

BRAD EVANS

HOW BLACK WAS MY V A L L E Y

"Written with
authentic authority.
It is evocative and
excellent in every
possible way"
NEIL KINNOCK

*POVERTY &
ABANDONMENT
IN A POST-
INDUSTRIAL
HEARTLAND*

Repeater



“Brad Evans’ captivating history of south Wales is written with authentic authority. It is evocative and excellent in every possible way. Evans provides a cliché-free, myth-lancing account of a ‘Coal Colony’ discarded by the powers that were after tearing use and relentless abuse. He doesn’t turn away from the alchemy of poverty which ‘numbed ambition’ or the fates of lives corroded into disengagement, but he is tough enough to ‘hold to the glimmer within the darkness’. Sometimes lyrical, never romantic he offers analytical passion, acidic candour, some love, deep melancholy, dry mirth, scorn for nostalgia about ‘a past that never really existed’ and an unbreakable grip on truth. Dylan Thomas wanted ‘rage against the dying of the light’. Evans bids us join him in that.”

NEIL KINNOCK

“How Black Was My Valley is more than a memoir. Its in-depth analysis captures the beauty of the South Wales Rhondda valleys, mountains and rivers; reflects the dignity of the people, whose language and rich culture has been confronted by the despair of ‘poverty apartheid’ inflicted on abandoned mining communities. From his reflections on the impact of personal loss and destitution, Evans writes sensitively of time, place and circumstance, unpacking the historical detail behind events that shaped the valleys and blighted their communities. Each carefully constructed sentence, every beautifully recorded or imagined moment, is placed alongside tragedy’s reality, ensuring that the ‘view from below’, as lived by the women and men who remain in the grip of economic marginalisation, is heard.”

PHIL SCRATON, AUTHOR OF *HILLSBOROUGH: THE TRUTH*

“Anybody interested in the history of working class resistance, and people’s daily struggles when confronting deep poverty blighting post-industrial communities should read this devastating study.”

PAUL MASON, AUTHOR OF *POSTCAPITALISM*

“Evans’ beautifully crafted words and thoughts are now seared into me forever. Sit with each chapter for a while as its true devastation dawns on you. These are tales of survivance when the outcome looks preordained because of neglect and cruelty, told with a level of detail that truly immerses. Thank God these stories are now being told. The boy of the valleys has come home and roared.”

LUCY EASTHOPE, AUTHOR OF *WHEN THE DUST SETTLES*

“This heartrending book summons powerful spirits from a great well of suffering. People in the valleys of South Wales remade the United Kingdom in the twentieth century, but have been far beneath the concerns of political and economic elite for decades. Brad Evans refuses to ignore these people — his people — as he tallies the steep cost of their abandonment. With striking insight, he shows how neglect has blocked the way to their future. As places in between, valleys can also be passages through. From within the darkest shadows of late Great Britain, both Evans’s prose and Meza’s haunting artwork allow us to glimpse a new vision of folk history from the deep: but it warns that humanity has taken the wrong path, and the light ahead may be too dim to guide us.”

VINCENT BROWN, PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

“Brad has gone down the mines and extracted a wealth of history that had been covered in soot and given serious literary attention to a vital yet overlooked aspect of working class and south Welsh life... a passionate, political, and personal retelling of the history of a place most people aim to avoid.”

RHYS THOMAS, AUTHOR OF *THE FUTURE OF WALES*

“A phenomenal, poignant memoir that pulsates with the militant passion and mordant wit of a Welsh Valleys landscape ravaged in turn by the forces of white-on-white colonialism and globalisation. Oscillating between acute socio-economic-political observation and lush, almost mystical lyricism, it is a must read for anyone interested in British social history and all fans of stunningly beautiful prose.”

GARETH OWEN, HUMANITARIAN DIRECTOR, SAVE THE CHILDREN

“This is a crucial, driven, and necessary piece of work, fuelled by righteous rage and dismay at how certain social strata (living, loving, hoping human beings) are deemed dispensable once their utility has been wrung dry. The chapter on the Aberfan catastrophe illustrates the ferocity with which the establishment looks after its own; if you finish this book without a sense of furious lament, then look to the carbonisation of your soul.”

NIALL GRIFFITHS, AUTHOR OF *OF TALONS AND TEETH*

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IN A
POST-INDUSTRIAL
HEARTLAND

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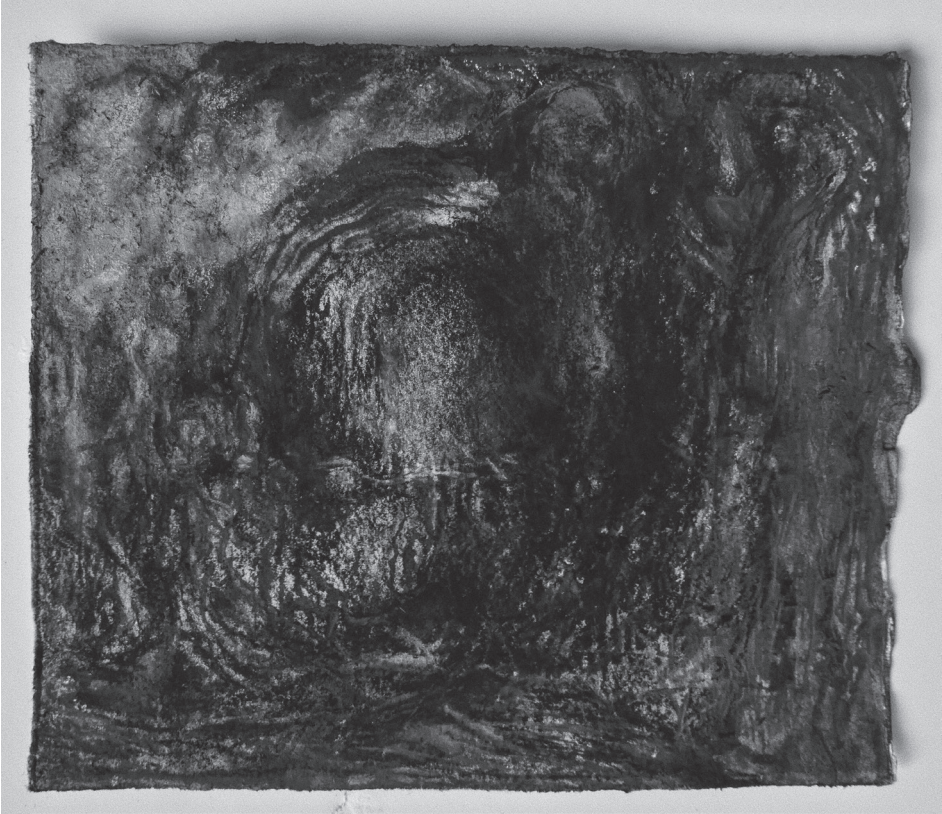
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 **Black** is the colour of the story of my life. Looking back, I now see it has worn me far more than I wore it. It is a melancholic bind holding forgotten communities together. It is the open wound — a devastating loss of innocence still cutting deep in these long-abandoned lands. Black is Home. The colour of my childhood. Deadly poor, yet still full of memories of love. Black is the tone of this tremendous fiery earth, which was once sung by choirs of promise who previously gave hallowed voice to this darkened world. Black is the suffering of my forebears and neighbours, too many lives taken too soon. Black is the cavernous depths now flooded by primordial waters. An infernal abyss, which still proved better than nothing at all. Black is the colour of an ecology of suffering, where nature has reclaimed what life never could. Black is the feeling of an atmosphere of misery, of dark forebodings and a darker comedy, laughing out of scorched forests unto the final, the last, suffocating breath. Black is the abiding memory of a permanent depression, as certain as the shadows that set over these fated lands. Black is the colour of the faces of ghosts, whose ancestral rhythms have been corroded by the dust of time. Black is a memory of pitiful sorrow. The colour of defeat dressed by those living within mountains of the mind. But black is also the story of the forgotten poets of a history. Those whose words have made the earth tremble and weep.



