

Coal-Biters

by Richard Hague

—for *Danny Miller*

Something of the Arctic
 drops on north Kentucky.
 Once a winter, maybe,
 a wind carries, heavy as
 coffin glass, a cold
 as massive
 as a glacier, and it
 settles on the sheeps' slope,
 and on the garden
 beyond the smokehouse,
 and in the little sweet run
 through the meadow—
 of any summer's day
 filled with frog-trill, cricket, and
 grass tuft—now
 rock, ice, silence, air: one frozen
 thing, indomitable,
 for a time.

Often in such cold we gather
 in homely dark at Coal Fest
 to light the night
 with food and drink,
 to fuel the stove,
 to speak of carbon
 in its many kinds:
 diamond, as the honed
 words faceting our talk,
 bituminous, as the ghost
 of smoke and air
 that escapes with our laughter,
 anthracite, that glows in
 three good stoves
 to gladden skin and blood.

As if Icelandic *kolbitors*,
 crowding the stove,
 sometimes we joke
 we eat it, coal,
 here in lignitish brownies,
 here in smoldering black beans,
 here in the peppery hots

of chili. Yet even our tales
are fuel; they kindle and
warm us in their heat.

And sometimes, as tonight,
one of us is gone.
The hills slope down
like genuflection to this place
where Danny is remembered—
and will be, year after year,
freeze after freeze, thaw after thaw:
loss will be healed,
life and voice recovered.

Words perennial as the seasons
come back and back around,
small sagas of coal and delight,
and the good night
full of music, talk, and food
passes, as Danny has,
and we are taught again,
in our drowsy happiness,
something of eternity.