial:

you know, we have our limits,  
but we have learned to

appreciate a  
tremendous amount of stuff,  
kemosabe: wat-

er's value doesn't  
rise, for instance, it is dis-  
placed by what's been sunk

into it: purple  
urchins withstand surges, cause  
they've got spine and ground

their mouths into rock  
to make the pits they call home:  
you'd never guess they're

a delicacy,  
those shore things: all palates can  
be cultivated:

there's corruption and  
then there's corruption, you know:  
our sources soured.

Some animals live  
their whole lives in one pool, cling-  
ing to their portion

as if, in a dream,  
to the body of a loss  
long since committed

to green earth: this zone  
is a hinge: we've come to it  
like regained feeling:

we call these creatures  
treasures: if they only knew  
what they are missing:

seen from some distance  
we appear to be buoys  
anchored in absence.

To blue to vi-: blue-  
green to blue to bru-: to blue-  
green to mor-: to to-

tality: into  
the range, coming from and be-  
coming unto an-

other entity:  
here is the evening: sky  
blue-green cut with milk

and the horizon,  
what seemed never and ever,  
here now, depth heaving

up from its own edge:  
the sum of all you have ev-  
er loved, rounded up.

A line cast to catch:  
a stitch undone: a sapling  
drawn up from shadow-

ground like a runnel  
of the long *I* sound in light:  
light glinting edgewise

out in the offing:  
who is playing who in this  
opera: when did

this play become work:  
is it ever not the shift  
change: the end frays: wind

in the leaves like i-  
vory dominoes of all  
things: oh what luck: you

are what you are: fig-  
ured here, self-portrait, crayon:  
light lavender bones.

*xix*

Unfair of me to  
call a son a sea, to say  
the waves swell and break

as a sea of sons  
might swell and break, break and swell,  
swell and break: unfair

all the twigs I've snapped  
just to hear the sound exposed  
like a tender bell-

y or a geode:  
unfair what I have taken  
from the wide, bracing

shore into the dark  
and silken pockets, where I  
like to keep my hands,

as if they are as  
capacious as the night sky:  
this is a poem

not a post-mortem  
or a post-production trick:  
in the face of hid-

eous loss, hide-

ous loss, hideous loss I

find long lines crossfad-

ing into holes hold-

ing holes: mere: sea: mercy: cy-

an-hued hides of surge-

ons imbuing mor-

bidity in their dissolve

from blue-green to blue.

xx

The moon's seas—mares—pan-  
icked open in your chest: you  
can't let go of i-

deas: there is no  
limit to inside either:  
cave, lung, firelight:

to light on: to land:  
all in a row, shelled shotguns:  
slugs on a strong jaw:

the sea urchin's whole  
body is an eye—it's skinned  
in retina cells:

what's not to love: don't  
answer: the tide lids over  
the iris iris.

## Ginseng

Wild sarsaparilla is the fool's sang.  
Follow jack-in-the-pulpit, goldenseal,  
cohoshes black and blue. To find true heal-all,  
fall head-over, get brave, get fangled up  
in bobcat mouths or caves, and wrangle twang  
and drawl from fiddleheads into a single  
clear-cut note. Then forage through the leaf-  
like chiming, sundried light. Hear me, stranger?  
Feel it pull you underground, transform  
you—forest-body, heart, and mind—to root,  
moving through the dirt, a shape like a person.  
You are wherewithal and you are wild.

*—jack-in-the-pulpit, goldenseal,  
cohoshes black and blue—*

You are real and dream and dissolute.  
I mean you are a tangle and a song.

## The mountaintop solemnly

swears, so help her,  
help her, hand over  
your heart land over  
fist, over body, burden,  
water flown over her holler  
as if unimpounded  
from her chest. *I need to call*  
*a daughter*. There's bloody  
undammed truth all over,  
water betide, her last ditch  
where the children, betide,  
play the running-running-  
river game, to hold, to tell,  
be told, be troughed— Whole  
truth, black as blood &  
hands & lungs sunken in  
nothing but dear—*My*  
*dear*—life, this oathen flood of  
dirt & nothing but the dirt  
rich as all get out.

**The mountaintop as expression  
or choking on her own words**

Something has to give  
and thus this voice, up

into evacuated space.

