



the
**Journal of
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❖ Studies**



Northern Kentucky University

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The Journal of Kentucky Studies

Acknowledgments



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Pauletta Hansel has had poems and prose featured in journals including *Kudzu*, *Appalachian Journal*, *Appalachian Heritage* and *Still: The Journal*, and on The

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Neil Wright teaches Interdisciplinary Humanities at Eastern Kentucky University, plays tennis whenever the weather permits, enjoys opera, reads Mo Yan, writes poems on odd subjects, talks to Lily's pet rabbits, seeks to acquire a life size Kia Hamster effigy, and is committed to the proposition that the state bird of Kentucky should be the Wild Turkey.

Don Boes was born in Louisville, Kentucky. He received his B.A. from Centre College and M.F.A. from Indiana University. He has been awarded three Al Smith fellowships from the Kentucky Arts Council. He has also been resident at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire and the Ragdale Foundation in Illinois. His books include *The Eighth Continent* (Northeastern UP) and *Railroad Crossing* (Finishing Line Press). His latest book is *Good Luck With That* from FutureCycle Press. He lives in Lexington, Kentucky, and teaches at Bluegrass Community and Technical College.

Jim Webb remains an outspoken advocate for social and environmental justice through his writings, radio program and actions. His *Get In, Jesus—New & Selected Poems* is available from Wind Publications. Webb owns Wiley's Last Resort—*The Primitive Campground at the End of the Whirled* where he hosts campers, hikers, artists, community groups, the occasional swarp and runs the paddleboat concession.

Scott Goebel is a writer, editor, gypsy scholar and an active member of the Southern Appalachian Writers' Cooperative (SAWC). His work has recently appeared in *Now & Then*, *Iron Mountain Review* and *Appalachian Journal*. He lives above a bar in Campbell County, Kentucky.

Nelson Pilsner is a swarper and amateur photographer. He has seen the destruction of Kentucky's highest peak, Black Mountain, from his cabin on Sparky's Knob, just a mile from the Bad Branch Falls in Letcher County. His work has been seen *Appalachian Voices*, *Article 25* and *Now & Then*.

Steven Paul Lansky wrote *Main St.* (2002) and *Eleven Word Title for Confessional Political Poetry Originally Composed for Radio* (2009), two chapbooks published

by Seaweed Sideshow Circus. His audionovel *Jack Acid* (2004) is available (2012) as a digital download. His novel: *the citizen*, has excerpts published in *The Brooklyn Rail* (2005), *ArtSpike*, *CityBeat*, *Streetvibes* and *Article 25*. For his animated videos: *Bratwurst* (with Leigh Waltz), *Exit Strategy*, *Harvest*, and *The Broken Finger Episode A-8 or the Cigarette Break* see the youtube channel: lanskysp. For more see: *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Whole Terrain*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Black Clock 20*, and *St. Petersburg Review Issue 8*.

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Bianca Spriggs is an award-winning poet and multidisciplinary artist from Lexington, Kentucky, The author of four collections of poetry, most recently, *Call Her by Her Name* (Northwestern University Press) and the forthcoming *The Galaxy Is a Dance Floor* (Argos Books). She is the managing editor for *pluck! The Journal of Affrilachian Arts & Culture* and poetry editor for *Apex Magazine*. You can learn more about her work here: www.biancaspriggs.com.

Sherry Cook Stanforth is founder and director of Thomas More College's Creative Writing Vision Program, often collaborating with regional authors and students to provide free arts events that blend creative writing with music and the natural world. She teaches fiction, poetry, environmental and ethnic literatures and serves as co-editor for *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*, the literary journal of the Southern Appalachian Writers Cooperative. She performs regionally in a 3-generation Appalachian family band, Tellico. The voices of her mountain heritage inspired her poetry collection *Drone String*, which was nominated for a 2016 Pushcart Prize. With her husband, David, she raises four children, two trusty hound dogs, a hive of bees and a garden.

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Ballad of an Apocalypse

by X. J. Kennedy

In a panic the Royal Astronomer
 Falls prostrate before the throne
 And declares, "O King,
 It's a terrible thing—
 The cosmos has come undone!

"I have seen through the lens of prophetic dream
 All the zodiac fly apart
 And a total eclipse
 With devouring lips
 Munch the moon like a mincemeat tart.

"Lion and Virgin lie locked in love,
 The Twins weigh down Libra's scales,
 And the terrible Crab
 Has got in his grab
 Both the silvery Fishes' tails.

"Never yet have my prophesies proved wrong.
 Not a minaret shall remain.
 Take your seventeen wives
 And run for your lives!
 All creation's insane—insane!"

The King twirls a finger around his ear,
 Takes a swig from a golden cup,
 Draws a handmaid to hand
 And bawls a command,
 "Lock this blithering idiot up!"

Indeed, since that day decades have passed
 And methodical stars still ply
 Their appointed rounds,
 With inaudible sounds,
 No madder than you or I.

Keeping the Vigil: for the Seventh Anniversary of the Interfaith Prayer Vigil for Peace

by George Ella Lyon

We have been standing
on this corner
three hundred and sixty-four
Thursdays,
almost a year
of weeks.

We have been standing
where the towers fell
saying with Gandhi
**“I have an unchangeable faith
that it is beneath the dignity of [humankind]
to resort to mutual slaughter.
I have no doubt that there is a way out.”**

We have been standing
as more hearts were torn
and the cup of blood
passed from hand to hand.

We have stood here
witnessing for another way
while our tax dollars
bore our children blindly
to kill their children.

We have grieved for all
lives exploded:

the soldier by an IED

the woman in the market
reaching for a fig

the man at prayer

the child dozing
in his grandmother's lap

the family who fled
out the back door
when they saw the sergeant

looming on their porch.
 Anything, anywhere
 to avoid the news
 that cannot be refused.

We were here
 saying with Martin Luther King
**“Darkness cannot drive out darkness;
 only light can do that.
 Hate cannot drive out hate;
 only love can do that.”**

crying “Stop now!”
 when the mosques were bombed
 the fake intelligence outted
 the images of Abu Ghraib
 burned into our brains.
 No back door
 through which to flee
 our nation’s story.

Over and over we have said
 with our signs and songs
 sweating and shivering
 reading and praying:
 We can turn around.
 This is not the way.

And cars have sped by.
 Ambulances, tank trucks,
 buses, SUV’s
 through rain and snow
 and on open-window days
 giving us the thumbs up
 or the finger, honking support
 or ignoring us completely
 as they careen from Main to
 Broadway talking on the phone.

We have sung
“We shall overcome”
 with Joan Baez in our midst
 and **“Lift me up to the light
 of change”** with Holly Near.

All along we have stood
 on this corner insisting
 our nation stop
 “staying the course.”

We have claimed
 every event
 in this hideous pageant
 as a crossroads
 where we could turn
 another way.

And now beloveds
 seven years
 after we began
 seven—that magical, Biblical
 number—enough of those drivers
 who saw or didn't see us
 (and our brothers and sisters
 on street corners around this country)

who read or ignored
 our op eds and letters to the editor
 our emails to Congress

who joined in or jeered at our marches
 who said we should “Go back to Russia!”
 who said, “What war?”

enough of our fellow Americans
 marched to the polls on Tuesday
 and turned that gray plastic wheel
 of history
 to steer us in a new direction

to choose a leader
 whose mouth
 seems connected to his head
 and heart, whose skin
 is the color of equality

whose blood
 is the confluence of us all
 whose pledge
 is to end this war.

**We have stood
 we are standing
 we will stand
 at this corner
 of democracy
 and history
 bearing the signs
 of a new direction**

**holding the hope
of the world
in our hands.**

The Poem

by George Ella Lyon

is elbowing her way down Fifth Avenue
on a snowy day the poem is coming up
from the subway the poem is scrubbing
coal dust out of work pants
in a galvanized tub
she is knee-deep in pot vessels
the poem is on her way to the moon
the poem is grinding the lens
for the world's largest telescope
the poem is undergoing surgery
she is calculating how to hide something
outside space and time she knows
the mathematics of Elsewhere
the poem is at the gym
she is strengthening her pecs
and loosening her hamstrings
the poem enacts the last anointing
she is turning off the respirator
the poem is a mite in the red-
tailed hawk's feathered armpit
she has built the sweat-lodge fire
gowned and masked she carries
the newborn, sucking on his fist
she is stuck in traffic
she is trying to turn the drone around
she is in jail for praying on federal
land the poem has crossed the line
she sat down opposite the reactor
the poem huddles in the crawl space
she shields her eyes from laserlight
with her crushed hand
the poem has made a pie
full of redwing blackbirds
they are singing
soon they will lift off
and perch in the tree
that shelters your heart's garage.

The Colonel's Maid

by Pauletta Hansel

(after *The Colonel* by Carolyn Forché)

When they come to his house
it is always the same.
The girl, she flaunts her backside
in the American jeans, her face turned
to the wall as if she does not care
they are there. She files her red nails sharp
as the stiletto in the man's boot.
The boy, he cares for nothing
but himself and the car that takes him away.

The wife rings for me.
I bring them what they want.

The Americans sit on the edge
of the chairs as if they might rise
and run stumbling away from here
but they never do.
The man smiles and shows them
his dog, his new wife
with her lotions, smooth hair,
her laugh like a glass bell.
He smiles and smiles
until cracks begin to form
around the borders of the room.
He knows they know
him beneath the polish of that smile.

I am the one who sweeps up
the blossomed ears
to toss them
into the fishpond
when at last they go.

Apology

by Pauletta Hansel

—To the 1st African-American Montessori
teacher in Cincinnati

We didn't talk much
about diversity then,

or privilege—everything
was black and white,

and remember, please,
I was 21

and I knew everything.
I thought I should know

everything, or swallow whole
what I did not, so it's a good thing

I was teaching 3- to 5-year-olds
and didn't know

how hard they were to fool.
And you made two of me—

tall and thick
and black. I thought

a little mutual respect
might be in order, here,

I had a Master's after all,
I should have known

better what it meant
to earn a thing like that—

respect, I mean— a nod
is all it took from you

to sit those children down
and put me in my place.

I'm sorry that I couldn't
stand beside you

ask for just a crumb or two
of what I didn't have. Instead

your name was chalk
under my tongue. I'd mutter:

Aren't you a little rough
for this environment?

Over the Rhine Ghost Tour

by Pauletta Hansel

Not the one they take good money for
 on Friday nights, set a bunch of strangers
 walking the street,
 looking down at their shoes
 as they pass.
 Like you're a ghost.
 One they don't want to see.
 I'll take you on a ghost tour,
 won't charge near as much.
 See that window
 all closed up,
 that's the one I'd poke my head out,
 Friday nights,
 see who's on the streets I know.
 People in that building now,
 they stay inside.
 They might as well be ghosts.
 Used to be I'd walk three streets,
 Vine to Main, hear *hey* and *howdy*,
how's your momma. People'd
 have my back. Pull my
 coat tail if I dared do wrong.
 Now I'll go two blocks,
 not see a ghost of a smile.
 Now there's places even I won't go
 and people I'm afraid of,
 not because I don't know them,
 because I do.
 I'll show you places, too,
 so full of light
 there ain't a ghost be brave enough
 to linger—People's Garden, thirty
 years of corn and squash, sunflowers
 coming up from last year's seeds.
 There's still a lot of richness here;
 we gotta dig down deep
 start pulling some of that back out
 before there's no one's left
 to show you what you're looking for
 not even me.

*(Inspired by a writing experience with Over the Rhine Residents in 2012,
 sponsored by Over the Rhine Community Housing)*

Photograph of a Woman at a Funeral

by Pauletta Hansel

Even though I knew
this day was coming,
now it's here
it seems a train
on fallow tracks
came from the dark—
no light, no whistle—
left me broken beneath it.

Well, never mind all that;
we do what's to be done.

This was his favorite
scarf, he said the green
was like the fishing hole
we'd sit by summers
when he came to stay.
These earrings, too,
he said were lily pads
the day he gave them to me
in the box he'd wrapped himself,
more tape than paper.
I can't see the likeness.

He was a good boy
then, and always to me, no matter
what you hear, you couldn't help
but see the goodness in him,
bright minnows
flitting from the stones.

The Poem Arrests His Attention

by Richard Hague

He's sitting on his porch doing nothing.
all day doing nothing, just hanging, chilling,
chilling so long he's breathless,

stiff. Just about done in,
doing nothing.
So the poem swerves around the

corner, lights flashing, hits
the curb, jumps
out before the cruiser's finally stopped,

storms up the steps, shouts,
"What you doing, boy!"
And the boy says, "Nothing."

"Exactly!" the poem shouts, and
writes him up a ticket, five hundred dollars,
"Idling and loafing

away a life, wasting a gift
that requires of us action and fine words
plus thanksgiving."

His sentence? "Look at a hundred
insects in the museum,
imagine their indigo and emerald and

iridescent lives.
Taste moo shu pork
with someone you've just met

and over dinner memorize
her life story. Kiss someone you've hoped to
love, despite your weakness and fear.

Love your teacher, though he is
balding and red-faced and angry
some of the time, for he

has treasure and wealth to
splurge on you
in the name of Beauty.

Why He Needs Beauty

by Richard Hague

If he doesn't get it,
he will die. Just as surely as a starved child
wastes away, he will

fade away into squalor and ugliness,
the daily assault of advertising and prejudice,
the interior poisoning of good will,

the rotting away of happiness and worth,
the month always longer than the check,
the pantry empty,
the roaches of poverty scrabbling his pillow.

Beauty costs nothing,
comes with every dawn, every moment of keen
perception in the subway, like Pound's

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd—
petals on a wet, black bough*

every noticing, like Basho's, of how

*the distant mountains
are reflected in the eye
of the dragonfly*

Beauty is toughness,
goodness, the way out of anger
and the smothered mine
of self.

He needs beauty like he needs air,
needs food, love, the touch
of the world firing his nerves,

the pull of gravity making
him strong even as he
staggers uphill
against it.

Writing About H.D. Thoreau With An HB #2 Pencil

by Richard Hague

My current writing fetish,
a cobalt-blue plastic
pencil sharpener, drops
from my hand.
The room fills instantly
with the scent of
cedar shavings.

And I tumble down
that rabbit hole of smell
back to kindergarten,
the cold room
in the brick school
by the acid yellow creek,
Mrs. Calabrese's thin, sharp face
dividing the dim room
into syllables
of remembrance:
table, apple, chair,
bear, boots,
milk, lunch.

How swiftly we learned
to gather such words
and speak our paragraphs,
lay our first chatterbox maps
over the arranging world,

And now I recall how adept
Henry grew, grabbing up
an even dozen pencils,
exactly,
every time.

Long use makes
easy use: too easy. When he quit
his father's factory, he asked,
"Why repeat what I have
already done well?"
And off he went,
ready to grab up
other collections
of things, more pertinent
seizings of life and self.

“Henry, you should
keep a journal” —

And so he would;
this time he’d try
grabbing up, in
exact mouthful,
apt words.

Mapping the Familiar

by Richard Taylor

Something as willowy and insubstantial
as love cannot be reduced to instructions
because feelings are like habits of hands
schooled how to loop and stuff silk
into the knotted bow of a batwing tie
without the need or agency of words.
Or like appending a signature to fulfill
a promise, ink closing loops and forming
customary bridges over terrain
the hand can forage without minding.
Or like feet descending a stair, twisting
into darkness with perfect neural memory,
never missing the last uncounted step.
Like these, love intuits its own way.
Unlike these, it needs no rehearsal.

Expansion

by Richard Taylor

Because I forget
to bring in flowerpots
by the porch steps,
each winter I lose
a few to the cold.
The ones with drain holes
survive intact. It is those
that permit no leakage,
like souls of the righteous,
that crack.

Revelation

by Richard Taylor

In sawing a plaster teardrop
from the floral ceiling medallion
that withstood gravity for 155 years,
I uncovered, fresh as the day it was drawn,
a pencil line of the long-dead plasterer,
a base mark for an intricate pattern,
scored by a hand that will at midday—
weary, hopeful—unwrap his sandwich
with dusty fingers and settle in the shade.

Leda to the Neighbor's Girl

by Bianca Spriggs

He won't come at all
the way you might expect,
wearing formal dress
blinding you with desire.

You won't even recognize him
when you're barefoot
in your garden tending
to the rosemary and he falls
dazzling as glassy quartz
from a low-hanging cloud.

It'll be a simple thing,
a flurry of feathers appearing
to collapse in your arms.

You won't even have to think
twice about wrapping
your limbs around his.

Yours, like mine, bleeds.
You think you'll be able to
save him—and you'll try.

He'll descend white-hot at first, sudden,
falling the way accidental taper wax
or an incense ember flares
when it meets your skin.

Before,
I'd never given much
thought to swans or any winged thing
that wasn't born of paradise.

To me, even a serpent
contains more sentience
behind its eyes, or at least, intent,
when it's set to strike.

And yet, there will be something
of the god about him,
some small stunning property
leftover from the solar system
even he won't be able to disguise.

By the end, when he promises
to deliver your young himself
from their golden eggs,
to hang a constellation
especially for the girlchild
who favors him, you won't care.

You won't remember
your husband.

You won't remember
your name.

All you'll know—or will ever be
content to know is the soft
musk of covert feathers,
the trembling prism light of dusk,
the ever-widening concave,

the trumpet—

the ascent.

The Woman is Round

by Bianca Spriggs

—after Izzie Klingels’ “Cells” (2012)

The woman is round
the way he likes,
but her hair is a constellation
and her teeth are shards of glassy quartz
and her clavicle is a tomb
in which he thinks he would like
to enshroud his lips,
and her garment is a forsythia bush
slipping from her right shoulder
so when she turns to look back at him,
he can make out the birthmark on her back
which is a mammatocumulus cloud, adrift,
and her spine is a blue bottle dangling from a limb,
and her gaze is the New Testament,
and her left temple is a grove of pear trees,
and the cleft above her upper lip is a pier
where she docks 11:11 wishes,
and her beauty mark is a mantis
trapped in amber,
and her ears are hyacinth blooms,
and the tops of her breasts
are waves cresting at dusk,
and her knuckles are hard candy,
and her scent is that of a newborn fawn
or the underside of a banana tree leaf,
and her dreams are mason jars
full of sparrow beaks
and butterfly wings
and possum bones,
but he finds he can’t ever touch her—
his fingers slide off her skin
which is a patchwork quilt of rainbow
light spun from prisms
trapped in a gold room—
no matter how tightly he closes
his fist.

