

# *Black Desert: Nineteen Remnants*

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*for Paul Cabuts*

1.

**B**REAKER BOYS were an important part of the coal industry's workforce from the mid-1860s until the 1920s. Their work consisted of separating coal from its accompanying materials. Straddling chutes and conveyor belts, breaker boys removed impurities from newly dug coal prior to its storage and eventual sale.

The work was brutal: long hours, heavy labor, and exposure to sulfuric acid, coal, dust, and other harmful materials.

A photograph by Lewis Hine from 1912 shows a group of breaker boys arrayed around a conveyor belt staring blankly into the lens. Part of the work Hine—a sociologist and photographer—did on behalf of child-labor reform, the image portrays an occupation that would disappear shortly. It's a grim image, dark except for stark lights from the windows that merely underscore the darkness. An adult who appears to be a manager leans on a post and looms over the scene, staring down the camera. Kids surround him, their faces smudged with coal, some sitting on the conveyor, others standing and disappearing into the background.

In another image, from 1910, Hine individuates the boys. There's the same haunted look on most of their faces, registering the physical and psychological weight of their labor. Yet something escapes. A child on the left smiles openly, and at least one other suppresses laughter in the way of kids resisting the impositions of the adult world, whether in the guise of foremen or reformers. They appear tragic or impish like extras from a silent film or Dickensian urchins, cheeks smudged with grime from a day's work. If they're icons of a particular injustice, they're also typical adolescents, representatives of a certain time, a

certain class. If the earlier photo showed kids staring down a grim future, this shot hints at a sense of play and even a form of resistance.

Anecdotal reports, some from the kids themselves, suggest they found ways to play within and around the coalfield and to strike back, however intermittently, against their elders. There are stories of kids throwing rocks at officials visiting the mine. And of kids turning the breaker itself into a playground. Joseph Miliauskas, interviewed by the local historian and author Susan Campbell Bartoletti, recalls: "We knew every hole in the breaker. And we'd hide and go through it in complete darkness. We'd go over the machinery and around it. We'd get to know it because everything stops during the lunch hour. We'd get to know it like a bunch of rats." Reimagined as a source of recreation, the breaker briefly lost its official function as an elaborate and gargantuan machine. Yet playtime was a temporary reprieve, a short-lived carnival haunted by the impending return to work.

Hine's kids represent one of the last generations of breaker boys, as technology and labor laws made their jobs unnecessary and illegal. A number of Hine's kids would have graduated from child's work to man's work, descending into the mine itself. Others moved on to skilled or unskilled labor in the iron foundries and factories that dotted the area. Some may have climbed the class ladder. Some left for New Jersey. A few went farther.

By 1959, most miners were unemployed as coal companies closed and left behind devastated landscapes composed of decades of spoil, much of it sifted out by the breaker boys themselves. With the loss of work, recreation took over as the dominant activity. The culm banks became playgrounds where generations of kids played on the corpse of an industry that had sustained and destroyed their ancestors.

## 2.

*On January 22, 1959, twelve men died in a tragic accident at the River Slope Mine near this site. The mine had been illegally excavated beneath the Susquehanna River at the direction of the Knox Coal Company. When the force of the ice-laden river broke the thin layer*

*of rock, over ten billion gallons of water flowed through this and other mines. This disaster ended deep mining in much of the Wyoming Valley.*

—Historical marker at St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church,  
Main Street, Port Griffith, Pennsylvania.

Unlike other rust-belt industries that suffered a slow drain of demand and manpower, coal mining in the Wyoming Valley had a more precise expiration date: 1959, the year of the Knox mining disaster, which effectively destroyed the industry overnight. Yet the landscapes coal created had a long afterlife in chronic coughs and labored breathing, in kids who scrambled over the slag heaps and in ATVs that sputtered up the black middens.

In 1955, I was born in a hospital overlooking the site of the future disaster. It appears as a red cube on the horizon of one of my photographs, looking over an array of hillside homes and an expanse of coal spoil. My family was solid working class and Catholic, though unlike the stereotypical large Catholic family, we were decidedly nuclear: husband, wife, two kids, one boy, one girl, in retrospect a curious superimposition of fifties pop culture on a residual immigrant identity. My parents had a premature identification with the middle class common to Americans who tend to blur class divisions. In spite of the identification my father worked in an iron foundry, my mother in a cigar factory and later the dress factory next door. Our house was a small two-story structure, the first my mother had owned, with a large backyard where my father grew vegetables and we kept the family dog.

