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DISORDERED: A TALE OF THE BODY

By

Elizabeth M. Benson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

Jennifer Sinor Major Professor	Chris Cokinos Committee Member
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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2009

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ABSTRACT

Disordered: A Tale of the Body

by

Elizabeth M. Benson, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2009

Major Professor: Jennifer Sinor
Department: English

While a body of creative nonfiction writing exists regarding experiences with various psychological disorders, few personal accounts have been written about the physical complications of Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Some memoirs tell a tale of serious illness in a straightforward narrative line. On the opposite end of this spectrum, other memoirs intentionally blur the lines of truth and heighten the confusion of a disorder. This thesis is as much a narrative of my experience with Generalized Anxiety Disorder as it is a response to the void in creative nonfiction surrounding this specific disorder and the narrative forms others have chosen to utilize while writing about the body.

In this thesis, I manipulate traditional narrative forms to expose the truth of my experience. The first chapter contains a straightforward narrative of my experience in the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine in Ashland, Pennsylvania, to provide a framework for a thesis regarding the redemption of a ruined landscape, or an ill body. The second section follows the guidelines of a psychosocial interview and intake form used by therapists and reveals the particular physical manifestations

of Generalized Anxiety Disorder. The third and final section is fragmented into fiction, drama and memoir. The combination of my personal story with illness and the geological, social and industrial history of central Pennsylvania coal mining and the mutation of form used to convey it permits a deeper level of understanding for the complexities surrounding collapsed bodies, landscapes and narratives.

(59 pages)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I offer my deepest gratitude to and express my admiration for Jennifer Sinor, Christopher Cokinos and Michael Sowder, who gave me the tools, the courage and the unending support to bring this story to the surface.

When I planned my trip into the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine in Ashland, Pennsylvania, I never expected to find such a generous historian inside. Thanks to Dave Walter and his quiet but fierce dedication to a beloved landscape.

Without the unconditional love and support of my parents, siblings and urban family, I could not have climbed into this story and back out again in one piece. They were the first to listen.

I dedicate this work to my sister Megan, who suffered first, and to those still in the struggle.

Elizabeth M. Benson

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INTRODUCTION: MINING THE TALE

Because the family couldn't afford expensive doctor visits, my grandmother treated my father's occasional childhood injuries at home. When my father bailed out of a runaway wagon and smashed his leg between the metal lip and a brick wall, he dragged himself home and his mother bandaged his leg. Fortunately, he didn't suffer any further complications. Consequently, when rearing his own family, my father taught my siblings and me to be tough. Injury and illness were just minor annoyances of the body. We were in control of our bodies. When I broke my hand playing indoor soccer, my palm swelling up to twice its original size, my father helped me apply ice packs, telling me to wait and see how it looked in the morning. When I couldn't move my hand at all when I woke up the next day, we went to the hospital. I understood my father's hesitation: all of my siblings and I had spent expensive time in the emergency room after rolling an ankle or jamming a finger, for injuries that would heal at home without medical interference. I learned to scoff at friends who went to the hospital for splinter removal, for every bump and bruise.

Over the past few years, I have trained myself not to cry out when I stub my toe or run into the corner of a table. I swallow the pain, breathe deeply and move on. So when I started exhibiting the signs of an anxiety disorder that would completely debilitate me in less than six months, I ignored them. When I couldn't stand for more than five minutes without breaking into a sweat, I told myself I was dehydrated. Drink more. When my head felt thick and my limbs heavy, I convinced myself that I was hypoglycemic. Eat more. When taking a shower

completely exhausted me, when I had to lie down on the bathroom rug still naked and soaking, I blamed it on lack of sleep. I can fix this, I told myself. I was in control.

I told no one about my steady decline, about my failing body. For months before and after my diagnosis of Generalized Anxiety Disorder and consequential Agoraphobia, I was ashamed to admit my weakness. I hid my medication and slowly emerged back into public, reluctant to reveal the depth of my body's betrayal. Writing about my body and its strange and misunderstood illness was not an option for me.

Everything started with wolves. One wolf, in particular. I woke up one morning and suddenly remembered that, when I was ten, I found a dead wolf in Mr. Lupolt's front yard. He (I immediately assumed the wolf was a male) lay on his side on the sidewalk, next to the fire hydrant, just as if he had been tipped over in mid-stride. His paws were white, slightly curled, and his tongue peeked out between razor teeth. This strange discovery of a wild animal on neighborhood streets had been tucked away in my brain for sixteen years. Intrigued by my recollection of the wolf, the detail of his thick fall coat, I began to write about his reemergence. I was writing about the appearance of something sinister in a place I presumed safe. Wildness and the threat of bodily harm in a controlled space. By the third page of my ramblings, I discovered the wolf story was allied with the story of my body.

Over the next year, I began writing stories about other memories. I wrote poems and nonfiction essays about the five tornadoes I used to dream about every

night as a teenager. I could only follow one or two cyclones as they swiveled toward my house, ultimately losing track of the other three as they spread across the yellowed horizon. I watched twisters spitting alfalfa and flashing chrome while they played leapfrog over the Heimbach's barns. They always bounced – those heavy, raging funnels; if I tracked one tearing toward me it might suddenly disappear. But there were always many tornados, so at least one might appear unexpectedly, driving its blustery fist through the center of my house. The tornado dreams, I understood later, symbolized my complete lack of control. I wasn't in control of my pubescent body; I wasn't in control of anything.

Finally, I became obsessed with a play I had seen years earlier in the heart of coal mining country in central Pennsylvania. *Hard Coal: Life in the Region* outlined the history of Pennsylvania mining and the hardships endured by the families who fueled the industry. I relearned all I had forgotten about anthracite, about the geography and geological history of my childhood home. Something was rippling just under the surface, daring me to dig deeper.

When I stepped into the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine in Ashland, Pennsylvania, for the second time last October, I knew my writing up until that point had been tales of avoidance. I had written about wolves, tornados—violent images that spoke of a hidden fear without addressing its impetus. Finally, while standing 1,800 feet inside of a mountain, bounded by slate walls and coal seams, I realized I was literally trying to put my body away. At first, I cloaked my body in metaphor, distracting others and myself with wolves and tornados. Then, on my

trip through the mine, I wanted to bury my weakened body and my disordered brain into the deepest, darkest caves I could enter.

Although I had discovered the root of my obsession for seemingly random subjects, I avoided facing the deeper subject head on, at first. Instead, I threw myself into further research of coal mining, its tools, its buzzwords, the stories of those in the heart of it. While I poured over books and photographs and websites outlining the cultural, industrial and geological history of central Pennsylvania mining towns, I was compelled to visit these areas again. In the middle of a semester of teaching English Composition and in between academic conferences, I flew home to Pennsylvania to continue my research. (It's easier to ignore a lurking tale of illness in the lavish brightness of an eastern fall.) During my visit home, I scoured anthracite mining museums, scribbling every line from informational placards into my notebook. I ran my hands along the soft cross sections of pine and fir trees used for timbering in the mines. I pressed my palms into the fossils of the bark and plants that served as the original biological material that eventually formed into anthracite. I learned the most from talking with Dave Walter, Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine guide. The tour group I tagged along with was comprised of a class of third-graders along with a few parents and teachers snapping pictures of their children's eager faces inside the mine. Tom Colihan, another guide, led us through the mine reciting a clearly well known script of facts. The group was noisy and fidgety, as many third-graders are, and I hung back, scribbling down setting information. Water dripping from ceiling. Moss coating the timbers and rock walls. As I paused, I noticed a grate by my feet

where a wall of the mine abutted the floor. The wide grate covered a giant hole that sloped down beneath us at a 45◦angle. Tom and his charges had advanced up the gangway, and I looked around, a question on my lips. Dave was bringing up the rear, quietly following us all, hands clasped behind his back.

Excuse, me—may I ask you a question? I said.

