Flash Fiction Competition 2012

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**Extraction** by Jack Williams

They haven’t told us what we’re looking for, just that we’ll know when we find it. “Dig deeper”, “Dig harder” and “Dig faster” they shout repeatedly as we smash further and further into the rock. It’s dark and cold down here and as we descend, the slit of light becomes thinner gradually, like the eyelids of slowly dying man. More of us come down but none come up. They say “It must be found.”

Our pale skin has now faded as dust, dirt and sweat paints darkness all around the suffocated tissue. I dread to see my face, I cannot recognise those around me anymore, and so I focus constantly on the unreflecting rock, cutting into it with repetitive motion. My clothes tighten, constricting all that is untouched by the rubble. Deeper, harder and faster we go; cutting into the rock face until it too changes.

One of us has stopped and just stares at the rest, stares at the dust flying away. It spirals upwards, dancing towards freedom. He stands in the light and could be anyone of the group I joined; he just continues to look on, dissatisfaction still visible from his masked face. We scrape at our obstruction, each chunk crunching like the bite of an apple, red, sweet and lovely. The syncopated satisfaction continues. We go further.

It was smooth when we began, now it screams. It’s jagged and almost as sharp as the tools we crash into it. When I look at it sometimes I can see a face, just for a split second, but it emotes and looks in pain. I like that, I don’t know why but it makes me feel as if we are doing damage, we are having an effect on the world. It cries little pebbles of rubble and we continue. I might be smiling but I can’t see or feel my face anymore.

Let it cry I think, let it bleed away till we have what is rightfully ours. What right does it have to hide its treasures? It may have been here years before I was even a thought, but I don’t care. Does it feel pain? It should and shall with every incision I make. It cannot hide from me, it cannot run. We are men and this is our claim.

I dig deeper, harder and faster. It screams.

Deeper, harder and faster. It cries.

Deeper, harder and faster. She bleeds.
Chris had been eleven when she had fled her hometown to seek better prospects. As the illegitimate child of a washerwoman, she was limited and, having seen what reputation had done to her mother, would not allow the cycle to continue. During the commotion of the last fire, she had packed her bags and left.

There were few options for a woman in Prescott and even fewer for one of Chris’ social status. Her birth name, Christine Waters, carried too much weight for her to ever prosper within the city walls. Unable to marry and an outsider, Christine had cut her hair, stolen some clothes and become Chris Renford.

Now fifteen and fast reaching maturity, Chris worked on the railways. Although rather conscious of her body, malnutrition and neglect had worked in her favour, as had the darkness of their conditions. Having lived off little from a young age, Chris had never fully developed. Sometimes she even convinced herself she was male, forgetting the thing, or lack of, that had made her everyday life a struggle against taunts and accusations. She was surrounded by a secret that it was becoming increasingly impossible to keep.

Working the railways was a demanding task that tested all of the senses. It tested the whole being. Conditions were dire and, in such confined spaces, accidents would often happen. It was a tense and unforgiving environment.

“I think we’re all set,” came a cry from the darkness, “Clear out”. It was always in the dark that Chris’ mind wandered. She supposed that it was something to do with her mind’s desire to see images but her eyes’ inability to provide them.

Someone banged into her as they tried to exit the tunnel. They held up their lamp in the dull light to get a better look and a recognition crossed their face, “Chris?” A puzzled look of misunderstanding, “Move it,” the voice beckoned towards her, “Unless you want to be blown to pieces.” A chuckle echoed around the walls, closing in. The small light from the lamp bouncing away, getting fainter.

Chris did not move. She was not going to leave the tunnel this time. She stood in the dark and waited. The time passing slowly, as if it were trying to give her more. Let her make her escape.

It started as a slow rumble and then dust began to enclose her. Within moments, Chris had been catapulted out of the tunnel at full force. The others watched in amazement as her fragile broken body twisted itself as it flew. Hitting the ground, her shirt was ripped open. Her pale flesh turned red. The blood covering her exposed chest in shiny red armour. The watchers looked on in disbelief. Chris was no longer one of them. She was a woman.
The timeless rock simply observed.

The climb.

In all his time Guiding, despite the long years, the winds, rains and snows; he had gone on with a simple desire. To see over the next hill. To challenge his perception of the land. To learn more of himself. Before him now lay the opportunity to explore uncharted territory and to do so he had to pass nature's test: he had to scale the chasm.

Ever the obstinate man, he planned his route alone - he would succeed or perish by his own hand. Fear lingered, tinged the hue of his thoughts, but it merely fuelled the rushing mix of excitement and desire.

The day came, overcast but bright with a light zephyr in the air. Cinching his rope to a well placed, secure - as far as he could assess - boulder and then around himself, he prepared to descend. Bending down, he reached for some dark soil and rubbed it liberally between his palms. With nary a glance at the dizzying vertical, he turned his back to the yawning chasm and in seeking his first foothold, lowered his foot into the hands of the gods.
Mantlepiece Tales by Mary Cane

Looking back it wasn’t much, that cherry stone game, but it pleased my grandmother.

Her hands in old age were swollen but she was quick enough to find the brown velvet bag in the cupboard by the fireplace. We would sit facing one another, she in her rocking chair and I on a low stool, holding onto my bare knees. The rules were simple. She would burrow into the bag of cherry stones and bring out a closed fist. ‘How many now then?’ She would say. I, seeing no way of winning by using skill or memory would guess 7, or 3, or perhaps none, because an empty fist was her little joke.

Shifting onto ‘the mantlepiece tales’ was a relief. I was allowed to point to a treasure up on the shelf and she would hand it down. There was the scaly brown seed that had floated all the way from the tropics, a dried sea horse in an old spectacles case. Then there was the spiral of ear bone she let me poke my fingers through while she described the whale it had come from. The last thing was the lucifer match box.

‘Ah, the expedition tale?’ She would say. ‘Yes...’ I said, the first time, and held up my hand for the small metal box. It opened with a click when I pressed a metal dimple at the front. I inhaled the ancient aroma. ‘Yes... please...’ I said, my voice hollow as I spoke into the tin. ‘Well,’ she began, looking upwards. ‘Your Great Great Grandmother was only 19, but she was allowed to sail on the ship because your Great Great Great Grandfather was the Captain...’ Grandmother would then go on to tell me about the shipwreck on the Arctic ice. ‘A few drowned,’ she told me, eyes downcast, ‘but most were saved.’ They found shelter in a huge ice cavern that looked like the inside of a whale. Everything they salvaged was wet so they were in danger of freezing. They huddled together their hoods up. One man had a tin that contained 5 lucifer matches. He crouched down and began to strike them against a piece of damp sand paper. The first broke and fell onto the ice, the next fizzled out, the third burned but died as did the fourth. Granny’s Granny then stepped towards them and apparently cried, ‘Wait wait! Let us wait’. Distracted, the man held up the fifth to her and she, (who was great), took it from him and protected it with the little warmth left in her body. The next day that last match lit a fire, warming the castaways until they were rescued.

It was only much later I realised that the ‘greats’ weren’t adjectives. I had thought Grandmother in her generous story-telling way, was making it clear they weren’t just ordinary ancestors. Looking back, her stories weren’t much either, and the objects along the mantlepiece merely flotsam, but they contained greatness.
The Mountain and I by Ross Hunter

A weeping crevice of the forgotten land beckoned my fall as I perched above the fracture between the two mountains. Figures of men trudged on the shale below and the cliffs bellowed echoes of their instruction. The greyness of the clouds seemed to stifle any sunshine; only hazy light penetrated. The mountain felt lonely as it suffered silently, a thousand scars from each pick axe. It seemed we shared this barren feeling; the mountain and I.

She was wonderful, galloping to the peak with the youth of a sprightly lamb. I tried to emulate her vivacity but instead found myself hindered by laboured breathing. Quite the fool, I stopped. Lost amongst residue from the last snowfall, the type of snow which glides carefully to the ground, I traced her steps to the top. Entangled in a mass of scarfs her face was bordered like a beautiful painting framed in gold.

We met one halcyon winter; when the mountain was cloaked in snow. Her gloves were neglectful of the heat lost through the fingertips so I warmed her hands at the summit. Snowflakes speckled her skin and my heart alit with such violent aflame that the snow might have melted on the ground. We spoke of the call of the skylark and agreed that its frantic melody could rouse the soul of even the stoniest man. That night we consecrated a love born upon the mountain, its shadow blanketing us in the town below.

And then, the day. The turbulence fraught within her family was well known about the village. A drunkard father and a shrinking mother were no symbiotic match; and the morning upon which her father was found dead in the snow proved too much for her; years of tightly wound frustration accumulated in a single act of rebellion - escape. On hearing the dreadful news of her paternal misfortune I wrapped myself in my warmest clothes and battled through the blizzard to her house. Her mother was in hysterics by the door. Following the widows gaze I saw her, clad only in a veiling white dress. Her beauty then seemed to halt the weather; though of course the snow kept swirling, my mind was frozen by her grace. Barefoot, she seemed to be a mystical white nymph returning to nature as if to complete her transformation into the ethereal. Running after her she led me to the foot of the mountain; where pine skirted the gradual ascent and leaked etches of green through the snow. Her eyes; bluer than the ocean depths seemed to hold more mystery than the Mariana Trench; pained but sufferingly beautiful. It was but a glance, but a loving one.