Several steps from the backyard an abandoned coalfield loomed and sprawled as a reminder of my family's recent past. Both my grandfathers had been miners: my mother's father in Pittston, Pennsylvania, the site of Hine's photograph, my father's in Exeter, where we continued to live.

## 3.

A railroad track bisects the coalfield into permitted and forbidden zones.

The Black Desert is on the wrong side of the tracks. We're forbidden to go there unless accompanied by an adult or an older kid. Directly above the mine, it's the place where the mine still poses an active threat. Beyond a screen of trees a pond of sorts occasionally emerges after a heavy rain and retreats during dry periods, leaving behind a plain of tires and a single shopping cart. Ventilation shafts, hidden by weeds, are notoriously treacherous. If you drop a stone or a piece of coal into a shaft, you can gauge its depth by counting the seconds before it strikes water.

Concrete covers a mine entrance that elicits fantasies of exploring the depths that have been hollowed out under our homes, schools, factories, the subsidence in some areas leaving partially sunken houses struggling through the muck.

The near side is more domesticated. The site of accumulated spoil and fine-grained coal called culm, it becomes known simply as the culm bank. It rises four stories above the surrounding yards and fields, easily accessed through a service road that leads to a plateau. It's also the site of much of our play, including bike racing and sled riding.

The track promises escape and goads further fantasies, the means by which the faraway comes close without stopping. By the 1950s, the town was tied into a system of automobile traffic at various levels from service roads to the new interstates, but the track is direct, urgent, its directionality emphatic and final. One imagines emerging beyond the vanishing point to a landscape that's unfamiliar, wholly new.

## 4.

Owned by a cinder-block company, the culm bank is accessible from a curving access road that serves the occasional company dump truck. Otherwise it provides entry to anyone from the surrounding neighborhood.

Its color changes over the course of a day. Black at first, but only because you expect it to be black. There's also a sheen of blue, a dominant color that shifts as it registers sunlight and the passing clouds. Bright magenta at one point. Then something approaching green or gray. Against the changing backdrop white birches grow from acidic soil. One pops through the center of an abandoned tire. From the peak of the culm bank, houses and cars become miniatures, a tabletop train set where wisps of smoke stream from chimneys and tailpipes.

The height and distance filter out some noises and magnify others: a Cessna's engine, a barking dog, church bells. The factory's PA system pages the boss and mothers call their kids. Passing trains dominate the soundtrack, their rhythm echoing long after they disappear. Different sounds emerge at different times of day. In the morning, you can hear grains of spoil trickle from the steeper embankments. By late afternoon, kids are screaming, playing ball, defending forts.

At night neon signs and street lamps create pools of light below. The red beacon of a radio tower blinks off and on. A dog barks. A plane, invisible except for its flashing light, flies overhead.

Decades later there's an inversion of the afternoon's signal-to-noise ratio as dirt bikes rip the silence. A near-continuous drone replaces quieter, more discrete sounds. ATVs, even an occasional dune buggy, break over black dunes. Tire tracks accumulate and cross each other out. Scraps of tires litter the landscape.

## 5.

*The Susquehannah [sic] cuts through the Greenfield mountain, and thence sweeps off grandly to the southwest, inclosing the lovely Wyoming valley on its west side. The scenery from any of the neighboring hills, in spite of the black blotches on the landscape, is exceedingly pretty.*

—*The New York Times*, 24 September 1865

One summer we work as caddies. Walking through the Black Desert to reach the country club we reenact the ethnic animosities

of our grandparents. The slurs echo in the landscape as the jokes pile up, part and parcel of the casual shoving, the endless ballbusting that is our prime source of entertainment and a permissible form of affection. Ethnic jokes become a coalfield version of “the dozens.”

The golf course is an impossible green—the antithesis of the landscape we’ve just crossed, as though a black-and-white film of our journey suddenly bloomed into Technicolor—the Wizard-of-Oz effect. Built on a section of mines, the fairway and greens deny both history and our everyday world, a close-cropped pastoral, a corporate idyll.

Waiting to be picked, the older kids smoke cigarettes and tell dirty jokes. After a week I learn the rudiments of clubs and can advise the novices. Veteran golfers curse every slice and take it out on us, flinging irons, tossing club covers on the fairway, yelling about our shadows on the green.