To the woman I saw today who wept in her car

by Bianca Spriggs

There is a voice that doesn't use words. Listen.
—Rumi

Woman,
I get it.
We are strangers,
but I know the heart is a hive
and someone has knocked yours
from its high branch in your chest
and it lays cracked and splayed,
spilling honey all over
the ground floor of your gut
and the bees inside
that you've trained
over the days and years
to stay put, swarm
the terrain of your organs,
yes,
right here in traffic,
while we wait for the light to change.

I get it.
How this array of metal and plastic
tends to go womb room
once the door shuts,
and maybe you were singing
only moments before
you got the call,
or remembered that thing
you had tucked back and built
such sturdy scaffolding all around,
and now here it comes to knock
you adrift with only your steering
wheel to hold you up.

Or, maybe today
was just a tough day
and the sunlight
and warm weather
and blossoming limbs
and smiling pedestrians
waiting for their turn to cross
are much too much to take

when you think of all that's left
in this day, and here you are,
a reed stuck in the mud
of a rush hour intersection,
with so very many hours left to go.

Woman,
I know you.
I know how that thing
when left unattended
will show up as a howling maelstrom
on your front door
demanding to be let in
or it will take
the whole damn house with it.
I know this place too.

I get it.
And because we are strangers,
because you did not see me see you,
my gaze has no more effect
than a specter who stares at the living.
And yet, I want you to know that
today, in the hive of my heart,
there is room enough
for you.

The Postmistress

by Rhonda Pettit

*In 1981, Nellie Woolum, a retired postmistress in Harlan County, Kentucky,
was killed when a coal refuse pond above her house collapsed;
it was owned by Eastover Mining.*

I knew it sat high on the ridge above me,
a purse without fare for the journey,
a black eye that never looked down
and yet was weeping.

I knew that they called it a pond
but the algae was gob, the plankton was clay,
and the crawfish and peepers were bony coal.
I knew the water was rock.

I knew how to speak, deliver the story
to bottom lines, bottom lands,
upper hands, bottom lies.
I, a crank without grease.

They told me the wall would hold up
hold up hold up hold up
all that was useless to them. Near Christmas,

I listened to the rain one night,
let it rock me to sleep, remember being
carried away, hitting a wall, splashing over it.
I sing now. Who listens?

This Light, This Time

by Rhonda Pettit

What if we were rain
with memory,
could recall

the soulful
and gradual rising,
the gathering into cloud;

the life we carried
as we fell,
this time

along the Appalachians,
drenching the paw-paw,
the hickory, the oak;

drooling into crevices,
becoming the split of stone,
the spit of springs

to come greening the ferns,
sip for the sapsucker
and others on wing

and foot, fin
and root? What if we believed
what the rainbow

of wet gravel
lit through a clear stream
tells us?

What if we were
wings of light
descending

onto peaks forever lost,
onto man&machine-made
songless prairies?

Would our light be
buried in pockets of earth?
Would it

refuse to go out?

Mermaids at Midnight

by Rhonda Pettit

We swam first,
 naked as old shells
 the tides scrub to shore,
 then lay high among buried nuns,
 watched stars in their decline and felt
 the August air press us,
 heavy as dirt.

We'd all had trouble
 with love—husbands and children
 continents away from our writing retreat,
 or the thing itself so deeply layered and molten
 we only knew it through
 eruption, the odd fissure
 an eon would close.

So we laughed
 about the night watchman
 who had peeked through the pool fence
 and said, *Ladies, let me know if you need
 any help.* We'd saved ourselves
 with water, darkness,
 and the muted

pool house light
 that blurred the lines, the lacks,
 the excess of our middle-aged bodies now
 drying on the cemetery concrete. We laughed
 at the shade between death
 and desire, knowing how
 it shaped us.

The Mercy of Circumstances

by Rhonda Pettit

—after reading *Simone Weil*

On my second-story deck,
while reading of love and affliction,
I rise and look down through a maze
of limb and leaf
cedar
maple
ash
and glimpse the moving
brown of a doe,
its white tail a silent clapper
startling flies.

Seconds
behind, its fawn appears
in the same slow stroll of feeding.

How quiet this moment,
its lack of expectation

as poems wander
the woods without me.

Balance

by Marguerite Bouvard

The clouds have their own messages:
the four directions of wind,
their calligraphy becoming a series

of stretched lines, spelling
changes, and there can be both,
the cursive beauty in front

of the harbinger of what is to come,
like the balance in our lives,
the pain that we fear can awaken

us to understanding, connect us to different
languages and countries, and the news
that once clamoured with its torrents

is nor longer distant, and darkness
summons light as we gaze at starlight
in the most unexpected place.

Victory Signs in the Darkness

by Marguerite Bouvard

The young people are sitting in a café
 sharing their stories, intimacy,
 and red wine, and gathering
 at a concert in Bataclan music pulsing

in their veins, and sharing
 their excitement at a sport stadium,
 another generation enjoying
 the simple pleasures

of every day, when suddenly
 a burst of explosions shatters
 their lives. The massacre was meant
 to kill an embrace, music that lifted them

to the sky, and the joy that united
 them, by those who invented their
 name to draw the disaffected
 with false promises, who see

victory in shattered corpses,
 the breath of people's screams,
 a river of blood, and seek to drown out
 the voices of those who do not want

the law of the jungle. But after
 the week of sirens and police streaming
 through the streets, Paris
 regained its voice, as the cover
 of Charlie Hebdo shows
 a bullet-riddled man spouting
 champagne, with the words,
 "They have the weapons. Screw them.

We have champagne," and the young
 people flock to their cafes again
 because nobody tells a French person
 what to do, and a powerful voice

demolishes the massacre—a young man
 who lost his wife and remains
 alone with his tiny son
 pronounces a true victory,

"You will never get my hatred.

If God whom you blindly
killed made us in his image,
each bullet in the body of my beloved wife

is a wound in his heart. So I won't give
you the victory of my anger
which would be the same
ignorance that has defined you.

You would like me to sacrifice
Liberty for security. My wife
will accompany my son and I
everyday, and we will meet

in a paradise of free souls.
Everyday my son will answer you
with his happiness and freedom,
and you will not receive his hatred.”

El Greco

by Marguerite Bouvard

It's the elongated hands that lift us
into the country of deep shadows

and blazing apparitions, fingers
resting upon ancient texts: palms raised

like birds in mid-air, whole bodies
soaring beyond themselves.

St. Francis kneels before us, hands
crossed, his splayed fingers

delicate as new shoots.
St. James the Great still gazes

at what lies beyond our vision,
his many hued cloak swept

by passion's wind,
his light-drenched hand

ferrying us above centuries
of petty quarrels, despicable wars.

Annick

by Marguerite Bouvard

From early June to October she lives
high up in the mountains
on the Chaines des Aravis
above the Col des Annes, with only a few

farms, a cascade of cows fanning
over pastures. She serves meals
in her small restaurant, in an old sweatshirt,
but dressed in smiles as she swishes

from her kitchen to the tables, she who
has worked there for 40 years, beginning
at the age of 13 when her grandfather
owned the farm. The people at the tables

chatter and comment on the ham,
the sharp taste of alcohol made from
gentians. But she carries wisdom
in her solitude, showing us

that it's not the proud who hunger
for recognition, who tout
their elegance and success,
but the importance of caring

for her aged mother who is ill, the brief
flame of life that is for the love
of family and others, seeing the beauty
of a sunset after a heavy rain.

Fertilizing the Landscape of Higher Education

by Sherry Cook Stanforth

Your rototillers bark accredited fumes,
plowing rich, creative soil into gridlines.
Teachers and students suck
from your cauldron of Miracle Gro
solution—rounded up, culled, fed

fresh manure you've shoveled
into the garden. Thank you
for your razor wire fences,
top-down growth plans,
towers of institutional
assessment dusting out
neonicotinoid promises
of success.

Yes, we will provide learning
outcomes to fit this mission.
Yes, we will meet virtual
needs, accept massive cuts,
embrace speed, then grow

a blight upon
original seeds,
even the ones
wiggling inside
your sacs.

We wish you the best
in your top-down practice.
May the mysterious architectures
of your imagination cave in
as a tire-ironed skull, or a deep
ground mind, reforming into
the highway strip mall design
scheme defining Southern Appalachia.

May you experience rapid growth,
always having three meetings
about how to have THE meeting—
in the way head lice tends
to multiply at the neck's nape,
or genetically modified corn
stalks a county's furthest edges.

May all the robots you've
constructed in this business
assemble obediently around
your damp sickbed, at the birth
of *your* grandchildren, inside
the state and church houses
of *your* home community. May
they lead the team of airport
engineers fixing *your* plane
and dominate the kitchens
and fields of *your* consumption.

We know there is no poem,
or philosophy to speak
away your gigantism.
You will either topple
to ground zero or rip
a hole right through
heaven, just because
you can. Those who
can't, teach.

What You Can Create with Cardboard and Duct Tape

by Sherry Cook Stanforth

We bumped past a burnt out trailer
projecting poverty in Hollywood set
style—two barking mongrels followed
us half a mile up Lost Mountain, then
slowed to panting at the hairpin bend:
the sign said Blasting Conducted
Warning—Explosives in Use
Daily
From Sunrise
To Sunset
Long Blasts and Short Blasts

We trespassed through rock-
flung fields—viewed clichéd
images, props tagged for tree
hugging activists, sang bye-bye
lullabye dirges. We will expose
the master graveyards, map
out sorry plots of recycled
devastation—nothing new
under the sun.
No, we did not
prop up our dead family stiffs
for the daguerreotype.
We didn't videotape the casket
closing or line the pink granite
slab with Dollar Store toys
or tacky plastic bluebells
clutched inside a tube.

All we had in the trunk was
cardboard and duct tape.
We scrawled "Lost" then
patched it onto a stick, held
it up for viewing. We stood
against the highwall, hillbilly
posing inside valley fill,
ground zero found anywhere,
everywhere.

We held ourselves still,
snapping shots of family
plots—saved—for visiting.
We posed inside our land

and your land
signifying that all things
ugly or beautiful
will remain unsealed
for documentation.

The Braun Sisters

by Donelle Dreese

—for Annette and Lucy Braun

What would Lucy say about floristics
now that the old growth forests are fleeing

taking their soft bones and medicines with them?
I see the headstones at Spring Grove Cemetery

above the pulp and rhizome of Lucy and Annette.
I think of Lucy's fight for Kentucky's deciduous

think of her sister, Annette, who told the stories
of moths, how their wings are scaled, not dusted

how their pale-dressed patterns have no desire
to dance for the sun, but somewhere in Ohio

or Kentucky they still walk the forests reciting
the names and properties of every living thing

Red Cedar, Bee Balm, Cinnamon Fern.
Lucy is collecting herbarium specimens

while Annette is reading Lucy's essays
to see if moths fly out of them.

Splash

by Don Boas

Anybody can pass through the gates
and frolic in the municipal water
as long as there's no running
or drinking from glass bottles
or contemplating
why movies matter more than novels.
I would cut the people some slack
but slack does not explain
some bathing suit choices. Chlorine
is paramount to the experience
although most swimmers
find the chemical hard to spell.
Slack only illuminates slack.
When my findings are made public
they will take the cake. A lack
of sunscreen is only the beginning.
My findings will blur the distinction
between customer and staff.
Wet footprints fade on the concrete.
Bees commandeer the gazebo.
The lifeguards blow their whistles
and race from the top to the bottom
and back. For insurance purposes,
the winners will lift a replica of the trophy.

In Praise of Turkey Vultures

by Don Boas

Night-blind and passive,
they circle above the suburban grid.
They feast on last year's spark.
They toggle between before
and after. When irritated,
and who isn't, they vomit
bone and fur. With no voice box,
they hiss and grunt. If you have faith
in the resurrection, they shake it.
If necessary, they scarf
roadkill and stranded fish.

In Praise of Your Gold Earrings

by Don Boas

They tease me from across the table.
Hammered ornaments from the earth.
No reason for the luxury, or regret.
I like to find them in the dark,
my fingers fascinated by skin
and then touching the odd
rightness of metal. You never
take them out or buy another pair.
So you don't need my latest gift—
a box for your treasure,
your initials carved in the soft wood.

In Praise of a 3-Legged Cat

by Don Boas

One of my neighbors is moving.
There's no sign in the yard
and she gave me no reason.
Her tabby cat could care less he is missing
his right front leg. He could care less
I call him Patch and his owner calls him Presto.
When my neighbor sells her house,
I'll miss the missing leg. I'll miss those mornings
when I open the front door
and that cat looks up at me,
his three feet planted on the black welcome mat.

Family Photos

by Kevin McHugh

“Time makes us old. Eternity keeps us young.”
– Meister Eckhart



Photo Courtesy of Culver Pictures

They lived back then, in a world of black and white
that seems to awaken only at the turning of the leaves—
the unfolding of the album to the epiphanies of light,
a mystery rife and ripe as the Second Coming.

The spinal pivot of each thick, thumbed page
transports us all, them new arrayed in trim toques,
brimming felt fedoras or flat caps, frocks, ties and tweeds,
to the brink where we meet again and forever anew
in these illuminated manuscripts of our snapshot lives.

Perhaps it is the illusory stasis of the page that draws us in
from the daily disorder and gives us pause in shared reflection.
Or maybe it is the austerity of the antique prints, preserved
against their fading, the unquenchable gravity of the spectrum,
the presence of all colors—and the absence—in whose bright shadows
we stand now in awe at this bound and swinging door.

Here, the white and black define each other—and all of us,
the pictures taking shape in the complementary interplay.
An intimation of the symmetry of some divine design,
like the polar architecture of the mind, the dawn and the dusk.
So, too, the past and future play off, their open ends on end
like a living hourglass, their vortices intersecting here in the now.

The faces rise again, ever and forever in fragile transfiguration,
in the kinetic interface of the spectral bands of light—
where the silent white makes possible the vocal black,

like lovers on the eternal brink of surrender and possibility.
The invisible, illuminating rainbow and the warm, all-absorbing dark.

The faded forms are therefore neither fixed nor gone;
they live on in us and we in them, but witnessed only
intermittently, in the turning to the light as with a strobe—
a sporadic sequence of one-time introspections.
From the wordless within the spectres stare without,
while we, without, gaze within and see—our ghostly selves.

2 The Grandparents



Photo from Kevin McHugh's private collection

As through a haze, the two emerge, arm in arm.
Properly posed. He, in his best and only suit, stands tall—
starched and pressed like Sunday and his photo—lean
against the sometime, somewhere gray of back-garden green.
He furrows his brow in the day's hard revealing light, but
steadily, through the steely glare of spectacles, he stares out.

This is no casual snapshot but a formal undertaking.
He has cocked his right arm purposefully at the thrust of hip
and propped his right leg, reaching out, to tilt him smaller in to her,
his left arm right-angled across his body like Lincoln.
And, peeking from the shadowed crease of elbow, her white fingers.

She wears her smile and looks through lenses, too,
pale and sheltered from the sun and our spying glass
by the shadowed brim of a lank and looming hat.
She is draped in the style of her day, demurely—
a dress that circles unimagined hips, as loose as she is not,
revealing nothing of her own spare and chiseled frame.

She is well grounded, in black, square-heeled shoes—
no slippers, these, but like her, sure-footed, straight-laced.
And, though in outline, from them two legs stand out—
a scant half-foot of stockinged revelation from ankle top to hem.
But then, on close reflection, we notice most the nose,

the birthmark beak of each succeeding generation.

Still, we want more—to labor through the thatching and scraw,
 as if wisdom were like generations of turf, layered—and so dream
 of digging deep into the welcoming dark for the good stuff that burns bright:
 the lessons that were learned—by him, as a coal-town teacher,
 put out by the Boss for permitting the miners to meet in the school;
 her, from the patient, painful, often silent truths a woman learns
 nursing, dressing and repressing her family of wounds.

Like a thin and polished slice of fossil, this photo fixes all,
 exposing much too little and too much in its one-time light:
 their features as sculpted and as handsome in their angularity
 as the rocky coast of distant Donegal that bred their line
 or the limestone bedrock freed by the peeling of the peat.
 They are framed now, shuttered and caught in a flush,
 transfixed in the flickering, the impressionist flash.

We do not know the what they celebrate or the why—
 no doubt a coming or a going, an anniversary perhaps—
 but we commemorate their existence by our very being
 and so extol their stubborn staying, their fated resurrection
 in us and in our own latter-day reincarnations.

3 The Kid



Photo from Kevin McHugh's
 private collection

From beneath the downturned frown of flat-cap bill,
 he smiles still to us in mystery, a grin about to crack,
 fine line stretching end to curling, upturned end
 as if to call us out for stickball in the timeless streets.
 Perhaps to say hello—to admonish or advise?
 We observe that he cocks his head a bit to one side
 like his son who is not yet but someday yet to be.
 It is a hint of boyish bravado that matches the rake of his cap—
 but not his eyes, so innocent and dark, wide-set, not wide open,
 and balanced above the trademark family nose.

We also note that in the pictures even boys back then
 looked like men—studiously attired. Childhood, a luxury.
 And so they suit-coated and tied them every one and (in this case)

tucked him tan and neat into a cut-down woolen overcoat, already winged at its wide, notched lapels. Little adults. As if by precognition someone had foreseen it all—the grown-up scars, the Great Depression and the War.

And yet, under their hair-oiled, plastered parts, we do spy the little boys, the snickering, giveaway clues: the betrayal of knickers and knee-socks, stripes and argyles, and in the very front row of the one class photo he had saved, the brash protrusion of a pair of high-topped sneakers, from the neat boy whose thin family could afford little else—just in front of him in row two, his own shoes hidden from view.



Photo from
Kevin McHugh's
private collection

That life, arranged like these checkered classmates, would change fast at his father's premature passing. And then his mother would begin to shrink and curve into the woman she would become, too-soon frail, arthritic of body but unbent in mind and rigid in creed. She would ask him on his eighteenth birthday what did he want, being then a man, and he asked for—“A whole chicken to eat, all to myself, and a coat no one else has ever worn.”

