

## **Black Beauty**

*Poetry by Brent Fisk*

We lived on coal even as it killed us.  
It could fill a father's lungs with dust;  
could crush a sister at the crossroads.  
It could lay waste to the world you knew.  
The mines scraped away the landscape—  
swallowed silos and one room schools,  
bulldozed oaks and sycamores.  
They planted white pine and acres of fescue  
and called it reclamation.

McCutcheonville was bought up,  
turned under like some garden gone  
to seed and spoilage. They cut power lines and roads  
that ran back miles and generations.  
As a boy I rode my bike there,  
laid it wheels up in a ditch of tiger lilies  
and walked the rail line looking for remnant spikes  
and things the freight cars lost  
to roughness. We lost so much  
to roughness. Old churches were taken down brick by brick  
or jacked up and hauled away whole  
to distant lots. Cemeteries were complicated:  
a release form from the nearest relative  
before those buried were disinterred,  
the caskets moved at night, strange  
and restless cargo crawling down the backroads.

If you didn't sell out quick enough,  
their offers plummeted and you paid the price  
of cracked foundations, houses rocked  
by nearing blasts. One old farmer grew  
unnerved, the constant quake and boom,  
the tremor and the rolling shiver, the silver maple  
showered down its summer leaves  
and then it split in two.  
The giant cranes grinding as they swiveled  
and emptied beds of coal or shale  
in coal trucks larger than a house.

He didn't take their money, not even in the end.

My father took us there one Sunday,  
crept across the yard with a metal detector,  
found pocket change and rusty nails,  
oil cans and horseshoes gone to rust.  
In the grass we saw a rib cage,  
a dog the old man shot, still tethered  
to a tree, and there were cats beneath the porch,  
unfleshed. He put a slug in everything he owned,  
left them there to rot. In the barn the carcasses  
of large beasts discolored ancient hay. My brother  
leaned in whispering, *a horse, a horse, a horse*.  
We needed more light than the barn could bear.  
The ground beneath a black-cored tree bristled  
with apples, mottled and rancid,  
that yellow jackets hollowed out like heads.  
A tire swing kept time like the pendulum of a clock.  
We counted bones and bones, the clapboards  
peeling from the walls stuffed with middens.  
The barbed-wire fence marked the end  
of what he once called home.

We waited in the station wagon  
as my father made his final sweep  
and through the windshield streaked with dust,  
we watched a redwing balance on a rush.  
He sang and sang to silence as if it were his mate  
until my father grew unsettled, too, and packed it in.  
Out beyond the swirling Indian grass,  
a moonscape of tailings and slickens.  
My father extended his hand,  
shared his meager take: A key that opened doors  
that disappeared, a button shaped  
like a marigold, a small car missing a wheel,  
a Mercury dime he said he loved the most,  
and three pennies with worn faces, one for each of us  
to use, a toll to luck, to see us home  
on roads the coal mine built and then erased,  
too ephemeral to name.