As we walk home, the bleak terrain is a relief.

6.

*On June 28 1896, fifty-eight men were killed in a massive cave-in of rock and coal here, in the Newton Coal Company's Twin Shaft colliery. An investigative commission, appointed by the Governor, reported on Sept. 25. Although its safety recommendations would often be ignored, the disaster was a factor that led to a stronger unionization of this region under John Mitchell after 1900.*

—Plaque commemorating the Twin Shaft disaster,  
Pittston, Pennsylvania.

There is a story about my grandfather driving a locomotive for the mining company. Uncoupling the engine from the cars, he moves it up the track, then suddenly throws it into reverse, slams the cars, and sends a shower of coal to the ground where a waiting group of women gather it for fuel.

Every working-class family had a similar story. Unions were an important element in the area's culture and politics before and after

the Knox disaster. The UMW gave way to the UIW and the ILGWU, but a set of values migrated from coalfield to factory. Walking the coalfields with my father meant hearing stories about union organizing and explanations of strikes at the foundry, which weren't uncommon. The stories were accompanied by morals:

Never trust the bosses.  
Support your coworkers.  
Never cross a picket line.

## 7.

The coalfield is a space of encounter. Backlit figures appear on paths leading up to ridges. Plateaus flattened by earthmovers resemble demonstrations of Renaissance perspective or the sci-fi surrealism of vintage paperbacks derived from Dali and Yves Tanguy—a stage for agoraphobia as you become a black dot for the gaze of another, a figure available for surveillance. Space is foregrounded in our perceptions, distance measured not in yards or feet but by a vague proxemics as figures approach or emerge from a vanishing point, appear and disappear in banks of spoil. Acknowledgements vary. Adults who know each other share gossip; strangers introduce themselves and compare memories. Kids establish bonds or, often as not, break into fights. Territories emerge as well as armies to defend them.

Most greetings are gestural—a nod, an absentminded wave. From a distance figures stand out as shadows or points of bright color. The slag heap becomes a driving range for a golfer teeing off, a grid-iron, a battlefield. Or just a shortcut for kids returning from school, for adults returning from work, for a woman walking in the rain, holding a green umbrella.

## 8.

There is a story about my father sinking into some soft, wet, black sand in the Black Desert. He is saved by a neighbor who attaches one end of a rope to the bumper of his pickup and throws the other

to my father. Revving his engine, he slowly pulls my father out of the muck. I have no idea if this is true or merely a warning, a cautionary tale to keep me from the Black Desert. Nonetheless I find it incredibly exotic, akin to images on Saturday morning television of Tarzan or Frank Buck barely escaping death by quicksand. For a whole summer quicksand is our greatest fear.

## 9.

The early sixties were marked by civil-rights demonstrations, assassinations, and cold-war paranoia; Vietnam was a rumor for adults and nearly nonexistent for their children. Shadowed by the patriotic rhetoric of World War II and well before the tender excruciations that would become the hallmark of liberal parenting, our play required weapons: plastic machine guns, rubber knives, wooden swords, metal revolvers. The culm banks were convenient settings for martial play. There were playgrounds nearby but rather than creaky metal structures in flattened lots and the indignities of adult supervision, we wanted hills, places to hide, to climb, to perch while we skillfully picked off our enemies or dramatically hit the dirt.

The coalfield provided hills for sledding, arenas for snowball fights, stages for reenactments of the films and TV shows that played a huge role in our imaginations: World Wars I and II, the Civil War, Knights of the Round Table. But, more than anything, our fantasies were fed by Westerns, a genre whose landscapes closely resembled our own. Images of the West lurk behind every American landscape to some degree. For kids in northeastern Pennsylvania, they endowed everyday landscapes with an aura of adventure. Typical eastern landscapes were shadowed by a myth that was still alive in pulp novels and B movies even as it was challenged by historical revision and the disappointment of tract housing and strip malls. Both destination and direction, the mythical West represented by the sunset threw its shadow eastward in dime novels and films. For a brief period John Ford's cowboys met Lewis Hine's breaker boys.

## 10.

The culm bank is the vestibule to the Black Desert, which sustains various rites of passage. The first tentative breaking of the taboo involves crossing the tracks. It's where you smoke your first cigarette, your first joint, where you drink your first six-pack and catch glimpses of water-logged pornography. There are rumors of pedophiles and other suspicious grown-ups who leave whiskey bottles near the tracks. Dead deer and sometimes domestic animals appear in various states of decay. Death is concrete here, and constantly changing, more real than the made-up corpse at the center of the funeral director's tableau. We find a dead bobcat who has made his way from the nearby mountains. Over time we witness the reduction of the carcass to skin, bones, dust.

