

JOE AND I ARE WALKING ALONG THE RIDGE OF KAYFORD MOUNTAIN IN southern West Virginia with Larry Gibson. Small wooden shacks and campers, including Gibson's simple wood cabin, dot the line of ridge where he and his extended family have lived for more than two hundred and thirty years. Coal companies are blasting hundreds of thousands of acres of the Appalachians into mounds of debris and rubble to unearth seams of coal. Gibson has preserved fifty acres from the destruction. His forested ribbon of land is surrounded by a sea of gray rock, pale patches of thin grass, and barren plateaus where mountain peaks and towering pines once stood. Valleys and creeks, including the old swimming hole Gibson used as a boy, are buried under mining waste. The wells, including his own, are dry and the aquifers below the mountain poisoned. The fine grit of coal dust in the air settles on our lips and leaves a metallic taste in our mouths. Gibson's thin strip of trees and undergrowth is a reminder of what has been destroyed and will never be reclaimed.

Gibson, sixty-five, stands five feet tall. He is wearing a straw hat and overalls, has a moustache, and usually walks his property with a loaded Glock .45 pistol. He left his pistol today in his tiny cabin, where he gets his electricity from solar panels and a generator. We are headed down a dirt road with his lumbering, twelve-year-old black dog whose name, Gibson tells us, is "very complex. His

name is Dog." Loss of habitat has driven the remaining wildlife, including bears and wild boars, onto his property: "When I was a boy you didn't see bears. You might see a paw print, but the coal companies done drove the bears in on us."

Larry Gibson was born on the mountain and spent his boyhood there. There were once sixty families clustered around the mountain, along with a small general store and a church. Gibson's father was a coal miner who had his leg shattered in 1956 in a mine collapse. The coal company did not pay any benefits. The bills piled up. The family sold its furniture. The house was seized, and for a few months Larry and his parents camped out under a willow tree. Gibson remembers that as a young boy he came upon his father during this time, a man who always seemed to him a tower of strength, sobbing.

The Gibsons—like the families of thousands of other coal miners, who in the 1950s could no longer find work as the mines were mechanized and diesel and oil replaced coal—were forced out of the mountains. They went to Cleveland, where Larry's father found work in a barrel factory. He later worked for Ford. Gibson moved back to the mountain after he retired from General Motors on disability.

"Livin' here as a boy I wasn't any different than anybody else," he says:

First time I knew I was poor was when I went to Cleveland and went to school. They taught me I was poor. I traded all this for a strip of green I saw when I was walkin' the street. An' I was poor? How ya gonna get a piece of green grass between the sidewalk and the street, and they gonna tell me I'm poor. I thought I was the luckiest kid in the world, with nature. I could walk through the forest. I could hear the animals. I could hear the woods talk to me. Everywhere I looked there was life. I could pick my own apples or cucumbers. I could eat the berries and pawpaws. I loved pawpaws. And the gooseberries. Now there is no life there. Only dust. I had a pigeon and when I'd come out of the house, no matter where I went he flew over my head or sat on my shoulder. I had a hawk I named Fred. I had a bobcat and a three-legged fox that got caught in a trap. I wouldn't trade that childhood for all the fancy fire trucks and toys the other kids had. I didn't see a TV till I was thirteen. Didn't talk on a phone till I was fourteen. There was crawdads in the streams down at the bottom of the mountain. I could pick them out with

my toes. Now nothing lives in the water. It stinks. Nothing lives on the land. And it's irreversible. You can't bring it back.

By the time he returned as a middle-aged man, the land of his boyhood was barely recognizable. His family's five hundred acres had shrunk to fifty. Old claims to mineral rights underground, many of them deeded by ancestors who could not read or write, gave coal companies the ability to seize the land. The spine of the Appalachian Mountains is being obliterated to gouge out the seams of black coal. The constant, daily explosions at the edge of his property—which in one typical week in West Virginia equals the cumulative power of the blast over Hiroshima—rains showers of rocks down on his property. We walk among the graves of his family cemetery on the crest of the hill. Coal operatives in the late 1980s stole more than one hundred and twenty headstones in an effort to erase the face of the cemetery and open it up for mining. These vandalized grave sites are now marked by simple wooden crosses. We stop at the grave for Larry's brother Billie, who died in 2004. His stone reads: "Back to the Mountains for which you loved and eternal peace that had eluded you."

"Buddy, when they was blastin' out here, for instance, when they was this close to me, they was blowin' rocks as big as basketballs," Gibson says. "Me and my uncle got caught in a dynamite blast four different times on this place, not on their place, on *our* place. It was fly rock. It was like *Star Wars*, where you see all them rocks comin' at ya in the movie. Well, this wasn't a movie."

He was able to save the cemetery near his house but watched helplessly in 2007 as bulldozers demolished an adjacent cemetery that also held family remains.