ABERFAN

The town lay silently at the threshold of the passing storm. In one direction the dark clouds were continuing on their unrelenting journey, soaking the helpless lands below. In the other direction, the sky radiated the deepest of reds that even made the sun envious, ceremoniously accompanied by a perfectly symmetrical marriage of two jubilant rainbows. The air was an unsettling mix of heat and damp, which was further compounded by the immensity of the contrasts. A few family members joined us on the roof, wanting to observe the awesome power of nature in its most unmediated form. Several hand-held phone cameras appeared as everybody wanted to capture this moment. But what were they really attracted to? The beauty or the sublime terror? As I take a step backwards, I look upon the multiple screens, which held high in unformed procession multiplied the appearance of the coloured arcs across this beckoning horizon of hope and rebirth. It was a sight to behold, but it also deeply unsettled me as I am haunted by the symbolism. I suddenly felt the true weight of an unbearable sadness as I am returned to a land over 5,000 miles away. And as the sadness washed over me, all I could imagine was the colour being drained from these iridescent curves to leave before us a parade of white arches that have become so iconic to the story of the valleys. How does nature become the source of such unending lament?

It was 27 October and we had spent the earlier part of the day buying flowers for the family *Ofrenda*, or offering, as part of the Day of the Dead celebrations that were to begin in the coming days. The first day in this Mexican town is set to commemorate in particular those whose lives were tragically cut short in accidents

or other violent acts. I find myself struck by the significance of this festivity; from the way it brings colour to death and the way it creates a healthy discussion on memorialisation. But the sadness doesn't leave me, for I know on this exact day just over half a century ago a funeral was held in a far-away village, which has shadowed the life of the peoples of the Welsh valleys ever since. Some tragedies are so exceptional that the place in which they occurred will be forever marked by the unhealable wounds they leave on the still weeping earth. In Wales the place where that wound is most visible goes by the simple pronounceable name, Aberfan. Maybe I was still being haunted by the previous night's "entertainment", having watched the dedicated episode from the Netflix series *The Crown*, which curiously brought me closer to the tragedy than anytime I could remember. It's strange how we sometimes need distance in order to have a deeper and more intimate connection. I had been trying in vain to convey what life was like in the place of my birth to my Mexican in-laws, then realising this episode at least conveyed the look of my childhood. Despite the glaring inaccuracies in the narrative and the setting, it was the familiarity to it all that brought this little town in Wales back into my migrated heart. I went to school in a Victorian building that looked exactly the same, I ran home through the same rain-sodden streets, I lived in the same terraced stone houses, I looked through similar windows that only mirrored others who lived exactly the same, and I too lived with a permanent reminder of one of those towering manmade mountains, which defined the scorched hillsides and would leave a lasting melancholic trace.

But it wasn't just the cultural memory of Aberfan and the poignancy of the date that was the real source of my troubles. For the first time in my life, I was experiencing what was commonly termed "writer's block". A metaphorical wall arrived as I faced the reality of a cascading blackness that emptied so much from our communities. The time had come to start writing about this tragedy, and I had never before felt such a weight marked by an absence that still appeared unresolved. I

wanted to say something meaningful, humane, something that might resonate. But I also knew I didn't want to be parasitic to this tragedy. Heaven knows the people of Aberfan have suffered enough from those kinds of extractions. My wife tried to offer comfort and asked a straightforward question, which had more resonance than she could ever have imagined at the time: "Why do you need to include it in the book?" We need such questions to allow us to put everything into perspective. Still, she kept asking the same "Why?" There were after all numerous authoritative books written on the tragedy from both survivors and academics from outside the valleys who have meticulously documented the failures and done a great service to those communities in the process. I didn't want to repeat these efforts, nor try to appropriate the experience of others. That was my dilemma, for I also knew it was impossible to write a history of the valleys without Aberfan. Yet how could I possibly do justice to an event, which really does expose through the arrival of a tragedy so devastating and so difficult to comprehend at a basic human level the limits of all words, the futility of language? Nevertheless, I knew it had to be written, for the haunting was too great to ignore. The tale of those poor innocent children would become us all as we lived in the shadows of their absence. The loss of a child is the loss of a future. The loss of so many, the loss of a collective vision of promise stopped dead in its wake.