On summer nights the crunch of gravel on the access road to the Black Desert. Drivers turn off their headlights and rumble past each other. Teenage couples haunted by urban legends nevertheless look for a place to park, a tribute to the power and desperation of adolescent desire. The site becomes simultaneously comic and primal as the Milky Way blooms overhead on dark nights while car chassis creak rhythmically. Dates end with the sudden burst of headlights and a single whoop from a patrol car, followed by flashlights and rapid fumbling with buttons and zippers. Heavy breathing. A red revolving light washes over the weeds and cinders.

## 11.

Coal as black diamonds. The metaphor shows up in several places, as the title of a Jules Verne novel, as the name of a number of mines, and as an appellation for a cluster of towns in southeastern Ohio: the Little Cities of Black Diamonds. It suggests a hidden and overlooked potential—diamonds in reverse, a photographic negative waiting to be developed, valuable only in bulk in contrast to the diamond's shining singularity. It's the Christmas present in the bad child's stocking, fuel for the furnace, a base functional material rather than

a gaudy decoration. Yet it retains a gloss of its own, a fire in bright sunlight before its literal burning.

Coal exists as a storehouse: both potential fire and potential diamond, a diamond under insufficient pressure. The metaphor indicates its status as a transitional element, an undervalued object on its way to perfection and the ultimate promise of redemption in at least one country song. In comic books Superman could transform a chunk of coal into a diamond through the exertion of sheer pressure. An act of ultimate alchemy.

On the slag heaps it's easy to imagine the hills and valleys of coal as a variant of science-fiction landscapes. You can picture a planet reduced to a single element, the world of Frank Herbert's *Dune*. Or the antithesis of J. G. Ballard's *Crystal World*, as though Ballard's clear crystal had given way to a darker reflection.

In Gilbert Sorrentino's phrase, "The Whole World Coal."

12.

*In the court-house is preserved a section of a tree, the stem two feet across, with about six feet of the root attached, just as it was taken out of one of the coal mines. It is a mass of pure anthracite, showing the bark, rings, grooves, cleavings, roots, &c., almost as distinctly as if it had been cut yesterday. How many millions of years have elapsed since it stopped growing? The Historical and Geological Society have an exceedingly interesting and valuable collection of fossil plants, &c., obtained from these coalfields. The section of one plant, manifestly of the reed species, is fully six inches in diameter. In hundreds of other cases, the impressions of leaves of huge plants, which grew in water, are stamped on the rocks with the utmost distinctness. In others, the bark of the trees has left its superscription in the most beautiful and rare figures. Mr. V. L. MAXWELL, to whose courtesy I am greatly indebted, informs me that the remains of some hundreds of plants have been taken out of the mines hereabouts.*

—*The New York Times*, 24 September 1865

A local television station broadcasts the 1955 Czech movie, *Journey to the Beginning of Time*, in the late afternoon. Dubbed into English and provided with an American frame, the film follows four boys on a river journey that takes them millions of years into the past. Their boat passes various flora and fauna, the familiar becoming more exotic as they progress upstream. Tigers and crocodiles give way to various species of dinosaur: brontosaurus, stegosaurus, pterodactyl. Giant insects emerge from backdrops that change from vine-choked jungles to giant ferns in coal-measure forests. Eventually the world reaches past biology to a pure mineral landscape of volcanoes spewing ash, stones, and lava.

We reenact the story out in the coalfields. We imagine the dinosaurs lurking behind hills and face down or flee from dragonflies that seem especially prehistoric. We pass the bobcat's bones and study a petrified tree. Cleaving open large pieces of shale, we peel the thinner layers looking for fossils. Ferns have left their delicate marks in the stark geological strata, fossils within a larger fossilized mass.

The remains stretch back three hundred million years—to the Late Carboniferous—also known as the Pennsylvanian Period.

## 13.

*EXETER*—Some borough residents are getting nervous about a mine fire that has been burning less than one-quarter mile from their homes for at least the past two weeks and wonder why no action has been taken to extinguish it. . . . “You would see a blue flame on the moss, almost like a natural gas fire,” Smalls said. “It’s been a real slow burn.”