"They pushed one hundred and thirty-nine graves over a high wall," he says:

They left us eleven graves. It was Massey Coal. The graves are now surrounded by their property. It didn't belong to them. It belonged to my uncle, his grandfather, my great-great-grandfather. The cemetery was three hundred years old, but there was coal underneath. I always tell people, "Ya got to stay cool, ya got to stay calm, got to be responsible, reliable, credible." I was givin' a tour and lookin' across this valley when I seen this 'dozer goin' through my cemetery. I was jus' 'bout on my way back home to git one of my guns. An' I'm a very good shot. This is what they do in the coalfields. They do what they want, and then

they go fight it in court because they got the money and the attorneys and the time to do it.

He laments that in many of the grave sites there are probably no longer any caskets or bodies. The underground mining, begun more than a century ago, has created vast honeycombs beneath the earth that open huge fissures in the land, causing many of the graves to sink into the deep depressions. The wide cracks and gaping holes that dot the landscape mark the earth collapsing in on itself. Some of the cracks, three or four feet wide, run through the graves in family cemeteries. You look into the pit and see a deep, empty hole.

But Gibson refused to yield. He formed a nonprofit foundation in 1992 to protect the property. He has steadfastly refused to sell it to coal companies, although there are probably, he estimates, hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of coal beneath his feet. The relentless stripping of the forests, the vast impoundments filled with billions of gallons of toxic coal waste known as slurry, and the steady flight by residents whose nerves and health are shattered, has left Gibson one of the few survivors.

"There was one thing I was taught as a boy livin' in the coalfields," he says, "and that was bein' organized. We didn't know who the United States president was, but we knew the United Mine Workers president. We had learned to always fight back."

His defiance has come with a cost. Coal companies are the only employers left in southern West Virginia, one of the worst pockets of poverty in the nation, and the desperate scramble for the few remaining jobs has allowed the companies to portray rebels such as Gibson as enemies of not only Big Coal but also the jobs it provides. Gibson's cabin has been burned down. Two of his dogs have been shot and Dog was hung, although he was saved before he choked to death. Trucks have tried to run him off the road. He has endured drive-by shootings, and a couple of weeks before we visited, his Porta-Johns were overturned. A camper he once lived in was shot up. He lost his water in 2001 when the blasting dropped the water table. He has reinforced his cabin door with six inches of wood to keep it from being kicked in by intruders. The door weighs five hundred pounds and has wheels at the base to open and close it. A black bullet-proof vest hangs near the entrance on the wall, although he admits he has never put it on. He keeps stacks of dead birds in his freezer that choked to

death on the foul air, hoping that someday someone might investigate why birds in this part of the state routinely fall out of the sky. Roughly a hundred bird species have disappeared.

"By the way," he says, arching his eyebrows:

y'all bin talkin' to me fer an hour now, and y'all ain't never asked me my opinion on coal. I'm against coal. I think coal should be abolished, 'cause the science is in. Ther' been test after test after test 'bout the coal an' related disease that kills people. Coal-related disease that kills people who never worked in the mines. We lose forty-five hundred people every year who never worked in a mine except they live in the coalfields. Mostly a lot of them is women, a high percentage of them is women, because women's tolerance against coal dust is lower than men's. Now, you have this here black lung, which affects fifteen hundred men a year. And then we have the emissions code. You heard about the World Trade Center terrorists? You heard about them? Bombing, three thousand people dying, but have you heard that with the emissions of coal we lose twenty-four thousand people a year in this country? You know, eight times bigger than the World Trade Center. Nobody say anything about that. Then you have the something like six hundred and forty thousand premature births and birth defects, newborns, every year, every year, and nobody's doin' anything about that. Coal kills, everybody knows coal kills. But, you know, profit.

"They passed laws that ya can't go down in Charleston in certain places and smoke in public," he says:

Think 'bout it. I'm allowed to breathe this air here. The people within the coalfields are allowed to breathe the same air I'm breathin' because the profit margin is higher than the price of a man's life. So long as we can make a profit, we can step over the bodies, and the man can breathe the poisoned air. Why do they pass all these health and safety laws 'bout smokin' cigarettes in public places an' they let the kids go to school beneath a 2.5 billion-gallon dam filled with mine waste two hundred and fifty feet away from a preparation plant? As long as they're makin' a profit. But how do the people make a livin' here? The people have become submissive jus' like a woman who is

abused and beaten. An' they have a high degree of respect fer the people who are doin' it to 'em.

"I expect to lose my life to it, I guess," he says about his defiance. "I expect, somebody scared, you know, somebody who normally wouldn't do anything wrong, seeing me up here by myself. Because of my belief and my stand. And the fact that they may lose a job. And they got a baby on the way and one at home. They may lose their job, and they had a couple beers that day maybe. You know. And they see me. I'm hit, I'm hit, you know. Scared people make dangerous people. They act without thinkin'. An' the industry uses people like that.

"But if I stop fightin' for it, they'll take it," he says. "Do you know what it's like to hear a mountain get blowed up? A mountain is a live vessel, man; it's life itself. You walk through the woods here and you're gonna hear the critters moving, scampering around, that's what a mountain is. Try to imagine what it would be like for a mountain when it's getting blowed up, fifteen times a day, blowed up, every day, what that mountain must feel like as far as pain, as life.