The hope of a body found in the spring thaw was a morbid and ultimately futile hope; as scourers of the mountain found nothing.

Today; the nymph of the mountain sleeks about my shoulders and the winds whistle tender notes in my ear.

"The mountains are calling and I must go" - John Muir
‘THE ONLY WAY IS DOWN’ by D.R.D. Bruton

It was a long way down and so cold at the bottom, and a green-dark there and a green-wet. Took half a day to get there, cutting a ragged path through thick rainforest, then lowered on a jute winch rope and harness, lowered from one station to the next. And Carl said we were making history and we’d take back to the surface such specimens as would make the world sit up and wonder. We were shifting the boundaries, he said, and Science would honour what we were about. I don’t think I believed a word of what Carl said. He’d boasted as much before, of other deep dark places, and though there was now a blind cave dwelling fish named after him, it was hardly something that paid the rent from one week to the next. This was different, he insisted. He’d heard tales from local tribesmen and there were the dried remains of fabulous lizards and strange crabs and the dead bodies of small birds with feathers that glowed in the dark, and a hunter with skin the colour of black coffee and he scratched a crude map in the dirt and pointed into the far distance making noises that might have been words or might have been just noises. And it was different. Slow and slow was our descent and all sound swallowed up, even the creak of the rope and the wheels on the screaming winch. It was like being in a great cathedral such was the all encompassing quiet. Down and down and the temperature dropped and the air was wet and dripped, clung to our clothes and our hair, and there was of a sudden a strange sweet smell that made me dizzy and a little sick. From the bottom looking up it was as if there was a bright and distant moon in a dark sky; no, not a moon but a star and the light from that star scarce reached where we were. Carl lit torches and the yellow flames from those torches brought a small brief warmth to that place. Carl laughed but the laugh was not real. I thought of those men who’d travelled into space and seen earth from far out. And I wondered if they felt god-like in the looking back. There were plants with black leaves and flowers the colour of blood and smelling of rotten meat or milk that has turned. And everywhere butterflies or moths the size of dinner plates, their soft fluttering wings the colour of ash or cloud. Carl set spring traps to collect dark scuttle-creatures from the pit floor, and nets hung from poles to snare the few birds and baited hooks on thin lines dropped into black water colder than ice to catch fish. And suddenly I missed the sun and the blue of the sky, and the voice of God spoke to me and it never had before, and unaccountably I knew then there was no going back.
The pulley mechanism lowered the two men down slowly. They glanced below them. Hundreds, maybe thousands of people worked methodically, chipping away at the abyss with tools that looked like they came from a different time, a different world. James glanced at his companion. The man was younger than he, but not by much. His face was unnaturally yellow and James tried desperately not to gawk at the deep red welt that stretched across his neck. The man met his eye and his expression said everything James was feeling. He wondered for a second how he appeared to the stranger and then realised the pulley had stopped.

He was being unbuckled and pulled to his feet by a girl who seemed no older than sixteen, dressed in some sort of regulation uniform and her hair scraped back from her face.

“Just the two of you?”

The yellowed man nodded and the girl began to walk.

“Follow me”

They found themselves in a sort of office fashioned into one of the stone walls. James looked up and could barely make out the surface. He tried to speak as she bustled around, thrusting forms and a small pile of clothing into their hands.

“What… where… what is this?”

She stopped for a moment and examined James.

“You weren’t briefed at the top?”

He racked his brain and realised he couldn’t remember the top; he couldn’t remember anything before being on the pulley. No words came out.

She turned to the other man, who had somehow already changed into the grey jumpsuit.

James found his voice

“Are we in prison?”

The girl laughed too loudly.

Fear and panic rushed over him and suddenly he recalled a moment of the previous evening. Loud music, people dancing, pretty girls, leaning over the mirror with a crisp rolled up twenty in his hand, inhaling the white powder, euphoria gripping him. Then; this. Fear, pain, his heart swelling, speeding up, then; nothing.

He snapped back to hear the young girl was asking a series of questions to the sickly man.
“Hanging?”

He nodded.

James noticed the scars across the girl’s wrists, silver with age. He moved closer to her as she continued to talk.

“You’ll be in section C, at least for now. It’s not as bad as you might think. I guess you thought this was the answer to your problems. We all did. But here’s the thing, this place is just that bit worse than things were before. Shame we can’t get a do over.”

The man almost smiled. James felt his throat closing again and blurted out

“No… this is not right… I didn’t…”

She stopped him.

“But you did. Just accept it. What do you want me to put under ‘method’?”

“I didn’t kill myself.”

“Yet somehow, you are now dead.”

She raised an eyebrow and poised her pen over the form.
‘This way Sir,’ Drummond said as Porteous stepped out of the basket.

Porteous followed the younger man through the tunnel. The stifling heat of the jungle lay over a hundred feet above and the walls sweated and ran with constant moisture. A cool draft teased his exposed skin. There were no mosquitoes this far down either which he supposed was a blessing. He detested the bitter taste of the quinine pills the Professor insisted the men take daily.

‘How is the dig progressing?’

‘We seem to be back on schedule now.’ The locals Drummond had hired had strong backs and toiled night and day for their few pennies.

‘Just as well – London is becoming impatient. Several telegrams have arrived insisting that we make haste.’

‘Yes Sir I realise that but…’ Drummond hesitated.

‘Well? What is it? Out with it man.’

‘With all due respect Sir, I don’t think they appreciate our difficulties. The locals say this place is haunted. It took a lot of persuading to get them to overcome their reluctance to dig here.’

‘Stuff and nonsense lad,’ Porteous snorted. ‘Let me tell you, I have travelled far and wide and I’ve yet to encounter anything that can’t be seen off with a taste of cold steel.’

‘If you say so Sir.’

The tunnel broadened out into a wider cavern. Porteous could hear the scrape of shovels from up ahead.

‘Are you sure the map is correct?’

‘Positive Sir. It took us a while to translate all the information on it but this is
The map had passed through several sets of hands before coming into the possession of Porteous’ employer. It purported to show an ancient burial site hidden deep in the jungle where untold riches were said to lie. Porteous had been hired to lead the expedition – a task which he had gladly accepted. Civilian life was far too mundane for his tastes although the heat made his old wounds throb.

There was a sudden clamour of voices raised in agitation. One of the workers, his face streaked with dirt ran up to the two men jabbering excitedly.

‘He says they’ve found something,’ Drummond translated once he got the man to calm down.

The diggers stood at the edge of the shallow pit as if unsure what to do next, a few shifted from foot to foot nervously. A stone casket lay at the bottom of the hole. Porteous could see the intricate carvings decorating its surface even through the dirt.

‘Out of my way,’ Porteous said, shoving them aside. He grabbed a pick from one of the men and jumped into the hole. He grunted as he hefted it over his head and brought it down to strike the stone.

A flash of light burst from the shattered casket, consuming all of the men. It burst through the tunnels and shot up to the surface. When it subsided the excavation had been erased and only the sounds of the living jungle remained.
Switch by Christian Ah-See

I emerged from the tunnel into the freezing night, jolts of vicious wind buffeting sheets of rain across my face. The scrapheap stretched before me and I waded through the jetsam of splintered wood and twisted metal. Fate had played recklessly with me as it capriciously preys on countless innocents: cruelly and unjustly. Catastrophe had consumed a seemingly ordinary day...

Work in the coal mines was arduous but satisfactory labour, despite the variable temperatures and stifling closeness, and we habitually delved into deep recesses and tunnels, transporting equipment to fellow miners.

"Take these flat timber boards down to Hartwright and his crew. And take Peters with you, it's his first day."

The task was simple enough, though devalued by the prospect of a novice companion. I met him in a narrow tunnel, intending to proceed without a word, but he offered a hand. "Walter P-Peters," he declared lamely. He was short and stout, with a red face that glistened even in the cold dampness of the mine. His slow wits and pathetic fragility were obvious; I knew he didn't belong here, but I wasn't paid to make decisions. Slapping his trembling hand limply, I gestured to the narrow passage before us and he followed me in.

An hour of silent walking passed.

"...Mister," Peters said. "How m-much further is it?"

I turned to him grimly. "In the mines, you work until you're dismissed, and you don't ask questions." I watched him quiver and a touch of sympathy crept into my heart, but not enough to pierce the steel armour years of manual labour had built around it.

"I kn-know I ain't perfect," he snivelled, "but, y'know, someone's got to feed the family, see?" I stared at him, but at that moment a harsh yell resounded down the tunnel.

