

Coal - A poem by Mark Lewis, whose parents grew up in Brynmawr

Norman Lewis and Rina Caffarelli met in Brynmawr and got married in 1948. Mark Lewis arrived in 1950 and his sister Christina, arrived in 1951. A couple of years later they all moved to Somerset. After school Mark went to college in London to do Business Studies and after a couple of months working in the City of London realized it wasn't for him and so he went to Drama School. He has been an actor for over 40 years, and has worked extensively in Theatre TV and Film. He has also been writing seriously for about 30 years. He has written screenplays, a TV series, and many short stories and poems. His parents retired back to Brynmawr about 30 years ago and so Mark visits regularly. Although his Mum, Rina is no longer with us, his Dad, Norman is still going strong. This particular poem 'Coal' was the first of many lucky accidents. Not knowing if he was any good at poetry he took it to a workshop given by a famous Australian poet called Les Murray. After giving a hard time to all the practiced poets in the room, with very strong criticisms, Les picked up Mark's poem, read it to the room, and said, "It's all true mate, would you like me to publish it?" Mark fell off his chair and then said yes, while there was a sharp intake of jealous breath around the rest of the room. The poem was published in a literary quarterly called The Quadrant, and later was published in a book of the best work of the last 20 years of said magazine. Hey ho, funny old world!

*Coal.*

*Wood burns, wood grows, wood floats, wood flies.  
But coal, older not wiser, does more.  
Wood's grandfather, black-shiny, tougher,  
A class act in old ties and tails, smooth  
Designer bastard of cool, a brother to  
Jet and a cousin of Diamond rich chic,  
If you squeeze him tight, right, knuckled.  
The second best friend of Marilyn M, hardest,  
Creates lodges and peoples and brass bands,  
And brings down governments, eventually.  
Builds towns of grey-flecked stone, wet.  
Creates memories, riots, and police horses.  
Sells soap by the bucket and tin baths.  
Makes lands of deep holes like Swiss cheese.  
Kills families, but keeps them warm  
While waiting in church halls for news.  
Turns lungs to slop, and good breath  
Into choirs that sound like thick necked angels.*

*Crushes wood for millennia to create itself,  
And holds itself up with wooden props -  
So eats its children by God! Coal reminds us of graft,  
And places not to be, on our knees in water.  
It smiles and laughs at dart matches over a pint  
In a club like a shed at the bottom of a lane,  
Loud and Bingo-knighted.  
It takes parts of the world and connects  
Us into history - Wales, North, Scots' Land,  
Germinal and boiler rooms 'cross raging seas  
With Hairy Apes and shovels, and posh ladies  
Smoking, and Russian dirty snow.  
It lights us all and clogs the world dying,  
To return us all one day to carboniferous  
Forests of oblivion. It is our life giver,  
And destroyer. King coal, a merry old soil, coughs  
Our lungs out, about the town. Wood is a wimp -  
Wood only burns and grows and floats and flies.*