"I'm not a highly-brained guy here," he continues, "don't have a lot of education. I just point at the common denominator of things: You screw up one thing, another is gonna fall, and if that falls something else is gonna fall, and how much more do we have to fall before we start saying, 'Whoa, there's something wrong here somewhere,' you know?"

"See that red pole up there?" he says, as we move toward the far end of the ridge. "It's a marker. From this corner across there, OK? What gets me about this is, my family owned this. And when I go up through here, I look at it as if I was walkin' on what was my family's before. *They* say it belongs to *them* now. An' 'member I told you how they took it? I look at it as if it still belongs to me and my family. But now you are on coal company property. You can be subject to arrest. You like peanut butter and pork and beans? That's what they serve ya in jail now. I'm pretty regular."

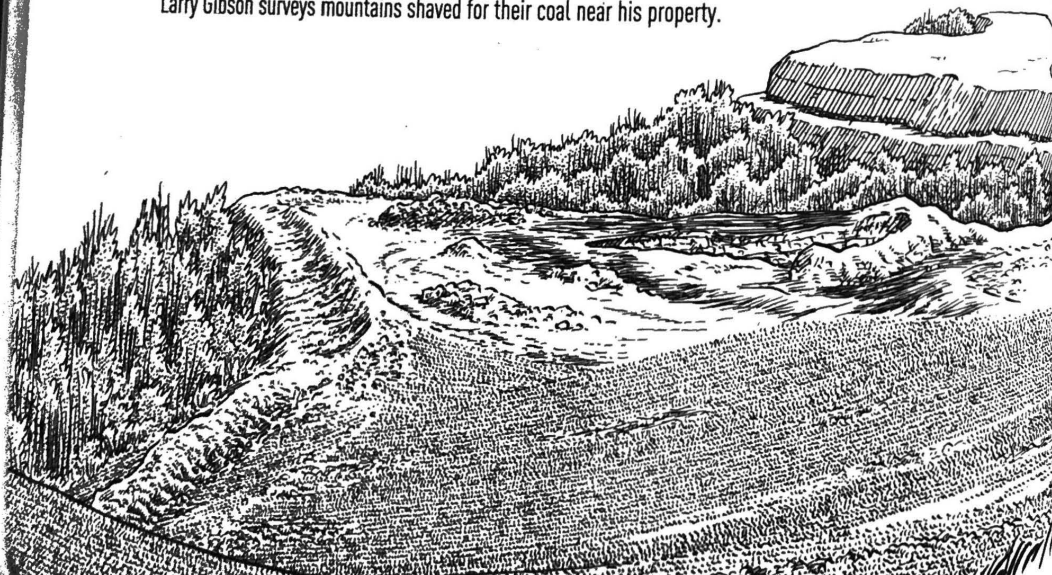
We climb up an incline at the edge of Gibson's property. At the top we see vast pits and rocky outcroppings where there once were mountains. Seams of coal run like black ribbons through sheer rock face. The wind whips across the barren slate flatlands. Idle earthmovers, diggers, and bulldozers lie scattered on the rock face before us. A few patches, sprayed with fertilizer and grass seed, are a faint green. In most spots the thin topsoil and grass, sprayed on by the coal

companies as part of their reclamation of the land, have washed away, exposing the stone beneath. White drill marks dot the top of the rock. The company will soon drill down and blast away another eighty feet of stone on the ravaged peak before us to get to more coal seams. About a dozen men with heavy machinery can carry out this kind of mining. When coal companies had to dig underground, they would employ hundreds, and at times thousands, of miners to extract the same amount of coal.

Gibson points to a huge impoundment of toxic coal waste that lies behind a dam in the distance:

They are dynamiting within two hundred feet of the face of that dam. It's over a one-thousand-foot dam. They say when the dam breaks, seventeen miles away the sludge will be forty feet high comin' at you. Ya must understand, now, mine waste per gallon weighs four times more than a gallon water. Ye'r lookin' at a lot of waste over there, and a lot of heavy waste. It's sittin' at thirty-five feet above an abandoned mine shaft, too. So it's gonna come out. One way or another it gonna come out. An' them dynamitin' within two hundred feet of the face and vibratin' the waste down below. In

Larry Gibson surveys mountains shaved for their coal near his property.



this part of the country we call it blowout—when the mouth opens up in the middle of a hill and shoots stuff out like a rifle. At the rate they're talkin' 'bout, it will kill people here.

"An' what chance are these people gonna have?" he says, looking down to a cluster of houses in the "holler" below. The mountains lie so close together that houses and communities scratch out space tucked in hollows, long rows between them known locally as *hollers*: "Ya see how narrow these hollers are? We're gonna lose a lot of people."

"When it comes right down to it, I been callin' fer a revolution across this country fer a long time now," Gibson says. "I think it was Thomas Jefferson said, I think it was 'im, who said we should have a revolution every twenty years to keep the country in check. We bin way overdue."

