

Closing Coal Plant Shines at Salem Poetry Reading

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When the coal industry closes its doors, one of the emotions that arises is nostalgia. This is true even in Massachusetts, a stronghold of environmental sentiment. On July 2, poets read in the control room of Footprint Power's Salem Harbor Station to commemorate the closing of the power plant.

In a much-contested decision, Footprint Power plans to close the coal plant and replace it with a natural gas plant. This power plant closing, along with the shutdown of the Mt. Tom coal plant in western Massachusetts, signals the end of the coal era in the state.

The poetry reading, titled "Power of Work: Work of Power," was organized by Colleen Michaels, a writing instructor at Montserrat College. She hosts the Improbable Places Poetry Tour, which has been running since 2010. The tour has brought poets to an auto shop, a chocolate company, a tattoo parlor, and many other novel destinations.

The power plant control room was a striking setting for the writers' work. The audience – close to 80 people – sat near gray metal channels carrying electrical cords past massive vertical cylinders. Above was a balcony with a curved edge. Sickly yellow lights beamed down on the reading.

The workers did not read poetry themselves, but the poets gathered to honor their efforts. In front of the poets, a hard hat sat on a stationary vertical wheel. At the end of the reading, a recording of the power plant's background noise was played. It sounded like a mechanical waterfall.

"We are surrounded by steam turbines," Michaels said. "Tonight, the plant is decommissioned and we are fueled by words. This is a space that we probably will never be in again."

Michaels read an amusing poem in which she described an aging power plant as an older lady. "Of course I smoked. We all did," she said. "Everyone knows I've had this cough for years."

The theme of age came up in other poems as well. Margaret Young, a student at Montserrat College, read a poem about old power lines. "Green glass insulator from an old power line – fragments on the beach," she said.

Today, many activists hope to make coal plants relics of the past. Sophie Sokolov, a Wesleyan student participating in the Climate Summer initiative, read an impassioned poem about climate change. "I wish holding back the tide was as easy as building a bridge," she said.

Michaels confided in the audience that she has a long-term interest in alternative energy. "In the sixth grade, I was in an alternative energy beauty pageant," she said.

Ironically, coal mining states hold coal-themed beauty pageants as well. A West Virginia pageant was featured in [a story by Think Progress](#) this year.

Only one of the poets said he had worked in power plants before. Richard Matthias, an engineer and resident of Salem, spoke strongly in appreciation of the poetry reading. "I think this exhibit, this celebration of the work of power plant workers, is great," he said.

"The roar of the turbines. The roar of the generators. This is the sound of the beating heart – the heart of modern life," Matthias said.

Modern life does change without electricity. Mickey Coburn, a playwright and screenwriter, read a poem describing the eerie nature of the New York City power outage in 2003. She said the outage was like “a strange B movie from the 1950s.” It was a novel experience for her to spend time in the city with no electricity.

J.D. Scrimgeour, a poet and creative writing instructor from the North Shore, read a vivid description of a pair of smokestacks. His terse sentences focused on health and danger. “Fingers on a bulky hand. A double-barreled gun... The number eleven. Cigarettes in a shared pack.”

Dawn Paul, a writing instructor at Montserrat College, reflected on the health of the power plant workers. “How much can a body take, still smile at the end of the day, and look back with pride?”

The theme of health hazards continued in Melissa Vardakas’s poetry. “I have cancer in my home – it’s true,” she said.

Vardakas, who used to write for the local newspaper Beverly Citizen, interviewed the workers from this coal plant fifteen years ago. She sought to recapture their vivid experiences. “Yellow bulldozers climb mountains of coal, pushing it onward toward usefulness,” she said.

Despite her concerns about pollution, Vardakas expressed nostalgia about the history of the coal plant. “And when the gate is gone, who will remember these 63 years – this footprint of power?”

Montserrat College art students and local poetry fans may now remember the power plant and see it in a new light. This poetry reading took place in conjunction with an art project, “[Across the Bridge](#),” that brought students to document the power plant through creative media. The art show was still open at the plant on the night of the poetry reading.