—*Times Leader*, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 7 January 2002

At first it’s easy to mistake for a brush fire: a column of smoke twisting in on itself and tending south. A week later it’s still there, hanging in the air like a static cyclone. Getting closer it comes into focus and springs into motion. Curiously, an elevated area has been cleared as an observation platform where nearby residents gauge the progress of the operation. Confronted with this late version of the

industrial sublime, we're astonished by a natural power. In the pit below, bulldozers push steaming piles of spoil around the source of the fire that spits and crackles, smoke mushrooming into a blue sky while an EPA worker sprays a constant stream of water. A small pipe emerges from the ground; above it a blue flame hovers like a pilot light. Negotiating the terrain, you need to dodge the moving spoil, the cloud that begins drifting with the wind, slow enough to outpace yet curiously tenacious, following you along with a stench of sulfur. The site is particularly explosive in the rain as ashes crackle and spit and plumes shoot high into the air. Ribbons of smoke wrap around the town.

## 14.

*While ninety miners were at work in the Red Ash vein of the Twin Shaft at Pittston, about 3 o'clock this morning, the roof caved in and it is believed that all of the men perished. About forty of the imprisoned men were English speaking miners, the others foreign. . .*

*Aside from these, there may be other English speaking miners among the unfortunates. Thirty Polanders and Huns were entombed, and it is thought that the total number of bodies in the mine will reach one hundred.*

—*Titusville Herald*, 28 June 1896

Mining accelerates deep time, speeding up a geological process that would otherwise take eons. It sets off a chain of actions and reactions, confrontations and encounters between disparate temporal frames where the primordial erupts into the present. The coalfield represents the intersection of the human body and prehistory. And sometimes their collision. The Welsh writer Ron Berry “pictures a massive slab of rock slamming down out of millions of lightless years, without warning.” Its victim “merely had enough time to be there, unbuckling his belt, and perishing.” A miner, one moment absurdly, humanly, attending to a natural function. The next obliterated, crushed by the literal weight of prehistory and integrated into the fossil record.

Cave-ins were a common form of mine disaster along with explosions, fires, gas leaks, and suffocation. Since 1870 there have been over 51,483 mining deaths in the United States, a figure not including other mine-related accidents. There is a story my grandmother tells, backed up by numerous sources. When a miner died he was carried home by his coworkers and placed on his front porch for his family to find. She remembered the sound of wives and mothers wailing in the street.

Her own husband's death was less sudden but as catastrophic. Silicosis is a disease contracted by breathing coal dust. The miners knew it by a blunter name, black lung, which paints a more vivid picture: an organ overtaken by an element that drifted into every pore and every fold of clothing, inhaled and swallowed clogging throats and nostrils, and hawked up in phlegm or cut with whisky after work. It was the ultimate mark of anthracite, colonizing the bodies that had known it most intimately, invading, hollowing out, turning the geography of the body itself into a coalfield.

Other traces were more benign. Some miners were marked by a blue tattoo (the subject of another country song) where coal dust had burrowed under their skin through scrapes or cuts. It was impossible to remove.

Marking the land meant marking the body—a constant push and shove that led to scars, scrapes, broken bones, and ultimately collapse.

## 15.

Occasionally the characteristic landscapes show up in a broader cultural context. In a 1963 essay, Kenneth Burke imagines William Carlos Williams writing “a gallant description of weeds, wildflowers, bushes and low trees gradually carving out a livelihood for themselves in the slag piles around Scranton.” In the underseen 1970 film *Wanda* (recently added to the National Film Registry), Barbara Loden, the director and star of the movie, walks across a coalfield somewhere in Pennsylvania. Near the beginning *Wanda* appears in a long shot, a white spot against heaps of spoil, surrounded by bulldozers and dump

trucks whose noise provides an austere soundtrack. The landscape is a catalogue of dilapidated structures, rusty machinery, smokestacks, all the signs of a coal town. Tragedy is built into the film, built into the characters as fated as anything in Dreiser. Wanda is one of Williams's "pure products of America" uprooted, unattached to any source of power, sustained and destroyed by a fantasy. But for the moment, walking away, standing out from the landscape, Wanda becomes an emblem of all the migrants on their way out to New Jersey, New York, or points west.