He told me about the hole in the ground, how it was part of the mining process. After one level of the mine was cleared of its coal, the miners dug into the vein underneath, angling their chutes downward into the next layer of strata. We were standing in the second level of the mine, chutes carved above and below us. The grate had been brought into the mine when it was reopened in 1962 to keep visitors from falling into the crevasse. Maybe I could have found that detail in a book about the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine; maybe I could have had a phone interview with Dave. But it was in the mine that I saw the way he touched the coal seams glittering between the sandstone. His callused hand against the rock and his acknowledgment of the materiality of ugly landscapes allowed me to think about the physical truth of my body; I had to recognize and accept its failure. We walked slowly behind Tom and the third-graders, taking our time in the mine. Dave was eager to talk, and took his time answering my questions, swirling information in his mouth like a sweet. Eventually, when he saw my enthusiasm, he volunteered other stories, tales of friends who worked in the mine, anecdotes about playing in nearby Centralia as a child twenty years into the town's subterranean burning.

Dave Walter plays a significant role in the beginning of my narrative because of his willingness to tell an unattractive story. While many people in their twenties and thirties flee collapsed coal towns in search of better jobs, Dave has remained to tell the story of a ruined landscape. His candor, and his obvious pride for his work and his mining history were instrumental in helping me to face my real story. Following Dave's lead, I would tell an unsightly story too, one that was buried beneath the surface. I would be a guide, too.

The only way into this story was to sidle up to it, warily eyeing it from the periphery. Because it has always been a shifting tale, I have struggled to ground it in one genre. This hybrid text is at times memoir, research-based nonfiction, play and personal narrative experimenting at the edges of nonfiction. Tales from the body are the hardest to communicate: How can I help others understand the exact electrical feeling that makes me pace? How does one speak from an undefined, unmapped space? Each mutation of narrative form highlights the almost impossible struggle, and grasping desire, for precise communication. I also believe the story bends and shifts along with my own understanding of what I have experienced and how I can move into the future with a body I have stopped trusting.

At first, when I realized my tale was born from illness, I turned to work published by other women writers exploring the same topic. I devoured Susan Griffin's *What Her Body Thought* and Lauren Slater's *Lying*, looking for fellow sufferers, women who could understand the fear of illnesses that can't be proved with blood tests or x-rays. While much of our subject matter coincided (Griffin

references a lack of trust in the body due to illness), I could not follow the path she took in her memoir. In *What Her Body Thought,* Griffin defends her experience, legitimizes it, by attempting to reform the public opinion surrounding Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome. She claims that CFIDs is not, as was previously believed, "largely a figment of neurosis." She also takes issue with those who see illness in women and then "confuse her affliction with who she is." Unlike Griffin, I prefer to highlight the neuroses of my disorder and work through the hybrid of self and affliction associated with an illness born in the brain.

Slater chooses to heighten the confusion and ambiguity of her illness. While at the outset of this story I intended to collapse images of self in sickness and in health, I have struggled to communicate the specific bodily sensations of my disorder. I have made precise attempts to explain my disorder in specific language that I hope illustrates the distress of ignorance and lack of sympathy on part of those outside of similar experiences. My attempt at precision, and its ultimate failure, is a testament of my intense desire for understanding rather than heightening the strangeness of something that is already difficult to understand by those outside of its grasp.

Eventually, while reading other memoirs, I was drawn to authors who toyed with their subject matter, who manipulated form to reveal deeper impulses and outcomes. Of particular importance was Doris Lessing's *Alfred & Emily* and Julia Blackburn's *Daisy Bates in the Desert* in which both authors create imagined lives for their characters. Like the beginning of both of these part

nonfiction, part fiction narratives, I have given a detailed account of my bodily experience with anxiety disorder before moving into the last section of this work, a highly experimental and postmodern chapter. Deborah Tall's *A Family of Strangers* heavily influenced this final section. Tall's abandonment of traditional form and the structuring of her story by theme, rather than linear narrative inspired me to re-imagine the conclusion of my story. Chronology and reality became secondary to the strength of unifying themes. As the narrator of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* states:

> By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened… and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain.

The narrative arc of this story mirrors my own journey of understanding regarding illness. Before I had the courage to deal with my own physical failure, I had to witness failure in outside entities. In the first section of this work, the main narrative of illness is buried beneath metaphors of coal mining and collapsed physical landscapes. The metaphorical section is largely a section of avoidance, a place where weightier subjects subjugate my body. Consequently, I must confront the collapse of my own body in chapter two. The second section is based on empirical information regarding the actual physical manifestation of Generalized Anxiety Disorder as I have experienced it. Yet, this material experience of disorder is not sufficient, nor does it completely communicate the complex nature of my relationship with an ill body. To address this, the third chapter breaks with form completely and explores the actual collapse of body, landscape and

narrative. What does writing surrounding collapsed things look like? By collapsing all threads of narrative—metaphor, empiricism, and form—I contemplate what remains.

I have attempted to separate this all too personal tale from myself in this way. While none of the events in the past have been fabricated, I have taken liberties with the third chapter for purposes of clarification. It is my hope that all of these attempts, whether metaphorical, empirical, or genre defying, provide a rich, layered understanding of my experience and the struggle to communicate it.

CHAPTER I

The movement between self and landscape as other: it is the same as this movement between self and other as person—across a space of difference.

—Margaret Somerville, *Body/Landscape Journals*

When winter strips maples bare in nearby Higher Ups Park and tourists stay home in front of natural gas heaters, Dave Walter re-timbers the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine in Ashland, Pennsylvania. He rips out rotting logs and replaces them with oak timbers—collars and legs, they're called—to brace the slate roof and walls from collapsing onto the heads of visitors and eastern seaboard schoolchildren.

Today, as we stand inside the mine next to the Mammoth coal vein (one of the thickest seams of anthracite in the world), Dave's callused hands are clean. Blonde hair curls out from under his black miner's helmet, his tour guide jacket embroidered in white over his heart. The maples outside and across the street are gold and red, their leaves falling in sheets. Next week Pioneer Tunnel will close for the season and Dave, along with other tour guides will recommence their winter chores. I picture Dave alone in the mine, his breath clouding around his head, red ochre from the dripping sandstone wall splashing onto his jeans and work boots like blood. I wonder if he folds his embroidered canvas jacket into a locker in the main office before donning shabbier outerwear suitable for rotting wood, mudslides and coal dust.

The Western Middle Coal Field sprawls through central Pennsylvania—an

anthracite-rich band of earth running through Mahanoy City, Shenandoah, Ashland, Centralia, Mount Carmel and Shamokin. Most 18th century settlers bypassed the rough ridges and valleys of the area, seeking fertile farmland elsewhere unaware that underground, tons of anthracite coal snaked through the earth, a hidden wealth of hard, glittering fuel that would burn with a strong, bright flame. About 300 million years before its discovery (depending on the source, the great find is alternately attributed to local hunters Philip Ginter or Necho Allen) anthracite began as rotting piles of refuse. Dead ferns and tree bark pocked like pineapple skins pooled into the swamplands that characterized ancient Pennsylvania landscapes. Drowned in thick swamp waters, plant remains decayed, compressing under layers of sand, rock and sediment. Beneath the surface, bacteria crawled, slowly changing the chemical nature of plants into beds of peat. Over the course of a million-year metamorphosis, the flat plain of Central Pennsylvania bucked and heaved upward into mountains during a period of great pressure and compression. The violence of the Appalachian Revolution squeezed oxygen and hydrogen from the peat, converting it into anthracite. Grinding fault lines, crushing forces and rotting plants birthed rich veins of coal that eventually drew 80,000 residents to the uninviting landscape by the 1840s.

To supply anthracite to burgeoning industrial markets in Philadelphia and New York, new railroads curled across the region. Lines such as the Reading, Lehigh Valley, and New Jersey Central began transporting tons of coal from breakers (a structure built next to the mine for sorting picked coal) to buyers. By 1874, after railroad tycoons earned fortunes by providing the only transportation

option for coal, many railroads owned or controlled Pennsylvania mines.

The Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company operated the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine—a tunnel carved 1,800 feet into Mahanoy Mountain—in Ashland, Pennsylvania, from 1911 to 1931. In 1962 the Pioneer Tunnel was re-timbered and opened for public tours after a thirty-one year silence. The once fully functioning mine is considered one of Central Pennsylvania's most popular tourist attractions.