While the English were still hungover from celebrating that Wembley victory, on the morning of 21 October 1966 the residents of the Merthyr Tydfil area awoke to see the place covered in a thick grey fog. This was the start of another eerily familiar day. At around 7:30am in the nearby small village of Aberfan, above-ground workers started to arrive at Tip No. 7. They noticed something wasn't right but had no means for communicating as the telephone cable had been stolen. In the centre of the village, directly below, young children were making their way to Pant Glas (Green Hollow) Junior School. They would no doubt have been excited. It was a Friday, and the school holidays were about to begin. Some probably even

hurried to school, knowing it would be over as the midday bell struck and its church-like sounds echoed across the valley. But just after 9am, the lights in the school began to flicker and a loud rumbling noise could be heard in the distance. Some villagers thought it was an earthquake. Others thought it was a tremendous storm. The mountain began to tremble and as if some infernal force could no longer be contained, it started cascading into the fog of the valley. But this was just the start. Moving earth broke water main supplies, only adding to the intensity as the slag heaps above rained down with catastrophic force. Approximately 105,000 cubic meters of discarded coal waste slid into the community and engulfed the school and houses below. Terrified little voices cried out. But everything was black. There were few signs of light. And soon everything fell silent. Children could no longer be heard. Nature stopped its violent scream. The birds stayed muted. 116 children and 28 adults were killed. Half the town's child population gone. In a small village of 4,000, everybody knew the children who would no longer be seen playing in the streets. Their blackened bodies dug up for identification, only to be reburied on the nearby hillside. The local Bethania chapel, which was once so central to local life, became a mortuary on that day. Like most things, it would fall into disrepair and close its doors as yet another symbol of abandoned hope. Volunteers took to the mountains and built a sandbag wall, hoping to stem the continued tide. Death certificates were handed out at the local chip shop. A mass burial took place on 27 October as an entire village, except the remaining children who were kept away, marched through its streets. Arm in arm, their silence broken only with cries. They wore their finest black suits reserved for weddings and funerals. The grieving families were flanked on the pavements to the cemetery by the police, ambulance services, firemen, Salvation Army volunteers and many others also dressed in black. Curtains were drawn as a symbol of personal loss. The procession walked slowly up the hill, also a unique feature of mining in these valleys, wrapped in a blanket of dignified

exhaustion. Arriving at the expanse where their children were laid to rest, they looked upon the two symmetrical graves lined with little white coffins. Were they trenches? Or mirroring the layout of the terraced streets below, which invaded by a darkness still presented togetherness? A black bird flying over looked down upon the giant cross of wreaths, which were donated by people from all over the world, appearing like a distress call to the heavens arriving too late. Or maybe it was a demand for an answer from above? Why did the mountain slide exactly when the children were sat in their classrooms? Why not one hour before? Why couldn't it have waited until three hours later? Why not in the dead of night? A school made of flowers sits besides, a reminder of the fragility of it all. Thousands of mourners gathered in the cold as the light touch of rain continued to remind there would likely be more of the same. As they gathered, the shadows of the remaining Tips that had stolen their children were visible in the near distance. Charles Wesley's "Jesu, Lover of My Soul" was mournfully sung to the tune of "Aberystwyth". The latter composed by the same John Parry who wrote "Myfanwy" and who was born in the neighbouring Merthyr Tydfil. The first chorus was tearfully requited to a still silent God:

Jesu, lover of my soul,
 Let me to Thy bosom fly,
 While the nearer waters roll,
 While the tempest still is high:
 Hide me, O my Savior, hide,
 Till the storm of life is past;
 Safe into the haven guide;
 O receive my soul at last!

The memorial service for the children of Aberfan lasted 13 minutes. What else could be said, when the pain was eternally suspended in the unforgiving air? Besides, how could one possibly mourn what was such an incomprehensible absence,

which despite the appearance of representatives from every religion and political stripe, nothing any of them would say could bring their little spirits back to life? The valley now had a tragedy everybody could connect to with broken dreams and damaged hearts. The dirty black waters that flooded the village after the slide would soon be coursing through the veins of its people. Aberfan was not a place any of us needed to visit. The community which lost its children wasn't simply a location on a map, even though we knew it was just over the mountain from us. Aberfan was a tragedy we all learned to share in classrooms built just like those upon which discarded black rocks of no value fell upon disposable children with such indiscriminate abandon. Aberfan still haunts the collective memory of the valleys, its history, its suffering, its fascination with the reality of death, its political neglect. If the disaster had people questioning what God could ever oversee such a killing of innocence, in many ways, it would also define the secular life of the valleys and even the wider landscape of industrial Britain. Yet some are still on the surface, in danger of forgetting perhaps what happened in a few seconds as a catastrophe which was building momentum for decades washed everything away and whose name is still pained by the momentous loss.

Aberfan was the unbearable that resided in the unreachable depths of the blackness. Survivors would speak of its reckoning as coming face-to-face with a darkened abyss. What is a tip, after all, if not the bowels of the earth, the pit below, ripped out from where it belongs, and its very naming turned inside out? As one tip worker recalled,

I was standing on the edge of the depression, sir. I was looking down into it, and what I saw I couldn't believe my eyes... It started to rise up slowly at first, sir. I still did not believe it, I thought I was seeing things. Then it rose up after pretty fast, sir, at a tremendous speed. Then it sort of came out of the depression and turned itself into a wave, that is the only way I can describe it, down toward the mountain... towards Aberfan village... I was looking down the

crevice, sir, down at the drop, and it seemed to me like as if the bottom shot out.

Aberfan was a testimony to colour. Black within black, depth upon depth, dust layering over dust, as the world sank beneath. The streets of Aberfan rose that day as the tormenting hill continued to breathe from within. Into the night, the smoke billowed from the ground as the black carried on creeping into the town. But what made that blackness so terrifying was its movement. Mining communities had lived in the shadow of the black for as long as they could remember. It was respected. Yet often, as with death, when the blackness was feared it was because they were heading in its direction. That gave them a semblance of control, or at least a belief that the dark matter could be tamed. Aberfan was different. The abyss itself was moving towards. And once it was unleashed, it showed no mercy for the innocent or the town in which they dwelled. That which was meant to be static and fixed into place, showed how it could move at tremendous speeds, like a black bolt of lightning striking across darkened skies to leave mortality in its pass. Death is not meant to run that fast.

Aberfan was buried underneath what the *South Wales Echo* at the time called a “black glacier”, and the BBC later described as a “glistening black avalanche” of liquefied coal waste, the lingering memory of the colour is what dominates the encounter. “It was suddenly growing darker”, Hettie Taylor, one of the child survivors, recalls, “and we couldn’t understand it”. Other child survivors like Bernard Thomas remembers the “wall of black”, Gareth Groves “a black wave of muck”, Gaynor Madgwick “turning my head seeing this black mass and trying to get up and run for the door... Then it was blackout”, Phil Thomas of a “rumbling noise” followed “then by quiet and black”, and Alan Thomas who, also speaking about the “black mass”, added, “Every time we opened a classroom or took windows out, there was nothing there — it was just a black canvass from ceiling to the door”. In all the recollections, the colour is the same.