And his two sons-to-be were not even a glint in schoolboy eyes. Nor could those same dark eyes foresee that, in a breath, he would soon be stitching the bodies of soldiers, boys younger than he, and cobbling them back into battle. But we testify to it all, abbreviated within a two-inch proof, developed and developing within this opened book.

4 The Siren



Photo from Kevin McHugh's
private collection

To her belongs the riddle—alighted upon the stool in Sloppy Joe's Bar in Havana, souvenir photograph torn in two—one ragged half of a picture puzzle, open-ended.

We hazard her age, a young woman then, long dead now, on vacation no doubt—but the novelty gleams in girl’s eyes. Her first time. And away from home and Philadelphia and from her first downtown job at Sears and Roebuck: “An *executive secretary*,” she would recount with emphasis in the liberation years that followed for her too late, her edge blunted by an era when only the wealthy women “went on.” In hindsight self-conscious, she thirsted thereafter for all of the books, places and faces that followed—as if the cocktail in her hand had only whetted her appetites.

But here, perched on the rim of her life, she is a looker, a young Maureen O’Hara, as iridescent as her satin gown. “Where is Hemingway”—they say he haunted this place—“to sweep you off your feet?” But it’s clear to us that she is the one doing the haunting—ingenuously, easily: to her right the sundered lady in the flowered dress, upstaged—and us as we attempt to reckon the reasons; to her left, the cipher easing in, insinuating, Jazz-Aged, spread-legged cock-of-the-walk. The same old story. All dressed up for the man with the camera, just getting by.

We see them through his Kodak eye. The *gringa bonita* in the waist-length fur, open-toed shoes and lipstick that, even at night and in the black and white, simmers. So, like him, we wonder: “Are you sleeping with *him*?” And we hope she said, “No!” We pray she escaped the disrobing eyes and the open mouth saying God knows what. Then in the wings we spy the gent who looks like a Gatsby and want it to be him, though we grasp with our hindsight—that she is destined to marry the doctor, the kid just back from the war. The missing, puzzling piece of the bigger picture—as if she knew, even then, the mystery unfolding in the spectral interplay of photographs and possibility.



Photo from
Kevin McHugh's
private collection

5 The Grandson

Relatively speaking, the picture is young, but in silhouette an anachronism in high school yearbook black and white. So its shadows soften the scoring of the classroom years—the elemental exposure for half his life spent manning

the blackboard walls like his father's father a century before.
He, too, has posed and, upon photographer's request, donned
his own flat cap like a memory forgotten but imprinted
homeward like the migrating swallow's unfailing compass.

He is retired now and by mortality's unmoved default
or Providential hand, he has inherited the buried treasure,
the archived pictured puzzles and the patriarchy.
So he gets his bearings by the book and by their light,
and in the silent night he takes a fix upon undying stars,
the family Zodiac, their heavenly bodies charting his course.
He finds some solace in his own old photo, its womblike
dark inviting him in like the light and thus he arrays it
with all the others that he delimits in deepest devotion—
while they continue in their rising as if at his ascension
to welcome him home to the end of his beginning
and the beginning of their ends, ever and forever again.

Someday his daughter and his son will turn the leaves
and thumb these selfsame pages to see him there
and they will wonder too and work to piece together
the thousand splinters of their lives with all who came before.
And even his picture will seem to them like an artifact
of the bygone age of books and the irony may strike them
as it did him—of the treason of the things that survive:
like his father's green felt fedora he could not discard
or the penny-loafer shoes that looked on shamelessly
new after the old man's dying and into which
he dared at last to step—their being the same size.
Yet most of all the photographs—that at first sight will seem
but brittle reminders of the lives that have slipped
like the invisible spectrum beneath the seeming death,
the superficial surface of night's black light.

Like them I shall live on and on and in more
than the mere, prayerful metaphor of old family photos.
I will rise with them in the prismatic interface of seen and unseen,
those lovers: the black and white, the darkness and the light.

America

by Jim Webb

America,
you are my teeth,
rotting even as I live.

My tongue
searches out the pain—
one tooth rotted to near nothing

hurts even now.
All of them are filled
or capped.

Some have gone, gone forever—
Coke bottle-Dairy Queen-Popsickle-
Chewing gum-Milky Way-Forever Yours
Rot.

Some I lost head first
on a concrete street.
Your fire department
hosed away the blood and
tooth-pieces of my mouth.

You capped the shards
with plastic and assured me
the gaps would close with time.

They did.
But others cropped up, America,
and holes remained.

My plastic teeth
look real, America,
except for the black line
of real tooth stub, dead
black bone: no blood,
no nerve, no sun bleach
like bones in your desert
West, America.

Others have the look of
Death.

Most work, though none are
Good. They still crush

Hot dogs & apple pie

But Sugar Daddies
devour them,
America.

No, I won't stand in your line, America,
but I will chew & chew & chew, gnash & gnarl
till they all fall out, every last
lead-silver-gold-plastic-bone
tooth.

I'll watch them fly in my spit
and never never take your
set of plastic perties,

But I will
Gum you
till I die.

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Buzzsaws in the Rain, *Get In*, *Jesus—New and Selected Poems* and *Quarried—
30 Years of Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*.

The Day the X-Man Came

by Jim Webb

I lived in my house
 for 33 years
 Before the flood came,
 before the land let loose its
 tears.

I thought if you worked
 hard 33 years, well
 Then just 12 more
 and you could sit and rest
 a spell.

Why,
 I remember one corner of
 the house
 was leanin and fallin in
 33 years ago,
 When my old man came
 haulin in
 wood and blocks and we
 set in
 To buildin year by year,
 buildin what we never had
 before.

It was slow, hard to see
 any end to the buildin
 and hammerin,
 but

We saved that corner, built
 it back—
 laid away and saved and
 raised five more
 to lay away and save.

All our lives
 We ain't never missed a day
 of payin some way,
 Doing the best we can,
 But I'm 52 and
 He's 63
 And it's way too late for them
 E-Z Credit plans.

Carpet, couch, the family
 tree,
 baby shoes and Bible too
 Went floatin on down to
 Kermit and Krum

Floatin away to Kingdom Come.

And I know they
 Ain't no amount of misery
 Gonna bring them sweet
 things

Back to me.

And I know it, I know it, I
 know it

But I still can't see
 Why we gotta pay
 Them Judas strippers to
 haul us away.

How on earth can we
 stand
 Selling our land
 On the installment plan?

And all them politicians that
 never do nothing
 but pat me on the
 back
 and tell a lie or two.

Later or sooner, it's all
 overdue
 them floods garnisheed
 me
 they'll garnishee you.

Well, it took all them years,
 All 33,
 Floods and floods and barrels
 of tears
 To bring me to this day
 And I sit and cry and wail
 and I moan
 But no amount of hurt and
 pain's
 Gonna float me back my
 home.

So I just sit and wait
 for the X-Man to come
 burn my buildin down.

Not much else to say—

33 years
washed away

“The Day the X-Man Came” first appeared in *Mucked* (1978) and has been republished in *Appalachian Journal*, *Buzzsaws in the Rain* and *Get In, Jesus—New and Selected Poems*.

Just As I Am

James B. Goode

The boy who sat in the coal camp house kitchen didn't want to go to church with the rest of the family who went there every Sunday morning and night and every Wednesday night to hear the fire-and-brimstone preacher dole out his brand of fear like he was on some kind of inside track with Jesus and helping him poke the fire.

"I ain't going . . . you can't make me," he said. He crossed his arms tightly with both elbows hugging his skinny ribs.

The mother looked at the daddy with her forehead furrowed like the skin of a drying apple.

"I reckon you ain't in charge here," the father said. "As long as you're in my house and I'm drawing a breath you're going to Sunday school and church."

"I ain't going nowhere," the boy said. "That old man is scary. He just keeps repeating himself. I got it a long way back. The Jesus he's talking about ain't like the one I've seen in the color pictures of your Bible—the ones with him carrying a baby lamb under his arm."

"Well, I ain't putting up with no disrespect or sass. You, young man, are going or I'll have you go cut a limb from the cherry tree so I can switch your boney legs," the father said.

Ain't nobody here has heard a word I've said, the boy thought. About all the time, they treat me like I ain't here. He edged toward the kindling box beneath the coal-fired kitchen laundry coal stove. He knew it well, for he had to fill it every night along with lugging buckets of coal from the coal bin out back next to the stinky toilet. While no one was paying attention, he pulled the enameled drawer out, stuck his hand inside and felt the smooth handle of the wedged-shaped Plumb hatchet with the broken tooth on the nail puller. He pulled it out, hiding it behind his back. The mother, father, and three sisters sat at the blue metal table on blue and white speckled vinyl chairs, stirring thick layers of greasy butter and granulated white sugar in their bowls of rough-cut oatmeal and munching on oven-made toast of homemade bread. He walked toward his empty chair.

They'll listen to me now, he thought. He two-fisted the hatchet as he brought it around in front, raising it high above his head and bringing it down swiftly, making a long triangular-shaped cut in the center of the chair seat. Before anyone could react, he made a second cut beside the first. The father was on him quickly, wrestling the hatchet handle from his grip with his powerful hands. The mother and three sisters' mouths were now dropped open, their doe eyes wide and fixed in glassy circles.

“Dadgummit, what is wrong with you boy? You act like you’re a right smart touched in the head,” he said as, in one swift motion, he pulled his belt from his pant loops and laid the first lick across his backside. Another followed, and then another, until the boy lost count as he twisted and danced in the father’s strong grip. Spittle flew from the father’s mouth, his bristled face flush with anger.

“That’s enough,” the mother said. “You’ve striped him enough.” The father stomped over to the kindling box, placing the hatchet atop the splintery sticks and threading the belt back through the loops in his dress pants. The boy slid down in a corner and sat on the flowered linoleum, trying to stop the rivulets of tears with the open palms of both hands.

“No breakfast for you, boy!” the father said. “Get up from your pity perch and get your behind in gear. You quit that crying right now, or I’ll really give you something to cry about.”

The father returned to the table and then there was nothing but the clicking of their spoons on the sides of the oatmeal bowls and the occasional slurping of hot coffee as the father raised and lowered his ironstone mug. After a few minutes, he arose as he banged it down on the saucer. He stormed out the backdoor, crossing the short stoop in wide strides, and heading toward his car. The boy heard the engine turn over and then catch.

* * * *

Soon, they were headed down the winding mountain road toward the *Sanctified Hill Church of Christ in Jesus Name*, a tiny rectangular, sawmill slab box that sat on locust stilts resting on a briar infested flat at the bottom of a steep hill.

The boy sat in the backseat behind the father, who spun the steering wheel left and right as the car wound through the snake-like curves. He thought about jerking his door open and jumping out of the car, but he knew the sides of this road dropped off into steep piles of rocks. He thought about running away from home after church. He’d just wait until everyone was filing out of the church door and make a sly move around to the back of the building and run in a beeline for the ridge top.

“Cat got your tongue, boy?” the father asked from the front seat.

The boy didn’t answer. He rolled his eyes toward the headliner and then to the window, where he stared at the trees flying by in a stutter. He thought about escaping after Sunday dinner. He’d gather a few things and quietly slip out the front door, making his way down to the railroad track at the bottom of the hill where he would hobo the coal train and make his way to the Corbin rail yard.

“Somebody in here needs to get on the right side of Jesus,” the father said as he tilted his head slightly back toward the boy. “Today would be a great day to walk down the aisle and get saved.”

That’ll not happen but once in a blue moon, the boy thought. Old timers said that some things wouldn’t happen until hell froze over. He liked that saying better, but dared not even think the words. The preacher was scary enough without having to walk the red carpet down the aisle and stand next to him while he palmed his head like a basketball and prayed until feet started shuffling all over the church.

They pulled into the gravel lot at the church and filed out of the car, following the mother like bantam chickens. No one said anything. Their feet sank into the crunching gravel on every step. When they approached the cornerstone of the little church, the father stopped the progression abruptly and lit into his usual recollection about how he and the mother had started the church in their home, after he was converted from

the Methodist to the Church of Christ because some old itinerant tent revival evangelist asked him where in the Bible did it say that sprinkling was allowed and when he searched the good book, he couldn't find hide nor hair of it. This all too familiar story was repeated every time they passed the granite block.

Father is just like the preacher, he thought. Doesn't have a notion that everyone had gotten the story a long time ago.

A verse of *Sweet Hour of Prayer* began wafting out the windows and doorway of the church. The mother led them up the steps, made a nod toward the deacon who stood at the vestibule to welcome everyone to "God's House," as he put it. "Remember, we are all servants, laboring in the vineyard of the Lord," he said, as he always did. The mother strolled down the aisle to the 6th row on the right—their family pew. There was no name on it, but everyone knew who was to sit there. The mother yanked the youngest girl along the narrow space between the pews. They all followed and sat down in a collective sigh. The girls fidgeted, twisting around on the smooth, worn pew, sliding back and forth on their slick dresses until the mother gave them the evil eye, punctuated with one raised checkmark eyebrow.

"Rise and sing hymn number 27 'When We all Get to Heaven.' Let's raise the roof of this church on all four verses, sisters and brothers!" one of the deacons said as he raised his hymnal high with one hand and belted out 'Sing the wondrous love of Jesus,' tilting his head back like a bawling calf when they came to the refrain:

When we all get to heaven,
 What a day of rejoicing that will be!
 When we all see Jesus,
 We'll sing and shout the victory!

The offering was taken and communion passed; the pinches of bread and tiny cups of grape juice were quietly consumed as the body and blood of Christ while one of the Elders proclaimed "Do this in remembrance of Christ as he died on the cross for your sins."

The boy looked at the baptistery with its turquoise water and gaudy mural rising from its surface—the river Jordan done in bright blue with electric green trees along the shore. The sky swirled with white puffs of clouds painted in fluffy round balls. Not like the clouds that formed images of elephants and snowmen in the sky he knew.

None of this seems real, he thought. Not the grape juice being the blood, not the bread the body of Christ, and not the Jordan with fake blue water lined with unnatural green trees . . .

The preacher sat in a huge oak king's chair like the one the boy had imagined King Arthur sat in at the Round Table. At the end of the offertory hymn, the preacher rose and walked to the pulpit. His bushy, overgrown eyebrows arched over his piercing slate gray eyes like a wild patch of weeds.

Seems like the offering ought to come after the sermon, the boy thought. Then, you'd know what you were paying for. A body might not be so excited to slather money in the plate if he'd had the piss scared out of him.

"Say amen and hallelujah!" the preacher said. "I aim to fill this here building with the joy of the Lord this morning, amen." He paused and slowly looked around the room. "'pears to me there's a mighty lot that ain't here this morning. They's found ever excuse known to man to not be here. How can I give them milk, brethren, if they're not here to drink? How can I deliver to them the bread of life, if they're not here to eat? The Bible says 'Go ye therefore into the world and preach the gospel . . . Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth

and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.’ Am I in the gospel brethren?” He turned to look at the entourage of deacons and elders seated in a row behind the pulpit.

“You’re in the gospel preacher,” they said in unison, nodding their heads in approval.

“Well, then, brothers and sisters, who hereabouts is bound and determined to be sent to that eternal lake of fire where there’s no escape? Who will be first?” he asked stabbing his stubby finger toward the right side set of pews and then slicing left through the air until the boy saw it stop directly where he sat, gripping the seat with both hands. “Will you be the first?” His voice lingered, trailing off as his fierce eyes bore down upon the boy. “Are you ready? Oh, can you smell the burning flesh, hear the gnashing of teeth, the screams of anguish?” He gasped for air, getting into a sing-song rhythm that filled the church with desperateness and settled over the pews like a heavy quilt. “2nd Thessalonians, Chapter 1, Verse 9 says, ‘They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.’ PUNISHED with EVERLASTING destruction . . . SHUT OUT! Forever. They ain’t no going back. Once you’re there, you’ll be punished FOREVER! Am I in the gospel, brethren?”

“Amen, you are with the gospel,” the entourage said.

The boy sat up straight, leaning forward as his heart began to pound against his shirt. A line of sweat formed across his narrow forehead.

The preacher continued, “Matthew Chapter 13, Verse 32 says, ‘They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ Notice it don’t say they will be CONSUMED. It don’t say they will DIE. That means to me brethren that this fire will burn the flesh forever and that the damned will shout out and plead to die. But there will be a deaf ear turned toward them. There won’t be nobody listening.”

“Amen brother,” the head elder said.

“You are spot on it,” a short, chunky deacon declared from his perch to the right of the preacher.

“A FIREY furnace, hallelujah! Filled with WEEPING, hallelujah! GNASHING of teeth, hallelujah!” he shouted as he paced behind the pulpit. He jumped high into the air, spasmodically jerking his legs up and down, dipping his head forward and back. The sermon began to play in the background of the boy’s head. It played on as fear crept into him, encasing him in a claustrophobic cocoon.

* * * *

When the deacon announced that the hymn of invitation would be “Just As I Am” . . . standing on all six verses, the boy’s sweaty palms gripped the hymnal as he waited . . . waited until the middle of the third verse when the harmonic voices swelled from the pews, tugging mightily at his heart:

Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

The boy stepped left into the aisle and walked weak-legged toward the preacher, repeating over and over, “I come, I come, I come . . .” but not knowing for sure what that meant.

* * * *

The preacher led the boy to his church office and gingerly closed the door, motioning him to sit in the slatted folding chair across from his desk. The boy sat on the edge of the chair, rocking its back legs off the floor as he dipped forward.

“Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God?” he asked, leaning forward and resting both wrists on the edge of the desk.

“Well, I suppose he is. I’ve heard you say that he is.”

“But do you think he is?”

“Well, I reckon,” the boy said.

“Well then, we’re going to go through that door in a few minutes,” he said, pointing to the wooden door that led to the baptistery. “And I will put you completely under the water in a watery baptism that will allow you to arise and walk in a newness of life—just like when Jesus was buried, but arose from the tomb and went up into heaven. When I bring you up, heaven will open and doves will come down and light on your shoulders and the angels in heaven will rejoice.” The boy let the words settle like when he cleaned leaves from a mountain spring and waited to take a drink.

“Doves,” the boy said. “The kind that coos in the fields?”