Hear in my gravel  
a paragraph you couldn't parse  
into sense, no matter where you'd

locate, relocate, allocate, elocute, cut.

I mean a handful of rock  
equals roughly one syllable,

its breadth, if you could hold  
a blasted conversation.

Talk the talk. Remove the point  
from the A and there you have it, havoc

on the wailing ailing alphabet—  
where to begin?

*Soil*

in your mouth, sounds like *soul*—  
like the word's been oiled, all the old

consolidated, uprooted, from  
this spit of overtold land.

I hear you grazing in the understory,  
your mouth full of maple keys,

black walnut husks, cold  
autumn dirt and rock,

bark, lichen, and broken, breaking

green: sour mash.

Your mouth's a still, a stolen

cave in  
which to fold the world.

## Glossary: Co'd Words

### *co-llapse*

Cave-ins are givens—  
the // broke loose, gone vexed,  
flat-lined—dividend—

### *co-al*

Forests, time, fire  
burning  
holes in our pockets.

### *co-le*

You know the Old King  
calling for his fiddlers three, the company he keeps  
sawing through the breakdown.

### *co-elacanth*

Hello again  
ol' mucilaginous, oil-oozing, cave-dwelling, hollow-  
spined, hinge-skulled, pseudo-lunged, linear-hearted,  
shark-intestined, four-legged fish  
of the copious fossil record skipping  
for sixty-five million years.

*co-alescence*

More or less  
grow together; say

sludge, say  
coal fly ash slurry spill  
five times fast:

coal cry hurry still  
squall fly fast as hell  
cold fish flash kill  
soul flesh slurry shill  
stole vile sorry spill.

*co-il*

As in the garden hose  
or pliant, mortal bodies ringing one another  
—we're tendrils—  
to prevent entanglement.

*co-re*

Unburnt center of a coal—coke,  
cold heart-

-in-throat—see *Adam's apple*, the choke,  
the corrupt nature

of uncertain roots;

not from heart, *coeur*;  
maybe from body, *corps*,

or from *cor*, horn—who knows, okay?  
What's cut out and what remains.

**The mountaintop as an opening  
and an opening**

See a phonograph,

phonographic blossom—

see music or pollen

in the wind;

or feel me—two hands directing a whisper,

warm, to your ear: either way

the impression is transmission

through and through.

I see you

looking down into the crater, the unsound

earth. I'm open like opening night.

Like the overture. I'm a hearth to your hands.

I'm a deafness—

What are the words?

I'm just a woman saying

*listen here, listen here, listen here.*

**The mountaintop as is:**

listening, listing in  
-to the oncoming of  
my S-slurred inroads—

tongue less lasso,  
more listlessness to-  
wards words.

—Fiddle me this,

you one note wonder,

with one legato bow, breathe, tie  
my long-lost ends:

lesson me up:

Where is the whisk in whining?—  
Risk in rhyming—?

Endless lisp-  
ing into sound-sick  
ground?

Whose grouse

is greener? What's the matter  
with the grass? Grenadine—

Grenade—

I'm not talking, I'm—You're

not talking, you're

licking your wounds, you licker

of wounds, you glistener

of gloss.

The mountaintop as Isis,  
“She Who Knows How to Make Right Use of the Heart,”

to her own Osiris,

gathering strewn  
endings—plosives and glottal stops:

*jug, spud, gushed,*  
*ain't, rocketed rock, uh-oh—*

so love will last beyond the grave, no longer lost  
than tempest-tost,

no more broken-  
hearted than a reincarnated  
bedroom.

*Isis* as in *crisis*  
is a mispronunciation, a myth—  
reconstructed as *ooh-set* or *ee-set*  
or *ee-sah*,  
the final *t* gone to ether—

but she likes the sound of it;  
she, like the sound of it,

insists, hear hear, on being

heard as she resounds:

*aye aye am am.*

Here, yes, her eyes

together again. Her voice, mine

run-off *there there.*

Her heart beaten

into earth.

*Can you hear't?*

## The mountaintop unmoored

Envision

canned oceans

and the tide, the tide

pool, pull your

self together, girl,

forget her, girl,

forgo ether, girl,

do what you see urchins do,

and gather,

girl, the despoilment

unspooling

from your pockets.

Get some spine. Some twine.