Everything returns to the black valley. As another survivor Susan Robertson explained, "My abiding memory of that day is blackness and dark. I was buried by a horrible slurry, and I am afraid of the dark to this day." A fear that also stayed with Gerald Kirwan, who admitted "since that day I don't like the dark". Aberfan was a trauma that took its toll upon the survivors from within for decades. How terrifying must it have looked to see that black avalanche emerging through the deep white mist that hid its reckoning, until it arrived. But the black remained ever-present, and its infinite absence was revealed to be a force that contained all, for the peril it consumed remained inseparable to the way of life in these towns. And it would also carry over as the community laid its children to rest. "We just couldn't picture anything else", one of the bereaved parents Marylyn Brown explained. "The one thing I remember was all the people walking on the streets, obviously all dressed in black, walking along the main road to the cemetery. It was one mass of black."

Some lost more than most people could ever comprehend. Others lost everything. John Collins had his entire family wiped out as the family home was washed away with his wife and children inside. "It was as if life never existed", Collins told, "There's nothing left". The first rescuers on the scene were the town's women and older children. In a state of bewilderment, they were left to frantically scour the mass with their own bare hands. Most of the men were either sleeping or down in the mine as the day shift and night shift changeover had already taken place. The speedy arrival of the men from the pits with headlights still on was a welcome relief, for they more than any other knew how to dig the earth. They would soon be joined by the Mines Rescue Service, who were often tasked with dealing with explosions and fatalities below. The miners worked in teams and divided the ground as they would normally when cutting the seams. Aberfan was an ecology of suffering, which had turned this world upside down. The tragedy also symbolised a historical conjuncture where both religion and industrialisation had to

reckon with their own histories, the false claims of their binding myths, from which neither has recovered. We might also say the contemporary fascination with the labours of man and its destructive impact on the environment, which geologists now term the Anthropocene in relation to the untold devastation humans have brought to the planet, could be literally traced to this catastrophic moment. If we needed to come face-to-face with the realisation most “natural disasters” were the fault of human excessiveness and not simply a smiting phenomenon from a testing God or a freak pattern of nature, surely Aberfan sets the tragic scene? This would bring to light two remarkable developments, which we tend to so often take for granted today. The remarkable power of televised humanitarianism, along with the inevitable problems such media spectacles can create despite all their best intentions. Aberfan was, in the words of the New York-based photojournalist Chuck Rapoport, “the first major disaster of its kind that was televised”. He arrived for *Life* magazine to document what he called “The Town Without Children”. Rapoport was not alone. Over 2,000 volunteers and reporters would eventually arrive, though it was already too late to help the children. No child was brought out alive after 11am. There were less than 100 minutes to save the poorly beloved of Aberfan. Those who were brought out after were taken to the chapel, their lifeless bodies laid on the pews and covered in blankets for the parents to go and identify. That place held a different kind of silence.

Black is the colour of the night. And as the night descended upon Aberfan, so a different kind of illumination set in. Silhouetted pictures of miners were set among a ruin of the present, which because of the atmospheric presence of the smoke from the burning fires below looked more and more like a scene from the Somme. As *Life* magazine’s London bureau chief Jim Hicks told: “No one who endured this night would ever forget it — the phantasmagoria of coal dust and smoke”. Other images that focused on the homes looked like a chaotic film set, as the miners and professional rescuers were now

trying to manage the presence of well-intentioned volunteers who frequently got in the way. Nightfall was also backlit so that a world could be witness to every second of a tragedy unfolding. Such desire for witnessing carried over into the days ahead. We cannot underestimate how important some of this was in terms of how we remember Aberfan today, even if locals soon became very weary of outsiders. Rapoport is notable here. Having arrived in the village on 29 October (the same day as Queen Elizabeth), Rapoport found the village a “hostile ground: sad, angry, wet and cold, half of it still covered in grime from the tip’s fallen slurry”. By the time he arrived attitudes to journalists were already strained. Rapoport tells of a notable incident in the pub where he was staying when he came across the “toughest man in the valley”, Dai George, who allegedly had a great dislike for journalists. He recalled how he convinced George he wasn’t a writer but a “poet with a camera” quoting back to him Dylan Thomas as he won over the locals’ affection. Rapoport would end up staying in the village until Christmas Day of that year. Of the many striking and black-and-white photographs he produced depicting the aftermath, the one that’s stayed with me is of a single child in a playground weighing down upon the air as they are propped up by a merry-go-round. His gaze is fixated on the ground before him. His body suspended in the fall. The world may be spinning, but this boy in this park is lonely, isolated and frozen. What is going on in this child’s mind as his chest is pressed against those cold steel bars, on apparatus which only gives merriment in the company of others who gift you their energies as they push the passenger into a delirium that sends the head spinning with the delight of friendship? Like so many of Rapoport’s intimate photographs, this image tells so much through its sorrows, solitudes and silences. And as his moving photographic essay also told, everything for the months that followed, the continued rain and the falling snow, the laughter and cries, marriages and divorces, births and deaths, happened within the shadow of the tips.

Many of the journalists who visited Aberfan behaved with integrity. Deeply troubled witnesses to something that was startlingly horrific, they also tried to make sense of the devastation and pain encountered. We might recall the infamous words of the television presenter Cliff Michelmore, who reported on the evening of the disaster and was visibly affected:

Never in my life have I seen anything like this. I hope I shall never see anything like it again. For years of course the miners have been used to disaster. Today for the first time in history the roll call was called into the street. It was the miners' children.

Michelmore's account was touching because it was genuine and felt. He wasn't following a formula or telling viewers how they should feel, which is so common in disaster coverage today. Moreover, as Aberfan also showed, from the very inception of disaster coverage, when a catastrophe becomes a media spectacle, what matters most is the image of its occurrence. As one rescue worker recalled, "I was helping to dig the children out when I heard one photographer tell a little kiddie to cry for her dead friends, so that he could get a good picture — that taught me silence". There was a story to be told, stories to be sold, and so the town was overtaken by outsiders who wanted to tell it. Aberfan became a spectacle of a catastrophe consumed by the spectacle's own ambition. Just as the Americans and Russians were setting out to place their satellites into the orbital skies, so the idea that what was local would become global was already being played out through daily broadcasts. But there needed to be a filter to this news of the world. And when it concerned nowhere people, that filter was most often refracted through the lens of a rupture of epic proportions. Moreover, with answers already set, too often the narrative was presented to merely confirm preconceived ideas about the people swallowed up, not to mention the desire to sensationalise the disaster in order to sell copy. A situation that would be later fictionalised

in Louise Walsh's *Black River*, which was partly inspired by residents' testimonies. Stereotyped narratives concerning residents of Aberfan would become more apparent once they ended up embroiled in legal disputes over compensation, along with fractious discussions with the National Coal Board and politicians concerning who was actually to pay to take away the unstable and psychologically wounding tips, which hovered over the village like mountains of death. The veteran Welsh reporter Vincent Kane, who has spoken at length about the failure of the media in supporting the communities in their times of need, wrote of these deadly mounds that encircled the village, six of which it should be added were already pensioned, as being the "seven pillars of sombre unwisdom".