“The very same birds of God’s creation,” the preacher said. “I’m going to put a handkerchief over your mouth and let you down backwards and then I’ll bring you back up from the watery grave,” he said.

The preacher arose, took off his suit jacket, and removed his shoes. “Take your shoes off and take out what’s in your pockets,” he directed. When they were finished, the preacher led the boy up the three steps, through the door and down into the freezing water. They faced each other. The preacher cleared his throat.

“This lost lamb has found his way home and the great shepherd welcomes him into his loving arms. In Acts 2:38 the Scripture says ‘Peter said unto them, repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins.’ I now baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” He gingerly dipped the boy backwards, stumbling as he put him under the turquoise water, held him there, and then brought him up with rivulets of water running out of his hair and down his face. The boy looked around the baptistery through the magnifying water.

Where are the doves? he thought. When the water stopped flowing, he looked again. Where are the doves he said would lite on me? he thought. No doves appeared. All he could see was the electric blue of the Jordan River and the fake trees along its bank, and the cotton ball clouds that didn’t show any shapes he could recognize.

“Does anyone see any doves in here?” he shouted to the congregation. “Does anyone see a dove anywhere?” No one answered. The church was hushed. The boy began to cry. He stood waist deep in the water and sobbed.

“Hallelujah,” said one of the deacons.

“Hallelujah,” the congregation repeated. A cloud slid over the sun and the stained glass church windows faded into dark.

Wiley Boynton is Dead

Raymond Abbott

Wiley Boynton is dead. I first heard the news when Katie, a colleague called me on my cell phone and told me Wiley had been taken to the hospital with a knife wound. I asked her right away—she is a pretty 28 year-old social worker who looks about nineteen—“Self inflicted?”

“I think so,” she said. Odd way to try to kill yourself, I thought.

It was then about 4:30 in the afternoon, and I was on my way home, but I thought, if Wiley kills himself with a knife it will have to be a first for me, not that I pretend to have seen it all, for I have not. But in my world working as a social worker with severely mentally ill adults, for the most severe that are on the streets, and there are plenty these days, suicide often means an overdose of one kind or another, or a gunshot wound, or a leap off a tall building or a high bridge. A self-inflicted knife wound sounded unusual at best, even though it might be possible, I figured, with someone like Wiley, considering the violent world he came out of. I knew quite a lot about him. I kind of liked the guy, too.

I tried to forget the information I got so late in the day from Katie, but it hung heavy in my heart and I knew I couldn't. I turned on the TV and there it was on the local news, the 21st murder of the new year and it was only April. Homicides get lead coverage on my local TV as I guess they should. A reporter was standing on First Street in front of Wiley's house telling us a man had been found dead with a stab wound to the abdomen. No name was given.

Murder, I thought. Wow! I knew Wiley associated, often unwillingly, with criminal types (those on parole) because, well, he was on parole himself after spending more than 20 years in state prisons for violent crimes, including once stabbing a state trooper in the eye. Wiley was around 40 years old. Most of his adult life was spent in prison, some very hard prison time, too. Wiley told me several times that the parolees he knew wanted to move in with him, and they were not welcome, but it was difficult for him to say no. He was in many respects a very vulnerable person, easily used by others.

I heard a second news report half an hour later and the reporter was now backing off the homicide angle. On this report he said the deceased man (never giving us his name), was thought to be mentally ill, which Wiley clearly was. When the words ‘mentally ill’ get introduced into such a report, one knows or should know, that something bizarre could follow, but that something is often much less than murder, and thus the reporters quickly lose interest. At the next local news broadcast a few hours later, the story was gone altogether.

I knew I could call the hospital, but with confidentiality laws what they are these days I was not likely to get much information. Then, I remembered a friend, Brenda, who worked in the psych unit at the University Hospital and so I called her. She typed Wiley's name into the computer and came up with nothing.

"Of course, if he was dead at the scene," Brenda reminded me, "he would go directly to the morgue." I was pretty certain now that that was what had happened.

First thing in the morning I called the Coroner's office, identified myself and asked after Wiley.

"We've been trying to get you," the man told me. Probably it was not me personally he sought because he had no way of knowing my involvement with Wiley, but he was pretty certain the agency I worked for, which covered seven counties and had nearly 2000 employees, was involved. We usually were when the subject was mental illness.

They had found an appointment card on Wiley with Katie's name on it. Wiley had had an appointment with this pretty therapist on the day he died, April 29.

I informed the coroner of my connection to Wiley as case manager, and he then told me what had happened.

The body was about to undergo an autopsy and the coroner said while Wiley had a knife wound to the abdomen as it was reported on television, it was not deep. His sister had told the coroner that Wiley had recently been diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver (I hadn't heard this), and if the knife penetrated the diseased liver even slightly that could be the cause of death. The coroner went on to say he had found frothing of the mouth, and that is often a sign of an overdose.

I was grateful that the coroner had already contacted Wiley's sister. I had met her only once, and I didn't wish to be the one to have to call her and give her the sad news. I knew she and Wiley were close. She now lives in Indianapolis but when I met her she lived in Eastern Kentucky, where both are from, by the way. Another by the way, I once lived there too, but that was long ago.

"I didn't find any bottles of medicine," the coroner went on, which he thought was odd because I had just told him Wiley was on lots of medicine, more than any client I can remember.

"He doesn't get bottles of these medicines," I explained. "He comes to the office about three days a week and is given medicine in increments, usually in little brown envelopes, several days' worth at a time."

There were no such envelopes found, I was told, but there was a heap of pills, all mixed together in a large ashtray from which I was told Wiley often grabbed handfuls, ingested them, and washed them down with rubbing alcohol as a chaser. Rubbing alcohol is common in prison population, the coroner told me next. I had never heard of this, if indeed it is true. I suppose it is. He also said a half full bottle of Vodka was found nearby. So far as I knew Wiley didn't drink anymore. So much for what I knew. That he once did, well, that was not news to me. Some of his most violent acts, ones that landed him in prison, occurred when he was drinking.

What surprised me most of all was learning that a black stripper, had been living with Wiley (who is white) for several months. She was not his girlfriend, he quickly added. His girlfriend was a white woman who lived across the street.

I knew Wiley had a girlfriend because he told me about her the week before. He didn't say "girlfriend," however, using instead the term "lady friend." (He often used old fashioned-sounding speech and even old-fashioned words like "blackguard.") He smiled broadly as he gave me that information, and I congratulated him saying, "Good for you Wiley." That was the last time I saw Wiley Boynton or spoke to him,

but I did call his apartment several days later, and a man answered, identifying himself as Wiley's roommate. "Roommate?" I said. "Wiley can't have a roommate because his housing subsidy says he can't" (at least not without permission). The guy on the line probably didn't understand it all, but nevertheless he quickly changed his story saying, "Oh, I am only here walking his dog." I told him to have Wiley call me, but I never got a call.

Wiley was nervous about rules and regulations, and not returning my phone call was not at all like him. I decided when he did call I would simply remind him of the housing rules, rules he must follow. Further than that I was not prepared to go. I would not turn him in, certainly. Besides, I doubted if Wiley could make it on his own. After spending 20 or so years in prison, and before moving to his own apartment on First Street, he spent a year at a halfway house for ex-cons. That's where I met him, at the men's center.

I was assigned to be his caseworker. Like a lot of the recently released prisoners, he could be demanding, even insistent about things he wanted me to do for him. Often though, he backed off quickly when reminded there were others who needed such services and he had to wait his turn. But he knew the "squeaky wheel" got the grease, and I might very well act more quickly if pushed a little.

The coroner finished his recitation, asking that I fax a copy of Wiley's meds to him. He wanted this information right away. I then checked with our medical director (so-called), a Dr. Hamel. Hamel never likes to make decisions, fearing, I suppose, he might get involved in an unwelcome way. But I asked him in front of others, leaving him kind of stuck. "I guess you've got to send it to him," he said slowly in a not very convincing voice. "Those coroners are always finding overdoses." I thought, well, there are quite a few overdoses to find, but I kept quiet. I knew Dr. Hamel was very happy the case wasn't his. Wiley was being seen by a nurse practitioner, a woman we called Dorothy, and I would need to call her and give her the news of Wiley's passing.

I knew she would be worried, because Wiley was on so much medicine. When a death is ruled an overdose, an investigation often follows, and the agency makes you feel as if they are looking for a culprit, a determination of who screwed up. The truth is, community mental health (what we are) is a loose operation at best. Lots of medicine is floating around and not so many checks and balances exist (labs and the like). Probably it has something to do with the people we serve—very poor, uneducated people, and often people with serious physical ailments as well as mental illness. We see much heart and lung disease, and diabetes abounds; hepatitis is rampant, and obesity and alcoholism are very common. Did I leave anything out? Yes, almost everyone is a heavy smoker. Treating such people can often seem futile, although no one in our agency would admit to such a thought. Then, there are the sheer numbers, staggering numbers of such folks. And so, after a while, it is my contention, one becomes a bit detached. After all, it might be argued, how does one fight for the safety and well being of persons who themselves care so little for their own health and well-being? The truth is, you don't after a time, or not to the extent you might in another setting. But such a public admission in my world would quickly get a person fired.

It was Dorothy's day off and she was about to leave the city for a conference in Atlanta, but I knew she would want me to call her and give her what information I had. When I got her on the phone, I said simply, "Wiley Boynton is dead."

"What happened?" she answered in a somewhat lethargic voice.

"I don't know yet. I just talked to the coroner. There is a knife wound to the abdomen, but it isn't deep and he's talking overdose. There was frothing at the mouth."

I could tell she was a little rattled with the news. Worried maybe about all that medicine she had been prescribing for Wiley.

“He has never presented as suicidal,” she said. “He never spoke of it.” But I had witnessed Wiley several times very severely depressed while he was living at the halfway house. My job is such that I see clients a lot more often than does a nurse practitioner or doctor.

“Do you have the chart in front of you?” she asked. “Look in the lab section. When was the last Depakote lab?”

“Not too recent,” I said, “unless medical records hasn’t filed one yet.”

“No, no, I do them myself. I don’t wait on medical records.”

I knew she was nervous, but I also knew she was glad I was the case manager because I have a reputation for knowing my clients and their recent activities and having my notes and treatment plans up-to-date and current. From my perspective, paperwork-wise, everything was all right for Wiley. The same is pretty much true of all of my cases. I am kind of an old fart about keeping my recordings current. I find life is easier that way, less troublesome, less unpredictable.

I told Dorothy the coroner needed to speak to her, and for a few minutes we discussed the wisdom of her calling him right away, as I knew he wished her to do.

“I don’t see how it can harm anything,” I said. “You can tell him truthfully that you are at home and cannot of course see your case notes.” She decided to call, and later called me back to say she had learned the knife wounds had not killed him, but pills were found in his throat and stomach, and then something more, something we both knew. That was that this guy, Wiley Boynton, was in terrible overall physical shape with advanced heart disease and lung disease and probably more than that. Thus, the coroner was not ruling out natural causes, as in a heart attack, but needed to wait for the results of the toxicity report six weeks from now. Dorothy seemed relieved that death might not be directly attributable to an overdose.

Next, I phoned Wiley’s sister, Mitzh in Indianapolis. I had met her before. I remembered her as a dark haired woman who looked younger than her thirties. She has four children, at least one grown, so she had to have begun having children fairly early in her teens. The children have different fathers.

Mitzh was sobbing on the phone. She had spoken again to the coroner and he had told her that the knife wound had not killed Wiley. Probably it was the pills, he said.

“They said they found pills in his throat and in his stomach. I just know he didn’t kill himself. He was so hopeful all the time. He talked about moving to Indianapolis to be with me and the kids. He loved the kids.”

I recall Wiley telling me the same thing after returning from Indianapolis at Easter time. He was a little down that day. He said it was because he had had to come back. I remember telling him it might be possible for him to make the move to Indianapolis, but it was complicated, too. He knew this. He was on parole in Kentucky. He was on SSI (a Social Security program) and Medicaid and those programs had to be transferred to Indianapolis. He would also need to find a mental health network to follow him, such as the one in Kentucky. All very doable, yes, but a lot of permissions had to be secured, and the most critical one was to get the parole officials to allow him to leave the state, even to nearby Indiana. So we spoke that day of setting a goal of getting all of this done by fall (it was early April when we had this conversation).

I told Mitzh it was my understanding that the coroner had not yet ruled suicide, an overdose, and I reminded her of what she already knew, that Wiley was in poor health overall, especially for a man barely forty years old.

“You know, for you saw it too, that Wiley could not climb a set of stairs without being exhausted,” I said to her.

“I know,” she sobbed.

“So it is entirely possible the coroner will rule Wiley suffered a heart attack while ingesting the pills. You said yourself he was very agitated and had called you at 4:30 A.M.”

“Yes, he was.”

She had also said he told her he loved her in that same conversation, and that might indicate a man saying good-bye.

Also, I remembered what else the coroner said, and that was someone told him at the scene that at 3 A.M. Wiley went up to the third floor of his building (he lived on the 1st) and began to bang on the door of his friend John, who lived there. He had to be pretty agitated, pretty hopped up, to do such a thing, for three floors for Wiley was like a mountain for someone else. In my mind a heart attack was a possibility, a stretch maybe, but a possibility.

I changed the subject. “I have the name and number of the funeral home in Floyd County.” I had to look at my notes to get the name. “The Ferguson Home. Do you have money for the funeral?” I knew Wiley had no insurance and little money in the account we kept for him.

“I am sorry, we don’t.”

“None?”

“No, none. I had hopes Wiley had a bit of money left in his account.”

“He does, maybe as much as six hundred dollars. I am only guessing though.”

For Wiley and persons like him determined too ill mentally (his diagnosis was schizophrenia, undifferentiated), and I suppose too careless with money (although he was better than most) the state, in this case the Social Security Administration, insists he have a payee. That’s where we come in. Our agency does that job. I have about fifteen persons for whom I handle their monthly funds entirely, every single penny. I pay the bills, rent, utilities, food, parcel out spending money. It is largely a thankless task, though necessary. Later, when I had time to check Wiley’s account, I learned he had only three hundred dollars remaining, a bit less than that in fact, and it was not immediately clear that those funds could be used for his funeral. It was now the 30th of April and I knew a check for \$579.00 (monthly SSI benefit) was due to arrive, but I knew as well without even asking that those funds, the May check, had to be returned to Social Security.

Before hanging up with Mitzh, I assured her that I would do what I could to locate some money for funeral costs. Part of my job, as I see it, is to satisfy the family at times like these, and it is of course the human, the compassionate thing to do, but that isn’t what I am getting at. I know if you do all you can to make the family happy in these sad circumstances, they are less likely to hook up with a lawyer and sue our agency (or me) for some sort of malfeasance or malpractice or mal- something. I think overall we do a passable job within our mental health agency with the resources we have and the numbers and the conditions of the population we serve. But, having said that, I know as well a good lawyer could have a field day with what he might uncover about our operations and with not a lot of effort, either. The paperwork in this case—and all of my cases I like to believe—the part I do I mean, is well covered, but I know in the system as a whole this is not true.

It is overall a shoddy operation. Cases examined randomly are frequently woefully inadequate with overdue treatment plans, missing or inadequate health screens.

It goes on from there. Curious though is that an effort such as mine to placate the family by helping with the cost (as of a funeral) is sometimes met with resistance if it involves, as it must, spending a few hundred dollars (usually less than a thousand). The resistance comes from a level above me. I want to remind such decision-makers, but I don't, just how much more costly it is for an agency to fend off a lawsuit, even one you win. To make such a comment would get me labeled a smart-aleck, so I try other tactics. I plan to call a woman I know in Frankfort at the state mental health offices in an effort to scare up seven hundred dollars. My goal is to get together one thousand dollars total to put toward the funeral (that's counting what is already in Wiley's account). If I can get together a commitment of one thousand dollars for the funeral home, we will have a deal. As I am about to call the woman in Frankfort, my phone rings. It is the Ferguson Funeral home in rural Kentucky. I speak to the owner, Sandra. Soon we are talking money.

"You know, there isn't much money in this case?" I say.

"I know," she says.

"How much do you need to bury him?" She doesn't answer me directly.

"Well, we are sending a car for the body and that and embalming will cost \$562.00"

\$562.00, a curious total I think. I would like to ask for a breakdown but I don't dare. "I haven't yet met the family," Sandra tells me. I guess she means Mitzh in Indianapolis but I know there are others. Wiley's mother is still alive in the mountains someplace and he has a son who is a Marine, and last I heard the son was in Iraq or some such place.

She continues. "I have no information about the deceased."

"Well, I can help you there Sandra," and so I give her Wiley's date of birth, SS number, address and whatever else she required. He was born in 1964. How young, I muse.

"Look," I say, "we have at the moment about three hundred dollars and I believe that that money can be spent, don't hold me to that though. And I am about to call Frankfort to see if more can be allowed, maybe a total of a thousand dollars." I tell her again that I can't promise that amount. It is simply my goal.

"I am worried," I go on, "that you won't have the promise of enough money today in order to collect the body and he will remain in the morgue for days while all of this gets sorted out." Wiley had his troubles and caused his share of trouble, but he was in my estimation a decent sort at the end of his short life, and deserved a bit more than I sensed he might get. My worries were misplaced.

"That won't happen, sir," Sandra said to me, getting somewhat formal. "I have already sent the hearse for him and if we don't get a penny he will be taken care of. Please understand though that we know this family, not the deceased, just the family he comes from, and feel if any more money is allowed and it is given to them to pay us it won't arrive." I almost laugh at the way she says this.

"No chance that will happen," I said and I am sure there was a laugh in my voice. "Any payment made to you will be sent by check and by mail with nobody in between."

"Thank you, sir," and she hangs up.

I am very relieved now that we have a plan for Wiley. He is going to be taken care of. There is a place for him to be buried among family in rural Kentucky and a funeral home to do the burying.

It is Friday afternoon and I cannot get through to my Frankfort connection. Her secretary promises me she will call me on Monday first thing.