"HEEEEEEEEEEEYYYYY!"

A warning. A junction in the tunnel lay ahead. Down a narrow track perpendicular to ours, a rogue trolley cart was hurtling towards five cornered workers. It was bound to crush them.

Casting aside my load I raced for the junction, without a plan but fuelled by the prospect of heroism. Confused, Walter blindly followed me, still piecing together the dilemma. As I approached the junction I discerned a lever upright next to the rail tracks. My heart pounded. The cart could be diverted. I reached the lever. It would redirect the cart into the tunnel we came from...the one Walter still stumbled along. I
paused. No. He could make it in time - death would be averted. Gripping the lever, I pulled.

With a clunk it locked into place. But in that instant, Walter's foot caught the rails.

He jerked, and fell spread-eagled onto the tracks.

I watched for an endless split-second. Slowly the high colour left his face. Slowly his eyes opened wider. Slowly, life switched to death.

I emerged from the tunnel into a freezing world, darkness engulfing my life. Walter's frozen eyes burned my mind.
Vrede by Aminah Ahmad

They sat together. Each aspect of their positioning subconsciously synchronised. Shoulders slumped forward as if crippling under pressure, limbs tucked in tightly. Each of their postures situated defensively as the emotions spread across their faces emoted nothing but sorrow. Every pair of eyes stared miserably into the scorching fire that raged on despite the atrocities that had undergone the previous day.

Having fled from a fleet of attacking huntsmen, the men approached the village they branded home to rejoice at their recent escape. Yet what they then faced wounded them deeper than any knife could ever have. The smell of burnt flesh lingered within the air as the siren of a screaming women froze them in their footsteps. What once was a village now looked the image of hell with the demons responsible for the carnage, ending the women’s pleas with one simple slash of the machete. Silence—what once seemed idyllic for the Vrede tribe, now existed as torment of the survivors of the clan. Silence was the trait which defined the events of that grotesque past day and was all that the Vrede’s could now hear.

“Vrede” the word from Afrikaans meaning peace had for centuries been the name of the nomadic tribe that originated west from Namibia. The Vredes had long lived an existence of harmony set against the usage of weaponry. For centuries they used nothing but bare hands as weapons and had dealt well in souring fish from the sea. The Vredes were not violent people. They were not accustomed to self defence with an attack almost always leading to a fatality. Yet never to this degree.

Nature had always helped the Vredes, this time in their most perilous time of need. The eleven men who witnessed the brutality were concealed deep within the darkness of the forest, beyond the surveillance of the hunters. Adrenaline soon overcame the grief within the Vredes’ veins as their instincts urged them to flee deep into the obscurity. At speeds beyond what they thought capable, the men ran deep into the night without a moment’s rest. For slowing meant dealing with reality, a situation too painful to address.

Forced to rest or risk collapse from exhaustion, the Vredes found themselves trembling around the fire. Anger overwhelmed many as they despised being reliant on the very same thing that destroyed everything they loved and lived for. Yet not a whisper left the mouth of any man. Suddenly it was not peace on the minds of the Vredes. Hatred and violence emitted from each man as they all made eye contact in unison. Any aspect of their past had died with the remains of their village and community. There was only one thing the remaining Vredes now wanted to promote. Revenge.
Desperation by Iain Christie

We couldn’t stop them; they invaded Europe before most nations even had time to react. The Chinese crushed any resistance they encountered. Britain, although the most prepared, still had no defences against the rapidly expanding Chinese military. The recession had left Europe an easy target by 2100 by which point most countries had collapsed into chaos.

I had been shipped off to a dusty uranium mine as soon as the Chinese applied their iron grip over the nation. I was now mining laboriously in a dark, dangerous uranium mine, without protection leaking from the rocks. We were overseen by Chinese guards, in white protective suits; they always had their fingers resting on the triggers of their laser pistols in case anyone needed a bit of persuading.

Lately in the mines, tensions had been high; many people had been dying in horrific pain due to radiation. Many people, including myself, thought it would be better to die fighting than be slowly killed by an invisible foe. I was mining, As fast as my weary, radiation ridden body would allow, when one of the guards took out his pistol. A German man had collapsed – he couldn’t take it anymore. Just as the guard was about to pull the trigger, the man’s desperate brother swung his pickaxe straight into his visor. The guard hit the ground. Nobody moved. Then, suddenly, it all kicked off. I swung at the guard closest to me, as the German man grabbed the pistol and shot two guards before they could even blink. Soon the whole mine exploded into chaos. I had downed the guard, and grabbed the pistol, but now were falling left, right and centre. Shots were being fired from both sides, guards were firing indiscriminately into the mob, but we kept running, overwhelming each guard that was eliminated. As I ran up yet another staircase in my ascension towards freedom, I spotted him: my younger brother. He was a lot thinner than when I last saw him, but it was him sure enough. I screamed his name as I ran up the stairs and grabbed him on an embrace. He was only seven, but the Chinese had still made him sort the uranium, leaving him with very little hair.

I snatched his hand and lead him up the last of the stairs as the human wave flowed into the bottom of the deep chasm. More men fell as further shots were fired; the remaining guards were soon sniped out of their lookout towers by the more skilled marksmen of the group. We climbed up the wide staircase dug into the side of the chasm, emerging to see a vast army of heavily armed police approaching us. The mob stopped in its tracks and dived on my little brother as lasers rained down from all sides…
“Pomonalia” by Alistair Lawrie

Something catches in your throat and, for a moment, you stand on the edge of an abyss.

Now have ye a box o nice aipples, my loon?

The homely voice cuts through the heavy perfumes of peach and plum, the sharp bite of orange and the cinnamon overlay of Jamaican bananas. Apples. Oh yes there are apples. Nutty fresh sharp or sweet smelling – lifting the lid off each box always an experience. Those different reds – dull ruby drawing light into its darkness; wetlook carmine sheen glittering with false highlights; greeny red russet stubbly in the hand; roseate bleeding into straw veined with lime. Only the Grannies saying tartly what they are by their looks, the rest seldom what they seem: the sweetness of delicately perfumed Delicious turning to dry lumps in your mouth. Where is she?

In the van’s doorway, fuzzily bright, obscured by the light enshrining her.

Purse in hand. Pretty red cloth bag with coloured bows and drawstrings masking its emptiness. She moves slightly, becomes clearer, her greeny brown shawl drawn close, grey hair in a bun, almost a caricature, you feel.

And so you move – opening box upon box of apples, searching, determined to find perfection.

It’s his shadow darkening the door. “Fit’s gan on here? Fit d’ye think ye’re playin at? Er’s a customer in there wytin. We’ve aa better things tae dae than stan aboot aa day file ye’re … Fa’s is?”

Sandy Innes stops and straightens his brown coverall.

“Aye, ye see, this lady wants some aipples.”

You can almost see the highlights glittering in Sandy’s eyes and know he’s going to say to…

“(…)fess doon at box o Stormonts, loon. Jist the thing, my dear. Canadian. Reed. Been sellin like hot cakes aa owre. At’s the boys ‘l’ll dae for you.”

Selling. Yes but mostly near two weeks ago. This one, the last, must be mush by now. It’s slowly you turn towards it.

“Get on wi’t, loon. We hinna got aa day. .. An there’s your receipt and thankin you. Now tak this boxie tae her shop.”

Already she’s away, is shuffling up the road.

“And tak that black look aff yer face. I ken fit ye’re thinkan. Fit’s at aal wifie tae me?”
She winna buy apples bit eence or twice a year."

You follow in her steps and somehow leaves are falling everywhere. One touches your shoulder and spirals to the ground, its oatmeal green speckling with brown as it falls.

Her shop is dark and as you lay the apples down she says, “Yer hert’s in yer face, boy. Er’s naethin tae be feart o. Ye’re jist daein yer job. Tak aff the lid an look.”

The box is glowing with apples of all reds and greens together.

Before you reach the van you can smell the rot. Even its neatly painted lettering is scabbed and mildewed over as it goes tumbling, turning and twisting, crumbling to dust as it falls into the bottomless abyss beyond.
Would it never end, his mind and body was tired, exhausted to the bone. He never really had a choice, it was a necessity, the family had to live somehow. He was one of the many who followed in the footsteps of his father, what else could he do? The few years of education he had received had been the best year of his life. It was then he discovered the whole new world that existed out there and within himself. A world full of colours and opportunities if one only had the means and desire to pursue them. Oh, how he had longed for the future, how he had dreamt that he would be the first to make something more of himself. He would be more than just a crippled miner, broken too early by life. How proud mother and father would be, he would be able to support all of them if he could just get the chance to prove his worth to the world. Father had been so proud of his fine results in school and when the schoolmaster had suggested that he could go far beyond his starting point in life. Father had worked double shifts in trying to make enough to send him to school. Father had constantly tired from working all those long hours and it was all for him, John. Things had looked bright and promising but then the mineshaft fell in and his father was lost. His father and the dreams found their eternal resting place together deep below ground, where light never shines upon them. There was nothing bright about his future anymore.