*Do you ever feel makeshift  
through and through?*

Find your center:

abalone

shell like a pull of moonshine

to tether you from there  
to there.

## Glossary: Mn- Words

### *li-mn*

Neither from *eliminate*

(to expel or divulge across a threshold—a door or mouth— — —)

nor from *limb*

(from *lith* and *limbo*; among other component parts, the spur of the mountain range and a disadvantage; the edge of the disk of a heavenly body and hell)

torn.

Is this monolithic or what?

Where were we? Hello:

illumine,

illumine,

illumine.

### *mn-emonic*

A device that need not work to work.

### *da-mn*

—!

*chi-mn-ey*

The spelling teacher blew smoke, true story,  
“It’s one of those tricky words in which the *n* works like an *l*.”

*moon*

Afar and away rock- and hole-  
scape, not man and not

—*main mean mine moan moon*—

what you promised.

*I see moon*, I said, my first sentence.

*m——n*

Tipping point blank of no return:

Choose your own adventure, little boy lost  
in the woods, little boy blonde

in the hay, little boy blew  
it on the spelling test.

So we enchanted—

*Em oh, You in, Tee ay, Eye in.*

We cast the spell  
afar and away.

*Elemen*ation!

— —

Forest felled for autumn.

History fell for amnesia.

We felt between, threshold, imminent.

## Hummingbird

Wing-  
span like attention—

oh, would that it whirr, fever

of steel guitar and tambourine

yellow and violin  
stringing in

your brain,  
bitten  
off and down and in.

Humming-  
bird, you're gone.

Little bird,  
little silvery flash in

the pan,  
you're one  
among

a hundreding; you're lost in  
the automatic, the hurry-rush, your ruptured

heart asun-

der. Hum-  
mingbird, do you have a tension,

do you have the time  
span,  
do you have a light?

## The mountaintop refuses his advances

I need you like I need a hole in my heart a soul  
in my head a hold in my hand and sand in my  
bed a foal in my whale a flood in my horse a  
toad in my ode a *scoal* in my toast a hot coal in  
my throat a listen, drop dead, you toll in my  
house you for whom I've bled infrared black  
and blue you pistol-spit you stone-face you  
price on my hide you violence purebred: I need  
you like I need another vowel in my head  
another hope in this hope-heap of hope upon  
hope that becomes me my knoll my knoll-edge  
my backbone my hymn-knell to this earth.

## Glossary: Tainted Words

### *ain't*

Yes, I know, I know:

am not, is not, are not, have not,

has not, do not, does not, did not.

But—what if there were

a literal explosion deep inside the under:

an *in* in *at*,

a sword through a box through an assistant who is nowhere,

carcasses to coal to carcasses.

Refusal and compost.

Uninearthing.

Something invisible and unheard of

now here.

### *compl-aint*

Ain't compliant.

### *pl-iant*

There is a plant in the woods

called the obedient plant or the false dragonhead

for its inflorescence of fire-breathing faces. So say the books,

the obedient plant is an arranger—  
for its spikes hold the bend you give them—

and the obedient plant is deer resistant.

You might enjoy the garden-friendly variety  
of false dragonhead called “Miss Manners.”

*bep-aint*

Is archaic for tinge:

the blush bepainted creek is irony  
her blush bepainted cheek is bloody

—reddening, ruddying, redying, read  
dying in the reverb.

*ain't-ed*

See *mountain*;

see *curtain*.

*cur-tain*

As in call: take a bow

little earthlet. Bravo!

*ob-taint-ed*

See *mountain*.

*moun-tain*

See *maintain*.

*main-tain*

To keep in an existing state;

to persevere;

to preserve from decline;

to uphold and defend;

to affirm in or as if in argument;

from the French

*hand & to hold*.

## Casserole

We are always welcoming you  
from our porches where we are always waiting, always  
eating pasta we bring to ourselves  
in Pyrex. We are always widening  
our smiles, our arms to embrace you, too, always  
our hips turning to the side to *sneak by you, honey*,  
to the kitchen where we'll fix you a plate  
and a tall cold glass. Oh, yes, the porch  
is mighty fine. And the stars so bright, and the night  
sky, we're always likening  
to fabric, a blanket up to our chins  
putting all this to bed. *Heft of night*, I wrote just moments ago,  
made the stars into pushpins, countable, as we are  
always to let you in, always in  
our time of need.