Now I have to mend fences, so to speak, with my office mate, a woman about 55

with bad teeth. My God, what a way to remember a person, but it goes to show that a mouth full of rotten teeth is just pretty paramount. Deborah is nice enough though and while her job is the same as mine, a case manager, she is the therapist type. At least she sees herself as a therapist. She asks me if I want to talk about how Wiley's death makes me feel. I am rather cross with her in my denial of sad feeling at his passing and I caution her not to ask me the question again, which of course she does. I tell her bluntly what I have come to believe. "Do you remember when John Benton died last year of cancer with his guts hanging out (he had what the doctors call a prolapsed colostomy much like a large hernia of the stomach with his intestine protruding)? You asked me the same question. I told you then that I could hardly wish John Benton a long life (he was 50) living as he had to live and for so long.

"I didn't mourn John's death and truth be known any of the people I work with could go at any time and I am not going to feel their death is my responsibility. Everyone I deal with had their problems long before I came along, and I don't believe that many of these folks I work with have much of a life to begin with. If they do, I don't see it."

I hold back my growing opinion that society erred when it decided to empty out all the mental hospitals and put these hapless souls in the community at large and then hire persons like me to try to hold together their pathetic lives.

Furthermore, I wanted to say and didn't of course—that I was not a big believer that therapy did much good with such low-functioning people. Yet, we were constantly being pushed by our agency to get people into therapy, if only in groups, for the revenue it would generate. For that matter, I am not a believer anymore that talking out all of one's problems is all that it is made out to be. Sometimes I think that such therapy does little more than poke a stick at a wound trying to heal itself. To my mind, there is something to be said for holding it all in, and if possible, putting it behind you. Try to forget it.

All I know for sure is that I don't want to talk about how I feel about Wiley's death with Deb or anyone else. Well, maybe I will amend that slightly. If one of the pretty young therapists we employ or one of the young nurses on staff wishes to take me out for a drink and explore my feelings about how this client's death had affected me, I am willing. But not with Deb, nothing doing. Still, I must reassure her that I am not angry with her, or she will lumber around the office for days like a wounded moose, so I do exactly that, mend my fences. I am good at it. After all I was once married for 25 years and had lots of practice.

Come Monday, I talk to my friend in Frankfort and we find a way to send the funeral home the seven hundred dollars (on top of the three hundred we have) we need for Wiley's burial. Overall, I've done the right thing by Wiley. No one can say I haven't.

Wiley was short and stout like the proverbial teapot. He was a mountain boy, largely uneducated although he could read a little. He told me this a bit proudly one day and how it was he came to learn to read and write. It happened in prison. A black Muslim inmate taught Wiley to read using the Bible, the only book available. The Muslim man said he didn't believe in the Bible but words were words and so it would do. Wiley learned the rudiments of reading from this Muslim fellow, but at something of a price. The white prisoners disliked the association between these two, and as a consequence Wiley was assaulted with a knife. He managed to avoid the attack and then picked up an iron bar and clobbered his attacker. Wiley was then thrown into solitary and shortly thereafter transferred to another facility—to Eddyville, Kentucky's maximum security prison. It was more than this one assault that got Wiley sent to Eddyville. Prior to this incident, and while drunk, he had attacked a guard.

He described to me the ride to Eddyville. “There is this steep road down a hill to Eddyville,” he said. Wiley and I were at that moment on our way to Value City to buy him some clothing. “God, it was depressing,” he continued. “It looked like some dark scary castle, an awful looking place, someplace from Hell, and I was going there and to solitary confinement, and I didn’t know for how long.”

The story I remember best that Wiley told me was an incident that happened to him at the age of ten. His father was in his sixties when he was born, and so by that time, he was a minor player in the family. His mother, in her early thirties, had a boyfriend who was close to her age. She and the boyfriend were quarreling at home one day with young Wiley and Wiley’s uncle present. The boyfriend pulled out a small gun, a derringer, intending to shoot someone—it was not clear who—but somehow the gun went off and Wiley was hit in the groin, whereupon he fell over and hit his head hard on the refrigerator door and was taken to the hospital in a coma. His uncle then beat up the wife’s lover, who, young though he was, suffered a heart attack and he too was carted off to the hospital, the same hospital where Wiley was being treated. Wiley’s father by this time had been informed about what had happened and went immediately to the hospital to see about his son. While there, he was told the man who had shot Wiley was in a room down the hall. After seeing his son, he went down the hall to his wife’s lover’s room and shot the man dead in his bed. The old man, then 75 or so, was arrested and there was an arraignment scheduled, but the legal business dragged on for a couple of years and in that time the old man died, and that was that.

Wiley told me all of this almost matter-of-factly, as if every ten year old boy gets shot in the groin by his mother’s lover and then his father shoots the guy in his hospital bed. But that is Eastern Kentucky life and I knew a part of that world because I spent a year in those same mountains interning as a fourth grade school teacher, and a more violent place I have never seen the likes of.

Finally, there is the matter of the knife wound. Once the coroner ruled it out as the cause of Wiley’s death it became, well, almost unimportant, not an issue. But I wondered still, was it self-inflicted? I am inclined to believe it was. Perhaps Wiley stuck himself while in the state of agitation at 3 A.M. My opinion only, however. The opinion in my office, among the clients we serve, is that one of the two women Wiley associated with stuck that knife in his ample belly. Just why no one cares to speculate. The clients may be right about such matters. They sometimes are, but often, I suspect, they hope to discover the cause of death is not suicide, but something more exotic. Like murder. I guess that is because suicide is all too commonplace in their sad existences.

Stories

Ray Abbott

I tell stories. I don't mean I just write stories as I am doing now. I mean I tell stories out loud, convincing stories I like to believe, person to person, but not the truth, never the truth (well, almost never).

I am not sure when all of this began, this untruthful storytelling. It must have a psychological label, as virtually everything does these days. I work as a psychiatric social worker—case manager—and I guess I should know, shouldn't I?

For me, I believe the practice began to take shape more or less on a transatlantic flight in the company of my then ten-year-old daughter. We were headed for Ireland, just the two of us. Her mother was to join us a week later. This particular flight was very full, and we were at the rear of the coach section. I noticed the stewardess walking down the aisle slowly and passing a lot of people before she reached me. Then, she stopped, looked “at me”, and asked, “Sir, are you by chance a doctor?” I would have liked to have said, “Yes,” but that would be nuts. She was clearly looking for someone to help a sick passenger. Actually, it turned out to be a crew member, a woman who had fallen on the flight deck and her arm was thought to be broken. This I learned later.

On another flight overseas, this time to London, more or less the same thing occurred. This time I was alone.

One year while in Ireland, sometime after all this had happened, I informed my wife Mary that I wanted temporarily to take on a new identity while we were in the country. I said I might become a brain surgeon. *Nothing doing*, she replied. *Well, how about a gynecologist?* I asked. She didn't even answer me that time. The expression on her face told me what she was thinking.

So I never did get to assume a new identity, but I did what I considered the next best thing. I began to tell untrue stories at work and at parties, even once to my own daughter, who is now grown. I told her and her boyfriend (soon by the way to be her husband) that an antique lamp I had recently purchased and paid \$225 for (that was the truth) I could resell for \$600 (not true). I told the two of them how the antique dealer—actually, more of a consignment shopkeeper—called me after I made my purchase to tell me a man was in the shop who had seen the lamp in the window and he and his wife very much wanted to purchase it. Now he was willing to pay me \$600 for the lamp. The shop owner gave me the man's telephone number, and my quandary was, as I told my daughter and her boyfriend, *Should I call and resell the lamp I had just purchased?*

My daughter's boyfriend Dave is a practical lad, and he said I should sell. And

that the lamps in his house were from Target and cost less than ten dollars each. My daughter wasn't so sure. She figured out quickly that if I resold the lamp, none of the \$600 was likely to come her way, whereas if the lamp stayed with me, it might very well come to her by way of inheritance some day. She seemed to like the lamp too, and she tends to be pretty practical, just like Dave.

I said earlier that I think this all began with flights overseas, but as I think about the subject, I am inclined to believe it began somewhat earlier, perhaps back when I was first single. (I am single now again, as in being divorced.) In those days, I used to frequent writers' colonies, places like the MacDowell Colony. This was some years ago. At one colony, I remember telling a certain talkative fellow, a somewhat well-known composer, that I was a pilot—I am a small plane private pilot—and that I had flown missions over Vietnam—I am old enough to have done that—from an aircraft carrier, no less.

I was interested in the response of others to having in their midst a so-called artist, a writer, who at one time in his life had dropped bombs from airplanes. I know the composer was impressed, but he seemed more impressed that I had the skills, or so he thought, to take a complicated aircraft off of a carrier in the ocean and then return it safely. What I did with it in between was of less interest to him.

The others, I suspect, were less impressed than my composer friend. While I know they knew the story, had got it from the composer, nobody confronted me, but a coolness seemed to develop in the social milieu all of a sudden, unless it was my imagination. I never reveal that I am putting a person on, either. I just go away and say nothing, as I did that with this writers' colony group.

I have one story that involves my 94-year-old mother, although she knows nothing of it. I have told people I work with that I spent part of my childhood in Revere, Massachusetts. When I was a kid, Revere, which is near Boston, had a reputation as a gangster underworld haven. Revere was a very tough place. In truth, I have never been there.

Revere today, by the way, is quite gentrified. But according to my tale, my mother was good friends with a lady who eventually became ill and died, but my mother helped her through her illness. My mother has done this before, helped the ill and dying, except this lady didn't exist, nor had we ever lived in Revere. As my account unfolds, this lady's son becomes later in life the virtual head of the New England mob scene. I describe him to my listeners as a somewhat more sophisticated Tony Soprano. He was of course very grateful to my mother for her attention to his late mother, and while we moved away from Revere, moved 20 miles north, this man, whom I call Manuel, always kept in touch with my mother, calling her several times a year to ask after her well-being, and if she were in need of anything, anything at all, he always said. The joke in our family was that because of the regular calls, my mother's phone, and maybe all of the rest of ours, were probably tapped by federal law officials trying to snag this gangster Manuel.

I got a bit of response to this story at work and wherever else I told it, but overall, I guess I was disappointed and bored with the reaction, so I expanded the story somewhat. Again my poor mother was central to my story. I told a woman at work, who had actually met my mother a time or two when she visited me in Kentucky, that as a younger man I was in a Boston bar once and a little drunk—I did live in Boston for a few years, and I am sure I was a little drunk in a bar a time or two. This one evening, however, I was chatting up, with some success I thought, a pretty young woman at the bar. Turns out her boyfriend was nearby, and he was a regular at the place and a

tough hombre, and he hauled me out of the bar and took me behind the establishment and punched me out.

It was no contest, I said. I got the worse of the deal by far. Somehow the police were called and an item actually appeared in the newspaper, but the culprit was never caught, not at least until my mother saw the item in the *Boston Herald-American*, which she reads each day—she does read that paper, but not every day. She was annoyed and worried about what happened to me, although she never said a word to me of the subject, so she called this fellow Manuel in Revere and he sent someone out to find out the entire story. When he had an accurate account, he sent someone else around, an enforcer who collects bad debts with sash weights and is a very tough customer himself. And so he taught this fellow a lesson. In other words, he beat the hell out of him.

I am unsure if the woman I unloaded this story on believed me entirely, but since she knew my mother and knew also how old she is and how alert and vigorous, the woman had to give the account some level of credence, and if she did believe me, I know she told the story to others there.

I once got thrown out of a major hospital in Louisville—too long a tale to go into now—but after telling of my mother’s underworld connections, I happened to say to a man who asked what became of the men who threw me out of that hospital, the security guards, and banged my head against a concrete wall a couple of times to teach me a lesson, I said that two of the three men involved in that activity were dead. Died in accidents, but I said no more than that, and the man listening to me didn’t pursue the subject. He got the point, though.

But I think my favorite of all the lies is this one: I went out for a while with a neighbor woman, a much too young woman for me and I knew it. Nevertheless, sometimes when I was out of town for a stretch of time I would ask her to watch my house, pick up my mail, and so on. I even provided a key so she could go in and look around. I told her not to be too much a snoop, and of course she promised she would not be. I told her also that I possessed a valuable collection of figurines from Morocco. I knew she once lived in Egypt, so I thought I would use Morocco as a place of origin. Then in a whisper I said, “They are very obscene figures. My ex-wife called them *depraved*.” I explained how my ex is from New York City and once when we were visiting there years ago, before my daughter was born, she introduced me to a man, a friend of hers—maybe a former lover, but I don’t know this, I said, and didn’t remember to ask her—and he had a collection of Moroccan figures, fifteen in all, and he needed money and offered them to me for \$500. And so I bought them. “They have to be worth a great deal more now,” I said. My young friend was bursting with curiosity.

“Oh, can I see them?” she asked.

“No, they are too shocking for me to show anyone. They show people having all kinds of sex, including sex with animals. I have never displayed them, and I have a secret space behind a false wall to store them. You will never find them, but please do not try, do not look for them.

“My wife forbade me to put them on display,” I went on. “And after our divorce, when I moved here to this house, I thought of putting them out, but I feared that might be misunderstood. I might somehow get labeled a sex pervert or child molester, or what have you. I seldom take them out.”

I then went off on my holiday. Sometimes I made a big mystery out of where I was headed, when in fact I was probably going nowhere very special. (I don’t know why I do any of this.) When I returned, I looked for evidence of a search, but I con-

fess I saw little that had been disturbed in the house, although I feel sure she hunted and maybe hunted aplenty for those figures. She was careful, however; there was no evidence left behind of a hunt.

I don't see this woman very often these days, but whenever I do, she always asks if she might see the Moroccan art, as she calls it. I say to her, "How old are you now?" and she answers 35 or 36. I then reply, "Sorry, you have to be 40 years old or older to see this stuff. It is that shocking and powerful." Good thing I didn't have much of a relationship with her, because at some point when I could not produce the Moroccan figures I would have had to fess up and admit there were none, and everything else I told her about my life would suddenly be suspect, just as everything I am telling you now has to be suspect.

Maybe this entire discourse is a lie, or maybe every last word is the truth. Hard to tell, I like to believe, not that it matters a whole lot anyway. Yet, as I said in the beginning, there has to be a medical label for such a condition, other than the obvious one that comes to mind, CHRONIC LIAR.

The Southgate House, Leon Russell and Audio Anarchy

Steven Lansky

I got the job through a contact at the radio station where I spun discs for a lark. Honestly, I'm small fry. I worked one weekend air shift for six years building it from one to three hours and developing a progressively nagging following. I shouldn't complain. Listeners who called late Sunday nights were rarely drunk and often made pledges to the station. But this one fellow—a harp player for a local band had become pesky. He'd call when I adjusted the volume levels too much during a song and ask me what was wrong. Something was wrong all right, he wanted to come on the air Superbowl Sunday and read aloud about his former spouse's suicide. I believe in talking about tense issues, but as the day approached I got cold feet. Things were going sour then. I was separated from my wife and off my medication. I split town, took a winter tour of the South and Northeast driving through a blizzard. The weekly radio show was a casualty of the trip. A job offer came a year later. The PR rep from the station dropped me a note that a promoter needed some "light" security for a Leon Russell show at the Southgate House in Newport, Kentucky. I thought I might get a chance to meet a music legend on the down side of his career, one of those aging stars who took a gig no one thought he'd take, at a venue small enough that I'd actually see him.

Then the promoter called early the day of the show. I feared that she wanted me to help haul in the audio gear for the show. I'm a bit old for that sort of labor and never intended to risk hurting my back. But, security sounded easy. I figured to show up and shirk if called upon to do heavy lifting. It was a nice day and I had nothing planned, so I drove over the river with the sunroof open, the breeze blowing my hair. My mirror aviator sunglasses gave me that classic look. As I say, I'm not too damn ugly. I have a cropped full beard that's darker than my long hair. My friend, Karen, says I have gentle bovine eyes. At six-two, and a slightly out of shape two-fifty, I don't look easy to mess with. My strategy for security focused on setting a formidable vibe.

The lady promoter had told me on the phone that I wouldn't be paid, and I was just to stand by the stage and keep people from doing anything stupid. From her description, the gig sounded more and more like work, and stupid work at that. I kept my energy low key. I figure, when you have a rock show, lots of booze, probably some weed, speed, crack and crank, the thing to do is keep the granola guy humor on top. I wouldn't push anybody; nobody would push me. When I first met the promoter over a year earlier, she had tried to turn my wife away from a show. I had a guest pass for

two, or so I thought. I recalled that this lady's dyed, black pageboy looked strange framing her once pretty face. Tired rims on dark beady eyes, and a mouth that worked too hard more than suggested that she only had one free ticket for the two of us. In the smoky, cavernous nightclub there were few seats left. In the end, her husband had smoothed the conflict over, but I had boiled with anger. Now, the woman was warmer towards me, but the sour memory of her first Newport welcome lingered. "I'm glad you're big and intimidating," she had said on the phone this time. Hey, I have a fucking mind too, lady, I thought to myself.

Southgate House was an historic landmark in Newport, Kentucky, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. Known because Lincoln had slept there and the inventor of the Tommy Gun was born there, it was a giant, gray brick Victorian mansion with a ballroom in back that had been converted into a concert hall that could handle four-hundred drunken hillbillies and only be seventy-five or so beyond the capacity that the Fire Marshall allowed.

When I got to the mansion, I let myself in and wandered around down the creaky steps into the dark, airy ballroom. The high glass block windows lit the room now. I found the promoter's husband and he asked me right off to help transport the star. He looked like an English professor, in pressed khakis, a solid brown button-down shirt, and a thin gray mustache. His handshake was firm, and his gray eyes twinkled when he talked about rock stars. "You'll bring him from his tour bus in the motel parking lot to the backstage entrance."

Then, the lady promoter turned up with her own instructions. "Don't let anyone on the stage," she said, as I visualized dancing babes trying to get close to Leon while I tugged at their jeans from behind, a hand on each cheek, my long hair flowing. "Just stand by the stage and look intimidating."

"Okay," I said, re-visualizing standing there, arms folded.

"Leon's manager told me he'd only accept money orders, so I bought them for him," she said. "Now, he says he needs cash. It's Saturday afternoon. The banks are closed." Her mouth twisted around a cigarette. Her husband wandered back over after she moved off. He told me what I'd really be doing most of the evening, which was closer to what I'd originally visualized—standing at the door checking hand stamps.

Now that my tasks were set, I stood around watching young men with the stereotypical green tattoos, on otherwise pale arms, hoist square, rectilinear, flat black speaker cabinets onto hand trucks, and wheel them down a wooden ramp propped on the back stairway. A tall bearded man with a ponytail, big colorful biceps and bad teeth, who was dressed in a black leather vest and black t-shirt sidled over and asked in a low voice, "Are you local?"

