THE COAL REMEMBERS

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This creek has some kind of gumption. That's my reaction as I consider Sterry Creek, rippling along through the woodland between banks of refuse and neglect. Near its eastern bank, a bare, black hill of coal waste hunches its shoulders against the blue October sky. To the west, the woods along the pitted and stony track I'm walking are scattered with more contemporary trash: a weather-ravaged mattress; cans and brushes left over from a paint job, laid out with anomalous tidiness on a blue plastic tarp; shiny clots of fused stuff; lumber, tires, and more tires. And yet on flows the creek, as if it had somewhere to get to and were so intent on its journey that it bothered little about the detritus it must pass along the way. Narrow and clear, it lifts and shuffles cast-offs no more noxious than autumn leaves.

The big heap gleaming like an obsidian mountain range in the late afternoon sun is called a culm bank. It's composed of shale, sandstone, and other unsalable tailings that were removed from the ore during the coal boom in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s—and it's one of hundreds left throughout anthracite coal country here in northeastern Pennsylvania. Although local families regard the culm banks as testaments to the hard work that their parents and grandparents from Wales, Poland, Italy, Ireland, and other countries came here to live and die in service of, the implications of them, if not the mounds themselves, are monstrous when you actually pause before them to gaze and consider. For those of us who live in this region, that's easy to avoid doing, because they are almost as much a part of the landscape as their daintier cousins,

the green hills known as the Endless Mountains that start rolling north just a few miles from here. You get so used to coal waste that it ceases to be shocking, as some new ecological outrage would be, something like a city block blown out by a bomb, or the charred skeletons of houses and trees ravaged by wildfire, or the hole that opened up in 1903 in the town of Olyphant, at whose southern end this coal patch lies. When a ceiling of the mine collapsed, it swallowed the West End Hotel, pulled the walls of several neighboring buildings below the ground, and snapped the water main.

Over the decades, thirty thousand people died working in Pennsylvania's anthracite mines, and yet the mining went on, and the culm banks peaked higher and higher. *How many men, boys, mules, and vehicles,* I wonder, *must have labored up those slopes on the other side of the creek to erect such a store of blatant undesirability?* The women of the mining families would have picked over it in search of overlooked lumps of coal that they could carry back to heat their small and insubstantial company homes. The mound is a wound on the current landscape and a scar of the past. And yet the features that frame it include, right before me, a scrim of thistles, goldenrod, milkweed, and tall grasses, all in their midautumn fuzziness, and on the far side of the coal, the gold, crimson, and copper chenille of trees at their picturesque peak. Like the creek, they prevent me from assuming a stance of unmitigated sorrow or indignation about this place. It's not pretty. And then again, it kind of is.

Behind me, the traffic on Route 6 murmurs and coughs while crickets offer a friendly, prefrost greeting in the scrub. Along both sides of the track, trees of a variety surprising for a waste place shimmer in the breeze, and leaves sashay through the air onto the ground: golden tulip and mitten-shaped sassafras, red maple, ochre birch, leathery oak and ash. Flycatchers flit among the sunny leaves of poplars, commenting briefly to one another. Purple wild asters, yellow partridge pea with its showy red stalk, and the miniature daisies of fleabane are still blooming in patches of sunlight.

Abruptly the soil under my boots shifts from powdery and dough colored to gritty black, which means I've just stepped onto a vein of coal. Olyphant is near the tip of Pennsylvania's northernmost anthracite coalfield, which curves out from Carbondale in a long, thin shape, roughly resembling a pea pod, to taper off again at the town of Shickshinny about fifty miles southwest. I'm not walking on solid ground. Underground stretch labyrinthine passageways constructed in a pattern known as "room and pillar." The "rooms" were spaces cut into the rock, and the "pillars" were those parts of the substratum left untouched, so as to keep the whole architecture from collapsing. The miners worked these tunnels ten hours a day, six days a week. When a man died, his body would be dumped in front of the small house he rented from the coal company. Everyone in the family knew that if they didn't find a replacement for him within a few days, they'd be kicked out of their home. Little boys as young as seven worked as "breakers" for pennies a week, bent over those rocks that never ceased to pile up before them as they sorted the lumps into different sizes and picked out the waste that would add to the culm.

