

The Seam

When I was ten my father took me down
so I could see the coal face where he'd spent
the best part of his life, plying his pick

and shovel in the three-foot seam.

The thing I feared most was the heat –
the stripped men sweating in the dark

and the splintered props when they gave way and creaked.

Nothing I'd known could be worse than this.

On his first day, just seventeen

they took a penknife to his arm
and scratched to letters of his name,
rubbed coal dust in to make a crude tattoo

that quivered on the bedsheet

decades later when he died.

I knew I'd never go back to that place.

On his last day he poured the water out

forever from his tin canteen

and said goodbye to everything:

his work mates, the blind pit ponies

and the gleaming wall of sheer black rock

which he bent close to kiss.