

The Village that Lost its Children – Laurie Lee

(Extract from essay)

Few people had ever heard of Aberfan until disaster struck it. It was just another of the small mining villages lying tucked away in the South Wales valleys – a huddle of anonymous terraced houses of uniform ugliness unrelieved except for chapel and pub.

Its heart was the coal-pit, and its environment like the others – the debris of a slowly exhausting industry: a disused canal, some decaying rail tracks, a river black as the Styx, a general coating of grime over roofs and gardens, and the hills above blistered with a century of mining waste.

Such villages learned to accept a twilight world where most of the menfolk worked down the pits. Many died early, with their lungs full of coaldust, and the life was traditionally grim and perilous. Disaster, in fact, was about the only news that ever came out of the valleys – the sudden explosion underground, miners entombed alive, or the silent death in the dark from gas. Wales and the world were long hardened to such news. But not to what happened in Aberfan.

A coal-mine sends to the surface more waste than coal, and a mining village has to learn to live with it. It must be put somewhere, or the mine would close, and it's too expensive to carry it far. So, the tips grow everywhere, straddling the hillsides, nudging the houses like black furred beasts. Almost everyone, from time to time, has seen danger in them, but mostly they are endured as a fact of life.

On the mountain above Aberfan there were seven such tips. The evening sun sank early behind them. To some of the younger generation they had always been there, as though dumped by the hand of God. They could be seen from the school windows, immediately below them, rising like black pyramids in the western sky. But they were not as solid as they looked; it was known that several had moved in the past, inching ominously down the mountain.

What was not known however was that the newest tip, number 7, was a killer with a rotten heart. It had been begun in Easter 1958, and was built on a mountain spring, most treacherous of all foundations. Gradually, over the years, the fatal seeping of water was turning Tip 7 into a mountain of moving muck.

Then one morning, out of the mist, the unthinkable happened, and the tip came down on the village. The children of Pantglas Junior School had just arrived in their classrooms and were right in the path of it. They were the first to be hit by the wave of stupefying filth which instantly smothered more than a hundred of them.