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A Clean Slate

Notes towards a site-specific film
at Annesley Bentinck Colliery, Nottinghamshire





My Dad was a miner for 35 years. He struggled for breath for the last ten. Dad showed me glow worms. Knitted. Loved horses. As a little girl in boxing shorts he taught me how to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. Dad had huge black lined hands. He held gladioli and karaoked along with Morrissey to *This Charming Man*.

Now I cannot see the face of my father, I wonder what the face of a miner will look like in a new century? As the new Millennium begins, the mine where Dad worked, Annesley Bentinck Colliery, will die.

Annesley Bentinck is the oldest colliery in Britain, thousands of men have mined its seams. Moving from a century that needed coal into a new Millennium, coal is obliterated from the social landscape. A new life was promised. But how easy is it to create a new future? Start again with a clean slate?

Can you live in the present without also living in the past? Is an act of erasure, an act of forgetting, the only chance to begin again?

What if you don't want to forget?

What if you want to hold on to the memories?

What if that's all you've got left?

With loss you try to hold on to memories by making them into images; frightened that they'll slip through your fingers if you don't.

Coal mining is about men working together. Working in dirt and damp, in unbearable heat, in tiny cramped spaces. Working in shorts or knickers with just a beam of light to reveal a few inches in front of the face. The whiteness of their skin stands out in the blackness. I think of young limbs, smiling faces. Muscular, strong bodies. But most of the faces belong to men who have worked underground since leaving school, some twenty, thirty, forty years ago. A big part of your life. Under the dust and dirt their faces and bodies have changed. From my first visit to the colliery it was the men's bodies that fascinated me. The lines on their faces, their hands, the stories they could tell.

My childhood memories of Dad are brief flickers. Black mascara was always etched around his eyes and in the creases of his big hands a big black pencil had drawn out lines. As a child I did not imagine what the dust did, even though the signs were already there.

Images around mining always start with miners' bodies. The starkness of being human, stripped of any signs of civilisation, crawling around in darkness. The body on all fours. Men having to trust that nature will bring them back to the light. Images on the surface depict healthy bodies, bodies that work, confident men, sure of where they place their feet.

After years of misrepresentation miners are wary; they know how cameras

depict them. Some of the men remembered Dad. He was quiet and hard working. Talking to the men I was touched by their openness and generosity; but mostly it was their humour that shone out. A humour surprising given the circumstances they found themselves in.

Everything in mining is about relationships. Present and past. Daylight and the darkness of the mine. Ascent, descent. The human and the natural. The physical and the psychological. The story of mining is about a relationship between the mine and the men and about the relationships between the men themselves. How often have we heard about the 'crack', the camaraderie, the watching out for each other? How does working in a dark, dangerous hole day after day affect how the men relate to each other? How does this 'looking out for each other' translate in the twenty-first century? It seems an old-fashioned thing, this empathy and shared experience in the context of our dissolving communities. Making this piece for the colliery site, I'm constantly asking: why are these relationships important and how can I translate them?

1999 Hospital. Massaged Dad's hands, saying that I'd never seen them so clean. All my life the creases, lines and nails have always been black with coal dust. He laughed.

Dad is on his journey. It is his journey. We try to adapt to the changing conditions of his body. Can the fear be lessened by knowing that we are there with him, holding his hand, to soothe and love him? Part of me wants to have control, but I have no control over his body. His body is doing what it is doing. It has a life of its own.

2000 Going underground. You have to be kitted out. Safety first. Helmet, lamp, goggles, earphones, kneepads, a self-rescuer kit. And lots of water. Physically you have to be strong. Goodbye daylight. Getting in the shaft cage you descend into darkness. The air changes, it's cold and smells of old bodies. You learn how to breathe differently, quickly. Like there's not enough air. Breathe shallow. Ventilation pipes run throughout, bringing in oxygen to keep the mine alive. One of the miners talked about the mine as a living, breathing thing. And being down the mine is like being inside a body. Archways, tunnels, shafts, subterranean veins. Dark and grey. Steel, corrugated. A noisy body. It could be the film set of *Alien*, water dripping, strange, stale smells. The temperature changes from hot and humid, over one hundred degrees in places, to freezing cold and windy. We walked the 'microwave mile'. It took over an hour and a half to get to the coalface. The walking alternates with rides on conveyor belts. Like being in an Indiana Jones scene, you lie down flat on the conveyor belt which sends you hurtling into the darkness. The mine is another world, where time is changed.

Three things stay in my mind after going underground: FEMALE, LIVING THING, GHOSTS.

Ironically 70s archive footage proclaimed coal as an industry of the twenty-first century. Images of unknown men descending in cages. Recruitment propaganda for the young working class. Generations of men, fathers, sons, grandfathers, uncles, cousins. The coal dust clings to their sweat. They try to shower-off the black stains on skin. "When you're dirty you don't have a voice, you're just a dirty face". The dust gets everywhere, it eats away at masculinity.



There have been many silent deaths.

"You go down the mine a young man and come up old".

Archive images of miners are like old pictures of themselves that have died. Now, washing away the dirt, lines and creases, reveals a new body. How will they define themselves as men in now changed bodies?

1999 Hospital. The man in the bed opposite Dad told Mum that Dad had cried himself to sleep at night. Father, man, human, crying. When your body lets you down you've lost control of your future, your destiny. Dad died. The dust found his heart and ate into it.

2000 Hands make a fire. Kindle the tiny flame. What have these hands done, what will they do now? I will never forget the story of Dad's hands. They would never come clean. Black, lined hands. If you could have read the palms, the heart line, the fate line, what would they have said?

Standing at the door step with a piece of coal in hand. A memory of New Year's Eve. The clock is ready to strike midnight. My father, brother and sisters are about to step over the threshold of the door carrying a piece of coal. First footing is a ritual that welcomes in the new. In first footing COAL = LUCK, HOPE and WEALTH. Stepping over the doorstep in a new Millennium, I am struck by the irony of what coal has come to mean.

The last shift. No *Brassed Off* style scenes, no silhouetted figures of miners and their families, leaving the pit wheel in the dying light. There were no tears. It has been a slow and quiet death. Just a shaking of hands. And a brief well-wishing for the future, for what it might bring.

Over the last century there has been a myriad of images of miners: mainly black and white. They depicted heroic, dirty men. Through the collective belief in their revolutionary power, the miners shaped a hope for society. White and black. They could also pollute, overthrow. They were seen as a germ, a virus. Yet in times of need the miner was the backbone, the backbone of the nation. Heseltine talked about making a green and pleasant garden of the coalfields.

What has grown in the garden? Sanitised versions of mining are there in the museum experience. No dirt, no noise, no dust. Just plastic models of miners. And old pit sites have generally spawned American Adventure Theme Parks, Kentucky Fried Chickens and supermarkets. Out with the old, in with the industry of the future: leisure. People in this area have a lot of time on their hands.

1999 I.D. bracelet reads IAN BRIAN POOLE 17-9-35

2000 A child's hand writes down new resolutions, a wish list. Though not all wishes can be granted.

Pit shower room. Water streams down the men's bodies, making them clean. Slowly over time water will fill the tunnel ways of the mine and the ghosts of masculinity will be submerged.

They say that memory lives on. But after one month of the colliery closing one of the men said: "You begin to feel like the memories belonged to someone else. Maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it wasn't your life, but someone else's."