Aberfan was a thunderous cry which still echoes across our shared landscapes of lament. It began with an unsettling sound. Then a torturous silence. A calamitous scream from the black earth matched by the inaudible voices of the drowned. But soon that cry turned to derision, the disbelief doubled by a catastrophe of an entirely political kind. Those in power sought a different kind of silence. A silencing of the truth. Nobody was to blame, it was insisted. Part of this was driven by the agenda of Lord Robens who, as Chairman of the National Coal Board, continually presented himself as a defender of the coal. In truth, not only would he invoke conditions of precarity to maximise profits, but he would also oversee widespread colliery closures and speed up the industry's decline. During his decade-long stewardship, the number of collieries in the United Kingdom fell from 698 to 292. In Wales, the situation was particularly acute, with the mining industry facing daily pressures to be either more profitable or close, which in practice meant doing everything to present the industry in a favourable light. The BBC documentary series *The Long Street*, hosted by Kane and narrating the history of coal in the Rhondda, was released in the spring prior to the disaster. Telling of the proud history of the miners' lives, it also captures this sense of unease. Having taken a few days to arrive at the scene, because he was being sworn in

as Vice Chancellor of Sussex University, Robens' original denial of the known presence of a water spring upon which the tip was dangerously formed set the basis for so much acrimony. Yet while the disaster Tribunal was clear in its damning verdict of the National Coal Board, nobody was ultimately held responsible. The nine named individuals were largely absolved. None lost their jobs, and indeed many went on to work at higher pay grades. One of the most difficult things to comprehend was how Aberfan was an abdication of responsibility from those who were meant to represent those people the most. As John Collins stated, "I was tormented by the fact that the people I was seeking justice from were my people — a Labour government, a Labour council, a Labour nationalised coal board". A situation later felt as the communities were badly betrayed by the Cardiff MP George Thomas, or Lord Tonypan dy, who was a miner's son. Then Minister of State for Wales, Thomas was one of the first politicians to arrive at the scene of the catastrophe. There he publicly lamented to the press how "A generation of children in Aberfan has been wiped out. There is an abundance of tips of this sort in Wales, and we shall be looking for the possibilities that it could happen again." Despite his early protestations, Thomas's offices were later occupied by grieving mothers who emptied upon its floor and desks bags of black sludge from the mountains the authorities were refusing to take. He would later be part of a political pact that orchestrated pressure on the community to pay for its removal. Thomas himself later moved to the right of the political spectrum, showing admiration for Thatcher and also being invited to speak at the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana. Royalty might be pardoned for not feeling connected to the tragedy. The Mall was after all a million miles away from Moy Road, which was obvious to anybody who observed Queen Elizabeth's eventual visit eight days after the tragedy first struck, regardless of how much it was subsequently reasoned and the deepest of regrets stated. Her arrival also came a day after the last child's body was recovered from the earth.

Moy Road was situated directly opposite Pant Glas school. It also felt the neglectful weight of history bearing down. Today the street starts at Number 11, as the houses numbering 1–10, which were in the path of the storm, were destroyed. I recall another photograph, which is also difficult to forget. Three men are pictured outside a home, its exterior wall has been painted in a coating of the black. It wasn't uncommon to see valley terraces dusted in charcoal, but this was more than the slow build-up of black particles that were weathered upon the sides of homesteads. As one elderly man appears to be shovelling the debris, another looks resigned to the scale of the task. A third is bent over, just perhaps as a reminder of the visible reckoning of the furies and the fates. What on earth seems an unspoken feeling, precisely the earth is the devastating reply. You have the sense of something terrible, but what exactly is difficult to tell. Did the earth arrive to this dwelling or was it summoned up from within? The rooms are full, and yet the barren emptiness of the land's spatial inversion is so apparent. And what would happen if its pennant sandstone structure, less a castle but still often a tested barricade against the sweeping elements, was removed? Would we be left with a mausoleum, or a ghost made of the mountain, all negative and compact? Would its interior be petrified, catastrophically concentrating the blackness in a manifesting void of a home? Might everything within be embalmed, until it too was eventually returned to dust? A pandemonious chamber of an impression casting the vanished, solidifying a shadow of a valley through which nobody shall walk? Or might the mountain feel regretful at the shape of its own disaster, having to look upon what it became and what it displaced? Maybe that is why it always feels like it is raining in this valley. For those houses in this world became so full of mourning, through its broken-out windows we observed there only to be an incommensurable blackness within.

Aberfan's tragedy was that it had all been prophesised. There had already been tip slides in the town in 1944 and 1963. Yet even though it was clear to locals, who continued to raise alarms

about the ongoing flooding the village was experiencing and trying to insist to local authorities that the slide in 1963 was dangerous, not a single inspector was sent from Cardiff to survey the fallout. It was, as Kane observed, a mere “dress rehearsal”, all fitted in the darkest of worn garments. More neglectful still was the failure to observe the recommendations of the Powell Memorandum dedicated to preventing *The Sliding of Colliery Rubbish Tips*, which was authored in 1939 following a major slide a short distance from Aberfan that led to a change in the actual route taken by the ancient River Taff, and later reissued in 1965 following an alarming incident at Ty Mawr Colliery in the Rhondda. Still, for the children, the tips were such a source of wonderment. In the summer prior to the disaster they would bathe in the spring waters that they dammed to create ponds, like their own natural hot springs. And like so many children from the valleys, they looked upon those tips as places of mysticism, adventure and discovery. Aerial photographs of the tips show just how monumental they were over the small town. As one of the children Alan Thomas observed of number 7 with also a tragic foreboding:

The only way I can explain the tallest one is — Mount Everest. It was a big top peak. And whether it was the material, or the sun from the summer, this rock used to get very hot, so we never knew for sure whether it was on fire inside, like a volcano, because when it drizzled in Aberfan or rained, that tip, the tallest of them all, would always steam. It would always look as if it was a volcano with smoke coming off it. So quite possibly it was on fire inside — we don't know.

Aberfan was the price of coal, now counted in an unquantifiable loss buried beneath the weight. As versed in the poem by Charles Mayo:

And the price of coal was the soul of these tales...
For never before was the price paid in children.