Still, after all the years of working down in the darkness, he had not forgotten the dreams that had once killed his father. He was ashamed to dream but he still dreamed of being better than he was. Being what he could have been. He looked around, many of his fellow miners were so young, still just children really. Now the dreams he carried was for the future of the young child who had yet to know darkness and broken dreams. Still sleeping, innocent and pure at heart. On the day the child had announced its intention to enter this world he had made that promise to himself and to the Lord whom he had long ago forsaken. He would do anything for that child to be able to make the most of its chances and the gifts that had been granted it. Work double shifts down in the dark, easily, if it meant providing the child with the at least a small chance of a better future. A future far away from the depths and darkness of the mine. The bell sounded, it was time to get up, up into the light. At least for some time.
Letters from Abroad by Veronica Whittaker

Dearest Emily, You find me writing this to you from the edge of the Devil's Throat, the name given to this god forsaken place. It's almost impossible to describe the size of this extraordinary abyss. I was led to it by a few of the local tribesmen, but it took a lot of persuading and parting with some worthless trinkets before they agreed. Stories abound about this place saying it brings bad luck to any one rash enough to explore its depths. But, as you and I both know, that's all just silly superstition. I will write more when we have descended into its secret depths tomorrow. Your loving fiancé, James.

Dearest James, How thrilling it must be for you! How I do so wish I was there to share your experiences, but I fear my health would let me down. Jack, the postman, knew the letter was from you and was very eager to hear about your exploits. He thinks you are simply marvellous. Mother sends her regards. Now I must hurry and try to catch the afternoon post before it goes. Always yours, Emily.

Dearest Emily, I so look forward to your letters. Please keep sending them. We made an attempt to get down the Devil's Throat yesterday. Unfortunately, the hole appears never ending, when we thought we had reached the bottom yet more revealed itself to us. Strangely the further it swallows us up the more depressed I feel. I do so miss you. Please write soon. Tell Jack to make sure to look out for any letters from me. Your James.

Dearest James, I hate to think of you down in that dark hole with all those natives scaring you with their silly stories. Please be careful and come home safely to me. Jack is being so sweet; he stayed to have a cup of tea in the garden with Mother and I so that I could read your latest letter out. He thinks you are very brave, just like I do. Take care, all my love, Emily.

Dear Emily, I went back down today and unfortunately slipped and hit my head quite badly. I don’t wish to worry you, but let’s just say that if anything were to happen to me, please don’t wait. You are young, beautiful and with lots of admirers, including, by the sound of it, Jack. I have a bit of a headache, so am going to bed and hopefully will feel better in the morning. Your James.

Dear James, this is the fifth letter I have sent with no reply from you. What has become of you? Jack has been so kind and helpful and keeps telling me not to lose hope. He’s such a capable person, just like you. Please write soon. Emily.

Jack, in his van, looked at the foreign letter in his hand long and hard. Then with a knowing smile he slowly tore it up before adding it to all the other ones from James.
The Pitted Men by Mark MacDonald

Within the canyon creasing wide (and below a cavern dark inside) the men toil for Earthly secrets, long into the smoke filled night. The pitted men, as they once were called, winched down in twos by the bucket full. In descent their whispers fell around the cracked deep like wild waves far above the ocean’s floor. At the halfway point, there was a slippery ledge covered in grease, stale water and broken tools; men with haunted eyes waited for them. So used were they to the darkened gleam of wet rocks that they had no need of torches but fumbled dexterously with the ropes so that the deep divers could continue into the hollowed Earth. The bottom always hits with a shock. Leaping out, Bran, the foreman, shivered off his tools to adjust to the subterranean gloom. The clamouring of shovels, sticks and the groans of workers in the near distance could be seen under the smoke screened red glow of industry. Whistles suddenly blasted. All other sounds stopped. Screams erupted and shook the chamber as if the very land below them was in pain. Bran hurried to find the source. A lamp light was found and hovered menacingly over the ghastly sight. A steel cart had cleaved what was once a man in two. All gathered around staring, mesmerised and huddled around as if proximity could steer Death away to another luckless victim. Voices called from above. The foreman sailed up the darkened line to find the boss. Both quickly came down the man made vine. Whilst all the way the boss hectored that, although unfortunate loss of man should be grieved, progress demanded that work should never cease. That each worker should count their luck, like their pennies, it was not him who foolishly lost heart and limb and created more for others to do. On reaching the chasm floor, the boss shouted and screamed at the listless and melancholy to clear the tracks and carry on. When no one else would move or help the boss in thunder cried for them all to move aside. He would shame them with his work ethic. As the boss began to move the top half of the split man, fiery recognition gave way to silent grief of his bar sinister. Bran stood and stared at the pitted men. Some continued working, some stood as still as Terracotta warriors, some sat and watched a grieving father. All are now part of that gloom with their memories of another world above ground lost in the smoke.
‘Glow’ by Kristian Rose

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CODE-NAME ‘GLOW’.

‘Apparently it was Corporal [Jake] Gillette who found it, just lying there.’- Commander Kevin E Bamof of Sharrwood Expedition Camp B at 1402 hours on 09-07-2010. Gillette is dead and no one at Camp is talking. His body has never been found, but stories persist. Gillette flew a jet plane into the Caribbean Sea after a failed takeoff, exploding upon a half-submerged rock; Gillette drove over the edge of narrow path cut into the slope of a tall ravine, swerving to avoid a startled gorilla. On a routine tour of the Sharrwoods east of Camp, a ferocious Komodo dragon lunged from the undergrowth and dragged him away, screaming. The Camp’s hangar is missing a F650-Kip jet, along with a quantity of kerosene. A jeep is inexplicably missing. On recent expeditions, human bones have been recovered from the jungle. Smoke and mirrors.

The truth is much simpler: Gillette did find it. He found it forty kilometres South of Camp, on the home leg of a routine week-long trek into the Sharwoods. As his exploration team exhaustedly skirted a deep ravine, something made him turn back to face the way they had come. He had glimpsed a faint light, far off, deep in the fetid darkness of the pit.

Against all regulations, Gillette slipped away into the undergrowth, waiting for his team to disappear behind a curtain of leaves and vines. He stalked to the edge of the ravine. Without thinking, he blundered down the steep slope through the oppressive darkness, grasping blindly at passing vegetation, desperate to find the glimmer of light.

In the stinking depths of the ravine, he reached back for his bullpup rifle, rammed the stock into his shoulder and flicked on the underbarrel flashlight. Cicadas shrieked piercingly in his ears and black shapes shifted at the edges of his vision. Eyes flickering wildly, he neared the glow, snicked off the safety and stopped.

Lit by the shaking beam of his torch, Jake could make out several bootprints in the thick rotting mud. A number of hired guns had gone missing from Camp, weeks ago. The beam of his torch shook harder and Gillette called out as confidently as his quavering voice would allow, ‘Corporal Gillette here! Identify yourselves!’ He was met with a smothering silence. Frigid fear crept into his bones. His heart stopped hammering in his ears, his hands stopped shaking. He did not hear himself cry out. Something was with him in the dark pit. He cast his head about wildly, searching for the glow.

And then there was a rushing bright light, a high wind, the scent of roasted almonds and the sound of every tortured soul crying out all at once. Jake’s finger yanked convulsively on the trigger and he tumbled backwards into a yawning cave, hidden by hanging vines and loose shale.

Most nights, a distant glowing figure stands tall amongst the tree-tops of the Sharrwoods, watching the Camp. Nobody has seen it.
The Pit of Crowns by Rachael Tierney

You are six years old when your father brings you to the pit. You lean over and squint, trying to see down to the bottom. A warm pocket of air rises up, brushes your face and you start to think that this was a bad idea. Your father steps with you onto the platform and you head down. I will be waiting for you at the bottom.

The air gets warm and heavy on your tongue. It goes dark. You step closer to your father and he lets you hold onto the loop of his belt, where his pickaxe rests, as he turns on a lantern.

It’s cooler on the floor of the pit; the air circulating. There are wooden beams holding the ceiling up and it feels like you’re being suffocated as you travel through the tunnels. You reach a dead end.

Your father hands you a pickaxe and tells you that one day you’ll be grown, but for now you are still tiny… then he points to a dark crack in the wall and orders you down it.

It’s tight and you hold your breath to squeeze through, stopping halfway in fear, convinced you will never be able to fit. Even if you do, who’s to say you will get back out?

The reward you get on the other side is nothing you have ever seen before. The light of your headband casts a dome of yellow around you. I am festering on the edge of rocks; I am all around you and I am blinding.

A gruff order from your father on the other side makes you regain your senses. He tells you to hit me. You kneel on the ground and look at the squares of my face— that’s kindness only children have. The men attack like brutes, tearing pieces off me, so I tuck myself away where they cannot reach.

