

Abandoned Mine

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Language of Chemicals and Probable Cause

Dave Seter

We scientists speak a language of chemicals and probable cause, chosen from the periodic table of elements and from a lexicon of government guidance documents.

Arsenic: known to cause cancer in people, and skin lesions.

Uranium: radioactive, used to make bombs, also harmful to kidneys.

We have measured these chemicals in the dust blowing off the copper mine, flowing in groundwater beneath, have collected samples with trowels and spoons, with peristaltic pumps and tubing snaked into

water wells.

We talk in terms of dose-response: how much can cause harm.

Parts per billion? Parts per trillion? The numbers sound

small but medical science says small amounts harm

the sensitive individual: the child, the pregnant mother.

The faces to whom we explain, growing familiar as studies

draw on, show worry, confusion, skepticism, anger,

in different measure depending on whether the face

is worn by pregnant mother or corporate investor.

Yes, we say, the mine probably caused these chemicals

to flow into neighborhoods in water, in dust.

Citizens want to know how arsenic, how uranium,

will affect their health, their wealth, today and tomorrow.

We've been trained in a language of scientific detachment

but grow less detached as we get to know the locals. No, we don't

live here, those of us from the

government—we're here to help you—

some hear it as truth, some as punchline to a joke.

Sometimes I say nothing when nothing
seems true.

—

Dave Seter is an ecopoet and the author of Don't Sing to Me of Electric Fences (Cherry Grove Collections, 2021). His poetry is informed by his career in environmental enforcement geared toward protecting drinking water and helping to heal the scars of mineral extraction in the Western United States.

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Dave's poem?

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