When the steep path reaches the far end of the culm bank on the other side of the creek, and the terrain to my left opens up into woods, a sense of relief floods me, as if both the land and I were released from a heavy burden. A large puddle lies to the side of the path, and an animal trail bypasses it and curls into the woods. Glossy black against its base of coal and tessellated with scarlet, gold, and bronze leaves, the surface of the puddle looks like fine Japanese lacquerware. A large emerald dragonfly darts purposefully among several invisible midair ports of call. One of the rewards of spending time with waste places is the startlement of beauty they hold in reserve. They take what has happened to them and deal with it. They are pushy and creative, and they muddle through, working with what they've got without expecting any favors. There is much to discover, both in the land and in myself, whenever I step into the mystery of a place that's been through a lot of trials, yet I

almost always postpone the journey. On some level, I know that if I allow myself to truly experience what is before me, my worldview will be rattled in ways I can't anticipate. I will, at the very least, be forced to experience something, perhaps uncomfortable, in the tender inner frontier where "I" meets "other." I risk feeling sad, shaken, and mad. Once my body is on damaged ground, my mind will not be able to insist quite so vehemently that I know what needs to happen there. Therefore, my mission today is just to absorb what is. I must greet and engage with this place in its integrity, as I do whenever I settle in to a shy first encounter with what the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas called, in *Otherwise Than Being*, the "vulnerability" of the face of the other.

The track diverges a short way off to the right and comes to a sudden end before a tall chain-link fence. Behind it, the added prohibition of a camera mounted on a tall pole warns me that trying to proceed will not be tolerated. I smell smoke. Or I think I smell smoke. Lifting my head like a deer, I sniff and sniff again, but it could be that the scent I'm gleaning is only decaying leaves, or maybe just imagination. Then again, it really could be smoke, because although the vista behind the fence is an innocuous stand of young poplars shimmying in the breeze, I know that this fence marks the boundaries of an underground coal fire. I'm tempted to follow the fence a little farther, but the sun is already glowing through the trees in the western woods, so I return to the main track and turn around. Before getting in the car, I turn and make a deep bow to the whole place.

The only furniture in this narrow, windowless room of the Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation in Wilkes-Barre is a long span of tables running down the middle, with chairs on either side. Affixed to the wall behind the chairs are waist-high racks from which hang

large folios depicting the interiors of the region's coal mines. The mining engineer Dan Werner has selected one, Folio 10X, and laid it out on the table, but before he opens it, we bend over a smaller portrait of Olyphant's mines, an aerial photograph. Several patches of the land below the highway, dark woodland green interrupted by two gray humps of culm piles, are marked with yellow outlines. Each one, Dan explains, is known as a "PA," a problem area. The problems include subsidence, dangerous high walls, leftover refuse, clogged stream channels, old slopes, and the biggest problem of all, the underground mine fire.

It started in 2004, when somebody decided that a culm bank would be a great place to set an old car on fire. The fire did what it could with steel and rubber, then moved on to embrace a more compatible partner. Down into the coal mine it slipped and then outward toward the town of Dunmore to the west. Coal burns slowly, at the rate of about one foot per day, but even when it's slow, contained, and invisible, a culm fire is toxic, for it emits greenhouse gases, as well as carbon monoxide, hydrogen sulfide, and various trace elements. In an effort to contain the damage, the Office of Surface Mining dug a U-shaped trench 150 feet deep and 2,800 feet long and lined it with clay. That prevented the fire from spreading horizontally, but it's still smoldering throughout an estimated seven acres at temperatures ranging from fifty degrees Fahrenheit to more than four hundred degrees.

Northeastern Pennsylvania's mining industry ceased almost completely after 1959, when miners, under orders, dug too close to the banks of the Susquehanna River. The river breached the mine and the tunnels flooded, killing twelve people and injuring dozens more. Decades later, many mines farther south are still under water. Higher elevations in the north have kept Olyphant's mine dry but more susceptible to fire. The coal veins are also thinner here, as I see when Dan peels back the cover of Folio 10X. On each large page is a floor plan of one level of a particular section of the mine, each room and pillar meticulously drawn. Olyphant's folio

contains only three pages. The folios of mines farther south, Dan explains, are eight or nine pages, each one representing a level deeper than the one above it. Around the town of Shamokin, the miners would have descended more than five hundred feet into the Earth each day to do their jobs.