It doesn’t take you long to raise the axe but you aren’t as strong as your father. It takes you longer to break a piece of me loose, cradled to your stomach as a mother holds her child. I feel your heartbeat as we squeeze our way back through the crack. Your father takes me from your hands and is proud of you.

I do not see you for a long time.

I am washed clean by fools with cyanide, melted down and beaten into a shape they find more pleasing. When I become acceptable I am adorned with jewels and taken before the court. There is a ceremony to induct me to society. You are not invited.

You’ll return to the pit one day to provide for your family, but you will never provide anything equal to me. I am the crown upon your King’s head and you won’t recognise me. I glow, clear and golden. You have darkened, dirty with the weight of the mountain on your aching back.

You no longer look upon me with wonder.
Echo by Lisa Kaiffer

The sudden shift in light startled Echo. She pressed herself against the stone wall of the canyon and looked up towards the humming city. The bridge high above stopped swinging as the nightly traveller disappeared back into the brightly lit streets of Aenerys.

Echo relaxed slightly as the now familiar pattern of darkness settled on the mining town again. She moved over to House Nr. 4. Her hands were trembling. It took her a couple of moments to get the key into the lock. The entry hall was dark and dusty. Nothing had changed, here. She followed her own footsteps into the bedroom. There was an envelope waiting for her on the bed.

She put down her bag next to it and stood there, for a few seconds, just staring at the white rectangle in the darkness.

It’s not big enough. He is not going to save you. Katya is going to die. You are going to die, the voice at the back of her mind said. She had hoped she had left it behind once and for all, but here it was again. She picked up the envelope and opened it quietly. There was a card with a message for her and a blue medicine patch that was probably worth more than her house.

The words on the paper lit up as soon as she touched it.

‘Next target: a pirate rubber duck.’

No word on the patch. She put the instruction in her pocket, absent-mindedly. She needed her mystery employer’s money, even if his jobs were not entirely legal. Or at least, she would need it if she stayed alive.

She turned the envelope upside-down. Still only one patch. She didn’t have much time left to think. She’s going to die, anyway. You should leave. Echo shook her head and left the house, shivering, the plaster still in her sweaty hand. She started the slow climb up the crumbling staircase towards the city.

‘I do not want to be that kind of person’, she told herself.

But you are, That Part answered. That is why you’re still alive.

That was true. She had had the choice before. But now she was older, healthier, stronger. She could become someone else. The kind of person who would give up her own life to save a child’s… even if that child had less chances of survival than she did.

She reached the top of the staircase and stopped. She couldn’t go back yet. Not like this. Not before she knew. So she sat down on the last step, looked up at the artificial stars of their little world, and waited.
I keep him in the cellar. Forty days have passed since I discovered him in the mine, yet he remains as stubbornly resistant to classification as on that first torrential afternoon when I carried him here in a barrow.

Save for the provision of certain fluids, my father’s cabinet has proven itself to be quite useless. His equipment retains some scientific application, but the texts on which his own work was based lie useless beneath their dust. The old man’s diary, written in the same dry tone that marked him in life, has offered no intellectual or investigative succour.

Too many nights have I laboured there, the sickly fumes of ether swirling with his cries from below; the judgement of the landscape’s glare on the other side of the glass. Too many nights… and yet he fascinates me still.

His skin: foremost of his features in my mind, it ranges from the rough husk of a pig’s back to the vulnerable epidermis of the new-born chick. It is pink; so pink and thin in places that the workings of not only the venous but the nervous system can be clearly observed without internal investigation! And in this translucency lies an even greater intrigue; for he appears to be entirely without skeleton. My theories on this anatomy have ranged and raved across a bewildering spectrum; from an exoskeleton to gravitational anomalies, and from there to wild fancies I daren’t even utter into these silent pages.

His eyes: quite sightless, I am sure of it, yet they do exist, in a form I cannot determine beneath the hanging, knotted folds of skin. He watches me, somehow.

His mouth: his mouth certainly exists, but it is utterly lacking in lips or definition; taking a new shape each time it yawns, stinking, across his broad head. The noises that spill from it echo now up the stone steps, at once bird-like and guttural, and I hear them not only with my ears but with my skin, and with the trembling animal in me that would take flight from the howling of the wolves and the whistle of the wind.

His limbs: tiny and therefore quite useless for perambulation, and so this begs another and very troubling question: how on earth did he come to be so far into the mine?

He eats only chickens, alive and feathered. I smell their rot in the air of his pen each morning yet he does not seem to excrete materially. Something else.

I have begun, I think, to hate him, as I have never hated another living thing. And yet every day when I think about killing him, I feel the weight of his blind stare on my flesh and I curse my own weakness as I pour another drink, shrinking from the admission that I cannot follow through with the thoughts that whisper in my mind; not
while he remains unknown and unknowable, and mine.
The Descent by Diane Fleming

It had started with her keys. Why Myrtle had put them in the fridge she couldn't remember, although she was sure that she had had a good reason at the time. However, there they nestled, along with the butter and cheese and the red notebook she thought she'd lost. Since then she had found her possessions in unexpected places – a bit like an extended game of hide and seek. Sometimes she enjoyed the challenge of wondering where her things were. At other times it was deeply frustrating and made her angry. Her mind seemed to have deep black holes into which she would sink as if sliding inexorably into an abyss. Then, try as she might, and she did try, hauling her mind up each clue and inching her way into the light of memory, she would notice the pity on the face of her family. Occasionally she would remember without trouble birthdays, names, holidays, who she was, who they were then, with a sickening lurch, her remembrance would fall over the edge and she would be left dangling, attempting to catch hold of some outcrop of memory.

Each time she fell over the edge it seemed to Myrtle that she fell a little further and the climb back was more difficult. More time was spent in the black, blank foothills and it was tempting to succumb to the almost carefree feeling of not remembering anything or anyone, not having to worry about where she ought to be at any one time. There was a seductive pleasure in letting her mind go into free fall and allowing herself to forget. Sometimes she wondered what the people round her thought - but these musings usually gave way to the comforting discussions she had with her group of friends who visited her often and shared her memories of the past. It was a pity her family refused to join in with these discussions – indeed there had been a bit of a scene when they declared they could not see her friends and they did not exist. She knew they were wrong and her friends seemed to help her negotiate the rough ground at the bottom of the abyss.

Myrtle knew this situation could not continue and she was delighted to move with her friends to a small room where she could converse with them without interruption and where she need no longer make the huge effort to scale the slippery sides of the abyss. She found visits from strangers who claimed to be related to her intrusive and the visits became less frequent and then stopped. Occasionally the small chink of light percolating the chasm shone brightly and Myrtle remembered the uplands of her mind but with increasing frequency the dark predominated and with it the relief of forgetting.
Things that Fall from the Sky by Ellen Lyons

It must have been the noise of the men who’d begun digging that day that had brought them out into the open and on to the rocky mountain ledge. Jameson, the geologist, had known they were there, or at least had had intimations of their existence for in his solitary meanderings of the network of caves which honeycombed the interior of the mountain, he’d found broken and discarded rudimentary hand-launching stone instruments; mounds of ash and heaped up piles of the small bones of birds and bats and other creatures that had been felled from the sky and on which he presumed these people relied on for sustenance in this barren land. Occasionally too, in his solitary meanderings, he’d glimpsed a shadowy figure retreating from a cave as he’d entered. But, no confrontations had taken place and it was assumed they were peaceable. In any event we carried firearms. It had taken months traversing this remote and barren hinterland to find evidence of the minerals we sought, but at last this particular mountain range showed encouraging signs of what we they looking for and almost immediately we transported men and equipment from the coastal region, set up camp, and started the work at the foot of the abyss.

The weather was favourable and for the first few days the work went well. Our system involved nothing more than lowering a strong basket made for the purpose, then filling it with, what we hoped and anticipated would be precious cargo, then lifting it with the help of the attached ropes and a team of donkeys on the mountain top. The men worked in shifts of two days duration and they too were lowered and lifted in easy sequence. During this time we saw no signs of the cave-dwellers, although each lowered basket carried trinkets as gifts to show our benevolence and good intent.

We were just beginning to congratulate ourselves in our perseverance and fortitude when the weather took against us.

We heard the wind’s lament, seemingly from afar, which was merely irksome, but there began some frantic pullings on the ropes from the men below and, as we attempted to bring them up, the ropes went slack and we heard the distant thud of the basket echoing in the abyss below. But, by then the wind had become a frenzy which found no peace or sanctuary against the mountain or in the abyss. We men on the mountain-top huddled together as best we could and waited until this rage blew itself out, but it was days before anyone could be lowered and by then it was too late. What was found appalled we Christians. Our gifts littered the ground, but there were no signs of any of our men, just their broken and damaged instruments and, in a nearby cave, around the remains of a huge fire we found their severed heads and the heaped up piles of their bones, resembling the remains of the creatures that had fallen from the sky.

