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Three Stories

Marat Moore†

I. HELEN Colorado, 1914

I remember Chicago
it must have been 1910
when hot ash burned off my father's hair
like dry brush, leaving his head
naked and scarred. In the hospital bed
he swore off the steel mills, he swore
in Slavic while my mother
moved heavy in pregnancy,
ironing and washing for strangers.
Her name was Angelina.
I was young then, only three.

My father's mustache grew back
when we moved to the Colorado
coal camp on the southern prairie.
When he joined the union,
we moved again to a strike colony
called Ludlow, where rows of
white tents fluttered like flags.
We lived thousands together,
Greek and Italian and Irish and
Hungarian and Slav. In our tent,
which seemed spacious with its two rooms
and wood floor, I slept snug
with three sisters, with our beloved
Princess and her puppy at our feet.

† Marat Moore has worked as an underground coal miner, journalist, photographer, and on the staff of the United Mine Workers of America. She is currently working on a book documenting the experiences of women miners in the United States. These poems are based on the oral history narratives of coalfield women who reflect on their experience of class and gender in America. At the Conference *Feminism in the 90s: Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice*, Ms. Moore spoke on the panel *Broadening the Definition of Feminism*.

We were happy there. In many tongues
we spoke the music of our common language.
We danced to the accordion and the mandolin
to celebrate the birth of my brother,
the colony's first-born child. I played tent tag
with our Italian neighbor's son, and made faces
when he licked hot lard off his bread.

Then the brown-uniformed soldiers came
and set up camp on the hill.
They stayed away, and watched us
from a distance through field glasses.

Every day the scabs drove by and
barked at us like dogs. We hated them
and sang our union songs while the
brown-uniformed soldiers
watched. Then they grew bold,
walked into camp smiling
and followed the older girls.
Go with your sister Pearl, my mother said.
I obeyed, but did not understand.
I was young then, only seven.

Fearing the guns
some men dug pits
under the tent floorboards.
Father refused and
argued with our Italian neighbor,
saying, but what if
the tents are burned?
The man threw up his hands.
She is pregnant, she cannot
run if they fire the guns, he said
and kept digging.

As more soldiers came
we sang louder
and held more dances
and one night at the big meeting tent
a sweet-faced old woman faced us
and when she spoke, her voice was
like canon firing and I couldn't breathe, just

clapped till my hands reddened and stung.
Later she handed out clothes
and gave me a pair of leather shoes.
They were too big, but I cried for happiness
because she was our leader,
Mother Jones.

Mother and Father sat up late at night
whispering by lamplight. Still
we celebrated twice for Easter,
both Protestant and Orthodox.
We ate barbeque with the Greeks
and I wore a lace dress
that whipped my legs like froth.
The sun melted the snow patches
and the women played baseball
in white blouses and black pants
that billowed like skirts. The white ball
floated across the sky and the crowd cheered
while the brown-uniformed soldiers
rode up on their horses
with their guns propped on their saddles
and watched.

I loved that lace dress
and wore it again the next morning
when the shooting started,
a crackle of machine guns
from nowhere. My father ran
to join the men, but I grabbed
the dark cloth of his trousers,
my little fist like iron.
I loved him. No!
my sister screamed and
grabbed my hair by the roots.
We ran to a water tank sunk
deep in the ground
Princess ran after us
barking
they shot her
shot the puppy
one boy ran to get water
for his mother who had fainted

they shot him through the head
he was older than me,
maybe ten.

The rock ledge was ringed with children
where mothers nursed to keep the babies
quiet. Gunfire was the only sound.
Mother shushed us and nursed
Ludlow's first-born.
Above us an Irish couple shot at soldiers
from a toilet while their two redheads
sat with us, below.
When the train came, we ran behind the cars
and down a creek bed.
My foot hit something soft,
a wounded man. He cried out
and I was so afraid that I ran
through barbed wire that ripped
my lace dress. I dragged the barbed wire
behind me, still running.
Finally we made it to a farm
where a woman fed us boiled eggs and tea.
We wrapped up in blankets
on the floor and my mother
nursed my brother and started to cry.