I nodded, "Yes."

He moved over close enough so I could smell the whiskey on his breath. "You know where I can get some crank?"

"No," I said, moving away as he asked, "What did you think I wanted?"

"I didn't know."

Then, I split before anyone asked me to carry any of the sound gear. I went home and returned later on after a shower and shampoo. I had to set an example for the hippies and hillbillies.

Nelson Pilsner called. He told me he found an old beer sign with his name on it. I thought that was funny. His name *was* Pilsner, for Chrissake. But, he insisted that name on the sign was spelled the same as his and was unusual and vintage, or some shit. So, he bought it. I told him he should use his newfangled camera to take

a close picture of the sign, run it into his processor and print it on light label stock. He listened. I told him to put the labels on the brown re-sealable bottles he'd been brewing with at home. My brother had been doing this kind of thing with white wine for some time—although my brother might just sweat the labels off someone else's wine bottles. But then, maybe, he actually knew a vintner. I'm not up to speed with my brother's scams. But, Pilsner could print out his own labels. He had come up with an instant home brew he called *Pilsner*, and it wasn't half bad. And he always had a case or two of the stuff sitting around, so he could give select bottles to celebs through his friends. I told him about the Leon Russell light security gig. He loved the idea of giving Leon and his band a case of his special *Pilsner* beer. Suddenly, I felt like some kind of Newport, Kentucky bootlegger!

The opening act played till about nine forty-five, while I dutifully checked hand stamps and watched an idiot feed quarters into an old, gray plastic and steel cigarette vending machine that had a huge OUT OF ORDER sign below the change slot. Then, he asked me for his money back. I passed him to the bartender who, believe it or not, refunded his money.

Finally, I got the high sign from the promoter's husband and exited the stage door into a warm fall night. I opened the star roof on my Toyota and headed for Leon's tour bus. The bus dominated the Travelodge parking lot. I parked my car on the warm pavement and knocked on the gleaming chrome door.

The woman who answered was a drop-dead knockout. Black hair cascaded across slim shoulders partially hiding a shapely chest. She had olive-toned skin with full, deep red lips. Her deep, warm brown eyes were shining almond shaped crescents.

I could see into the shadows. "It's time," she said to the star, reaching up to turn off the TV. Leon's white hair, sunglasses and beard hid his face except for a prominent, fleshy nose. He held a cane by its jeweled handle and he gingerly climbed down the steps out of the bus, traversed the several yards to the Toyota, limping slightly on the bad leg, and climbed into the car where he struggled with the automatic seat belt, causing his tall, white cowboy hat to tip onto his forehead. The girl and a guy slid into the back seat. Leon asked me to close the roof as he doffed his hat.

I caught a whiff of cologne or booze. Maybe both. "I'm honored to meet you, Sir," I said. "I've been listening to your music since I was a teenager. You must hear that a lot." He had a good handshake for a musician. (Ever noticed how careful guitarists and keyboard players are of their hands?)

"There used to be a lot of gambling here," he said.

I adjusted the rearview mirror. I just couldn't keep my eyes off the girl in back.

"Yes, so I've heard," I said, "Are you a gambler?"

"No," he said, killing the conversation for a moment, as I put the car into gear. We arrived in the alley and he spoke to the girl, cocking his head halfway.

"Shoogie, at least you're not chewing gum like last night in Cleveland."

"No," she said. I thought I saw her looking down into the shadows, as I glanced again in the mirror.

"Altoids?" I asked, as I picked up the tin from the dashboard shelf and reached back toward her.

"No thanks," she said. Then, I half-heartedly offered to the others.

An awkward silence fell between us as I cut the engine. Finally, Leon spoke, saying to me, "When you hear *Kansas City*, get the car ready." Then, it was time. I could hear the crowd howl from the alley when I opened the car door.

I re-entered the Southgate House through the dark, backstage entrance and resumed

checking hand stamps. By this time, Southgate's ballroom was filled with hazy smoke swirling in the colored stage lights, while wide-eyed shouting longhairs swayed to the pounding rock-n-roll filling the air. When Leon reached the microphone on stage, he said, "Thanks for inviting me to The Newport Jazz Festival." The crowd shouted with approval. Shoogie sat front and center on the stage with a huge beaded gourd wedged between her thighs. There was no mike on her instrument. She tapped at the gourd half-heartedly, frowning, slouching and looking miserable. The promoter's husband told me Shoogie was Leon's daughter and the drummer was his son. They were both dark-skinned compared to Russell. As he played and sang, his white hat shone in the hazy light. The gruff voice bellowed and rolled. When he launched into *Back to the Islands*, I remembered my teen years in California dancing with a wild blonde on the beach. It was our song. Leon had it then and he still did.

As I took my position at the door, a thin, flat-chested, blonde girl in a tight, red silky blouse with sleeves dangling past her hands, threw herself at me like an animal. She was obviously tipped pretty deep into her cups. "I'm forty-two," she shouted. "I'm forty-two and Leon's there in my dreams," she cried, her chewed nails and tight clammy hands digging into my big warm mitts. She pressed her body against me, pulling at my jeans. Then, she hugged me, forcing her face into mine, trying to kiss me.

"No," I said, pushing her away, "I'm not the one." She clawed at my hands, as I pulled hers from my waist. She obviously only wanted me for my body. When I realized that and saw it manifest beyond any doubt I felt angry, resentful—even hurt. Sure, I'm a handsome man, and I like being attractive to the opposite sex as much as any man, but I am a thinking man as well. I looked for a spark beyond the tearful red-rimmed eyes staring drunkenly at me and at that mouth twisted with sobs. It sadly occurred to me that she was just an older, sadder, version of my California blonde, as I watched her rub her nubby fingers together, pasty from pumping ethyl in the Newport night.

When I got her loose from my body, I moved a few paces away and she climbed onto her drunken boyfriend. They connected at the lips and staggered together for a while. I moved back to the entrance and watched the crowd reel and roll with the rhythm of rock-a-billy. For Leon, it seemed this must be a sad time too, his career on a downward slide from the seventies when he was on top performing at the Bangladesh concert with Bob Dylan, Billy Preston, George Harrison and Eric Clapton. In those days, Leon's *Jumpin' Jack Flash* was everyone's favorite.

A dark eyed, large featured woman with frizzy hair came over with a note on a cocktail napkin. Her flesh bulged out of her black leather pants and puffy white sweater. "Give this to Leon for me," she said. I told her I couldn't. She started to insist that I could, and told me she knew I was the promoter. I didn't straighten her out. I looked down and chuckled; then, I let her walk away, sad after pleading with me for an embarrassing minute.

As I watched her lose herself in the crowd, a thought occurred to me. Since I get that much respect when I do security, maybe I should really stick it to the man. I could get a gun, steal the money from the promoter, take the gate myself, and just hijack the entire concert. It was an old scam, but a classic one. I imagined myself talking to Wershe up in Detroit telepathically. He could give me some tips. But, the thought left me, almost as quickly as it came. The trouble was, I didn't really have the chops to do it. And I didn't understand the criminal mind well enough to get away with that kind of shit anyway. I let the fantasy that I was the heir to Meyer Lansky's haunts in Newport, Kentucky slip back where it came from. Besides, I didn't need that kind of negative reputation. Still, I was Steven *Lansky*, and Meyer's legacy followed me

around like the stink on a low bottom skunk whether I liked it or not. I was even wearing black leather.

While all this was simmering in the back of my mind, all I really wanted was a chance to boff Shoogie without pissing on Leon. I mean, if her dad liked me, then maybe I could ride out of town with them on the big silver bus. On the other hand, maybe I was just like all the rest of his fans, hoping for the impossible. Then, I started to fantasize again. I imagined a moment when I was in the stairwell to the ballroom surrounded by its dark green walls, the steps covered with beer-soaked, black rubber treads. I stood watching the tight skirts flash in and out of the ladies powder room. Then, I saw this guy with a patch over one eye, both eyebrows arching all the same. He was dressed in black leather pants, and a worn jacket that matched the patch and the trousers. He stopped and pulled a pack of bootleg Marlboro Reds out of his rubber heeled cowboy boots. I was wearing Royal Imperial brown brogans, so he couldn't touch me. He didn't know that my Smith and Wesson seven-shooters were imaginary, but I knew we were the only two who would be able see them if the time came that I needed them. He didn't have a clue that I had meditation, time, medication, art, and magic all running his number. It was like I didn't know either, but I had an inkling, and that inkling was enough to fold into a two-dollar bill tucked in my sterling silver money clip. I was the rich motherfucker who held the whole little scene together. In this scenario, I was actually more famous than Leon this night, because I brought him here with the whole wattage from the cottage. And Shoogie liked me for a long minute, looking deep into my soul. She told me in her own way that music can change the world with her daddy's miracle fingers, clammy and syncopated playing that piano, while his throaty singing pulled me up by my fucking bootstraps. I never could have survived this Newport and Cincinnati fall without the sin of lust—even if it was only in the mind.

As the show wrapped up, Leon leapt into an energetic encore. *Kansas City* came through with his gruff voice hollering. I realized that I was the only person in the audience who knew it was the last song. "*I'm goin' to Kansas City and I'm gonna get me some.*" I headed for the rear exit, past the corner of the stage and the steps to the balcony. In the alley, I thought about how Shoogie had been on stage all that time and I wondered why? My best guess was that Leon wanted his daughter where he could see her. I couldn't blame him for wanting to keep an eye on her, but still. I found the Toyota in the dark alley, backed it, the four-cylinder mill whining, to the opening door and heard the applause. Leon came out with a handful of fans trailing behind. He moved steadily with the cane, a blazing silhouette as he crossed in front of the beaming headlights. He sat in front next to me, and Shoogie and her brother piled in back. I drove them over to the bus in silence. When we got there, a couple was waiting to take pictures. Leon was patient with the fans. I stayed in the car, opened the windows and the moon roof, and heard him talking with the other members of the band. Just before he climbed into the tour bus, he said, "On stage, it was audio anarchy tonight." And I thought that would be a great name for a radio show.

In the end, I felt used. Both the drunken girl and the promoter just wanted me for my body, although for different reasons. Being separated from my wife, what was abundantly clear to me was that *she* didn't want my body anymore. This was a sad time for me, too. The intelligent spark in my eye had been dimmed because I was doing work that let my intellect atrophy. I was left with too much time for criminal thoughts. Still, meeting Leon Russell, and having Shoogie and her brother grace my backseat was a little bright spot that gave me an honest buzz as I drove over the bridge

back from Newport that full moon night. I had had the opportunity to feel something that I think many women, but only a few men (who aren't rock stars) get to experience. You know what I mean, and what I mean is—you've got to want all of me, if you want to love me right.

9/11 Poetry Anthologies and the Protest of American Exceptionalism

Joe Moffett

Anthologies and the Passing of the American Century

In February 1941, shortly before the United States entered World War II, *Time-Life* publisher Henry Luce called on the country to become more involved in the war so that Americans could “exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit” (20). When he made this bid, Luce surely did not anticipate the long standing effects of such a policy. Sixty years later, the United States would find itself reeling from terrorist attacks that, in the opinion of some, stemmed from the United States actions abroad, particularly its presence in oil-rich Saudi Arabia. The United States had grown confident in its ability to exert its will around the world, despite the setback of the Vietnam War, and on 9/11 the nation seemed to face one of the consequences of its foreign policy.¹ Recently, critics have re-assessed the belief in the importance of what Luce presents as the time for the “American Century,” including Andrew Bacevich, who sees the ideology of an “American Century” as “a mythic version of the past that never even approximated reality and today has become downright malignant.”

But even long before 9/11, the idea of the American Century as Luce envisioned it was hard to accept. Certainly the Vietnam era signaled the immense problems with such an approach, and like the literature of protest from that era, the post-9/11 years have similarly witnessed a resurgence of the poetry of protest. In this way we can see poetry assuming a social position where it enters into dialogue with the dominant cultural ideology, a belief in American exceptionalism as Luce promotes it that permitted Vietnam to happen in the first place. William Spanos has recently argued that the United States’ response to the 9/11 attacks provided the country with an excuse to resume “its errand in the global wilderness that had been interrupted by the specter of Vietnam” (x). In Spanos’ view, the culture had sought to suppress memory of Vietnam in the years after the conflict and 9/11 provided a definitive event that could allow the country to turn from Vietnam, only to forget its lessons.

The literary era that Vietnam coincided with—postmodernism—can be seen to grow out of 1960s counterculture and reached its terminus, at least according to N. Katherine Hayles and Todd Gannon, sometime in the mid- to late-1990s (99).² Many critics contend, however, that postmodernism came to end more specifically with the events of 9/11. As Brian McHale has persuasively argued, 9/11 brought the real tragedy

that postmodernism, particularly in its forms of architecture which often constructed simulated ruins, had been rehearsing for some time.³ If postmodernist art is seen as playful, derivative, and indifferent to the particulars of history, as Fredric Jameson has suggested, its ensuing era has been solemn and all too aware of the effects of history.⁴ If postmodernism represented the luxury of a culture that could produce art works that played with the divisions between high and low culture and embraced the kitschy products that only an economically rich and highly technologically advanced culture could produce, then 9/11 represented a sense of failure of that culture and the passing of an age of American self-assurance represented by Luce's phrase. The terrorist attacks symbolized a repudiation of American hegemony that Luce had so forcefully advocated.

Among forums for literary discussion, the poetry anthology provides a compelling case study of the concerns of the culture that produced it. Here I want to focus on anthologies that capture the views of writers in the period immediately following 9/11. Most of the writers express the outrage Bacevich portrays in their view of the Bush administration's actions in Iraq. The notion of American exceptionalism promoted by Luce is thus critiqued as it continued under Bush's leadership and the poetry anthologies offers us an exemplary model of literary artists' reaction to the dominant ideology.

To be sure, the anthology held a place of importance in twentieth-century poetry overall. Poets early in the century, such as Yeats and Pound, worked as anthologists, and the decisions made by these writers helped to reinforce or create canons. Pound, for example, worked tirelessly on anthologies from early in his career with the intention of promoting a different aesthetic than the literary world had adopted up to that point.⁵ One of the taste-setting, Victorian-era anthologies Pound wished to displace was Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury*, which Marjorie Perloff has shown to be representative of the tradition against which modernists reacted (*Dance* 176-181). Among postwar poetics, Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* (later revised as *The Postmoderns*) was paradigmatic in establishing groupings for contemporary poetry associations: the Beats, Black Mountain, New York, and so forth. The more recent *Postmodern American Poetry* edited by Paul Hoover emphasized the experimental side to current poetics and picked up where Allen's anthology left off.

Of course the anthology in the last century was important not only as a taxonomic or pedagogic tool, but it also worked as a site for cultural changes.⁶ Feminist issues were the seeds of *No More Masks!*, recently celebrated at the National Poetry Foundation conference in June 2008. The book worked to bring attention to women's place in American poetry. In terms of cultural perspectives, Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred* argued for a wider engagement beyond Eurocentric poetics, focusing on Asian, African, and Oceanic poetry. His ensuing volume *Shaking the Pumpkin* highlighted Native American verse. Both collections helped to shift focus to multicultural poetics away from an American-centric view. In the 1980s, the anthology became the battleground for the canon debate with such collections as the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* evolving out of the discussion and helping to expand and reshape which texts would be presented for classroom use and thereby redefining what "American" literature consists of to start with.⁷

More recently, the period immediately following 9/11 saw an upsurge in the number of poetry anthologies printed, many of which were intended to respond to the terrorist attacks and the ensuing war on terror. The anthologies thus represent an effort to speak for the culture and in this way poetry seeks to assert its place in public dialogue. In this essay, I want to explore the anthology phenomenon as a way to identify some currents

in recent poetic practice. In terms of the political significance of these anthologies, the format of the anthology allows poets to speak both collectively but also individually. In this way, the Bush era witnessed a return of the poetry of protest evocative of the Vietnam years.⁸ Judging by this new post-9/11 poetry, poets have left behind the detached irony and playfulness of postmodernism and have embraced a poetics of social engagement. And yet one must also acknowledge that the marginalization of literature has impeded the social impact of these collections. I will return to this issue in my conclusion.

The post-millennial anthologies can be divided into two main categories: those appearing in direct response to the events of 9/11 and those intended to raise voices contrary to the Bush Administration in the time leading up to the invasion of Iraq, both of which, again, show a discontent with the continued policy of American exceptionalism. In this essay I will survey books in each category, as well as identify prevailing attitudes or characteristics in the poetry presented in them. Suffice it to say now, the verse is as various as the books which print it—at times pensive, at others angry, but always tense, reflecting the uneasy anticipation of the country in the years immediately following the attacks. The anthology, then, might be viewed as a useful gauge to measure the literary temperament of the United States as the nation entered the century following its rise to ascendancy. The anthologies also reflect the uncertainty of the post-9/11 era in which the direction the country is headed in is not entirely clear. As the United States continues to seek a way out of Afghanistan, and Iraq persists as a teetering independent country, the very concept of American exceptionalism has seemed to reach an end. Indeed, as these anthologies show, there is the growing sense of an end of an era.