The End
Lost by Lindsey Stirling

We descended into the earth, the operator and I. The chasm sides grew thick with moss and creepers. Smoke billowed from below, obscuring the stony ground. The sky dwindled to a strip above our heads.

My hands gripped the rope and I peered down over my shoulder. There were men on a ledge scraping away at the rock.

“What are they searching for?” I asked.

“Things that were lost,” said the operator. “This chasm was once cut by a great river. It is said that everything once lost would eventually float by on its waters.”

“I see no river.”

“No. Even the river is lost now.”

As the winch turned we dropped deeper into the lost chasm. I could see the bottom at last. More men worked away below with pick axes against the rock. The clang of metal upon stone echoed up.

“What do they search for?” I asked.

The operator shrugged.

“Some look for riches, some look for love. Some seek an escape, some a second chance. Some want fame and others want answers. And then there are some who seek the river.”

I thought about this as the lift dangled downward. The men’s faces were pictures of concentration, determination, even desperation. There was one, who could only have been twelve, stacking wood on the fire. His face still held a glimmer of hope. But how many years of his life would he spend in this chasm, searching for the things he had lost?

There was a bump and I almost lost my balance. We had reached the bottom. The operator unhooked me from the rope.

“I hope you find what you are looking for.”

I smiled back, knowing he would not understand.

I stepped away from the lift and watched it ascend. Then I turned to survey the place in which I had been left. The clang of pick axes came from ahead and behind lay a silent tunnel. I stood for a moment and then picked a rock to sit on.

Before long the boy I had seen from the air came over.

“What are you doing?” he said, his head tilted to one side.

“Sitting,” I replied.

“What for?”

I shrugged.

“Aren’t you looking for something?”

“Not anymore.”

The boy frowned. “Did you find it?”

I shook my head.

“Is that why you’re here then?”

“No,” I said. “I’m here because I am lost and I need to be found.”

Just then there was a deep rumbling from within the tunnel. The boy and I both turned and watched with a fearless fascination. There was a trickle at first, then a stream. Then suddenly the whole tunnel exploded with water. It burst out from the deep and sprayed across the chasm. All the men stopped their searching to marvel. The boy smiled.

“The river has found you.”

“Yes,” I said, smiling back and letting the coolness of the water wash over me.
My fears, my strengths by Maria Filomena Nogueira

The beginning of a journey starts whenever we make the first step. Planned or not, the uncertainties will be always there. My heart anticipates that journey, bumping all the adrenaline through the depths of my soul. Somebody calls it fear but I prefer to call it strength. The certainty that the uncertainties will make me stronger is the voice of honesty to make me go beyond my own limits. My heart is calling me, my soul is awakened, I must go now. The horizons appear to be very high, very distant, like the sunlight we can never touch. There is absolutely nothing to lose, once my heart is beating and my soul is lighting the way. I am alive! I can feel the fear freezing in my spine, but I also can feel the whole myself as anyone else. Me and my soul in a journey with a beginning and no end.

Others might join and cross my way but they will have their own personal journey. We will walk side by side, we will make our lives one, and we will make the direction worthwhile. Their fears will be mine and, I will translate them in smiles, in joy, in compassion, in forgiveness and share them as strengths. My soul is giving me unlimited strengths. Let’s go! Not anyone else is even thinking about fears. Has anyone actually thought about them? The way is designed in curves, lines, triangles, squares, peaks. The only smooth element is our desire to achieve the top and to answer the challenges. Who else has challenges? Everyone. Everyone is a challenge of its own and everyone has other thousand challenges around. They keep us alive and make us go further. Some of us stay longer at the bottom of the mountain to sharp the needs, to plan carefully and to visualize the challenges; others are faster or simply do not want to wait for a good challenge and just advance; the last ones but not the latest ones, could be applauded as the best, as the most intelligent and strategists. They could be… but they are certainly not. Each one of us is simply different. Different in fears and similar in strengths and different in strengths and similar in fears. The challenge will frame one or another at the appropriate time. Therefore, each one reaches whatever they want to reach, no matters whether it is the top, the middle or only the bottom. Because, there is nothing more important than just be and live and be awake. What matters to be at the top if there is no wise, careful, and passionate support at the bottom? If I fall down…

My fears are not anymore in me. Me is the strength!
The Discovery by Cassidy Warner

It was supposed to be exciting. Descend into the craggy depths of the earth, brush that membrane between this world and the world of Hades. Dig, discover, improve our quality of life. Make a name for ourselves. Make a name for our country. And it was exciting, at the start. We were lowered into the chasm, depending on the people above to not send us careening to the bottom. Beyond my grimy hands clutching the side of the lift, the dark mouth of the chasm gaped. The light of the noonday sun did not attempt to penetrate the shadows of this purgatory. Vague shapes and vague imaginings were all that presented themselves. But still we went with beating hearts and anticipatory eyes, staving off clenched stomachs with thoughts of our importance.

We bumped to the floor, began digging. For weeks and months, we dug. Dirt was as common to my lungs as air, and infinitely more palpable. Callouses formed. Muscles hardened. The solid rock gave way beneath our tools. It came unexpectedly. One swing of my pickaxe, and there was light. I froze, the light plunging through my eyes to pierce my brain. The whiteness of it, the intensity. The purity.

I felt my companions move in close, could hear their rustling murmurs. I remained immobile, hands clutching the rough wood of the pickaxe handle. We had pierced the Underworld, and it was made of light. Gruff hands grabbed my shoulders, forced me away. More pickaxes chipped the edges of the light. Its brilliance illuminated the grey rock walls above it, around it, across from it. The men's faces blazed in fierce pallor, the whiteness of the light turning even the dirt on their cheeks to the color of snow. My eyes ached. I did not avert them.

The screech of metal being forced into rock hiccupped. Tendrils of steam curled tentatively from the hole, caressing the light. They drifted upward, reaching for warm sunlight beyond this unfeeling white light. More hesitant tendrils joined. They collided with one another, grew. They billowed from the hole, moving upward in great puffs of pale humidity. We scrambled backward. The steam was wrong. Clammy. It smelled of rotting leaves and musty dirt and unadulterated fear. We ran for the lifts.

The emergency bell rung out, the lift moved under our feet. It raced for the sun, but not fast enough. The steam embraced our legs, used our bodies to grope its way upward. It stroked our chests, crawled into our mouths and noses. It blocked everything. We could not find enough air to cough. It rolled up the rope to the surface. My lungs ached. The light shone brighter in my eyes. The steam breeched the surface. The basket stopped. The steam marched on. I could feel it suffocating the world. I thought of crying. The steam was too thick. There was only light. Light and steam. Our great discovery.
The Descent by Christopher Silver

From above it looked almost beautiful, those lines of workers. They were lit by small lamps and enmeshed in some mass activity that they knew nothing about. Yet down there it was hazardous: smoke, explosions, dust, rocks. Frequently, distant cries would puncture the low din of the works. As he was lowered down in the basket, these awesome sights and sounds, and thoughts, too many thoughts, swirled in the pulsing head of Edwards. He realised that he was only ever Edwards now, as he stood in the basket balancing his weight against some other nameless, but gaunt, unfortunate. First time? Asked the youth. Second. This is the worst bit. plain sailing after this. Both minds clearly realised small talk to be an inadequate sedative. In silence they focused on the precariousness of their situation. Edwards looked at this young companion, his fair skin showed he hadn't been outside much. Poor kid, probably out of some city room. Would have a family counting on him. Once again he stopped these thoughts: you just couldn't have them in a place like this. Come on They were two thirds of the way down now. A kind of serenity gripped Edwards, and he could see nervous relief sparkle on the face of the youngster. It was just a long chain of risks: if the boy lasted the week he'd understand that. A surreal lurch of gravity awoke him with a crack. The meagre basket plummeted into a small ledge above the chasm. The sudden lurch of air numbed the pain of impact and Edwards lay briefly paralysed on the shelf of rock. Deafened. Blinded. Lucky. As his mind began to piece together the reality of the impact he was alerted by cries of help from the edge. His young companion was suspended by one slender white hand above the chasm. Edwards scrambled on his knees in the hope of coming to his aid, but by the time he looked over he had plummeted. Human commotion surrounded the small broken corpse. Fighting the numbness Edwards clambered by a series of ladders to where the descent had begun. At the top he was met by the fat authority of the foreman. Edwards remained relaxed: the foreman was ambivalent about accidents in his sector, would call off searches after minutes. Yet as Edwards stood up, he saw the pale blank expression and marvelled that this man had found a conscience. He grabbed Edwards by the collar. Where is he? The boy Edwards, Where? At the bottom sir, there was nothing I could do. The foreman's composure was entirely ruptured, he stood aghast. He should never have gone. Boss's son, site visit. Stop the works. A thousand faces looked up, incredulous. For the first time in their year long history that massive rooting around in the deep ceased, was silenced, went into mourning for this one young man. Inexplicably clad in the clothes of a worker.
Under the snow by Benone Alexandru Popa

