

James Deahl

## THE COAL

Once again I am leaving Pennsylvania,  
driving north as autumn closes.  
An early snow has edged the corn  
still ranked on hillsides;  
cattle offer their heavy breath  
to the still air.

How good the farms look  
standing among their bare trees.  
I can believe that in these houses  
fathers and sons  
are called to the same tables, still speak  
the same language.

Travelling towards the headwaters  
of the Allegheny, I realize  
all of the Pennsylvania relatives  
I knew in childhood  
are dead. All have gone to live  
in long rooms under the snow.

I notice hawks clinging to branches,  
talons ready for careless mice;  
and contoured fields shaped by the forces  
that shaped the land.  
Under the farms black coal lies like a hand  
steady on a bannister at twilight.

It is the hand of my father  
and the hand of his father before him  
dark and silent, never moving.  
And I see we must celebrate  
the coal; it is talking, recollecting,  
supporting our transient lives.

We must enter these November fields  
with songs of praise and gratitude  
knowing the earth is good.  
In the darkness of every root cellar  
apples wait in barrels, their flesh  
crisp as frost.