Anthologies in Response to 9/11

An intriguing characteristic of the post-9/11 anthologies is that these books are all supported by smaller presses. The poetic voices are thus coming from semi-marginalized sources, not receiving mainstream publishing company sponsorship. This fact emphasizes the populist nature of these volumes, which helps to reinforce the social act of poetry and its function of speaking out against injustice. One of the first collections to appear was William Heyen's *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond* from Etruscan Press, which was conceived in the days following the terrorist attacks. Verse appears alongside prose in this volume as the editor seeks a wide ranging response to the event. The book contains such pieces as Mark Jarman's prose recollection of eating at a Waffle House with his family after he learned of the 9/11 attacks and his children transfixed only on the country music celebrities in the booth nearby them. Here we see the complacency in American consumer culture, as figured by the celebrities, meeting with the horror of the attacks. The piece furthers the mission of the collection to provide a snapshot of the impact of the terrorist attacks on individuals' lives. Heyen's own introduction to the book mirrors the emotions of fear and anxiety the attacks provoked:

we must understand that the September 11th hijackers were filled with such hate for American aspirations and were of such fanatical . . . fervor that they would with a sense of great fulfillment have killed all 280,000,000 of us, every man, woman, and child, if they'd been able. Theirs was not the flower, but the hellfire of the human mind. Such mania evokes new dimensions of fear and realization and commitment in us, disrupts and challenges the romantic American imagination as perhaps never before, and demands from us a different retaliation, an intricate move toward world justice for each star and

or stripe on every Old Glory now or to come. (xii)

There is a fascinating mixture of anger, bewilderment, and patriotism here, reminiscent of the response of mainstream America directly after the attacks in which flags could be seen flying from almost every house, from almost every car that passed. Heyen, on one level, reproduces a form of American exceptionalism, where responsibility for American actions and their effect on others is not taken. His word “retaliation” in particular is intriguing. The editor appears to see his anthology as a way to strike back, although surely it is beyond the reach of literature to do with words what the terrorists had done with planes. The most art can seem to do in this context is give a voice to the perceived victims, here certainly those who perished in the attacks, but also their families and the nation at large. In this way the writers “retaliate” in the only way they can: through their art to give voice to the bewildering and often conflicting emotions that accompanied the shock of 9/11. Jarman’s piece certainly captures that spirit as it meets head on American superficiality and the results of American foreign policy.

Heyen broaches the important question of who has a right to speak on the tragedy (xi). This is a central question in 9/11 literature: do only those who were directly impacted by the attacks have the right to speak of the grief and devastation wrought by the terrorists’ deeds? Is it an act of appropriation for writers to assume the voices of characters intended to represent those involved in the events of 9/11? The strategy almost universally adopted is that poets decide to write in their own voices, without elaborate personae.⁹ This, of course, is a strategy native to lyric poetry anyway, but in the post-9/11 era the approach of speaking for only one’s own experience appears the most reasonable thing to do. Fictionalized accounts run the risk of seeming insensitive or exploitive.

Some of the poems in Heyen’s book share with Jarman’s essay an unvarnished quality, such as Ishmael Reed’s diatribe against the Bush Administration, “America United.” The poem casts a caricature of Bush: “He said he would bomb Afghanistan / as soon as Condi showed him where it was / on the map” (323). The poem clearly plays to the familiar themes of Bush’s boorishness and war mongering, but seems one-dimensional when read next to Lucille Clifton’s pieces, which, in their characteristic understated elegance, explore a complexity of emotion. Clifton offers a series of poems dated for each day in the week following 9/11, pieces that contain such moving imagery as “all of us gathered under one flag / praying together safely” (81), as well as probing questions such as, “is it treason to remember // what we have done / to deserve such villainy // nothing we reassure ourselves / nothing” (82). In this way, Clifton’s poems present the conflict of feelings that many experienced after 9/11. They also unite the personal with the public, as in the last poem of the series in which the speaker worries over the world her newborn granddaughter has recently entered.

This merging of the personal and public persists throughout the anthology, and indeed throughout much 9/11 verse. Alike Barnstone’s “Making Love After September 11, 2001” imagines “ghosts of the people killed crowded into our room” as the speaker and her lover enjoy a moment of intimacy. The speaker indicates these ghosts “wanted / to be flesh against flesh, wanted to hold / the beloved and pleased body close again” (35). The couple cannot escape the dead, even in the most personal of moments, bound in an act which of course is intended to lead to procreation. In this sense the dead who crowd the room envy the speaker’s ability to create life, and thus the tragedy of those lives cut short by the terrorist acts is all the more poignantly felt.

In comparison to *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond, Poetry After 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets* offers a more focused perspective from a geo-

graphically centered group of writers. *Poetry After 9/11* carries such pieces as Pulitzer Prize winner Stephen Dunn's "Grudges," a villanelle that appears in his subsequent volume *The Insistence of Beauty*, the title poem of which again addresses 9/11. As I have argued elsewhere, these poems show Dunn thinking deeply about our feelings of indignation and horror at the events, at the same time they turn a reflective eye back on us and ask where we stand when it comes to issues such as irrational fear and hatred. "The Insistence of Beauty" explores the way the speaker uses the experience of watching the terrorist attacks on TV to reevaluate his old prejudice against the role of the sentimental in high art. The speaker decides that "the sentimental, / beauty's sloppy cousin" deserves reconsideration; he asks rhetorically, "Doesn't a tear deserve a close-up?" (87). Much 9/11 verse represents just such a turning away as Dunn's poem from the aloof and ironic attitude that dominated modernist and postmodernist approaches to literature and culture at large.¹⁰ In the place of irony we find a desire for genuine feeling, even for such previously tabooed emotions as sentimentalism.

One of the most interesting poems in any of the 9/11 anthologies, or the anti-war anthologies to follow, is Norman Stock's "What I Said." Here the speaker captures the anxiety and fear and anger intimated in Heyen's note for *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*. The poem's form mimetically reflects the confused emotions that course through the speaker's mind. Here are the first few lines:

after the terror I
 went home and cried and
 said how could this happen and
 how could such a thing be and
 why why I mean how could
 anything so horrible how could
 anyone do such a thing to us and what (34)

And the poem goes on. The "ands" and "coulds" at the ends of the lines push the poem along, replicating the feeling of panic and lack of reason in the speaker. This quality is confirmed by the end of the poem in which the speaker declares, "I said and I said this is too much to take no one can take a thing like this / and the terror yes and then I said let's kill them" (34). The sense of inconsolability and hysteria the poem communicates early on is confirmed by the end in which the speaker can find no other conclusion but to inflict upon the terrorists what they have done to us. And yet the poem also doubles back on itself. Is simple revenge really the answer, despite the intense feelings we wish to act upon? Do we not stoop to their level by simply wanting to destroy them? The piece's unique representation of these very different parts of the 9/11 experience helps it to stand out as an exemplary poem. It was reprinted in *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature* edited by Michael Meyer, which shows how 9/11 poetry has begun to enter teaching curricula and thus might be seen to seek to represent our more collective experience.

That is not to say that all of the poems in *Poetry After 9/11* address the event directly. The editor explains that the book reflects the authors' state of mind or attitude after 9/11, that it does not contain only poems directly responding to 9/11 (ix). Such is the case with Jean Valentine's lovely poems, which only vaguely refer to the attacks. In "In the Burning Air," for example, the speaker mentions that in "the burning air" there is "nothing," but then the poem proceeds to offer images of the ground level in which a woman with tools of domesticity around her—a spoon, a "broken bowl"—stands, apparently shocked by the events of 9/11 (29). Such poems draw on the power of

the event, but refuse to address it directly and for some readers this tendency lead to disappointment with the book. Shortly after the book's release, a customer on Amazon.com wrote, "As the editors proudly note in the forward, few of the poems make any direct reference to the atrocity, and only two mention retaliation, and that in a negative way. Instead, these curdled by irony bards spin blank, meterless lines of . . . whatever comes to mind, apparently." I would disagree that these poets are "curdled by irony bards"—as I have remarked, these poets are very engaged and avoid irony in general—but this customer's response does speak to the dissatisfaction many in the general public have felt in recent decades with the self-involved nature of poetry. One might say that this customer holds on to Lucian ideals of American exceptionalism, that outrage is all we should feel about the attacks and not a complexity of emotion that most poets, who tend to adopt Bacevich's side of the argument, favor. Such an attitude from the customer underscores the distance between poetry ensconced in the academy and that which might speak to a larger public. If an event as important as 9/11 fails to produce poetry that appeals to a wider readership, what chance does poetry have of regaining the place of importance in society it once held?

Poetry After 9/11 and *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond* can be viewed as attempts to offer a literary response to cataclysmic events in United States history, despite the dubiousness of some readers. The anthologies that follow attempt to stem another crisis: the implementation of the Bush Administration's foreign policy of preemptive action in Iraq. In this way, the books devise their own kind of preemptive strategy, although it is one that proves ineffective in the face of Bush's determination to root out what the world later learns to be non-existent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. In the pre-Iraq War anthologies, the tone naturally becomes more heated and the poems are more stridently political than those found in the 9/11 collections. The books engage the self-assured supremacy that informed Luce's argument about the place of the United States in the world. In this way, they represent as convincingly as anywhere the passing of the American Century in the eyes of American writers themselves who express contempt for the United States' continued foreign policy of forcing its will on others.

Anti-Iraq War Anthologies

An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11 edited by Allen Cohen and Clive Matson bridges the 9/11 collections that seek to come to terms with an altered world and the anthologies to follow that protest the inevitable entrance of the United States into Iraq. Like the other 9/11 anthologies previously mentioned, this book was printed in 2002, but its title clearly states its resistance to the idea of retaliation for 9/11. In the introduction, the possibility of an invasion of Iraq is mentioned (i). Cohen describes the book as an effort to provide "a different historical record of these monumental events" in comparison to the Bush Administration's clear desire for military action (i). The book's cover is particularly striking: it evokes 1960s iconography in the form of an eagle, composed of a patchwork American flag, who is shown flying away with a peace symbol with a city aflame in the background. In this way, the book deliberately draws to mind the poetry of protest of Vietnam. Like William Spanos' view that 9/11 allowed Bush to pursue a pre-Vietnam mindset, *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind* thus expresses the notion that we are pursuing the wrong course, repeating Vietnam, as it were, in Iraq.

An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind began its life, like the others to follow it, with a call for work on the world wide web. The call responded in over 800

poets sending in poems (iii). Such an overwhelming response again highlights the use of these anthologies as a way for a collective body to speak out, as well as the function of the post-9/11 anthology as a populist mode of discourse. The reliance of this book, and the others to follow it, on the web reveals an interplay between print and electronic media that is particular to this era. The impressiveness of such a large number of respondents testifies to the widespread resistance to war among poets, of which the book promises a glimpse.

Unlike *Poetry After 9/11* and *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*, the focus in *Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind* is on political rather than personal responses as the poets address the assumptions of American exceptionalism. Devorah Major's "America on Terrorism," for example, cites "Vietnam warriors" who "would come and go leaving / chemical forests, massive graves" and thinks about the country in the time of terror (24). Allen Cohen's "Whatever Happened to the Age of Aquarius?" speaks of "the American world empire" (63). Carl Stilwell's "On Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" evokes Whitman and a poet who was deeply involved in Vietnam protests: Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg's "Howl," seen by many as an important postwar statement against American complacency and homogeneity, is echoed in Stilwell's poem: "walking on Brooklyn Bridge as you try to describe flames and smoke / ascending above starless dynamo in Manhattan machinery of night" (37). While most 9/11 poems, as I have indicated, find their speakers speaking from a personal position, Opal Palmer Adisa's "Last Thoughts 9/11 Voices" breaks this rule and seeks to give voice to those who experienced 9/11 firsthand, including a fireman, a security guard, and some anonymous individuals of both sexes.

A number of collections follow which look to intercede after the United States made it clear it intended to take action in Iraq. These books derive largely from the efforts of one person: Sam Hamill, a poet and the editor of Copper Canyon Press, an independent poetry publisher that has promoted some well known poets. Hamill represents a desire to bring poetry in connection with politics. He was invited by Laura Bush to the White House for a symposium titled "Poetry and the American Voice" that centered on the works of Whitman, Hughes, and Dickinson scheduled for February 12, 2003. Like Bracovich, Hamill takes to task the very notion of American exceptionalism. His response was to write to fellow poets asking for anti-war poems that he might deliver on the day of Bush's event. The press reported that actions such as Hamill's led to Bush's cancellation of the event. Noelia Rodriguez, Bush's spokeswoman, explained, "While Mrs. Bush respects the right of all Americans to express their opinions, she, too, has opinions and believes it would be inappropriate to turn a literary event into a political forum" (Left).

Hamill established a website, *Poets Against War* or *PAW*, in January 2003 to which poets could submit poems of protest. 1,500 poems arrived within the first four days of Hamill's call, and on March 5, 2003 an anthology of 13,000 poems by 11,000 poets was presented to the Bush Administration and Congress, as well as "several other national governments around the world" to represent the poetry community's opposition to the invasion of Iraq. According to the website, March 5 also saw 120 poetry readings or discussions undertaken across the world in countries such as Great Britain, Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy, and Mexico to further the protest against the war.

Although such a large number of poets had submitted poems by the time Hamill began assembling a book version of the anthology—which bears a similar name to the website (this time emphasizing poets against *the* war)—only 174 poets are represented in the collection. While the limitations of print publication no doubt play a

role in the number of poets Hamill could include in the book, it is interesting to note how the electronic medium reinforces the democratic ideal of multiple voices whereas the print medium emphasizes the process of selection. We must ask, then, if Hamill's decision to print the book, despite his best intentions, works in hegemonic ways to limit voices rather than to raise them, particularly since poets continued to contribute poems to the website. According to the site, as of September 2004, 22,000 poems had been received. The website carries a section that lists poems by "prominent" poets who include Robert Bly, Brenda Hillman, W.S. Merwin, Rita Dove, and Adrienne Rich, among others and this too tends to rank certain voices over others.

Nevertheless, Hamill's collection begins a practice that is picked up by later books: selections are usually accompanied by the age of the poet, and often a brief biography. This age factor highlights the populist ethos of the volume, where contributors run the gamut of ages 8 to 97. Some writers, such as George Bowering, offer a "statement of conscience" rather than a poem. While the reader does not expect as much out of such a "statement" as a poem, the statements are often very flat, such as when Bowering begins by saying, "Someone, please introduce the idea of God, if not Christianity, into the Cabinet of the USA, and tell these eerie people that killing children is wrong, that the U.S. becomes every day more and more frightful" (41). The Canadian poet ends his piece by asking Americans not to use "your weapons of mass destruction on my world" (41). While Bowering's sentiment is no doubt held by many, his strange word choice, particularly calling the Bush Administration "eerie people," strikes a wrong note. There is, in other words, a hastiness to certain of the statements, which perhaps reflects the sense of urgency certain writers felt in the need to speak out, but which leave aesthetics by the wayside.

While Hamill's anthology shares work by both established and unknown poets, *100 Poets Against the War* is generally more literary in its focus. The book started when the editors of the British website www.nthpostition, inspired by Hamill's efforts in the United States, made a similar call for anti-war works. The editors originally trimmed the 1,000 responses they received down to 100 poets and launched a free chapbook that could be downloaded. The editor of the print version of the project, Canadian writer Todd Swift, reports that as of the time of the printing of the book, early 2003, 50,000 copies had been downloaded (xvi). Swift asks for the reader's indulgence for any errors that may have crept in due to the rush to get the book out before the war started (xiii). There is with this book and the others, then, a sense of hastiness to print, precipitated by the feeling that the world needed a response by writers to the history-changing events. *100 Poets Against the War*, like Hamill's anthology, shares the belief that it is important to raise voices in protest to the impending war. The editor acknowledges that his book will not likely stop the war, but does contend that "such poems witness to the presence of opposition to illegal violence at a time when many in power would like to pretend to the moral high ground" (xvii-xviii). A curious feature of the book, in light of its title, is that it contains more than 100 poets, as the editor points out.

Other volumes include anthologies of more local interest. *Raising Our Voices: An Anthology of Oregon Poets Against the War* is very grassroots, with its ISBN printed on stickers adhered to the copyright page and back cover. One can only surmise that a rush to publication necessitated such a measure. This book again prints the ages of its contributors and carries some very political verse. James Merrill once memorably remarked that "the trouble with overtly political or social writing is that when the tide of feeling goes out, the language begins to stink" (72). Some of the verse in the book bears this perspective out, such as Paul Cooke's "war and duct tape," which evokes

the familiar protest song “War” by Edwin Starr that carries the refrain, “war, / what is it good for? / absolutely nothing.” But Cooke’s poem, as Merrill intimates, fails to generate interest on a linguistic level and concludes with a series of one word lines that hardly respect the art of lineation, not to mention a lack of pronoun agreement in number between “their” and “one”: “duct tape. / what is it good for? / too many uses to name / although one might use it to / seal their mind from truly / thinking / about / what / we / were put / here / for. // war?” (32-33).

DC Poets Against the War also cites Hamill’s work as inspiration and carries on the practice of publishing poets of a variety ages, who run from 10 to 80 according to the introduction (11). The book survives into a second edition in 2004, printed on the eve of the Presidential Election, in which the editor points out “poets are witnesses” and promotes the idea that poetry is related to democracy (11). As with Swift’s statement for *100 Poets Against the War*, the editor, Sarah Browning, evokes the tradition of the poetry of witness. Browning predicts that many would vote for John Kerry, but not without some hesitation. A couple of essays attached to the end of the book look at the political situation and one of the writers, Danny Rose, makes the case that a vote for Kerry represents a protest vote (117). Interestingly, the volume also turns out to be one of the most experimental. As we saw with Paul Cooke’s poem, message rather than aesthetics often assumes primary importance in the political poems which populate these anthologies and matters of form and experimentation therefore tend to be an afterthought. Such is not the case with this anthology where interesting poems such as Michael Willett Newheart’s intensely rhythmical “shok & aw shok & jive” illustrate an edgy approach to form and a linguistic playfulness (with humorous instructions such as “[clap hans sway bak & 4th]”) while also clearly condemning the measures adopted by Bush (85). “Shock and awe” is of course the strategy promised by the Bush Administration in the lead up to the war, and Newheart takes liberties in punning on the phrase.

Wartime America inspired another volume in the years following the commencement of military action in Iraq: *American War Poetry*, published by Columbia University Press in 2006. This anthology covers the American colonial period up to the Iraq War and includes such classic poems as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride,” Walt Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!,” and “Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead.” This book is certainly the most literary, least populist of the collections under study here. It underscores the discrepancy between the anthology as a mouthpiece of the people, a political tool, and the anthology as a pedagogic device. But it publishes political statements nevertheless, such as Hayden Carruth’s “On Being Asked to Write a Poem Against the War in Vietnam,” which lists the speaker’s many poems against war but concedes that despite the poems, “not one / breath was restored / to one // shattered throat . . . but death went on and on / never looking aside” (290-91). Among the book’s more recent contributors, Brian Turner, an Iraq veteran, offers the poem “Here, Bullet.” This is a moving contemporary piece that operates as an apostrophe to a bullet by a soldier. The soldier begins by saying, “If a body is what you want, / then here is bone and gristle and flesh” and concludes, “Bullet, / here is where the world ends, every time” (366). In the poem we see the Iraq War from another perspective: from one risking his life in combat. In this way the poem may be a more effective anti-war statement than the poems of outright protest found in previous anthologies.