“It’s always dark here, have you noticed that? And those annoying sounds... They are all working to get a bowl of soup which tastes like metal. I wonder what it is made of. And the snow... I used to love this snow. I used to play in the snow with my son, I used to love it, you know? But my son is dead. They say I killed him. I do not recall having done that. I think they are lying. But I cannot contradict them. I forgot who I am in this God forsaken place. Where is this place anyway? Mountains everywhere, but it’s not very cold, although it snows every day. But it doesn’t last. It melts the next day only to be replaced by other snowflakes. It’s a weird place and I haven’t seen the sun in ages. I forgot how it looks like. How many years have I been here? Oh, here it comes again, the siren. It means we have to go back to work. I hate those mines, it’s hot in there and that smell of coal... I hate it. I should try and escape again. But what for? I don’t have any place to go to. I will die out there. Last time they had caught me before I could cross the mountain. Thank God they did! I would have starved to death out there. But I’m human and I can’t stand the idea of being under the rule of someone else. I was born free. I can’t die under their control. Yes, yes, I’m coming. Look at them... in their clean grey uniforms with their stupid hats and their stupid little guns...
Ah, this pickaxe is getting heavier each day. I feel my hands chained to the earth underneath. It’s like I have boulders tied up to my arms. I don’t feel my tongue anymore. I haven’t spoken to a human being for ages. Only in mind, I still have freedom in my mind. A smart man once said: “I know but one freedom and that is the freedom of the mind”. Voltaire said this. Or not... Oh, here he is yelling at me again. I’m not going to move. I am not. Stop yelling! I’m not going to move. I’m going to hit him! I am going to kill him! Yes. Why not?
There you go! Oh... I forgot I hate blood! “

_The man took the guardian’s gun now and slowly raised it to his chest. He pressed the trigger in the direction of his heart._

“Oh, the irony of my life! I can only be free without it. Um... I also remember who had that smart idea about freedom. It was Antoine de Saint-Ex... Oh, why did you need such a long name? Let’s call you Antoine... Oh, here comes the daily snow. I love it once more. I will remember the day I died under the silently falling snowflakes.”
It's a good job my mother's dead. If she could see me now, she'd have another heart attack and that would be unpleasant for everyone. It was bad enough the first time round.

I teeter on the edge of a yawning great chasm and wish that I had the nerve to yawn right back at it. Unfortunately, I don't much like heights, so I don't wish to tempt fate with insolence. I can hear the bangs and clangs of miners far down below and I take solace in the fact that they have all completed the journey I'm on now and survived. I glance over at the man who's descending with me, my guide. He looks a lot calmer than I feel. His hands, which are holding the rope loosely, are rough and calloused, unlike mine. Unlike me, he is looking upwards. That's probably the best thing to do. If only I'd noticed it sooner. It's too late now; I've already seen the drop. He could have warned me, but I suppose it's nothing to him if I plummet to my death… which is entirely possible in this sort of environment. I'll never take the feeling of ground under my feet for granted again.

When I step out of what is basically just an oversized bucket, my legs are weak and trembling. It's difficult to hide it, but I feel the need to do so. A man with a profession as both an archaeologist and a historian is already so out of place in the world of miners that I don't think they'd appreciate me slowing them down with an almost crippling fear of their lifestyle. I'm an unwanted outsider. I'm an educated nuisance who has descended to hold up the day of those who work to earn their crust. My guide signals for me to follow him and I avoid looking too closely at the hostile glares from harder working men than myself. My background of libraries and dusty pages means that the world of mining is a whole new one to me. It's loud and harsh and sweaty. I do not care for it. It's too messy for anyone to make any sense of, but bizarrely they all seem to know what to do.

A strongly burning fire leaves me feeling too hot too fast.

"Ere it is," my guide gestures downwards. My breath catches in my throat. What I have been expecting to find is simply not the case. I had been lead to believe it is an old Viking grave that has been uncovered by careless miners. It isn't. My guide crouches down beside me and wipes something from under his nose. "What d'ya suppose it is then?"

"What it is," I reply shortly, dusting off the skull. "Is a fresh grave."

"Oh." There's a pause. "Suppose I best phone the police, eh?"

"Yes," I sigh. "Yes, I suppose you must."

A dead body. Police. How annoyingly eventful. I should have just stayed in the library.
Dear Diary,
I had an awful day today. Firstly, I woke up very late and my friend waited for me half an hour. I feel bad, because he had been waiting for me the last time as well, and I promised I am going be on time. Then, obviously, both of us were late for work, and our boss promised us a salary cut, even though we blamed the alarm clock, which did not ring, for some unexplainable reasons.
Now comes the worst part. Another guy from the coal mine came to our mine today. He replaces good old Johnny, who died last month. Another one!! I hate that. Coalmine workers should work in coalmines, in the very deep of the ground, not in our white and dusty places. Besides that, he just does not fit. His clothes are dark-coloured, which is stupid. We all have light-coloured overalls. Even the other three men who came from the coal mine here before him in the last six months. They told to him that he should buy a new one, but he did not listen to them.
I do not like the other three guys either. When they came for the first time, they were exactly as this new one. But now, they think that if they have light overalls, the rest of us, the ones who had lived all their lives here, the ones who had been born to work in the chalk mine, should tolerate them more. I do not. Moreover, I talked to my boss. He also does not like it, despite his son's ideas. They argue a lot, because his son supports these changes. The young man said that these workers could teach us about trust in each other, and acceptance, because they themselves learnt it when they worked in the coalmine, in the underground. He told us that once, two of them, one from the North and another one from the South, who were working at the same coalmine for less than one month, were stuck together for one week. Apparently, even though initially they could not stand each other, because of the differences between them, they survived because they accepted each other, and they remained friends after they were rescued. His son suggested that this should happen to us as well. I told to my boss that he shouldn't have sent him to study in the capital.
We will wake up one day and there would be no one left from us. There will be only coalmine workers, dressed in our light overalls, pretending they have been here since the Big Bang. I should do something about that. I should talk to the mayor to prevent them coming. He should tax them more, or pay them less than us. Or, at least, our sons should have priority, not because they have more knowledge, but because they were born here.
That’s all for today, my dear diary.
Yours faithfully,
The Man who works in a Chalk Mine
In a Grain of Sand by Noel Chidwick

Look. Don't blame me. I told my boss and he told his boss, and his boss told his boss.

All I said was: is that pile of sand shrinking? We were just taking a breather—it's hard work with the jackhammer, trying not to hit Edinburgh's precious tram lines. All the while you can feel the eyes of the Princes Street shoppers on your back.

Me and Joe took a closer look at the sand. A pile twice as high as a man, shaped like a volcano. Sure enough, as we watched, the crater at the top was slowly getting bigger. Joe and I climbed up the slope, thinking we'd take a real look, when there was a massive bang and I was knocked off my feet. The sand was falling from under us, taking us with it. Where? Underneath the road, that's where, pal. We were dragged along, in a cascade noise, and swirling sand as the whole bloody lot vanished under us. Joe saved my life. Just as I was about to be dragged down like a spider in the plug hole Joe, grabbed my boots and held on for all he was worth. He earned his pint that night, all right.

I was head down in a huge space, sand pouring over me. Finally it stopped. Joe dragged me back up, and we peered down into a hole the size of a skip, right opposite Jenners. We thought it was yet another uncharted cellar, but there was an eerie sound echoing around like the moan of something large and unwell, and the draught up out of the hole was deathly cold. It took a while to adjust to the dark, but there was a red glow, way, way down. Hamish—my boss—ran over, shouted at us to get away from there.

Quickly we erected screens: more rubberkneckers with camera phones we did not need. Some more of the lads had gathered round. Hamish asked for a couple of volunteers - yes, paid as overtime, he said. Joe and I were up for it. They brought over the big crane, attached a large bucket and before we knew it, we were lowered down. Did I say this space was big? It was huge. I've seen the Grand Canyon. Imagine a chunk of that, roofed over. That's what's under there, right under Princes Street. We had torches, but we couldn't make out much. But the red glow was getting bigger, flickering. It was a fire, right at the bottom. We smelt the smoke. We shouted at Hamish to haul us out of there pretty smartly.

No you won't hear about the canyon under Edinburgh. They've patched up the hole, hopefully even reinforced it. Two things I'll tell you. One, I won't be riding a tram. The other? Oh, the smell of the smoke. Bad was it? No, I think it was bacon: someone was cooking something down there.
The woman was there again, standing in front of me. Staring at me with me with her open blank eyes of stone. It was the same every night. I close my eyes and she is there in front of me, waiting. I could almost reach out and touch her.

They say that they found her in the stone mason’s workshop, hollowed eyed, her creator dead at her feet. His chisel was in his hand as if he had died in the middle of smoothing an edge.