What value should be attributed to the loss of so many so tender in age? £50 was the initial offer. Four years later the insurers settled upon £500. Yet as the families reminded, no life can be measured that way. As one resident, Francis Smith, put it, "Everything lost its value in comparison with those children". Often when children die, they stay that age in our thoughts. For generations born in the valleys after Aberfan, those lost children were never our elders. We become the same age as them for a while, then invariably leave them behind. And as generations pass, it's easy to see why the memory fades, even if something of that day still remains and its traces are still subconsciously felt. We feel the trace alone, for they belong to a time that's no longer lived. Hence, to do justice to the children of Aberfan, we need to walk with them in the present and let their tragedy be our continued guide as we try to make sense of what followed in the aftermath of their absence. Words of the survivors must also be heeded as we try to make sense of the psychic life to a catastrophe, which cannot be measured in how much it costs financially to remove what is dangerous from the plains of sight. Despite all the talk of systems of power and neglect, too often we can lose perspective of the taken. While some newspapers decided to print the names of the victims, the community has preferred not to speak of them individually precisely because they wanted to keep them as one. We might see this decision in contrast to tragedies such as Hillsborough where the public naming of the 97 have become an integral part of memorialisation in the face of forgetting. Neither is right nor wrong, but maybe the difference is location. Hillsborough wasn't Liverpool. Aberfan was Aberfan. They died at home. Their oneness in death was never in question in terms of where the injustice that took their lives occurred. Maybe the name is also more difficult to utter when the child has yet to grow into its potential? And who could read all of those appellations without breaking down when sensitised to a force that also sought to erase what that name would come to embody? What I do know is that for anybody from the valleys who looks upon

the names of the deceased as they are written on the memorial cross adjacent to the graves, they will read all too familiar.

The legacy of Aberfan presented so many challenges in how a society was to deal with such collective trauma. What could psychology offer when survivors like Jeff Edwards felt they walked around with “death on my shoulder,” in reference to the young girl whose head rested upon him in the dark? As Sue Elliott, Steve Humphries and Bevan Jones wrote:

The treatment of people who’d suffered major trauma where death is close at hand was underdeveloped in 1966. What little was known came from the experience of “shell-shocked” soldiers after the First World War and the impact of military conflicts on men’s minds. Aberfan was something new and terrible in peacetime Britain — a disaster involving whole families and large numbers of young children.

Many didn’t want to give themselves over to treatment, because the culture of the victim wasn’t something to be entertained. But even the psychology when required was used against the community, as survivors’ compensation was subjected to the degrading practices of means-tested grief. The valleys had a proud history of fighting means-tested handouts, but it became part of the survivors’ tale. Moreover, the tests carried out on a number of the children really pushed the boundaries of acceptable ethical standards and have even been open to claims of abuse. “That film *Frankenstein* is exactly what happened to us”, Madgwick claimed, as she describes being taken to a psychiatric hospital and having all manner of tests conducted upon her, which she defined as a form of “torture”. An experience backed up by Edwards, who described being placed into a chair and having a headset applied with electrodes and flashing lights in procedures that are more often associated with serious mental illness. “Are you afraid of the dark?”, the children would be asked. “What do you think?”, was an unspoken reply. These tests were authorised by the Aberfan Disaster Fund after legal guidance

from their solicitors. This was in response to the Fund's intention to pay a small increase to the suffering families, especially to help with the trauma of Christmas. This followed the Charity Commission advice, which instructed, "before any payment was made, each case should be reviewed to ascertain whether the parents had been close to their children and were thus likely to be suffering mentally". How can we even begin to account for such a lack of basic humanism from an organisation tasked with upholding the charitable spirit, wherein both parents and children are tested in terms of how much they suffered before qualifying for meagre increases in support from donations that were given in good faith?

The sense of guilt was palpable. Fathers, uncles and other townsfolk carried a load, haunted by the thought that the labours of their toil were at least partly to blame for the torment. Many found solace in alcohol and silence. As one survivor explained, it wasn't that people "don't want to speak about them, it's because they can't". Mothers felt guilty for simply having sent their children to school that morning, for not saying the right goodbye. One mother was pictured staring out of her doorway, waiting in anticipation for her dead child who would never return home. Another took her own life, clutching a photo of her child in her hands. Rescuers felt guilty that they didn't bring out more children alive. They too became an often neglected part of this emotional economy of life-changing trauma. But the most tragic of all were the child survivors who also felt guilty. Guilty that they were alive, while their friends perished. Was it just sheer luck of having been sat at a particular desk? Why them? Why them? Living children thus became part of the haunting, as their joyful presence confirmed the absence of others and was more than some could take. "It took all the roses and left the thorns behind", one survivor was told, as the mother of another found her appearance too difficult to bear. So they also commissioned their own disappearance, staying out of sight, staying inside. Still the triggers continued, tormented by crashing sounds,

uncontrollably crying at the sound of groups of other children, haunted by the familiarity of the earthly smell, though never in a predictable way. I think of the way triggering today is so easily deployed in a world where everybody feels like a victim, and I feel ashamed by the comparison. The only persons who didn't feel guilt or remorse were the National Coal Board, indifferent politicians and efficacious bureaucrats, along with a number of unscrupulous journalists. But how can a people move on when the town is the trauma? When survival can't be survived? After the disaster, the pit kept tipping and those black mountains were not just nightmares of the mind only reappearing when nightfall set. A number of survivors spoke about how the evenings were difficult, especially when the rains were falling and the familiar streams returned. They had become watchers of the hills. Oversensitive to the slightest movement. But that was the point. The mountains were still there, and the debris continued to slide. Time and again, the village would continue to be flooded by the black waters from those towering mounds. No compensation was ever paid. It never is for such communities, who living on the edges of time are classed as uninsurable. The fear throughout the valleys was also contagious. Schools would be shut down at the slightest suggestion of a potential rift. Too many others wore the marks of sleepless nights. And while elsewhere children were being drilled to sit under desks in preparation for a nuclear attack, the children of the valleys had the memory of when the drill was real, and the enemy was not imagined for its flight path permanently shadowed over their lives. The skies did fall that day in a town whose name is more than just a name. Aberfan — a town, a mountain, a tragedy, a memory, a child, a people, a crime.

Two decades later, Jeff Edwards, who managed to somehow get his life on track and escape the village, found himself back in the valley as a witness. He was devastated to find the same post-traumatic afflictions that were present in the adults of the town he thought he had left behind, were now being repeated

by generations of the young and disinherited who were born after the devastation. “When I came home from London”, Edwards explained,

there was quite a lot of animosity in the community, people were hanging around the community and getting involved in drugs. When I was speaking to them, they told me traditionally they would have gone into the mining industry, but the collieries were closing, and they didn’t have those opportunities and they turned to crime and alcohol and drugs to alleviate the boredom and despair in their lives. Many struggled with their mental health, which sometimes manifested as suicide.