Yes, the night's a blanket. And the night's a pulling weight.  
We'll stay up till we can't see straight—  
is that newsprint or soot on those boys' or men's faces?  
You'll attribute our skipping record of likenesses  
and kindnesses to the state  
we're in, that you find yourself in—always  
and suddenly—this bad shape  
like Naomi's body, suddenly getting the news  
her brain has had for days, crumpled  
to the floorboards, as the ground is falling—  
always down, and down—beneath us deep  
as a downed draft of air or beer or life. We're good with soot

so we'll always take the ink off your hands  
as if it were your coat, to shoulder, to shelter  
our paper-white bodies  
that always remain always most true to you.

## Type O Minus

Your Highness of *Oh My*-ness,  
of Word and Stars and Goodness,

as your hand flutters to your cheek  
or your breast, and as your lips go *O*,

I wonder, tell me, if there's any wreckage  
enough to crown you Speechless.

*Oh my oh my oh my*, you pray,  
*oh my*—identify, then own

all the deaths, door prizes, and burnt toast  
that fortune throws in your direction

and intone your kingdom with a verbal  
moat. You're floating in cold water, Lady,

treading at the zero, zero middle of the road.  
Close your mouth into a smile, or frown.

Axe your scepter. Cut a tree into an oar, and  
gently row, row, row.

## Never Never

Now and then for-  
everesting,

growing  
smaller, minute

by minute  
in the snow

of, or drift of  
deepening clauses.

Or, put this way,  
a classic case

of train sensation:

parallel passengers'  
seats facing facing seats.

Forward, forward  
ad nauseam.

The mountaintop is as *as is is*

Disaster, asterisk:

another man's treasure  
island.

My kiss-  
your-sorry-ass-  
goodbye goodbye

letters' river-  
ripple cursive

when I'm feeling  
wishy.

My highway mirage,  
your missed ache

or ashen mist  
oasis.

## Glossary: Re- Words

### *re-ward*

Ruts anew in the road that rewinds to now.

With biscuits and in no time  
even an old dog can play dead and come back to life.

She'll shrug like a dishrag to the ground,  
just snap.

### *re-claim*

mine again

mine again

mine again

You are mine, a gain, your back back  
against haha onslaught.

Recall that summer we lost falling  
at Mt. Mineagain.

MINEAGAIN  
—invalid in Scrabble.

### *re-gret*

What you send back, on slender white bird plumes,

when you are disinclined.

*re-cant*

What are you  
giving up?

*re-nege*

You played hearts with a handful of diamonds.

*re-moval*

See *stain, tattoo, wallpaper, graffiti, dent, grease, mold, mildew, hair, stretch mark, cellulite, spider vein, mole, bat, rat, skunk, smoke, odor, asbestos, snow, rust, ash, stump, boulder, mountaintop, kidney stone, wisdom tooth, barrier, appendage, Indian, body, pain, phantom pain, spirit, sound, scar, and other reverberant remotions.*

*re-fuse*

To the discard pile, refugee.

To the refulgent diamonds in spades,  
incoherent light playing at their edges.

## What Gives

Buoyant but submerged, the day suspends  
our disbelief. Our subject: the pool of light  
& suspect: the yolk within the night of white:  
the pasture for unbroken horses penned  
by woods: no, words. No, future pasts upended  
by horses that run backwards. No, no rewrites,  
no repasts: no way to ride Midnight  
back to afternoon. Remember when  
I finally kicked you out—out of the blue—  
into the disarticulating dark?  
I raised my voice so high it flew away:  
stir flour into milk and the milk turns blue:  
stir nightshade into milk and it will take  
your voice away, if not your nights and days.

## Whitetail, New Development

Meteors and deer whisper in  
from the margins

—*hey*—

as our eyes tuck in  
to the darker and darker, please.

There's Orion, the Pleiades. The North Star?

We're well aware of the constellations,

but happy not to know them  
any more than neighbors

who stop by to leave  
poinsettias and tins of fudge

on one another's stoops—

their arms touching ours  
in toasty movie theatre anonymity

like mine, there, touching yours,  
here,

maybe leaning in, maybe  
a happenstance.

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