These days, the only thing that's moving through those rooms and breaking them up is fire. The plan, Dan says, is to dig out the uncombusted coal and extinguish the fire, then fill in the trenches and reclaim the land and about seventy-five acres surrounding it, so it can be converted, perhaps to an industrial park. When that work might begin is unknown. Meanwhile, although mining in this region ended decades ago, the coal itself does not stand idle. Abandoned, it is yet active. Like Sterry Creek, like poplar trees sprouting in a black bed of carbon and a dragonfly busy with the air over a puddle, the coal goes on, doing what it does well. It burns.

A few days after my visit to the Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation, I return to the coal patch. This time I take a different path, less traveled and surrounded by woods. It, too, is littered with trash. A paper plate nailed to an old wooden door that's been propped against a tree is riddled with bullet holes. A child's pink plastic pedal car lies among a dozen plastic grocery store bags, their handles knotted to keep the contents inside. As I watch, leaves drift down from the trees to slip and slide over the sides of the bags and pad the molded pink interior of the little car.

Waste attracts more waste. When a place is seen as useless, unwanted, uncared for, it loses value not just once but increasingly over time. It becomes a pariah of the landscape. Before long it is no longer a place in need of attention but a repository for other things that have passed from usefulness to junk. Once so condemned, it invites deliberate acts of aggression and disrespect, such as target

practice, dumping trash, and setting an old car on fire. The place has become good for nothing—nothing except expressions of contempt. Knowing this sad evolution keeps me coming to places like this coal patch: I feel sorry for them. They have given everything that voracious humans demanded of them and now, spent, they are despised. Yet they are like friends who have fallen ill; although I can't heal them, I can attend to them, praise them, give them little gifts.

Higher, the path ends at another section of that forbidding chain-link fence. Animals have made a track around the foot or so of roughly horizontal land around the perimeter, as if they were pilgrims circumambulating a sacred mountain. Although the woods to my right are thick and the slope steep, I can amble along in a counterclockwise direction with no problem at all until I come to a large maple tree that has crashed down and completely blocked passage. Its upper branches have bent the top of the fence, and briefly my imagination plays with the possibility of climbing diagonally into the fire area. Instead I bushwhack through the woods to the place where the overturned tree forms a wall of mud, stone, and root parallel to the metal fence. A scattering of boulders on this rise of hill makes a good place to sit, so I do. I'm vaguely curious to see the fire up close. Mainly, though, I'm thinking about how alive this place is. I'm reminded again of Levinas and his writing about the open, needy face of the other. When I let myself be drawn into the vulnerability that's communicated beneath first impressions of the one before me, I soften. My defenses slip. It dawns on me that, wherever I look, I will see a life that is etched with some hurt, even if the scars aren't always visible. It's true of places no less than people. In that suffering and survival, I see beauty and discover something like love. Before I leave, I weave dried flowers, leaves, and a blue jay's feather into the fence as a parting gift.

My reflection that the trail around the fence was like a path of circumambulation around a sacred place gives me an idea I can't shake off. "Circumambulate the fence!" I scrawl on a Post-it note and stick on my computer. By the time I return, it's early November, and the sky over Olyphant is temperamental, reeling from overcast to bright sun and occasionally releasing flurries of snow. The puddles I sidled around on my previous walks are covered with a thin layer of ice. Except for the oak and a few enthusiastically twirling poplars, the trees are bare. Under the windy gray sky, the culm bank broods ominously.

