

I was born in West Virginia
To a family of mining men
And women widowed young
I was the only boy in that company town
To come down with polio in the summer of '27
Two girls got sick
But I was the only boy -
It was curious.
My leg brace was a curiosity too
When I came home
From the hospital in Lexington
A year and six surgeries later

With my disability
I couldn't be a miner
That world of perpetual night,
Humid tunnels, dust, glowing lamps,
Danger lurking like a psychopath,
Was lost to me
"And a damn good thing too," my daddy said,
His skin slightly blue from coal-dust that wouldn't
wash out
Or from black lung disease
We never knew which
(He died in a mining accident when I was six)



"Nature's Revival"

Judith Hopkins

Gynecology / Oncology

I was small and crooked
But I could talk a coin out of my mother's purse
And prove to my daddy why a tomato wasn't a
vegetable
At school they told me to be a lawyer or a clergy-
man
Instead I became a traveling salesman
Talked my way through the mining towns of Appa-
lachia
(Having had practice all my life talking to lonely
women)
I sold the tools of women's work -
Cleaners, disinfectants, pungent soaps -
What they used to scrub out the coal,
What they used to make their world seem pure
and womanly

I lived my life
On the surface of the earth
Moving where I wanted
In the light of day
I saw sights my daddy never saw
And slept in places he'd never heard of
I spent most of my time among women
Hollow, dried-up women
Like empty gourds
Whose seeds rattle when you shake them
Convinced them they needed floor polish
Or a brush for their toilet
Persuaded them they would feel better
When they had those things
And I came home to women -
Widowed mother and widowed sister -
Also hollow, dried-up, empty

But I never stopped wanting to go down
Because that's where the men spent their lives
Plunging below in the momentum of the cage
Till they reached narrow paths where they couldn't
walk upright
Swinging pick-axes, setting explosions
Watching for signs of methane or CO2
Smelling the salty stench of raw coal in their nostrils
Their skin slippery with water and sweat...
Of course I can't describe it, I wasn't there,
There where all the men went, even the boys.
Only the women stayed above

Now I live alone
Mother and sister both dead
(each surprised in her turn that she didn't
outlive e)
I've had two heart attacks
Can't get around much anymore
Post-polio syndrome my doctor calls it
(Funny it should sneak up on me again
After almost sixty years)

I don't complain
Men of my generation don't
We were taught to endure
So that's what I do
I set my alarm every morning
For five a.m.
Because my daddy told me once that
Men don't need more than six hours of sleep
I get up and make myself a cup
Of coffee, bitter and black
And I wait patiently
I wait to go beneath the ground
To join the men at last

- Johanna Shapiro , Ph.D.