

The Miner of Gold

Inspired by the history of miners in the California Gold Rush

Written by Kesavan Venkatesh

In eighteen forty-nine, my father's hands
shoveled the earth in search of precious gold.
His beard hung moist and scraped the ground, so its
graying patches were colored charcoal black.
He labored back and laid beside the fire.
He kept a dusty glass beside his wool
and gingerly sipped wine that Old Man Tom
had wrapped in cloths and brought from Cincinnati.

The twirling smoke and littered winds would cake
his throat. He pleaded for fresh air: the rhythmic
pounding his chest endured, the throbbing aches.
He felt his forehead burn, unsure if sun
or fever was to blame. Entrapped by Nature's
tortures, he grabbed his book and wrote at night –
in swirling strokes and unpredictable,
if not obscurely used, vocabularies –

of California's austerity,
of Joe who broke his back and could not stand,
of scars that marred his once pristine visage,
how waves of heat could rip invisible
textures in air and warp geometries,
how digging holes for months could numb the mind
and swap reality for plain deception,
and how his ink became his call to life.

A man's passion is chiefly tied to love.
"The inescapable" he wrote, in poor
cursive. The inescapable to him
was Ri, his darling girl. Her complex eyes
and slender frame would entertain his most
scandalous dreams. Within the howling storms –
the precipice of spring – he heard her call
his name in Nectar's sweet, golden whispers.

In eighteen sixty, him and Ri had me.

He left the mines, hung up his tools. For I,
he said, made him regret the futile days
he slaved away. Eleven years he was
the dust he washed off coins for feudal profits.
America's elusive dream had fooled
him too. The rich would thrive, the poor would starve.
"What came of mining gold?" I asked one night.

The stars were bright and I was nestled on my father's lap. I mapped the constellations while he pondered, "They say that men must bring home bread. But 'they' who preach have yet to spend a summer morning breaking stone. I saw a dream of life out West, of great expanses. But look what happened, son: a fractured knee, a restless cough, and swollen twisted ankles."

The years would pass. I traded childish musings for teenage angst. I found myself in brush strokes and pastel paints. Against the autumn sky, I placed my easel. Gentle breeze, fluorescent light green. My father sat while I colored his sunken lines and sharp contours. It was that night, September eighth, a full moon day, when after drinks my father slept for good.

I framed his face and elegized a parting thought:
my father,
tired but earnest,
simple yet soulful,
the miner of gold.

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