As Dave and I walk beneath the wooden collar overhead in the gangway, my eyes shift to the timber legs on either side of us along the walls. As hard coal is culled from these caves, the rock walls and ceilings weaken. Replacing and maintaining extra supports is vital. Timber provides miners with a safety net, a natural alert of collapse or "squeeze." Soft conifers, such as pine, fir, or spruce, are strong enough to resist minimal pressure from the rock walls, but will bend before breaking. If the structural integrity of a mine is compromised, the firmly wedged timbers will creak and pop before collapsing. Timbers provide a vital signal that a cave-in is imminent, allowing miners precious seconds to escape. Hard woods are seldom used as timber because a hard wood, like oak, might snap under pressure rather than bend enough to warn those underneath. *We use oak in here,* Dave tells me. *It's strong*. I think that Mahanoy Mountain—rippled with coal, slate and sandstone 400 feet above our head—is stronger. I listen hard for creaking, snapping.

Rockslides and cave-ins were common in the early days of Pennsylvania coal mining. The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* reported a miner "entombed" for five

days in September 1913 in the Continental Mine in Centralia, a town bordering Ashland. On the fifth day of his entombment, rescuers bored a hole into the wall of coal blocking his escape. Into the hole, rescuers inserted a food tube. On July 8, 1898, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* printed a story of a miner rescued from beneath "hundreds of tons of coal and rock." After seven hours, he "was found with his right foot pressed against his face while the sole of his left foot was twisted about so that it rested on the small of his back." While reading these accounts on my couch back in Utah, I am breathless with fear. I co-mingle bodily pain with panic, of dwindling oxygen, the clawing hands of entrapment.

Dave and I pause next to an iron ladder sunk into the rock. The ladder climbs up the rock wall before tipping into an angled chute that leads up to an opening at the top of Mahanoy Mountain. The thin rungs look rusty and remind me of cheap playground equipment. Conquering that incline would make my thighs ache. Tom Colihan, another mine guide, leads a group of fifty third-graders past Dave and me. He points to the escape chute and ladder above our heads. *In case of a cave-in*, he says.

Flying to Ashland, Pennsylvania, in the middle of a busy fall semester of graduate work and teaching is not typical for me. I'm not quite certain why I have come to visit the Pioneer Tunnel mine today. Maybe it's something to do with control. Aversion therapy. Walking with Dave under the crushing weight of Mahanoy Mountain should terrify me. And although it does, I have to be here. My trip underground was certain when I woke from a dream and realized it was a memory.

When I was fifteen, I watched as a young coal miner peeled off his red thermal shirt. Turned away from me, he rolled the shirt over his ducked head, the muscles in his back working like those of a draft animal. He was short, heavily muscled. I don't even remember his name—his true identity is tucked somewhere inside a forgotten playbill. He wasn't really a miner. But I remember his workplace, the tiny community theater in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, (twenty miles west of Ashland) where the stadium seating creaked as audience members leaned forward in the dark. I remember the uninspiring name of the play, *Hard Coal: Life in the Region*, and the disembodied wheeze of a miner dying of anthracosis—black lung disease. As for the remaining actors, their stories have disintegrated. In my memory, whole bodies have dissolved into slips of calico swirling at the edge of the stage, work boots dragging along a wooden floor.

For the past few weeks I have been tugging the edges of this memory like an anxious woman worrying a loose seam. I remember this: The stage was spare, only black wooden boards underfoot and the ghosts of sets. A doorway here, a pile of crates there. Outside the theater red maples and Norway maples were budding and bursting along undulations of ridge and valley. But on stage the Appalachian Mountains were mirage, a trick of light and grease paint. Each actor wore dirt and coal dust on the planes of their face, in the folds of their costumes—a filthy landscape superimposed on that of the body. Even in studied silence, their battered bodies told stories. An actor showed the beauty of a coal vein with a stroke and a sigh, or hinted at a horizon by a wary look to the east when a backstage rooster crowed. The terrain of the fuel-rich Western Middle Coal Field

evoked by curving arms, narrowed eyes, the lengthening spine at the back of a reach.

As a fifteen-year-old, I am certain I had no interest in seeing a play about the lives of those who mined the anthracite coal regions of Central Pennsylvania. I didn't care about the industrial history of my state, or about the mining towns scattered in a line running east away from my hometown. My grandpa and great-grandpa had fixed pool tables, bootlegged liquor, lived in Philadelphia row homes—coal dust had never painted their faces like shoe polish. Why should I care about this play, these filthy particulars?

Yet this remains: A young man in a red thermal shirt swings a pickaxe into the heart of an imaginary vein. His strokes are slow and soundless, belying the hardness of the coal, the grunts required to reveal it. He works methodically, wiping sweat from a filthy brow. His work done, he turns slowly, pulling his story around himself with a lowered head, his face and hands hidden from view. Unexpectedly, he shrugs free of his shirt, revealing frame and muscles and skin in topographic relief. And then, I am aware of another body—mine in response to his: two curled fists, a sharp intake of breath in a field of black.

Hard Coal: Life in the Region was created for teenagers just like me—those with no knowledge of the lives sucked into an industry that formed and ruined surrounding towns. The Bloomsburg Theater Ensemble—a small group of actors who in 1976 created a professional theater company in a predominately blue-collar mining town of 8,000 residents—occasionally toured northeastern Pennsylvania schools to educate children about the area's anthracite history.

When the BTE realized that school history textbooks neglected to mention the region's distinct and tragic role in the Industrial Revolution, they offered their creative talents to telling the story of the community. The BTE collaborated on all aspects of the play *Hard Coal*, completing everything from the script to the music to the set design and costumes. Ultimately, a cast of fourteen provided a performance patched together with personal stories of miners, newspaper accounts of fatalities, ethnic music, and images from the height of the mining era. After reading through the *Hard Coal* script I purchased a few weeks ago, I discovered that my strapping miner stretched his back into a tombstone. The names of miners burned alive or drowned in local mining disasters were projected across his naked skin.

I saw this play because Mr. Edwards, my high school English teacher, thought my classmates and I should learn more about the history of anthracite and those who broke their bodies to mine it. Ten years later, I had forgotten almost everything about the play. Before research filled some of the gaps in my memory, I could not remember that hard coal is anthracite and soft coal is bituminous, that the Susquehanna River I swam in swept coal shipments along its currents, that mining stories are buried in the bones of mining families and tales are bled into the soil of the region. Instead, the history and individual stories of anthracite coal mining that I heard and saw on the stage curled to sleep in the deeply muscled back of a stranger. I clenched my fists and inhaled sharply as a teenage girl, and lodged this memory of a body in the folds of my brain until it emerged again in a

glittering new form. I do not know what upheavals of body and mind have revealed it, but it has brought me here in the middle of everything.

Just fifteen minutes ago, when Dave, Tom and our tour group clacked through the yellow entrance doors on the battery powered mine locomotive (a simple engine with three passenger cars attached), I scribbled notes on my Steno pad, water droplets splashing onto the page. Two third-grade boys, here at the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine with their class on a field trip, sat next to me, their bodies frail and squirming.

Did your teachers tell you about the mine? I asked them as we waited to begin the tour.

No, the blonde one said, slightly shifting his body away from mine.

They just brought you here, and you don't know why?

Yup.

Over the deafening rattle of the cars, all fifty third-graders cheered as we picked up speed.

The locomotive pulled us farther into the mountain, until Tom stopped next to a short gangway revealing the Orchard Vein, 4 feet of coal exposed in a wall of sandstone.

Why is the ceiling green? A kid had shouted to Tom.

Above our heads a piece of bright green fiberglass covered the slate roof. Tom explained that it kept water from dripping on tourists when they stopped here.

This would be a cool water ride, the blonde boy said to his neighbor.

I wondered if this boy had been to the Museum of Anthracite Mining, like I had been the day before. If he saw the placard for mine disasters, floods. *Collapse of strata under a river, overflowing streams, or by miners tapping an unsuspected body of water.* The walls suddenly seemed brittle, like the bird bones of the little boys at my side.

Six years ago, a wall of the Quecreek Coal Mine in Somerset, Pennsylvania, burst. Drenched by 50-60 million gallons of water after drilling into the adjacent abandoned Saxon Mine, nine miners floated 240 feet underground for three days before rescue.

I can almost hear water roaring through this tunnel, tearing out oak timbers, tossing passenger cars like toys. What would remain after that kind of collapse? A shattered mine, our bloated bodies pale and waterlogged, huddled into schools like fish in a black ocean.