Later in the day
the soldiers moved in with
brooms dipped in oil, and
touched flame to canvas.
In the pits below, women and children
screamed, choked and burned.
We lost our good neighbors, and many more.
Then the soldiers moved in again
and raped the survivors.
People don't know that
but it happened,
some were our good friends.

I was young then, only seven
I'm ten times that now
but I remember.

II. ELLA
West Virginia, 1983

I was a welfare kid in a company town
after my dad's luck ran out.
He lost a leg in the mines
and then had a car wreck and died.
I always thought that things
might have been different
if he'd lived
but he didn't.

In fifth grade the teacher said,
"Everybody on welfare stand up!"
There was just one boy and me.
I hung my head, walked home
and dug fence posts because
I wasn't considered good enough
to work in a store,
not in that town.

When my brother opened a coal seam
with some other boys, I hefted
a six-foot auger, and hand-dug and
loaded coal, then pushed it home
in a wheelbarrow. I was 12.
We worked every Saturday
until my brother ran off.
Then I worked alone,
two years with a pick and shovel
but it kept my mother warm
and that felt good to me.

In high school teachers were surprised
when I won awards. You're bright, they said,
you could make a doctor or lawyer.
But brains couldn't take me
to my graduation, since I didn't have the dollar
and a quarter it cost, and was
too proud to ask for help.

When I got the chance to leave
I did, and took my mother with me

but then I married a paratrooper
who'd been a narc for three years
in Vietnam. He busted his buddies
for dope, and was honored
for his contribution.

I don't honor him .
for what he did to me
coming at me like I was Viet Cong
with our little girl standing there.
He got 5 to 18 years for hurting me
while I got tumors that
kept growing from the scar tissue inside.
Half my intestines and half my stomach
are gone, and every year
I lose more to the surgeon's knife.
He cries and says he loves me
but I know he'd come after me again.
So I take precautions.
Every room in this house
is stocked with food and water
and ammunition.
He caught us once unprepared
but it won't happen again.

Things were going bad between us
when I went to the mine office
weighing 89 pounds and praying
to God for that job. I got it,
but lost the respect of my neighbors
who said, "She's screwing around down there.
Ain't it awful?"

My first day in the mine
the boss said, "Don't worry about
rubber boots. This mine is dry."
So I wore leather. When bad roof
forced us through a waterhole
where a high-voltage line had slipped
I got knocked twenty feet in the air
and then slammed into the tunnel wall.
The boss was fine. His boots were rubber.
That's when I thought, maybe

I should do something else for a living.

I've never been hurt bad
just little things, like
burst kneecaps
pulled muscles
broken fingers
electrical burns
and a couple of hits
from falling rock
but no lost-time accidents
and nothing to compare with
what I got at home

My lungs are a different story.
I thought I'd die at the clinic
having to breathe in medicine
that's supposed to break up the coal
in your lungs until you spit
black phlegm. I jerked like
a killed chicken and
the doctor shook his head and said,
let's try something else next time.

I'm 36
I feel 60
I started bossing because
this old body can't stand much more
hard labor. My first shift as a boss
I ran more coal than any man there
because I wouldn't ask anyone to do
what I wouldn't do myself. And we pray.
Every shift the preacher on our crew
asks God to protect us inside
and protect our families on the outside
because you never know,
they are vulnerable too.

Good money makes bad enemies.
In my daughter's class
only one other kid has a parent
with a job. They say, your mommy
took my daddy's job, and

screwed to get it.

It's made me hard,
I know that.
I don't socialize in this town
don't even go to funerals
but I have a dream
to save my money,
invest in coal lands
and open a mine.
I will build an empire
in this county
and nobody will ever
touch me
again.

