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Black Lung

Marianne Peel Forman

They couldn't find a handkerchief
that wasn't stained from his years of coughing.
A blend of soot and blood
hacked up over the years from the mines
he couldn't help but breathe in
through his mouth, his nose, even his eyes.

They called it black lung
this coal miner's plague
this coughing that kept wives up through the night.
Night,
when it was worse,
because the lying down
made the miners feel like their own throats would
betray them,
suffocate them.

They called it black lung,
this convulsing of the chest,
which eventually left wives alone in the bed
a whole town of widows
who now collect black lung payments
instead of their husbands' paychecks.

They laid Grandpa out on the kitchen table.
Had to put the holiday leaf back in
because he was six foot five
just like my father.
Most families laid their dead on the piano
but there was little music in this house.
Even the radio was busted
from the night he'd had too much Boilo,
that sticky homemade poison
in the brown bottle next to the garbage disposal.

I used to think this liquor ate your throat
pieces at a time as you swallowed.
But it soothed Grandpa for a time,
made his throat numb to the spells of coughing,
to the coal dust
that always gathered in his throat and on his tongue.

He always smelled like the dampness of the mines,
leaving trails of soot from his boot laces
on Grandma's hand-scrubbed tile floors.

Hardly anybody came to see Grandpa,
all laid out in his best suit.
Neighbors feared him.
He wasn't a quiet drunk,
not like his son-in-law
who would cradle a case of beer
under his arm every Saturday night,
cart himself up to the garages and drink
until he felt good and ready
to howl at the mountain and the moon.

No, Grandpa was a dangerous drunk
taking out the liquor on my grandma most times.
Always used the back of his hand.
Grandma learned
to turn her head fast,
to never raise her arm
to shield her face,
to move out of his path
when he was full of Boilo.

He used to hurt her things when he couldn't find
her.

Take a whole box full of her housedresses
and set himself down on the corner of Spruce and
Second
and light himself a fire.
Grandma's dresses always had little blue or pink
flowers on them,
like she was springtime all year long.
Grandpa used the long matches,
the ones in the wooden box for lighting the stove.
I watched the fabric flowers
close,
shrivel up,
and die
as he set fire to her cotton garden.
One time he laughed and laughed
long into the night
until the six a.m. church bells rang
and he stumbled up from his cross-legged squat
and headed down to morning Mass.

My Grandma would scurry out
with that old metal dustpan
and scrape up the ashes.
She'd throw them into the coal bin
with the other ashes
this house always burned.
Then she'd have her morning cup of coffee
knowing the factory whistle would blow soon.
Softer than the church bells
but filled with greater demands.

Grandpa was a quiet corpse.
The mines had choked the life right out of him.
My grandma was a satisfied widow
knowing her dresses would bloom now,
unafraid of the fire
that too much Boilo
always ignites.

About the Author

Although Marianne's mother and father fled the coal dust years ago, most of her family still resides in Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania, long since deserted by the mines. For the past 11 years she has taught in East Lansing, Michigan where she resides with her husband, Michael.

Marianne was the inaugural winner of the Pete Edmunds Poetry Prize. She was nominated for the Irving Thornberg Bell-ringer Award in Teaching and was honored as one of Michigan's Top Teachers in 1997 by *Metropolitan Woman* magazine.