I will say this about that walk: there is surprising beauty and gargantuan scarring, the land is busy the entire time, and my mood gets whipped around as wildly by the land as the trees are by the wind. Just seconds after I begin my walk around the fence, clockwise this time, I push through a thicket of spindly cherry trees and spot a large silver Christmas-tree orb glistening in a sudden shower of sun. How did a Christmas ornament come to be here? By wind? Dumped? How is it possible that it is so little battered after all it must have been through to get from somebody's holiday tree to the coal patch? Picking it up and nestling it in my backpack, I feel gleeful and triumphant, as if my good intentions for making this odd solo pilgrimage have been noted and applauded. Pride shifts into aesthetic appreciation as the hill levels off into a flat area, where poplars with white trunks and buttercup-yellow leaves sprout from the ebony coal floor sparkling on both sides of the fence. Deducing at first that coal is no deterrent to growth, I begin to grasp that all these trees are young and spindly, a clue that their ambition does not match their ability to mature in such circumstances.

As I peer at the vista through the fence, four ravens glide overhead, playing with the wind and one another. One veers over to investigate me. The birds drift onward when I make the turn to walk the far southern side of the fence, and at that moment the sun disappears behind a cloud. Thickets of blackberries now knot my path. Instantly I feel abandoned and edgy. I start worrying

about people with guns and all-terrain vehicles and other hobbies of messy destruction. I chastise myself for forgetting my orange vest when it's now two weeks into hunting season. As I press on, ducking through the thorns with eyes closed and head down, my nervous musings attach to a friend who's just been diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

On the long western side of the fence, the landscape inside the containment changes abruptly. Just a few feet away from me tower mounds of coal waste, thirty or forty feet high. Deep pits run among them. There is no scent of burning, no sign of smoke, but knowing that this is the place where fire is slowly devouring the substrata is like standing at the site of a recent highway accident or act of violence: the terrible reality of the unseen coats the place, blotting out the apparent ordinariness of what's before the eyes. The fire in this colliery is one of an estimated forty burning in Pennsylvania's abandoned coal mines, both here in the east in anthracite country and in the western bituminous mines around Pittsburgh. Like the fuel rods of nuclear power plants, like garbage moldering in a landfill, like carbon drifting into the skies and sticking there, the life of a thing does not easily vanish from the Earth just because humans are done with it. It lingers, it seeps, it clogs. It keeps finding ways to be part of the Earth.

The lines of Yeats's poem "The Circus Animals' Desertion," which have guided me for decades, swim into my thoughts: "Now that my ladder's gone / I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart." In other words, down at the bottom of as-bad-as-it-gets crouches the possibility of renewal. Compelled suddenly to make that paradox manifest, I take Yeats literally and lie down on the ground beside the fence. I'm half-hoping for another Christmas ornament moment—for the fire to reveal itself and radiate some gentle warmth over my back and legs, or at least for another flyover from ravens. It doesn't happen, of course. It never happens when you demand it. The ground is cold, the snow is brushing across my face, and the stones under

the leaves make a punishing bed. Nevertheless, the very act of positioning myself here, supine on a place that's endured and still endures so many trials, shifts my relationship with it yet again. To lie down voluntarily on a place is to anticipate relief and solace. It's to take yourself off those resolute feet that hold you up and propel you all day long and give yourself over to a more extensive gravity. I succumb to rest. Beneath me stretch loose stone, cold grasses, and a patchwork of rooms and pillars where many, many people did hard labor. If any of them ever lay down on the coal, they probably didn't do so by choice.

The coal waste that lies scattered on the path and piled in the culm banks in this place is the Earth turned inside out, like the pocket of a great jacket. Such places cause discomfort. They unabashedly bare, for any who cares to look, all that is foul, ugly, and spent, and maybe contagious as well. They don't keep their unpretty bits hidden, as one is taught to do in polite company. Yet waste places like this are teachers. They coach me in how to persevere, no matter how bad it gets. They remind me that, if I'm a little bit patient, I'll quite possibly be granted a gift I can't possibly have earned. It could be a Christmas ornament, a dragonfly, or a moment of cold discomfort as I lie on the stony ground and picture the presence of those who worked below. Most important, a waste place reveals that the memory of the Earth does not discriminate between beauty and ugliness, value and trash. This abandoned landscape remembers how to seed, flow, bloom, and chirp. The tunnels remember the many lives that labored and even laughed in them. The coal remembers how to smolder.