

Mine Subsidence  
by Brian Bell  
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Beneath my birth town,  
my grandfather braced the hollows  
carved from the coal  
seams with fresh timbers.  
Those beams strain there still,  
in the damp dark, rotted by time,  
bowing beneath their burden.

I felt the cavities in that town long  
after the shafts were gated,

a sense that all was not  
well in the recesses,  
in the cracked faces  
of the old-timers,  
a limp, the hunch of shoulders,  
a sallowness that suggested  
nothing to my distracted adolescence  
but settled in memory as  
dust between floorboards  
to bind one to the other.

At night my grandfather  
would spit on newspapers  
placed at his bedside.  
In the morning,  
my 12-year-old mother  
would gather the bloody rags.

He drank and was a monster;  
he loved and was a father.  
Fellow miners of the Number 5  
called him the Iron Horse,  
his mulish labor shamed theirs.  
His love for my mother  
strengthened her against  
the abuses of her own.

But he came home from the hospital,  
a broken man, never to work again.  
Soon after he opened a trust fund  
to leave some legacy for his girls.

When he needed help  
paying bills, my mother skipped school.  
That evening when he collapsed  
at the inn, townsfolk sent word  
Her older sisters rushed to his side,  
leaving her behind  
always grateful for at  
least that day with him.

Years later, when his daughters  
reached majority, the trust they inherited  
was just enough to pay for his casket.