On September 6, 1869, 110 men and boys were suffocated or burned alive in a massive fire at the Avondale Colliery. The wooden breaker at the colliery was built directly over the shaft through which workers were lowered into and lifted out of the mine. When the shaft and eventually the breaker accidentally caught on fire, flames quickly engulfed the only route to the surface, trapping all miners in rooms lined with glittering fuel. The doomed miners frantically rushed to construct wooden brattices to seal off tunnels and protect themselves from toxic gases. *Blackdamp*, miners called it. *Carbon dioxide and water vapor.* As the fire ate into the coal and devoured the oxygen in the mine, blackdamp crawled through tunnels, dousing carbide lamps and curling its thick fingers through the

mouths and noses of the Avondale miners. Not rockslides or cave-ins, but an insidious, invisible killer collapsed these men from the inside out. At first, miners would have felt dizzy, light-headed, fatigued. Eventually the dead were found with foam covering their bloated faces, some smeared with coal dust where they had lain face down on the gangway floor trying to suck oxygen from the dirt.

In 1962, the same year that Emil Ermert reopened the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine as a tourist attraction to boost the local economy and "make Ashland known far and wide as a unique place," the Big Buck coal vein in nearby Centralia caught on fire. Between January and May of that year, load after load of Centralia garbage had been piled on top of the exposed coal vein, an ill-chosen dumpsite. Some versions of the story claim the garbage was intentionally burned for waste management, some say spontaneous combustion ignited the trash. Regardless of its cause, the Centralia fire—due to insufficient fire fighting, lazy contractors hired to dig out the fire, and failed fly ash and clay seals—was never contained. For decades flames ate through the underground coal seam unchecked, a hidden fire except for occasional belches of smoke at the surface, a collapsed lawn, or a patch of cracked asphalt.

In 1980, the government estimated it would take $660 million to dig out the fire with no guarantees for success. Instead of chancing one more failure, Centralia residents accepted a $43 million buyout from the government and left town to begin again elsewhere.

When I was young, my parents and I traveled along Route 61 through Centralia, on our way somewhere else. By then the fire had affected 4,000 surface

acres. I remember dried out trees twisting naked limbs toward the sky, dead maples collapsing into each other like dominoes. We sped through a barren forest, columns of smoke pouring from fissures in the soil.

Yesterday, I drove back to Centralia to rebuild my memory. The Pennsylvania Environmental Protection Agency has posted signs in the area that advise, "walking and/or driving in the immediate area could result in serious injury or death. There are dangerous gases present, and the ground is prone to sudden and unexpected collapse." I was undeterred, and not sure why. The coal region, with Centralia nestled in its heart, is dirty, crumbling. An eyesore. I have never wanted to return. I say I went back to Centralia yesterday to rebuild memory, but perhaps I drove there to commune with something broken: a collapsing town, a fractured self.

I followed route 61 two miles north of Ashland toward the center of the burning town. *Turn right at Mae's Drive-In,* the woman at the Ashland borough office told me. *You can't miss it.*

I anticipated boarded up row-homes, buckling pavement, the crumbling skeleton of a ghost town. Only red maples, Norway maples, telephone poles, a fire hydrant. The two-lane route was barren, nothing flaming, nothing standing. Where was Centralia? I kept driving north, red and gold leaves washing over the windshield as I strained for a Main Street.

In a few minutes, I was over the hill in Aristes, its streets lined with row-homes, pale aluminum siding polished by the late afternoon sun. American flags hung from porches, geraniums nodded in the breeze. I turned the car around and

headed south, rolling down the window to sniff for smoke. Back on route 61, I turned at each crossroad between Aristes and Ashland. I wound along empty streets, dried leaves popping under the tires. The roads were overgrown, each dead-ending into forest. Remnants of life—broken glass, shredded paper, a passenger seat ripped from a car—littered streets that circled back on themselves. The air smelled sweet with decomposing leaves. There was nothing there.

How do I get to Centralia? I ask Dave now as we stand in the mine. *I tried to find it yesterday.*

It's gone, he says, leaning against the cool slate wall.

What remains after that kind of collapse? Yesterday, I stood on top of Hummie Hill, looking out over the demolished remnants of Centralia. After driving back and forth between the burnt out Centralia and Aristes for thirty minutes, I had finally seen the dead oak tree on the east side of Locust Avenue on my way back toward Ashland. A white, hand-painted sign was nailed to the tree stump. *Fire,* it read. An arrow pointed west onto Wood Street. I followed the patched pavement up toward the top of Hummie Hill, dead trees lying in piles to my left. I parked the car and picked my way carefully through green glass shards and carpet-like moss. Standing in an open field of trash, gravel and dried grasses, I caught a strange scent on the breeze. I saw no signs of fire, but the odor of smoke bombs, thick and sulfury, burned my nostrils.

I stood on top of a burning hill, a disappeared town stretched before me slowly collapsing into subterranean flames. Grief, not fear, permeated my experience on this hill two miles north of the mine. In the mine, I fear for myself.

At the edge of this overgrown wasteland, I saw the loss of thousands, their homes demolished by an insidious, unseen threat. *How can a town disappear?* I asked myself again and again. And if an entire town—baseball fields, front porches, foundations—can vanish without a cry, why should I escape?

A friend of mine got caught in an explosion, Dave tells me. *He was in the hospital for a while, but he got out. He got hit in the face and neck with pieces of coal; you can still see them under his skin. Blue spots.*

With a few strokes of my pencil, I refer to Dave's nameless friend as The Blue Speckled Man in my Steno notebook. Over the next few weeks, I will tell my family, friends, colleagues, and uninterested freshman English students this story. I want them to know about Dave, about how he hauls logs into the ground every winter to support dripping walls of coal. I want them to know about his friend, flecks of coal studding his face like acne.

I am one of many reporters. Regional newspapers also detail the constant terror of the mines. Cave-ins, minor flooding, and other singular mishaps in Pennsylvania coal mines are referred to as "accidents." While euphemizing fatal events in title, reporters highlight the gruesomeness of mining accidents in the body of their articles, abandoning tasteful descriptions of lost life and limb in favor of "blown out eye[s]" and "horribly mangled" victims. Accounts of miners falling to their deaths down open mine shafts litter newspapers in the late 1800s, like one in *The Courier* based in Connellsville, Pennsylvania, that reported fallen miners were "a bleeding mass of crushed flesh and bones when they were hoisted to the top of the shaft." After the turn of the century, reports are less

sensationalized, their descriptions more spare. Did less colorful reporting arise after decades of mining disasters, when reports of injuries and death lost their horrible novelty? Without these gruesome accounts, each miner is a typed line on a page, their stories swallowed by the silence of white space.

Dave and I have walked farther down the gangway, what miners call the main passageway through the mine. The slate roof drips steadily on our heads as water snakes down from the top of the mountain through open chutes picked clean of coal. More ladders here. Dave points out two laddered walkways cut up into the rock, separated in the middle by a 30-foot pillar of coal. At the base of the coal pillar, just above us, a wooden gate holds back the mined coal until the chute is emptied into waiting coal cars for removal.

They blasted the coal in there and took out about 6 feet a day, Dave says.

They blasted in there?

The walkways would fit one man—Dave, about 200 hundred lbs, 6 feet tall, would fill the space easily. Perched on a slippery ladder, miners drilled holes into the coalface to place their dynamite.

Where would they hide? I ask. *During the explosions?*

Dave points to small cut outs carved into the rock at right angles from the walkways. These crawl spaces sit a couple of feet below the miner's workspace, just a few rungs up from where we stand in the gangway.

They'd light the fuse, then run back down the ladder and crawl into these monkeyways.

Dave says they ran down they ladder; I know they slipped. I picture

miners placing their work boots along the slick edges of the ladder and sliding down it before balling up into the monkeyway. What does a dynamite explosion sound like in a four-foot space? How thick was the coal and rock dust spilling down into the crevices, coating miners, dousing lights?

Suddenly, the overhead bulbs flick off. I feel the darkness in my chest, around my head, a weight suddenly compounded by hundreds of feet (how many tons?) of shale, coal and sandstone above us. The battery-powered light on Dave's miner's hat remains off, and in this complete, thick dark, my senses shift. I see nothing, but I feel the heat coming from Dave's body. Time stretches out, its concrete edges disintegrating into black, minutes losing their authority. Why are the lights out? What is wrong? I hear my heart pounding in my ears and a steady dripping as the roof leaks and pools around our feet.