Edwards, for his part, did what so many who leave the valleys can’t bring themselves to do. He returned. I feel a person from the valleys’ relationship to those towns is like the natural pull of a magnet, which one of the poles wishes to break. You see yourself as the positive and the valley as the negative. You feel opposed to all it stands for, and yet still it pulls you back, pulls you into its invisible orbit. Often what you see has you clamouring for a repulsion, but still it pulls you back into its fields of lament. Edwards would become a highly respected local politician and community advocate who channelled what he noted to be his life-long “survivor’s guilt” into combating the new collective conditions of local depression. A striking blonde-haired child whose photographed rescue was also poignant, as he was the last to be pulled alive from the disaster, Edwards has campaigned tirelessly for the people of his town.

Aberfan was a lasting injustice that rained down upon a people for whom catastrophe became the norm. Beyond the tragedy, certainly the most contentious of all the subsequent battles was the removal of the tips. In just over a month, the Aberfan Disaster Fund had reached the unprecedented sum of £1 million (approximately £38 million today) from near 90,000 contributions. This would prove to be a great benefit to those in need, but also a curse. The media in particular took an

avid interest in the management of the fund, and so did the politicians who were keen on using the fund to strengthen their own political capital. Everything was drawn out as a community was denied the ability to move on. As the poet and novelist Laurie Lee wrote on his visit to the town:

Across from the school, and facing up the mountains stands a row of abandoned houses... Something has been done to clear them, but not very much. They stand like broken and blackened teeth. Doors sag, windows gape, revealing the devastation within — a crushed piano, some half-smothered furniture. You can step in from the street and walk around the forsaken rooms which still emit an aura of suffocation and panic — floors scattered with letters, coat hangers on the stairs, a jar of pickles on the kitchen table. The sense of catastrophe and desertion, resembling the choked ruins of Pompeii, hangs in the air like volcanic dust.

It took several months before work started on removing the ruins of the school. A new facility was then built and would open lower down in the valley in the year of my birth. In the same year the memorial garden on the site of the old school was opened by Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. It would take nearly two years of constant community pressure before Tip No. 7 was finally removed. And this was only done after the villagers agreed to pay £150,000 from the Disaster Fund to clear it, which amounted to some 10% of its overall proceeds. We can recall the words of Dylan Thomas:

The hand that signed the paper felled a city
Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath.

This extorted money would later be returned many years later with some kind of apology. Still, the tragic tends to find ways of returning in these towns. Much of the tip waste was subsequently relocated to a natural floodplain at the bottom of the village. It would raise the level by over ten feet. Part of the

idea was to flatten the past and create a playfield for children, including a football pitch whose sinking tendencies I recall from elsewhere in this vale. Yet the longer-term effects of this proved disastrous as it ended up being the cause of widespread flooding of nearby streets. Residents on estates such as Pantglas Fawr would now be pictured rescued on boats as muddy waters entered their homes. It happened in 1979 and again in 1998. Similarly, it was decided that, while the cause was undeniable, nobody was liable, accountable or financially blamed. Faced with this history, it's hard not to stigmatise as tragic a town whose stigmata are so visible to all. Yes, there's a greening, but there remains the blackness, seeping out of memory and into the fields that have their own ways to remind us of it all. So what we can say is the recovery is endless and the fight unending. But that's not just for this town, it is for the valleys complete.

Aberfan was the valleys. It was the shadow of us all. And for those reasons, it also showed in a very concentrated moment of horror to be a place full of humanism, dignity and pride. Tragedy often brings out the best of people. It shows their compassion, their care, their willingness to help, their shared frustrations and tears, their nakedness as the inhibitions and daily trivialities that so often preoccupy our thoughts and govern our lives temporarily dissipate. On that fateful morning, the miners had never toiled the earth so hard. And alongside helping with the dig, the wives and relatives shared what they did to provide for their families each and every day, but now for the entire community complete. The exhausted were fed, watered and kept warm, despite the continued heavy rains. And still the miners kept digging, even though it was clear that no further children would be brought out alive. How could they stop when there were bodies to be recovered from the depths of the black mountain? While its ambitions had succeeded in fulfilling its horrifying plan, something needed to be rescued out of the abyss and brought back into the light of the next day. I still can't get out of my mind the image of that schoolteacher David "Dai" Beynon, who was found pressed against the wall

of a classroom with his arms spread wide trying to protect the children who were stood behind him. Five suffocated children were held in his arms. A giant of a man, Beynon may not have been able to defeat the demon of the black mountain, but still he managed in that single act to show unimaginable humanism in death. He would later be eulogised in a poem by the Merthyr-born Leslie Norris. Some things deserve to be remembered, just as some tragedies refuse to be forgotten.

So what of that memory today? Can it say something to a world that would barely recognise those black-hilled towns? Could children today from any town in the valleys connect to that blackened time? They say that time is a healer. That may be true if the healing has a chance. But across generations, time is also forgetful. It can permit us to forget so that history repeats. Yet, observers to the events that surrounded the fiftieth anniversary of the disaster were notably struck by how its memory seemed more resonant than ever. Aberfan should never be forgotten, nor its place in history denied. There is no history of the valleys without Aberfan. It concentrates most its enduring blackness. There is no history of Wales without Aberfan. It has become an integral part of our national story. There is no history of coal without Aberfan. That which enriched the few and gave meagre sustenance to life, showed through the mist of the day its utter indifference to the plight. There is no history of socialism without Aberfan. A few miles down the road from where the red flag was first flown, how the vanguard failed when the collective most needed it. There is no history of ecology without Aberfan. What happens when the earth is unnaturally torn inside out, becomes a tale that makes Gaia continually sorrowful in these parts. There is no history of injustice without Aberfan. Time and again, those in power show most evidently here how they can provision alibis so that even the irrefutable appearance of truth can always be denied. And there is no history of the future without Aberfan. For it is in the presence of so many futures denied where we might just learn to appreciate the living.

