She was 41.
He was 34.
She was married with two children.
He had never dated anyone.
She can speak.
He can't.
She was the chairwoman of a college philosophy department.
He has the mental capacity of a toddler.

The Strange Case of Anna Stubblefield
By Daniel Egger
he scale of an open-pit copper mine feels impossible; it is a bible-grade phenomenon made real by machinery.

Vehicles called bucket-wheel excavators, nearly five times the size of the largest dinosaurs, rip up the surface and gradually descend, piling 200,000 cubic meters or more of rock behind them every day. Once the copper is extracted, waste products and unremovable metals stream out as tailings, smoking tributaries that turn psychedelically looking as they outline an open air for the first time in millions of years. Each excavator, meanwhile, turns the land it is standing on into a ledge and leaves a recession of three steps, or "bunches," behind it as it goes. The Chino Mine, for example, in Grant County, N.M., has been excavated permanently for more than a century and now stretches almost two miles across and 1,300 feet down. It's a chaos, a void, a deep and sullen gash in the ground where human intervention gets four out of five stars on TripAdvisor.

"Wow, that's huge!" you or I, as the case may be, will say as one miner after another, who visited the overlook point on the side of Highway 175, "What a huge pit," says another. "Another: "Wow. Another: "Wow." Another: "What a hole in the ground." And: "That's it's deep. What a hole." It's a huge hole on the ground."

Stupendous giddiness, disbelief. These seem to be universal responses to open-pit mines. When the photographer Edward Burtynsky started taking pictures of mining complexes in 1981, it was, in part, out of the same simple wonderment. "I took the biggest mines in the world," Burtynsky says, and those photographs, shot in Arizona and New Mexico in 2014 and published here for the first time, include both the Chino and the continent's largest copper mine, the Morenci Mine, which is projected to produce 900 million pounds of copper every year for the next five years.

Burtynsky's other work includes photographs of oil-drilling and tar-sands infrastructure, quarries, dams, geological features blasted open for railroads and the seemingly inescapable spectacle of Chinese manufacturing towns engineered landscapes that determine, in various ways, a country's awesome capacity for problem-solving and how far we've come. Once, early humans hid in underground caves to avoid being eaten by giant predators.
cats, now, we tear holes in the ground and turn the copper recoverable there into electrical wiring for products like the Cat Mine Cyanamid American Dry Food Pet Reeder. We’ve learned to reshape the earth to get what we want and need, sometimes willfully, to the radically altered condition in which we live it. “I have a fondness for the sublimity landscape becomes narrated,” Burzynsky says. And here, he knows it as an historically nutrified, carved up and combined.

Open-pit mines now wounds we’ve inflicted, and the wondrous they evoke easily becomes tinged with pangs of remorse or dread. Burzynsky calls that unique in feeling ‘a twinning of the sublime.’ In the beginning, the sublime meant us in awe of nature,” he explains. We would look up at a thundercloud or mountain, or across a heavy sea, and be “awe-struck or powerless. But fast forward to the Industrial Revolution, and 50 years after that, and now we are the observers and fearsome force that’s reshaping the planet.”

And that power can’t be checked. “We work in a world of atoms and molecules,” Burzynsky told me. “I’m talking to you on a phone. There’s copper in this phone. It’s in our appliances and cars, inside the walls of our homes. If you feel revolution in this landscape,” he said, “you should have a revulsion to your hide life.”

That tension is reconcileable, maybe inevitable. Humanity live always ripped materials out of nature, but the pace and scale of that extraction has accelerated so quickly that it challenges, or even outpaces, the individual human imagination’s ability to make sense of the consequences. It’s a strange predicament to feel dwarfted by the momentum of your own power to feel yourself being threatened, even swayed by, problems and to recognise that you’re also complicit in them. This is how this person operating the excavator must feel, disappearing down the mine.

Burzynsky’s photographs are opportunities to start that journey in in poems we all let that tension in; to look down — way down into those mines — and allow yourself to feel unsettled, to lose your balance a little.

“Huge hole in the ground,” one of the more pensive Thirty-third observers wrote, “I just imagine falling into that hole.” Exactly. There may be no getting to the bottom of any of this.

More photographs of copper mines by Edward Burtynsky are at history.com/explo-