On my first trip inside the Pioneer Tunnel mine I felt the same panic. I was on a field trip and although classmates must have flanked me, memory stands me alone, 1,800 feet deep in a dripping cave. While inside, a vague picture of the outside slope remained: a wild, overgrown mound littered with feathery ferns. I felt the entire weight of the mountain pressing down on the slate roof above my head, pushing the walls in at my sides. The mountain gathered itself around me, towering above in violently folded strata I couldn't see but suddenly felt. Awareness of the weight and height of the piled earth thrummed along my limbs, radiating out from slippery organs that knew something I did not. There was a grandness, a swallowing immensity along these tunnels that my body tapped into, urging me to acknowledge it. This vast and complex landscape terrified me; how

could I trust something so entirely outside of my control? I imagined not only weight—the sheer massiveness of earth and fern and resident animals—but of time, too. Galloping centuries, slow ages of iron and glacier, eras of dinosaurs and grinding ridges.

Now in the dark, Dave chatters on about monkeyways, his words pulling me back into the present. He speaks steadily, and although my terror erases the words he says through the pitch, I am comforted by his calm. If he were to falter, to register any shock that the lights are off in this cave, I would disintegrate into panic. His composure reminds me of flight attendants—if they carry on with their normal duties, nothing can be amiss. Nothing is wrong in the mine. I hear his heavy jacket rustle as he shifts, and even in the dark, I somehow feel the solid edges of his presence. I match my breathing to his. The lights come back on.

While Dave had been teaching me about monkeyways, Tom was around a bend in the gangway with the third-graders, at the base of a coal chute. He was teaching them that when emptying the chute, miners would sit on the lip of the coal car beneath, their feet hung over the edge as a stream of anthracite poured into the waiting receptacle. The cloud of coal dust that six feet of anthracite kicked up blacked out every sense but touch for the miner. *'So dark you can't see your hands in front of your face' was first said by miners*, Dave tells me later. A miner's feet were his eyes, a way to judge when the coal car was full, ready to be rolled to the breaker. To illustrate the depth of a coal miner's night, Tom had flicked off the lights in the entire mine and tripped my panic.

In his 19th century ballad "The Hard Working Miner," Patrick O'Neil

sings: “I work in the mines where the sun never shines/ nor daylight does ever appear/ with me lamp blazing red on top of me head/ and in danger I never know fear.” I wonder about the bravado of this last stanza. Do miners never know fear, or do they simply befriend it? Call it by name, and wear it like a coat down into the pit?

Dave lengthens our private tour, taking me back to the Orchard Vein, showing me how the sandstone sandwiches the coal. He runs a finger along the anthracite seam, a glittering surface that shames the dull slate beneath.

How did you come to work here? I ask.

My whole family worked in the mines and I didn’t want my life to be like that. I ended up here.

Dave readjusts his hard hat. He doesn’t romanticize working in the coal mines; rather, he acknowledges the choking isolation, the backbreaking demands. He knows that even modern mining carries the threat of injury, of violent death. Does he hesitate when confessing his dread of coal mining, his rejection of a family legacy? He doesn’t want to be a miner. But in a few weeks, Dave will start tearing out rotten logs, hauling in newer, stronger supports. He comes into the mine so he can speak, relating accounts both sensational and simple.

I understand why he comes back. The mines are in constant flux. Each day, the timbers might buckle and break, rock ceilings could crumble, water dripping down from the top of Mahanoy Mountain might dam up in the mine. Someone has to return to create a sense of order, to guide others through a shifting space. This landscape is filthy, dangerous, and terribly inviting because beneath

the rubble, something remains in these halls, in the culm littered mounds bordering Centralia. Something that refuses to break completely. I cannot dismiss this battered landscape anymore than I can dismiss what has brought me here, what has pulled my own body toward collapse. The danger doesn’t deter me. With a pick or a pen, I will create order and mine what remains.

CHAPTER II

Of all the miseries that afflict human life and relate principally to the body, in this valley of tears I think nervous disorders in their extreme and last degrees are the most deplorable and beyond all comparison the worst.

—George Cheyne, *English Malady*, 1733

PSYCHOSOCIAL INTAKE INTERVIEW
Behavioral Health Services
☑ Initial ☐ Update

The information contained in this report is CONFIDENTIAL *and should only be released with appropriate consent.*

Client: Elizabeth Benson
DOB: 03/21/1983
Age: 23
Date of Assessment: 3/5/2007

1. Why have you come here today?

I'm not really here; I don't want to consider therapists yet. Currently, I am lying on a gurney in the InstaCare in Holladay, Utah, an IV hooked into the crook of my elbow. But I'll tell you what I told them: I feel like I'm going to faint, I'm going to hit the floor at any minute. An hour ago a pony tailed nurse, Stephanie, affixed skin electrodes to my chest, nestling one between my breasts. After reading the EKG results, Dr. Longenecker told me that I was tachycardic, that my heart rate was elevated above the average 100 beats per minute. For the last hour I have been exhibiting a physiological response that may be due to any of the following: exercise, stress, anemia, dehydration, sepsis, or heart failure. Dr. Longenecker has declared me *the mystery of the day*.

Stephanie—the LPN as old as I—drained my blood for testing. Results in hand, the doctor ruled out diabetes, leukemia, and stroke. He squinted his eyes at me and then ordered a chest x-ray to make sure my heart wasn't too large for my body. When another nurse pulled open the soft cotton hospital gown, baring my chest for the x-ray machine, I started to cry. That's what you want to hear, right? That I breathed in shuddering gasps, that my tears were a flood?

Therapists want to talk about feelings, right? Well, I want to talk about my legs. A few months ago I was making a sandwich in my kitchen, the bacon popping in the microwave while I leaned against the sink. When I pulled the sizzling plate from the microwave, my legs started to tremble. They couldn't carry my weight. I pushed the plate along the counter away from me and clung to the lip of the sink. I stretched out an arm toward the kitchen table and shifted my body weight toward it, dragging my feet heavily across the floor. Grabbing the back of a wicker chair, I slid it across the tiles like a walker, shuffling along behind it until I reached the couch in my living room. I left the bacon and sandwich ingredients spread out on the counter while I collapsed onto the couch. I didn't move for ten hours. I chose to ignore my legs, to punish their failure.

I can't ignore them now. I couldn't stand at the receptionists' desk long enough to fill out medical forms when I arrived. Stephanie, the LPN, had to hold my arm as we walked behind the curtain. Now I have to lie on this gurney with my eyes clamped shut. Clamped is the wrong verb—they are too heavy to keep open. Just outside the flimsy curtain boxing me in, I can hear the nurses talking about the slushy weather, about what to make for dinner. I can't open my eyes—nurses are disembodied voices. I feel heavy, everything is pressing down on me. Thick head, pounding heart, heavy limbs; I am only ears. Everything is dark.

2. What kinds of jobs have you had? What work have you done?

My boss calls me an administrative assistant, but when asked to investigate the women's bathroom and notify maintenance if there is a clog in the

third stall, I know I am just a secretary. My light brown cubicle doesn't muffle sound; I can hear Randy clearing the phlegm out of his throat before he answers the phone. The worst moments of my day include waiting for the elevator, running errands to the supply room thirteen floors down, and standing in the cafeteria line to buy my lunch. Waiting is standing and standing is shaking and shaking is potential collapse. My legs are weak, like the first day out after a long illness, and I sweat while waiting. My face flushes, I press a palm against my forehead, the back of my neck, my cheek, the back of my neck again. I pace in front of the elevators. I sometimes leave my freshly ladled soup on the counter next to the toaster and flee the cafeteria if the lines are too long. No one suspects anything is wrong.

I manage to get enough work done: copies, luncheons, payroll, organizational charts, travel itineraries. No one suspects. In between brief bouts of productivity, I rarely glance away from my computer screen. I teach myself geography on educational websites, I put together jigsaw puzzles online. By the time I leave work, my eyes are bloodshot and my vision blurs. Distances shock me, landscapes are soft and vast.