## 16.

Franz Kline was born in 1910, around the time Lewis Hine was photographing the breaker boys. Kline's gravesite in the Wilkes-Barre city cemetery overlooks an old iron railroad bridge built when the coal industry was thriving. Kline grew up surrounded by railroad bridges, trains, mines, and coal breakers, which became sources of his early images: *PA Street Scene* (1947), *Pennsylvania Landscape* (1944), *Locomotive* (1945–47), *Chief* (1942). In 1946, he executed a mural for American Legion Post 314 in Lehighton, Pennsylvania. Among his sketches is a 1949 image of the Black Diamond Express, one of a group of trains that served the coalfields. In his later work the images become more abstract. Yet the catalogue of place names continues: *Mahoning* (1956), *Hazleton* (1957), *Pittston* (1958), *Lehigh V Span* (1959–1960), *Coal Valley* (1957), *Bethlehem* (1959–60), *Luzerne* (1956). Kline insists on acknowledging the roots of the images, their foundation in black spoil, even as they attain an abstraction where black and white are freed from their subjects, where brushstrokes suggest, yet go beyond, familiar objects, where structure morphs into gesture. The style elevates the local into a new design, a shifting figure and ground, like slate roofs, iron bridges, coal breakers covered by and then emerging from the snow. Or the snow drifting across acres of spoil. As his friend Conrad Marca-Relli remembered, "Pennsylvania was always in his head."

## 17.

On bright days, discrete fires seem to burn inside the scattered coal, prefiguring their controlled combustion in countless homes. Still the area's major source of heat, the coal is stored in bins and fed into furnaces which, anthropomorphized, cartoonlike, mumble at night and feed the nightmares of children.

Other fires, less contained, simmer and fume in the coalfields where they're constantly fed. The Red Ash colliery just outside of Wilkes-Barre caught fire in 1915 and is still burning. The fire lies two to three hundred feet underground at a temperature of 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit. It's said to have been started by a forgotten miner's lamp.

Burning refuse and brush fires have caused recent blazes. Bonfires, linked to beer parties, have also been mentioned as possible sources.

## 18.

Heritage is everywhere. Images of breakers and breaker boys pop up in fast-food joints, school murals, and VFW halls. Every disaster receives a commemorative plaque.

Yet while heritage, as an industry, preserves a past, it simultaneously petrifies a living history. It draws a frame around an era, asserting its importance while cutting it off from larger continuities. A lot spills out from the frame. The coalfield has an afterlife in chronic coughs and labored breathing, in the kids who scramble over the slag heaps, even in the new spate of ATV's that stutter up the black hills.

Some coalfields have been erased, most often becoming sites for new housing. Others are in the process of reclamation, though some areas are so big it will take decades before their full rehabilitation. Meanwhile spoil continues to break through the irregular fabric of the landscape. And the physical remains of the industry are accompanied by a continuing sense of human loss and the demoralization of an entire class.

The Scranton Mining Museum houses relics of an older technology: blasting caps, coal stoves, and so on. It has also recreated a number of characteristic interiors including a wooden bar, a typical kitchen and bedroom, a section of an eastern-rite church—fossils that barely survived into my childhood before being replaced by the design of the future: brightly lit window displays of chrome and glass, white enamel tiles, model kitchens. Images of a space age itself supplanted by computer screens and the internet.

Nostalgia is useless, but it is possible to see a continuum among the coalfields, a primal connection spanning continents and populations. The story goes that a great seam of coal runs from Pennsylvania to South Wales. The connections go deep. This was Pangaea's equatorial belt of giant ferns reduced to peat bogs, to coal, and finally broken into a scattering of puzzle pieces. In the nineteenth century, Welsh miners migrated to Pennsylvania where they found a landscape that was strangely familiar. They were followed by Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Italians, Germans, all of them reweaving the primordial geography.

19.

The last Exeter Fire of 2002 burned for four months, finally extinguished in April when I show up with a video camera hoping to catch the eruption in action. The pit that had been dug to contain the fire has been filled in. No viewing platform. Nothing to view. As though nothing had happened.

On the day I visit the sky is a pure blue. The newly leveled site mirrors and multiplies the sun in the tiny pieces of coal. Birdsong. Wind in the trees before an ATV roars into the scene drawing and redrawing circles in the culm. The driver keeps at it, moving in and out of the frame. Always returning to his circle, deepening the impression. He's not cutting anything flashy, no figure eights, no acrobatics, just retracing the figure, circling until he's satisfied with his mark.