The townspeople had marvelled at the detail of the woman, the intricate stonework of the folds of her dress. In memory of the stone mason, a reserved but loved man, the townspeople planned to relocate the statue to the local museum. They had carefully moved the figure to outside of his house whilst waiting upon the delivery van. The van, however, burst a tyre on the way over and so the collection was rearranged for the next day.

But the removal never happened. The two men who had moved the statue outside both died that night. One fell from a ladder as he was painting a high wall at home, the other had a heart attack while driving back from town. It was just a coincidence, of course, but from then on the statue had been regarded as bad luck and stories had grown up around the statue, much like the tangled grass that now hid her feet.

She still stood outside the mason’s house and the local townspeople believed it bad luck even to drive near the small road that led to the mason’s house.

Being a newcomer to the town I was unaware of this. Having taken a wrong turning I stopped my car to check my map again when I saw her. Her blank face seemed so realistic that I walked over to look closer. When I stood before her I reached out my hand and felt her cheek surprisingly rough. She surveyed me with her empty eyes.

Then the dreams started. The first few were all the same. I would wake up and catch a glimpse of the moon peaking through the curtains. I’d move over to the window to see the garden hidden under the blanket of night and she would be there in the garden. Every night she moved slightly closer. I’d close the curtains hurriedly and return to bed as the dream ended. At first I thought I was awake when this was happening but then I began recalling the moon when I opened the curtains. Crescent, always crescent.

For a while the dreams stopped. I still had restless nights but there was no woman. Then she reappeared. This time standing in the doorway to my room. Vacant eyes. Still she moved closer, a small amount every night. Now she is just inches away and I can reach out and touch her as she stands there.

Watching me.
The Spelunker by Katy Hastie

The first time Henry told Francine, she thought it was a rude word. Spelunker. A foreign rude word. Back then she wanted to hear the burly stranger say it again. Pot-holer sounded duller. Now, 30 years later, she hoped the same was true for the paramedics, administrators, nurses, doctors, radiologists, consultants, surgeons, anaesthetists and oncologists. If nothing else they might remember he had been part of the mountain rescue team and deserved a fighting chance.

The mining of Henry began that winter morning after his walk. A thankful bundle of dog settled at his feet as he read the paper but a high pitched squeaking had begun to bother him. It could have been the dog whining or tinnitus but it was too familiar. It was unmistakably the creaking of a rope pulley. Even in retirement he knew it well; the sound of inching suspension; ascent, descent. What he didn’t know so well was how come the sound was pulling the words on page 14 off to the right? Why was each word, squeak by squeak, being inched into a gutter of letters at the side of the page? The same on page 16, the back page and the front. He felt tiny ropes heave and slacken against his fingertips.

He dropped the paper in alarm, disturbing the dog whose head was also being winched away, as was the top half of the couch. Even his thick-socked feet were being hoisted apart from his body. A terrible tearing whiteness, white as bone separated the space and he felt the awful tilt of the room sinking. A calm man in all weathers, he tried to grip the edges of the gap. Miniscule black figures peered from the other side, as tiny as mandibles. They gathered his hands into buckets held on their backs.

When he called for his wife, her name felt heavier the deeper he fell. He pulled the first consonant Fffrrrrr… but the vowels had sunk too far. Like wheels stiffening, he was unable to pulley the sound to his mouth. Without his feet visible he rose to stand, falling uphill. A sharp empty precipice sunk to his right and the newspaper fluttered down its slopes. The coffee table and breakfast dishes clattered after. Carpet threads wafted in the updraft as he tried to pull himself towards the door.

Before each call-out she’d seen him check every rope and harness against his laminated sheet. Then weekly he’d re-check and maintain his kit. Few were as thorough; he fought for every chance he could get, they said. But even he couldn’t save a few.

She spent the night in a hotel near the hospital, phoning the kids and crying into the steam carried off by her washed tights in the en-suite bathroom. The MRI scan had shown severe temporal lobe damage in puffy white patches. It was a tumour that had triggered the stroke. His vital signs are sinking. He’s just roped to life here, she thinks.
**Frozen Icarus** by Paul Fleetwood

“Your father is dead too,” his mother had sobbed, “Frozen up there where the snow never stops. Please, son, please: stay in the camp. It’s safe, it’s warm…”

But Isaac knew that the camp was death. He could take no more the smog-stained air, the hacking coughs of the men by day, the starving cries of the children by night. Worst of all, the endless silence of the women conceiving, tending to and eventually burying the baron’s supply of slaves.

No more!

He would not live as another’s serf. He would not die in the shadow of these cliffs. He would feel sunlight upon his face. He would look, at last, on the horizon. He would!

So he’d fled. Made stealthy passage through the slumbering camp. Passed murmuring guards hunched over cooking pots, long shadows pitched against the cliff-face. From shadow to shade he’d darted in his bid to quit the darkness. Finally, the row of Fortunate Fools - those attempted escapees who had been killed by the guards instead of by the cruel, icy grip of the mountain. The row of mummified corpses was a warning. Each had been positioned with one hand pointing back at the camp, imploring any potential fugitive to return. Go back! There is only death ahead…

The mountain was dotted with the frozen bodies of the unfortunate, each having performed as their last action this same warning. A finger pointing down. Everyone who ahd ever fled had been found in this position. Everyone except his father.

He made it, Isaac thought, I will too.

That was days ago.

The purgatory of the work camp seemed nirvana to him now.

Hunger chewed his belly. Frost gnawed his fingers, the winds gnashed his face and the legends, he knew, were all true.

The first corpse he had passed not far from camp. Huddled on a tiny ledge on the side of the cliff, a stranger pointing down. He’d paid it no heed. Continued. At the top of the cliff, a frozen woman in the foetal position cradled a frozen infant. She, too, pointed down.

Days and bodies blurred. Isaac climbed the path of the dead and with each
frozen, warning corpse he felt his strength wane further.

Finally, pressed against the cliff face, lost in a world of static, icy realisation lit within him and Isaac cried, “I am a fool!”

The winds grabbed his words, shredded them to ice and spat them back at his face as tears.

“I will get to the top of this section,” he thought, “And wait there for death. Let my body be a warning…” but as he clawed onto level ground he found his place already taken.

There, encased in snow, packed in ice, was his father.

Mother had been right.

Hope soared within Isaac. A strange fire suffused his breast and flushed the chill from his bones as he regarded the corpse of his sire. Frozen. Huddled. One arm raised…

Pointing up.

Up.

To freedom.

end
The Pit by Véronique Heijnsbroek

Nen was holding on to the rope that was lowering them into the deep chasm everyone called the Devil’s Mouth. The smoke was rising up and from far below he could hear the muffled coughs of others, hammering to exploit the riches in the stone. The further down Nen got, the further away the surface seemed and all the suffering it had encompassed. Rock was pointing like spikes out of the walls, on which the individual cells were kept. His pulse accelerated with excitement and the oppressiveness of the darkness that he had tried to prepare himself for didn’t set in. Maybe what his grandmother had told him was true.

“Take a left and grip the wall or you’ll smash down there like rotten apples!”, said the foreman gesturing towards the rocky cliff face. The drum made contact with the ground and its dirty passengers stepped out, desperate to grab the wall as soon as they could. The chasm was exercising an irresistible pull on Nen so he stole a glance at it, leaning forward. Now he could see over the edge of the precipice he stood on; the air hung thick with coal dust and sulfur, and steam interminably rose up to the surface. His shirt was jerked back so that it cut into Nen’s throat and his back was thrown against the sharp rocks that stuck out of the walls, causing his knees to give way.

“Watch out pup, this mine is out to kill ya! Now get going!” Coughing and spitting, Nen scrambled up and past the stout man who was drenched in sweat and covered in dirt. Nen soon found the steps that would lead him further down. Nen put his hand on the wall and began his descent, subconsciously feeling for the differences in the rock and with ears turned towards the pit. Men were shouting and pickaxes hit the stone with cracking sounds. Yet there was more.

“In his mind he could hear a crone’s familiar voice singing:

“…listen to the rocks and their lore,  
You’ll find wonders for sure …”

Trying to tune in, Nen progressively phased out each of the industrial noises that were unnatural to this place and gradually he could make out a short, rhythmical drumming. The drumming was constant and got louder and louder the longer Nen listened. Every rock and stone seem to vibrate in its resonance.

A hand slapped him hard around the head, breaking Nen’s concentration.

“Cut that out, pup!”, the rough voice behind him yelled. “We’ll have none o’ that here. Listen well or you’ll be dead within the week, if the cave doesn’t do it I might help!”

When he reached the bottom of the stairs Nen cued behind the other newcomers. Their faces portrayed a wide range of emotions from anger to desperation to defiance. Eventually Nen got given a pickaxe and he knew that although his life would change drastically, for him it would be changing for the better.