One day after work I go to a University of Utah gymnastics meet with some acquaintances. I think I should get out of the house, try to be social. When I emerge from the tunnel into the indoor stadium, everything begins to spin. To stay steady, I have to look down at my sneakers, at the back of the girl in front of me. Everything is too big—stretched out in front to swallow me.

3. What is your medical history?

Medical history… Well, never any problem with my legs. Nothing like this. I've never had any problems walking before. Maybe I have Multiple Sclerosis. Maybe Diabetes, I don't know. But medical history, well, I did break my hand once. Is that what you want to know?

A history of anxiety? Well, kind of. I remember having panic attacks on cold nights in central Pennsylvania, electric heaters clicking in my bedroom. Do you know that in the dark, a pounding heart sounds immense? Hard to believe that a fist-sized organ could bang that loudly through flesh and sheets. With a sleepless night stretching out before me, (you are not you you are not in control you are trapped in this body you are not in control you will always be on the outside of yourself), I depended on sounds to distract me. First line of defense: recite times tables, or grocery lists, out loud. Turn terror into banality. If that failed, I sang Latin songs I learned in high school choir: beati, beati, beati. Blessed.

That only lasted for a few years. I left Pennsylvania and my panic attacks when I moved to Salt Lake City for college. Things were fine for a long time. But the spring I turned twenty-two I woke up and found my panic living in the morning light. It perched on my naked shoulder as I stood beneath the shower's spray (you are not you whose hands are these who moves this body you are not in control) and turned me into a stranger. I went to the doctor, a family friend, and told him I felt weird. *Eat better, get exercise, get enough sleep*, he said. Befriend the fear; wear it like a shroud.

I shared a body with my panic and learned its habits like those of a roommate. It showed up in the morning when I was too groggy to hold it off, it lay down with me at night just before sleep. It lived in the mirror (don't look into the mirror's depths or you will not recognize yourself you are a stranger stay busy you can work while it sleeps.)

But anxiety now? That was nothing like this. The problem is with my legs now. Before, sweating in my twin bed at home, or in the shower, it was just my brain. But that kind of panic moved out two years ago. The problem is with my body now, not my brain. I am not afraid of anything today but fainting.

4. Tell me about your relationships with your family.

My brother is on his way here to the InstaCare. Concerned by my earlier sobbing, the chest x-ray nurse offered to call someone for me. My brother lives a few blocks away and will come to sit quietly by my bedside and explain the battery of tests the doctor has ordered. My brother is going to be a doctor. He will try to comfort me. A few days ago when I asked him to drop me off at the clinic, when I told him I thought something might be wrong with me, he told me that I needed to stop eating like crap. *Eat better, get exercise, get enough sleep*, he said.

When I had lain down on the gurney earlier, I asked Dr. Longenecker if I might have something to eat, as that usually helped me feel better. He brought me graham crackers wrapped in brown paper towels. For the past month I have been trying to eat every time I feel faint—maybe it's hypoglycemia. At work, I always have something to snack on at my desk. I am constantly eating. I have gained

weight.

After getting dizzy during one workout, I have stopped using the exercise bike in my apartment. My heart pounded, I thought it might explode. I lie on the couch most nights, watching TV, ignoring my body.

Sometimes, I cannot fall asleep for a long time. Twisting my body through the sheets, I punch my thighs over and over again, beating them for their failure. Before now, I have refused to tell my family (there is something wrong I am sick I cannot walk I am collapsing), the silence a bomb in my chest. Often in the dark, my rage and grief erupts in a strangled sob, splitting the silence of my solitary apartment.

5. Tell me about your social life.

My friend Christina and her husband Thayne came over for dinner a month ago. I managed to stand in the kitchen and make small talk and fajitas for an hour without incident. We sat on the couch to eat and halfway through our first serving, I abruptly excused myself. I walked into my bedroom and lay down on the floor in the fetal position, my body heavy like when I have the flu. I knew I had to get up, go back out to entertain my guests. I hoped they would just leave, put their dirty dishes in the sink (I wouldn’t get around to washing them for weeks) and lock the door behind them. They didn’t leave. The rest of the night blurs—I think I propped myself up on the couch, resting my leaden head on the back, talking only when necessary. I must have put a movie on to distract us.

Since that night, I have continuously canceled on all of my friends,

avoiding game nights, birthday parties, potlucks. My unexplained flakiness has upset them. When they get together, they talk about how I have hurt them, how I ignore them. Understandably, they have stopped calling. I have spent every night lying on my couch, food-caked dishes moldering in the sink. I cannot stand up long enough to wash them.

6. Are you taking any current medications?

No. The only time I take any medicine is when I pop three ibuprofen for bad menstrual cramps. But I don't even like taking pills for headaches—usually a glass of water will fix that. Twenty minutes from now, Dr. Longenecker will prescribe potassium pills for me. He will tell me that I have weak blood, that I don't have enough potassium, salt, and water in my body. Dutifully, I will try to swallow a potassium tablet at my work desk tomorrow morning. The pill is large—a horse pill, I think—and it will lodge in my throat until I choke and spit it up on the desk in a chalky, watery mix.

In a few days I will see another doctor: Dr. Harrison at the Granger Clinic. He is the doctor I saw almost two years ago at age twenty-two when panic lived on my shoulders and in reflections. *Eat better, get exercise, get enough sleep*, he said. This time Dr. Harrison will tell me—less than five minutes after he walks into the examining room, glances at my chart, and asks me what the trouble is—that I have an anxiety disorder. The weakness, the sweating, the vertigo, the heart palpitations, the near fainting that have debilitated me for six months is uncontrollable anxiety. Textbook case. Dr. Harrison will prescribe 20mg of

Fluoxetine, and I will only tell a few people that I have a bottle of generic Prozac on my nightstand.

I will call my mother when I hold the first blue gel cap in my hand, a glass of water next to me on the table. *I don't want to take it,* I will say. *What if it changes me? How will I tell who I really am?* I will cry when I swallow the first dose.

Fluoxetine regulates the chemicals in my brain, normalizes me. This tiny pill helps me to walk, stops the constant flow of words (you cannot walk you will fall the pavement is too close to your face the world is too large). This medicine will not take effect for four weeks until my blood is soaked with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. While I wait for the medicine to kick in, I will lie on my couch and tap my forehead with my fingers because my head feels heavy, thick, slightly addled. I will tap out the cobwebs and wait for my mother who will fly in from Pennsylvania to stay with me for a few days. Eventually I will stroll slowly around Liberty Park, leaning heavily on her arm. (You are not walking right you are not seeing right the world shifts and sways nothing is steady nothing is real it is all a movie a flicking cracked reel on a hand cam nothing is steady.) After our twenty-minute walk, I will need to sleep. *Some people need medication to motivate them to get better,* my brother's wife will say in response to my diagnosis.

I hate taking a pill everyday. It means that you are sick. *Try not to stay on that medicine for too long,* one of my friends will tell me. *That stuff is addictive.* I will wonder where she was when I was using my apartment furniture as a walker.

But, when I have to take my pills in public, I will hear her words and think that people are staring.

After a few months, I will not remember how bad it all was. Surely nothing could make me that weak. If I know it's all in my brain, that my legs aren't really going to collapse, I can fight it off. I can be strong. Like a lot of people taking anti-depressants, I will feel completely cured in a few months. Like most people, I will keep trying to go off of my medicine. Like so many, I will crash.

7. Any additional comments?

I am lying on a gurney in the InstaCare in Holladay, Utah, an IV hooked into the crook of my elbow. I don't want to consider therapists because I fear you will take my terror, my grief, my body and confine it to a single narrative line. What can remain after this kind of a collapse? And what will you tell me about that which survives? I have seen the smoky skeleton of Centralia, newspaper reports after mine cave-ins, broken towns after industry crumbles. What will remain won't be understanding, or my story. This interview won't end with me; your final assessment will be a record of a distant "she," a clinical diagnosis, typed lines on a page.

PSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT
Behavioral Health Services

☐ **Initial** ☑ **Update**

The information contained in this report is CONFIDENTIAL *and should only be released with appropriate consent.*

Client: Elizabeth Benson
DOB: 03/21/1983
Age: 25
Date of Assessment: 3/5/2009

Medical Necessity:

Elizabeth is a 25-year-old Caucasian female who was referred due to her history of anxiety. She complains of leg weakness, vertigo, increased heart rate, and unprovoked panic attacks. She reports hypersensitivity to physiological changes. When her blood sugar drops, or her eyes adjust to distance, or when she feels tired, a panic attack generally occurs. She fears unexpected or sudden collapse. She reports occasional moments of depersonalization—feeling outside of herself.