Without question then, we have a duty to remember Aberfan. But it's not just what we remember, it's how we remember too. The coal that killed is no longer there. That has been reduced to a half-sunken wheel. Many of the bereaved parents have now died and been laid to rest with their children in Bryntaf cemetery, while those who still remain are no doubt still torn about keeping the memory alive. This is nothing new. A *New York Times* article from 1976 noted how Aberfan was already "Trying to Forget the Day Children Died". This was understandable. Memorialisation is after all a conflicted circumstance, fractiously torn between the desire to move on and the hope things may always be remembered. Memory and forgetting are twinned in this town. Thankfully there is no desire to return down below. There is too much madness in there. On the morning of the disaster, children and villagers noted how the coming earthly storm sounded like an earthquake. In many ways it was, though perhaps less defined by "aftershocks" than "afterflows", that like its catastrophic build-up, slowly seeped into the wider fabric of a now faithless bloodied shroud that was also stained with the faces of innocence. One of the most brilliant and kind intellectuals I ever had the privilege to meet and get to know was Zygmunt Bauman. A dignified man who fled persecution in the Soviet Union and later the Nazis, nobody could better read the historical moment. A central theory of Bauman's was how the collapse of industrialisation meant societies shifted from living within a time marked by solidity towards what he called our "liquid" modern times. In such times, we learn, nothing is fixed, no bonds secure, and nothing lasts. While such reasoning would evidently find its voice in the liquidity of the currency speculators that redefined the entire logic of global capitalism during the Thatcher years, I would begin to date its appearance on the day the children of Aberfan stopped breathing. For what they encountered was precisely a Liquid Terror that no fixed object could contain. And what would follow would be the washing away of everything the industrial world felt was permanent, lasting and undeniably true.

After that black river engulfed the town, many of its people believed less and less in those who served them. Aberfan showed the deep mistrust impoverished communities feel towards the Oxbridge-educated political classes, and even those who come from and yet forget the needs of the valleys. In fact, the response to catastrophe opened a rupture, after which the Labour Party's monopoly over the valleys would never be the same. Moreover, there was a realisation that if there was to be any kind of recovery, it was the community that needed to try and pull itself together. Yes, there were conflicts and yes there were divisions. There always are after a major disaster. Still, the survivors tried despite the denial. Women organised their own Young Wives Club and the men formed a choir to help vocalise what could never be said. The very first verse sang by the men would be Parry's "Myfanwy". They would practice in the Ynysowen School when it opened in 1974. Such responses are instructive. Along with simply finding reasons to believe in each other, which was a necessary step if they were to ever start finding reasons to believe in the world, perhaps the answer to a recovery was already there in affection shown to the poets of truth. As the locals understood all too well, it is the poet who speaks a shared ancestral language, for it is the poet who speaks the language of tragedy. They can also paint, photograph and perform the memory of suffering to touch something deeply human within us all. What's more, poets are not corrupted by the politics of the righteous, nor do they share a bed with those consumed by power and who come to such places from outside in order to save. They know life is complex, existence is fraught and full of imperfections. We see this in the Aberfan artist Ron Jones' work "Unspent Youth", in which the strident ride of the miner is still clouded over in a blue that's not of summer, but a deeper melancholic hold. Jones was born in 1926 and witnessed first-hand how the depression of the valleys took different forms, culminating in that disaster 40 years later. Yet, as Jones (who was also notably inspired by the history of the Spanish Civil War and seeing men marching down the valley en

route to Barcelona in the 1930s to fight the fascists) and others testify, it is the poetic spirit which keeps us alive in the darkest of times. Is it any coincidence the valleys men returned to the power of verse and song? As the fiftieth anniversary dawned, the poet and writer Owen Sheers brought his own creativity to the cause by telling chapters of the story of Aberfan with renewed force. Featuring a captivating cast, *The Green Hollow* brought together the personal with the poetic to recast words that read so familiar, yet still manage through a new visual composition to evoke something timeless in the human. One verse in particular stands out as an evocative testimony, with Sheers retelling the tragedy from the eyes of a journalist visiting a catastrophe that destroyed a town:

I couldn't help seeing
one specific sight —
The curtains of a house in a short terraced street
I'd passed earlier that day.
They were closed, which in Wales
Not at night, means only one thing —
a house where the seeds of death
have been sown.
I walked on, but as I did
I looked down the rest of that row,
which is when I saw —
the curtains, they were drawn
in every window
Behind drawn curtains, 116 children's beds lie empty.

In the long night of Aberfan, it is undeniable how music is able to return something of the human within us. Songs of the valleys may be sorrowful. But they have depth all the same, which is where its imagination and the memory of its future resides. The poetic verse is the timeless testimony to the valleys' struggles and part of its ongoing fight against the omnipresent shadow of oblivion. So, in bringing a close to this chapter on the black-

fated life of the valleys of South Wales, there are times when as authors we need to appreciate the limits of the written word and encourage readers to look to other sources for guidance. There are times when words need to be spoken and there are times when the music needs to lift so at least we can find ourselves briefly floating above the vortex of an abyss that continues to spin. To honour the people of Aberfan then, I would urge pause, allow the air that fills our thoughts the chance to breathe once again, and let the music guide a more poetic reflection. It is not just about lamenting, if it touches something deeper within, for in the moment we reach those depths is when real change begins as the fire in the earth is reignited.

I imagine the book as a doorway. As the reader turns the next page, they look upon an opening into another world. Another time. Stepping through, they find themselves transported onto a mountainside. They look down upon the quaint little village in the distance. The sun is shining, but these are empty streets. There is silence all around. Quietly a song starts to travel up the valley. "Cantata Memoria: For the Children" greets them on the hill. It begins with the beautiful and delicate chaos of the pitter-patter of invisible feet. "All Things Bright and Beautiful" rings out in the sound of joyful children's voices. This was a song that was so often jubilantly exhaled by so many in the morning assemblies. But as if from nowhere the sound changes. A new chaos descends. Or is it more the order of society now revealing its truer nature? Industrial. Progressive. Massified. Determined. A baritone voice cries out to the nothing. In the black silence it searches. Nothing again. But something is there. A growing darkness. Dead and still growing, growing within. In this moment, "Myfanwy" can be heard, but her tragedy also keeps growing. And the children's names are spoken at last. Maybe it took children to sing out the names of those fallen, dignified together, for they know nothing of appropriation and can still speak so loudly for those who have been suffocated away? As the visitor to the still tranquil lands feels the sorrow of the

naming, another voice tells of who is to blame. “Buried by the National Coal Board” is reissued over and over. A forceful reminder of responsibility and neglect. But what does this mean as the music starts to fall silent? And what shall be wept when the shadow dies? Conducted by Karl Jenkins and written by Mererid Hopwood, “Cantata Memoria” is a lament for the valley. But it is also a poem sharing the same spirit of journey followed by Dante, as it moves us from the depths of suffering into the hope for a future in which the glimmer returns. To that end, it is a dream for a valley whose wounds are still so desperate to heal, and whose future will be forever defined as a land of the song.