III. MELISSA
Virginia, 1991

Purple and yellow crocuses
had poked through the cold ground
and redbuds had spread a pink mist
over Nealy Ridge
when Dad sat me down and said,
“We’ve got problems at the mine
and if we strike, it could be a big one.”
I only half-listened. Dad had said things
like that before, but nothing bad ever
happened. He shielded us from pain.
When our dog died, he buried it.
I knew he could handle a strike.

Anyway, I was 15, with other things on my mind.
I had to make straight A’s and do my
homework, because I had a plan.
I was going to wear the starched gray pants
and the broad-brimmed hat of the
Virginia State Police.
I would protect the public
and keep the peace
and help stranded drivers
like Uncle Roy in Florida.
Troopers were respected, and
I liked the idea of respect.

Dad was right. The strike of ’89
was the biggest thing ever to hit
southwest Virginia. Mom and Dad left to picket
every morning just like it was a regular job.
I did my homework, cooked all the meals and
took care of the younger ones. Then one day
a boy walked up to me in school
and said, “My parents are in jail
and so are yours.” I was shocked.
We walked out to the parking lot
to listen to our car radios.
Hundreds of strikers had been dragged away
to jail for sitting in front of coal trucks.
Some were handcuffed to fences by the

Virginia State Police. They used chokeholds
that left bruises on my father's throat.

We couldn't stay in school
so we walked out.
Other schools emptied too
to join the crowd at the county jail.
Parents waved from behind barred windows.
We sang "Amazing Grace," put on our camouflage
(not sand-colored, like Desert Storm, but green)
and organized a strike support group.
Soon company guards in dark jumpsuits
and mirrored sunglasses
tracked us with video cameras,
sneaked up to our homes
and peeked in the windows,
while the arrests continued
and the judge handed out millions in fines.
The tension got worse
when one man threw a rock and
40 were charged as felons.
The company called us violent
called us communists
and I got mad
and asked Mom, why does the president
praise union people in Poland and
turn his back on us?

Dad got quiet
and started having headaches so fierce
that he drove his car right off the road.
The doctors packed his head in ice
and sent him home
but he never yelled at us once,
He just got quiet.

Things happened. I remember
possums dead on the road one day
and the next, stuffed with jackrocks
that were two big nails welded in an "X"
and twisted to stand upright on the road
to puncture truck tires.
One day a nun in her big

Winnebago with medical supplies
got arrested and was taken to jail
because she was driving too slow.
The troopers thought it was a union conspiracy
to slow down coal trucks and
thought she was a public menace
because of a strip of camouflage
pinned to her white blouse.

Things like that will make you militant
and make you mad.
The strike women made earrings
that dangled like tiny jackrocks.
They came in all colors and
some were strung with beads.
The men would sit at the
picket shacks and carve cedar into
sculpture and wooden toys
while the pile of shavings grew
and camouflage spread through the hills
like kudzu. Some people said it made
no sense, peaceful protesters who
looked like guerillas.

We all wore "camo" but
we all looked different,
not like the troopers, who all
looked the same with their
blank faces and hard eyes.
It was like we invented ourselves
on the picket line, using camo in
ruffled skirts and baby clothes
and quilts and sunbonnets until
it seemed like camo had gone through
a sex change! And everyone wrapped
yellow ribbons around telephone poles
and mailboxes (this was before Desert Storm)
because they meant union, not war.

All I remember from that summer
was sweating in the strike kitchen
walking the picket lines
singing until our voices rasped

and cooking meals while
time rolled over us like water
and days and nights ran together,
and the future was not just some dream
in the distance, but it was right there
to fight for, and it was
ours to lose or win.

We fought, and they say we won the strike
but it didn't feel much like victory
when the company took my dad's job.
But they couldn't take away what we did here
in southwest Virginia. And now you couldn't pay me
to put on a trooper's uniform,
but if there is a coal miner in trouble
anywhere
you'd better believe
I'd put on my camouflage and go.
My college plans are on hold,
but that's alright because
I have a new plan
to study child psychology
to help these kids
now that the mines are closing.
I'll find a way to work and
stay in these mountains
and get ready for the next time
the battle comes around again.