Case Conceptualization:

Elizabeth is a Master's student at Utah State University writing her thesis about her anxiety disorder. She stopped taking Fluoxetine twice in the last year. She began retaking Fluoxetine after re-experiencing debilitating symptoms of panic disorder. She feels anger and grief in response to her relapse. She has frequent panic attacks (almost daily) when out in public places. She believes that her current dosage of Fluoxetine (20mg) may be inadequate for the long-term treatment of her disorder.

Diagnostic Impression:

Axis I: 300.21 Generalized Anxiety Disorder with Agoraphobia

CHAPTER III

So anthracite, to Live.

—Emily Dickinson, *More Life-went out-when He went*

She is lying on a gurney, an IV hooked into the crook of her left elbow. Water from the slate ceiling drips, drips, drips onto her right arm like the saline in the tube spiked in her vein. It's approximately 54 degrees here in the mine, but she doesn't ask for an extra blanket to supplement her flimsy hospital gown and scratchy top sheet because the cold distracts her from her crippling anxiety. Better for her to focus on the body.

I don't know if I forced her to come here, or she forced me. She was silent during our car ride east on route 61 (I drove because she can't), reclining in her seat, closing her eyes because the whirling movement outside made her dizzy, she said. I turned the car radio on, cranked the volume and pretended like she wasn't there. We went sightseeing through nearby Frackville, another mining town full of aluminum-sided row homes and failing small businesses. As we circled the town and headed back toward Ashland, I could tell she noticed something different—a flash of movement sickening her from the periphery. I slowed the car and saw a teenage girl climbing a ladder propped against the large window of a run-down gas station, her ponytail bouncing as she ascended. The young girl dipped a large brush into a white can of paint, tapped off the excess on the rim, and started painting a picture in long, sure strokes. A skull. As we drove past, the young girl started painting an orange miner's helmet on the top of the skull, a

pickaxe at its side. In the passenger seat, she opened her eyes, placed both hands against the window and looked back.

We were born identical twins, she and I. Our bodies are the same, but I am incredibly social; she lies in bed for days, ignoring phone calls. I laugh loudly and she is silent. She punches walls. Sometimes, when I look in the mirror, I don't recognize myself. I am me and yet somehow not, somehow a stranger. Maybe it is she. When I read that a doctor at the Mayo Clinic has described this common symptom of anxiety disorder—depersonalization, feeling outside oneself—as *troubling*, curse words tumble out of my mouth. How can I explain that depersonalization breaks you open, blasts your identity? When I was eighteen, I got poison ivy all over my face. Before the steroid treatment kicked in, my face was swollen beyond recognition. The wells under my eyes filled out, the bones of my chin and cheeks masked by bloated flesh. I couldn't look in mirrors until I had returned to normal. Depersonalization is that, but it is also the aftermath. It is lying in bed, away from reflective surfaces, and still not recognizing my small hands, how they move without conscious effort. It is knowing that I have turned into she, my hands curved into claws, the panic cresting as I brace for a fight.

What's wrong with her?

I am startled to see a small bird-boned boy standing beside me, his blonde hair curling around his shirt collar. He looks straight at her on the gurney, notices her flushed cheeks and closed eyes. He waits for me to answer, pulling a giant canvas coat around his small frame, tucking the extra yards of fabric into the folds of his limbs to keep himself warm. The coat drags along the floor, dwarfing his

small frame. The left side of the jacket, now pulled snugly across his chest, is embroidered with the name Dave.

I consider simply saying, *she's sick.* I consider sitting this tiny boy down on the cold, wet rock floor to tell him the whole story, about her sick brain, about how she trembles and sweats and loses her strength. About dirty dishes and broken social engagements and the number of times she has slapped her own face, but I don't say anything. There is everything to say and nothing I can communicate.

Earlier when she and I had cruised down Main Street in Ashland, we noticed more teenagers perched on ladders outside of privately owned businesses. A boy decorated one window with a ghost in a green miner's helmet, a girl painted a window with two ghosts riding in a purple coal car. Halloween approaches. This year, I think she and I will be shape-shifters. The medicine that keeps her at bay has stopped working. Each hour she inches closer.

Report of Bodies Viewed: Mine Safety and Health Administration Library, Denver, CO

- George Stackhouse of Avondale, driver, age seventeen. Head on one side; right hand raised though affirming, left arm doubled and fist clenched. Single.
- The next body was not at first recognized, but was subsequently ascertained to be that of Jacob Mosier of Plymouth. He was lying on his

face, which had apparently been forced into the ground, and was much disfigured.

- Henry Smith; of Avondale. Wife and four children. Hands clenched as though guarding against a blow.
- Evan Ross. Body discolored; face turned to one side; blood and foam issuing from mouth
- John Roberts; single; recognized by one stiff finger on the left hand; body bloated.
- C. F. Ruth, of Hanover; face pale; head turned back as though gasping for last breath.
- D.P. Pryor. Marked on arm with cross and D. P. P.; of Avondale

Additional Comments: In many names there was great difficulty finding persons who were able to recognize those brought out, and it (is) possible that in (certain situations) one or two may have been given wrong names. A Committee of the Board of Trustees of the Relief found a James Jones, which name does not appear. In this case, James Jones and James Jason may stand for the same individual.

She looks a lot like you, the little boy says, still staring at the gurney positioned along the rock wall.

No, not really, I say immediately. Her hair is greasy and unwashed. The muscles in her legs are atrophied. Her face is blotchy from crying. We look nothing alike.

From 1925-1926, anthracite miners in Central Pennsylvania went on strike to protest dangerous working conditions and poor wages. During the hiatus, coal stores were depleted and in the absence of freshly mined coal, buyers turned elsewhere for their fuel needs. Competitive fuels, such as natural gas and petroleum, hijacked the industry. After the strike ended, miners earned better wages but worked fewer hours and mines dropped production to one or two days per week. Between labor disputes and alternative fuel options, coal demand declined sharply by the 1950s. Boomtowns that had sprung up throughout the region collapsed in an industrial vacuum. For the past sixty years, state and local chambers of commerce have scrambled to draw new industries into coal towns to boost the economy, but have remained largely unsuccessful.

What's all this….stuff left in here? The boy asks me, drawing lines in the dirt along the gangway with the toe of his sneaker.

Picks, hoses, and drill bits litter the mine. Some are hung up on walls, on the wooden stalls built for the mules that helped pull coal cars, others are left lying on the floor, tilted against the slate wall. The tools were abandoned when the mine closed in 1931. As if the miners literally dropped everything and walked out one day, and damn the coal company, the owners would have to foot the bill for new tools if work picked up again. Where did they go, the miners out of work? Did they find jobs in other mines? Maybe some abandoned their picks, wooden handles greased with the outlines of their palms, and walked slowly home where they stepped out of their coal blackened skins onto the kitchen floor. Who would

recognize their pink faces, coated with wood shavings or sweat as they sawed timber or pounded anvils?

There's a man singing up there. The boy frowns slightly, his pale, almost invisible eyebrows lowering. *Can you hear him?*

Down the gangway, somewhere above in an angled chute, words drift down like smoke:

Sixty-seven was the number
That in a heap were found.
It seemed that they were bewailing
Their fate underneath the ground;
They found the father with his son
Clasped in his arms so pale.
It was a heart-rending scene
In the mines of Avondale.

Who do you think that is? the boy asks me, taking a step toward the music.

I grab him by the shoulders and roughly spin him around to face me. *Should you even be here?* I ask. *Where are your parents? How did you get here?*

My whole family works in mines, he says like it's an answer, then pulls free from my hands and runs down the gangway into the dark.

How did I get here?

CHARACTERS

The play is performed by two adult women who look exactly alike.

SETTING/SET

The set evokes a Pennsylvania coal mine; lights are dimmed to evoke isolation and entrapment. Walls of set are designed to lean in on actors as if something may collapse at any moment.

At the opening of the play, the stage is empty.

ACT I

(Two women emerge from separate sides of the stage. They are wearing jeans and jackets, modern design. Woman 1 enters from stage left wearing a sign that says 'Story.' Woman 2 enters from stage right wearing a sign that says 'Subject.')

WOMAN 1: I've asked her not to speak.

WOMAN 2 (*whispers*): Are you gonna be okay to do this? You'll have to stand here for a long time.

WOMAN 1: If she has anything useful to add, I will communicate it to you in a well-crafted, coherent fashion full of deeper meanings and metaphorical connections.

WOMAN 2 (*whispers*): I wouldn't mention it, but you did almost pass out that one time in British Lit. when you had to give a ten minute presentation on postcolonial theory. Your face was so pale. Like a ghost.

WOMAN 1: I promise to connect any of her limited experiences to a larger subject so that you, the audience, will find something to identify with. So that you can discover your own meaning in one woman's story. It's the least I can do.

WOMAN 2 (*whispers*): Have you eaten yet today? How's your potassium intake?

WOMAN 1 (*overlapping*): When I was fifteen, I watched as a young coal miner peeled off his red thermal shirt. Turned away from me, he rolled the shirt over his ducked head, the muscles in his back working like those of a draft animal. He was short, heavily muscled.

WOMAN 2 (*coughs*): Ahem.

WOMAN 1: Um…yes. Just a minute. I can make that much more lyrical. Let me start again: A young man in a red thermal shirt swings a pickaxe into the heart of an imaginary vein. His strokes are slow and soundless, belying the hardness of the coal, the grunts required to reveal it. He works methodically, wiping sweat from a filthy brow. His work done, he turns slowly, pulling his story around himself with a lowered head, his face and hands hidden from view. Unexpectedly, he shrugs free of his shirt, revealing frame and muscles and skin in topographic relief.

WOMAN 2 (*mumbles*): Bullshit.

WOMAN 1: This image has drawn me back here to the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine today—wait. What did you just say?

WOMAN 2: BULLSHIT.

WOMAN 1: No, it's true. I woke up one morning and thought about the play, about the mine, how I had to come back.

WOMAN 2: You remembered the play. How brutally boring it was, how you wanted to sit next to your best friend Stefanie because you could make fun of everything. And now you've made the memories pretty, dressed them in their Sunday best. You pretend like this is all some sort of personal legacy.

(*One side of the stage starts to buckle*.)

WOMAN 1: But I grew up in the area, in Pennsylvania. It's my home. And it says something more about me—

WOMAN 2: —than I could say? Forget your prose, your lyrical inventions—you're here because we're ugly and deserve to be concealed. Buried under sweat and coal, our hearts bleeding out to the sound of the pickaxe, extinguished by stories that other people should care about. About fire and foam and blackdamp and blown-out eyes.

WOMAN 1: But that's the metaphor, something has to connect—

WOMAN 2: It doesn't. And no matter how much you write you still don't believe that anyone wants to read about us, about our petty tremblings. We are miniscule, something to be hidden. But you are shaking now, you are collapsing in class, you are canceling on your students. You can't hide it so you shut me up and try to make it grand. And in between the swallowing enormity of a collapsing industry, a community, a region, you've lodged our insignificance in the rubble.

(*Opposite side of the stage starts to buckle*.)

You can't bear the thought that all of this might mean nothing.

WOMAN 1 (*takes a step closer to WOMAN 2*): And you're terrified that no one will listen. That they will ignore you, like I did.

(*WOMAN 1 takes another step closer to WOMAN 2, placing a hand on her arm.*)

But you have to tell me one more time. This time I promise to listen.

(*The entire set starts to shake, sounds of timber creaking and popping can be heard*.)

WOMAN 2 (*removing the sign around her neck that says 'Subject' and placing it around the neck of WOMAN 1*): You already know. Tell it and redeem us.

(*As the stage collapses, the women fall on each other. Lights fade to black.*)

END

"Today, more people are killed trespassing at abandoned mines and quarries than operating active mines and quarries in Pennsylvania, which is why DEP partners with other local, state and federal entities on the Stay Out/Stay Alive program. There is no requirement to report accidents at abandoned mines, so many may go unreported. There were 27 fatalities at abandoned mines and

quarries in 18 different Pennsylvania counties between 2000 and 2005. There were 17 fatalities at active mines and quarries over the same period."

—PA Department of Environmental Protection, *Miner Safety Report*, January 31, 2006

Can you see them in there?

No, too much rubble…

Twenty mines currently function throughout Northumberland, Schuylkill and Columbia counties in Pennsylvania where 98% of anthracite is removed through strip-mining. Most coal companies abandoned deep mining after the Susquehanna River burst through a thin rock wall of the River Slope Mine on January 22, 1959. Safety demanded that miners leave 50 feet of rock and coal between the workings and the river but the Knox Coal Company asked its miners to dig closer and closer to the retaining wall until ten million gallons of water ripped through the rock and whirl pooled through the mine. Out of twelve fatalities, no bodies were recovered.

Move those rocks to the side, clear a space.

Bring that light over here!

"In England…a mine manager told me a story involving Britain's Royal Marines [who] were regularly run through some of the deepest and most confining sections of his mine as an exercise to help them develop their mental

and physical endurance. If needed, temporary marginal ventilation and hot working conditions could also be readily arranged to enhance the exercise and more closely approach human panic levels… The closely encumbered space of coal mining frequently requires much mental control."

—Joseph W. Leonard, III, *Anthracite Roots: Generations of Coal Mining in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania*, 2005

I don't hear anything, do you?

Keep digging.

"The stresses of the early mine towns created a community strong enough to resist any threat to itself, change for the worse or change for the better."

—Ben Marsh, *Continuity and Decline in the Anthracite Towns of Pennsylvania*, 1987

I am lying on a gurney, an IV tube taped to the inside of my elbow. A filthy man stands over me, his face barely illuminated by the carbide lamp attached to his cap. A small blonde boy is struggling up onto the foot of my bed, smearing the white sheets with dirt from his sneakers.

Careful, don't knock the IV, I tell the boy and the man laughs.

That? No problem. He grabs the tube near the adhesive and rips the entire IV from my skin. *It's just a prop.*

And sure enough, there's no real pain, just the sting of plucked arm hairs. No blood, no needles. A prop.

It was a cave in, he says and then winks at me.

It's not funny. Someone could have been killed.

Oh, they were. As he swings his head to the right, the flame from his lamp illuminates a pile of fifty or sixty contorted men, their faces shiny with blood. A teenage boy toward the bottom of the pile, his neck stretched out beneath another man's leg, opens one eye and look at me. He smiles.

When I slide off the gurney, my legs feel strong beneath me. I run down the gangway toward the ladder angled up out of the chute—the only way out after a cave-in.

Wait! They're fine, the man calls after me. *It's just cornstarch and red food coloring! A theatre trick!*

One rung, two rungs, three rungs. The chute is pitch black, I can only feel for the steps of the ladder with my toes. Eight, nine, ten. I am crawling through a mountain, rock pressing in around me on all sides. Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two. I scramble all the way up until I'm out, sweating, quadriceps quivering, on the top of Mahanoy Mountain. Facedown in ferns, I breathe in shuddering gulps.

Are you okay?

The little boy squats next to me in the foliage, his head tipped to the side, examining me.

It's just not right, I repeat again and again. *It's not funny, those things really happened.*

He drops down into the dirt, spreading his legs out in front of him. He picks a piece of grass out of the soil, positioning it between his thumbs and pursing his lips as if he's about to make it sing.

I watch him push his heels through the dirt and lay the blades against his lips. My breathing steadies. He is swallowing the landscape, sipping oxygen from slivers of green. I sit up slowly as I realize he will consume it all—crack coal between molars, take fire into his bones, replace his spine with timber—until he and the ruined landscape collapse into each other. I understand why he will come back to tell the story to visitors.

A true story is a story lodged in the body, outside of language. It will fight to emerge, waking you from a deep sleep, pulling you to other landscapes. As I look down over the slope of ferns and beyond into the barren basin of Centralia, I sink my fingers into the rich, dark soil on top of Mahanoy Mountain. The earth is dark and cold under the surface. Collapse is not just a failing, but also a surrender and a joining. A body collapsing joins the dirt, a story collapsing joins a body of knowledge. A ruined landscape redeemed as it emerges in a glittering new form.

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