Conclusion: On The Efficacy of the Anthologies

Ultimately we must ask, what is the cultural value of these books? To be sure, the voice of the people is represented in Hamill's collection and those he inspired. The anthologies present a number of poets, both canonical and marginal, raising voices in opposition to the powers that be. And yet nothing happened or was averted as a result of the anthologies; one finds the absence of real political change coming about because of the literary consensus these collections seek to represent. Thus we appear to live in an age in which literature can still be used to serve a political function, but as a result of a number of factors, including the entrenchment of literature in the academy, poetry also appears so far removed from the center of culture that its influence might be seen to be limited to preaching only to the converted, which these books can be viewed to demonstrate.

W.H. Auden famously declared that "poetry makes nothing happen," but he was also quick to point out it is "a way of happening, a mouth" (248). So, too, do these anthologies make nothing happen: the terrorists were not deterred, the Bush Administration did not stop its headlong plunge into Iraq, despite 11,000 voices or 22,000 voices to the contrary. Laura Bush's symposium on poetry was cancelled, but that was of little consequence. Nevertheless, the anthologies do provide a "mouth" for the hundreds of dissenters. In this way, they promote the essential function of a democracy. They give us a voice.

There are a number of ancillary issues one might consider when thinking about these anthologies. There is, for example, the fact that I mentioned earlier: these books are printed by small presses. Is this, then, an example of small press opportunism, recognizing a need in the market and responding to it to satisfy the bottom line? Or is it a reflection of an authentic populism? Of course, these questions are unanswerable. The cynic would be tempted to think the books are simply attempts to make a profit on a tragedy. On the other hand, people like Hamill are willing to put their time and efforts into raising a multitude of voices, and in this way there is a place in the poetry for the "genuine," to borrow a term from Marianne Moore (36).

I began this essay by mentioning that 9/11 is seen by many as a turning point, away from the postmodernist tendencies of the postwar era, in which irony in particular is seen as a defining characteristic. The literature of 9/11 largely eschews irony; its use would seem insensitive to the loss of so many. Irony surfaces only when anger pushes poets into sarcasm, as in Ishmael Reed's anti-Bush poem. The anti-Iraq War poetry is reminiscent of Vietnam War poetry in its fervent denunciation of the government, but the current protest is not as widespread or as sustained. There are certainly some individuals who make political statements, such as Jennifer Karmin's performance "4,000 Words for 4,000 Dead" in front of the Vietnam War Memorial in Chicago on October 3, 2008 intended to draw attention to the number lost in Iraq. The 4,000 "words" were collected from submissions of the poetry community. In this way, the lost individuals are recovered in the words of the living. In another example, Susan M. Schultz, the literary scholar and editor of *Tinfish Press*, would regularly send links to photos of signs she erected outside the United States base near her home in Hawaii to the University of Buffalo Poetics Listserv as a way to make her political voice heard.¹¹ But these are relatively isolated incidents rather than representative of a culture-wide event. Still, they show the poetry community engaging in cultural affairs in a way it had not done since Vietnam.

Overall, when we consider the impact of the poetic outpouring after 9/11, we must conclude that the impact is small indeed. Poetry's distance from the center of the cul-

ture surely has something to do with this limited influence. According to Sarabande books, one of our best contemporary small presses in the United States, only 2,500 volumes of poetry are published a year and 98% of them are published by independent presses.¹² If this is a test of literature's value in the United States, then poetry fails. Yet these books—the 9/11 anthologies and those against the Iraq War—*will* stand as an historical record of people in response to their world and their government. Even if the literary voice is small, even if it is politically weak, it is a voice nevertheless and should not be undervalued. In this way, the measure of success is that the voice lifted in conflict exists at all and that it carries on, despite an awareness of its own circumvented reach.

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Endnotes

1. William Spanos puts it this way: however horrific, the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were, as the symbolic significance of American power of these chosen sites clearly suggests, the consequence in large part of a very long history of what Said has called Western Orientalism, a history of representation / domination of the Orient culminating in the United States' ubiquitous indirect and overt economic, cultural, political, and military deprivations over the last half-century in the oil-rich Middle East in the duplicitous name of stabilizing a recalcitrantly backward and unstable world. (249)

2. See DeKoven for an account of the emergence of postmodernism from 1960s cultural currents.

3. After discussing simulated ruins in postmodernist architecture, McHale writes, long before the actual catastrophes of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, we have been *imagining* such catastrophes—staging them, rehearsing them in our imaginations and in our art-works: in apocalyptic movies, in paintings, even in works of architecture. As many commentators have observed, what was especially shocking about 9/11 was *not* so much that it caught us by surprise, but that it *didn't*: we had already seen such disasters before, at the movies and on television; in *The Day After* and *Independence Day* and *The Towering Inferno* and, yes, even *Planet of the Apes*. We had composed scenarios of the end of civilization, and life among the ruins, not only in popular science fiction novels but in demanding literary novels like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is set in London under the rocket blitz and in the war-ruined cities of Germany, but which obviously and self-consciously refers to the projected future ruins that our own cities would be reduced to if the intercontinental ballistic missiles, the heirs of the Nazis' V-2 rockets, were ever launched.

Throughout the entire second half of the twentieth century, we have been living in the ruins of our own civilization, if only in our imaginations. Is this another version of postmodernism? I'm not sure; perhaps it's a foretaste of what comes *after* postmodernism. Maybe on 9/11 history finally caught up with our postmodern imagination of disaster, and we are now living in the aftermath of postmodernism [. . .]

4. See Jameson's influential study of postmodernism for an articulation of these qualities of the era, especially his first chapter.

5. See Nichols for an account of Pound as anthologist.

6. One of the leading late twentieth-century poetry critics, Marjorie Perloff, wonders about the value of anthologies as teaching tools. See her “Why Big Anthologies Make Bad Textbooks.”

7. Pace offers an overview of the gender and ethnic biases in 1980s anthologies. She argues that at the time, “The textbook canon exhibits an exceedingly narrow spectrum of the intellectual and emotional story of life in our country. It presents, for the most part, a homogenized ideology that buttresses the existing power structures” (38). For an evaluation of an anthology that sought to right this balance, see Lauter’s piece, which details the desire of the editors of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* to present more than a white-based canon. For another anthologist’s perspective on his attempt to balance canonical works of poetry with more varied multicultural selections, see Ramazani (276). Along the lines of poetic canons, Abbott demonstrates that the emphasis on high modernism as the achievement of modern poetry in postwar anthologies is the deliberate work of critics rejecting earlier populist views of the function of literature and thus illustrates the ideologically driven nature of the anthology creation process.

8. An influence on my thinking about 9/11 and pre-Iraq War poetry in the present essay is James F. Mersmann’s study *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War*. An important distinction between my approach and Mersmann’s, however, is that whereas his focus is on the poetry of war, here I am looking at poetry in the time leading up to war. Nevertheless, like the Vietnam poets who Mersman notes benefited from the presence of the verse of World War I and II and could thus start from a different point, the pre-Iraq War protest poetry I discuss later in this essay benefits from the body of Vietnam poetry.

9. This characteristic reflects the verse of Vietnam, about which Mersman points out, “the voice is nearly always the poet’s own” (25).

10. See Wilde’s classic study of the differences between modernist and postmodernist relationships to irony.

11. Jennifer Karmin’s posts, as well as Susan M. Schultz’s, can be found in the University of Buffalo Poetics Listserv archives, housed at <<http://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A0=POETICS>>. For Jennifer Karmin’s announcement for “4,000 Words for 4,000 Dead,” go to <<http://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0809&L=POETICS&P=R30337>>. For a link to Schultz’s “sidewalk blog” on the popular social networking site *Facebook*, follow <<http://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0709&L=POETICS&P=R2677>>.

12. See the Sarabande Books catalogue for these and other numbers (2).

Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*: Mother China and the Wheel of Misfortune

Neil H. Wright

Big Breasts and Wide Hips (1996 in Chinese, Trans. Howard Goldblatt, 2004), a title laden with carnal appeal, procreative amplitude, and mother earth interest, is Mo Yan's longest novel to date, an epic piece spanning the struggle for survival of the woman Shangguan Lu, via her life story and those of her eight unbidden daughters and her one disappointing son. It is a story that does homage to the women of modern China and that bows to the terrible irony of Chinese history, the grist mill of lives, hopes and dreams of so many Chinese people in the last tumultuous century. It is moreover a story built on an essential paradigm and an almost mythic trope: the paradigm is the strife-ridden dialectic of Chinese "progress" from the late feudal society of the last empire to the first Republic, the Japanese invasion of the late 1930s, the drab first generation of the Communist era of the 1950s, the oppressive Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, and finally the post-Maoist corporate culture of the 1980s and beyond;¹ the trope, borrowed from Chinese tradition and reprised in the advent of the infamous "one child policy," is the tragi-comical plight of the family, in this case of the mother, Shangguan Lu, who keeps on bearing daughters in the futile attempt to bring forth the man-child who will secure prosperity and continuation of the family name.² However, since Shangguan Lu's husband is impotent, so that all of her nine children are fathered by other men, including a Swedish Catholic priest, she is really a mythic mother figure, a modern Mother China.

The Wheel of Misfortune

Shangguan Lu's first seven daughters are named in order in Chapter One, along with the meanings of their names: "Laidi (Brother Coming), Zhaodi (Brother Hailed), Lingdi (Brother Ushered), Xiangdi (Brother Desired), Pandi (Brother Anticipated), Niandi (Brother Wanted), and Qiudi (Brother Sought)" (17). To these are added Yunü, the eighth girl, and Jintong, the boy, whose names mean "Jade Girl" and "Golden Boy." In Taoist lore, Jade Girl and Golden Boy are the children of the Jade Emperor and servants of the Immortals, hence ideals of childhood, often depicted in Chinese art and associated with the New Year celebration. They are the perfect children, and their names connote auspicious family destiny, happiness, and prosperity. But the history of the children of Shangguan Lu is the very antipodes of the auspicious; it is the history of fantastic and unimaginable disaster in a plethora of forms, a pandemic

of misfortune and death that will claim all eight of her daughters while Shangguan Lu toils on, raising her orphaned grandchildren and enduring the stigma of association with counterrevolutionary elements and her own procreative past. The novel is both a great symphony of death and an epic threnody of heroic persistence in the face of Chinese history in the 20th century, a Wheel of Misfortune from which all fall but none rise.

Mo Yan's *Wheel of Misfortune* has little to do with the character or psychology of Mother Lu's daughters, who fall in a variety of ways not according to their personal attributes but in relation to events in Chinese history from 1930 to 1965. However, their misfortunes are oddly entwined. Laidi, 1st daughter, loves Sha Yueliang, the guerrilla fighter she met in the marshes during the Japanese attack on Dalan village in 1939; but he soon turns to the Japanese, as did a parcel of young Chinese, and is rightly stigmatized as a traitor, feared and hated by the villagers. Laidi runs with him for a while and bears a child by him but then returns to Dalan village where she is forced to marry the crippled mute Speechless Sun, widower of 3rd sister Lingdi. Speechless Sun is a loyal Communist soldier, hence village hero, but he is also a vulgar, legless, malodorous, disgusting halfwit who can only utter one word: "Strip!" Laidi rebels by carrying on an affair with Birdman Han, Lingdi's lost lover, and eventually murders her ridiculous, foul and abusive husband, for which crime she is imprisoned and executed.

Zhaodi, 2nd daughter of Lu, is more fortunate in the short term, as she marries the enterprising landlord Sima Ku and becomes the first lady of Dalan; but so doing, she binds herself to the feudal order that will be persecuted by the Communist movement in its ascendancy. Zhaodi is killed in the civil war, and Sima Ku, once a heroic defender of the village, becomes an infamous fugitive outlaw; he is finally executed by Lu Liren, Communist officer and husband of yet another Shangguan daughter, 5th daughter Pandi. Pandi is perhaps the most progressive and heartless of Lu's children. She casts her lot with Lu Liren, changes her name to Ma Ruilian, and for a time they attain regional status as Communist leaders. But they too are struck down, Lu Liren by a heart attack during the great flood (late 1950s) that raises the Flood Dragon River and inundates the region, and Pandi of starvation and disease shortly after. Pandi's corpse is so heavy, swollen with her crimes of greed, cruelty, and pride, that it takes a veritable platoon of carriers to tote her back to Mother Lu in Dalan village.

Lingdi, Lu's 3rd daughter, is the first unwilling bride of the local hero and drunken brute Speechless Sun. Lingdi is distinguished as the child who attempts to escape from the vortex of calamity, the terrible Wheel of Misfortune, via creative madness or magical dementia. Lingdi falls in love with Birdman Han, an itinerant bird-catcher who provides her family with wild fowl during a season of dearth. Birdman Han disappears, though, and Lingdi in her despair becomes a Bird Fairy, adopting the appearance and behavior of a fantastic bird to fly away from Speechless Sun. She dies by "flying" from a cliff behind an American Army pilot, Lieutenant Babbit, who is testing a glider he built as an experiment.³ Niandi, 6th unwanted daughter of Mother Lu, marries the American Babbit, a "quiet American" who is in China to assist the Nationalist forces. But the Nationalists are soon to be a lost cause, and Niandi and Babbit are killed in the explosion of a munitions dump in a cave during the civil war.

The other three daughters never marry. However, they suffer as casualties of equally morbid disposition. Xiangdi, 4th daughter, sells herself into prostitution as a young girl to provide unwitting Mother Lu with a one-time sum of food money. She returns to her mother decades later (1961), her mind and body consumed by syphilis, to die five years thereafter in Shangguan Lu's arms. Qiudi, 7th daughter, is sold as a small child to a Russian lady from northern China. Adopted by a generous and cultured

Russian family, she becomes a doctor in Russia; but like Xiangdi she finds her way back to Northeast Gaomi and Mother Lu as Qiao Qisha, only to die of starvation in the famine that claimed sister Pandi. At last, Yunü, 8th daughter and twin of the celebrated brother Jintong, born blind on the day of the Japanese incursion, becomes Lu's most cherished and most innocent child. Sadly, she decides to run away at the age of 20, mistakenly believing that she is too great a burden to her poor mother. What becomes of Yunü, we never know.

Jintong the Mammorius

The latter three chapters of the novel (V-VI-VII) relate the grotesque life of Shangguan Jintong, the presumptive Golden Boy of Shangguan Lu's life. Jintong survives almost literally by hanging on to every tit he can find. Only at the age of 6 is he weaned from his mother's breast by an exasperated Laidi who forces him to drink goat's milk instead; even so, he periodically relapses to his mother's milk, even in middle school where he is the object of scorn and ridicule as a "mamma's boy." Victimized by village bullies, he has to be defended by his music teacher Ji Qiongzhi, rescued by his niece Sha Zaohua and nephew Sima Liang, and saved from imminent murder in the sorghum fields by Sima Ku, the notorious outlaw. At the age of 12, he is chosen Snow Prince for the regional winter festival, a bizarre event where he, as Snow Prince, is tasked with fondling the breasts of all the prospective mothers of Northeast Gaomi (a county-sized territory), and where disaster strikes when Old Jin, a village nymphomaniac with one, and only one, enormous breast of exceeding warmth, mesmerizes Jintong and breaks the taboo against speaking aloud during the festival, causing panic throughout the realm.

Jintong ricochets down the unforgiving corridors of the "iron house" of modern China like a bullet that cannot find its target but never loses its momentum, driven by the endless force of sheer terror.⁴ He is somewhat like Voltaire's *Candide*, careening from one historic minefield to another, but more like Emile Habiby's tragi-comical anti-hero in *Saeed the Pessimist* (1974), the impotent and cowardly Palestinian taxi-driver who survives in Israel by serving Israeli intelligence as a (fairly worthless) informant, cravenly avoiding every opportunity to redeem himself by doing something courageous.

In his late teens, Jintong is reunited with his lost 7th sister Qiudi, the Russian-educated doctor now known as Qiao Qisha, at the Flood Dragon River Farm, where both are sent for punishment as "rightists" (supposed Nationalist sympathizers), but he watches during the famine as the gruesome farm cook Pockface Zhang forces Qiudi to submit to anal rape in the woods in exchange for crusts of bread which she chokes down even as she is being raped. The apotheosis of his shame occurs when he himself is accosted at this same labor camp by the female Communist leader there, Commander Long Qingping, a one-armed "fox spirit" who corners Jintong alone at the compound and threatens him with an ultimatum: "There are two paths open to you. You can get it up, or I'll shoot it off!" (424). Commander Long, a terrifying 40 year-old virago, descends upon Jintong in all her horrible nakedness, embellished by her bushy fox tail and her scar-tissued shoulder stump, but finally turns her sidearm in frustration on herself; Jintong, sexualized at last (since he is a virgin too) by this fearful then suicidal apparition, gives her what she wanted even as she dies of her self-inflicted head wound. The psycho-sexual complexities of this union are perhaps beyond any known system of comprehension, but it is clear that no good can possibly come of it. In fact, Jintong confesses the whole ordeal to Qiudi, who records it in her diary; and

even though Commander Long's corpse explodes from bloat during the ensuing flood and cannot be examined, the diary proves sufficient to put Jintong in prison for 15 years (1965-1980) for murder and necrophilia, though he is not guilty of either crime.

Before Jintong is carted off to prison, though, he manages to return home to Mother Lu, who has been taking care of Laidi's orphaned child Parrot Han, nursing the dying Xiangdi, who came home to die bringing precious jewels, the wages of her sad life as a prostitute, hidden in her lute, and providing for Yunü, her blind Jade Girl, 8th daughter. We learn that she and other women working at the local mill have been securing food for their families by eating raw beans and regurgitating them at home for their children. Very soon, the entire Shangguan family is subjected to public humiliation by the Red Guards and made to march in a parade of "Ox Demons and Snake Spirits"; in the course of this mockery, Mother Lu takes pity on a young man who is about to drown in the village pond and is consequently berated, beaten down, and trampled while Jintong stammers in helpless amazement: "'Mother . . . ' He fell to his knees beside his mother, who raised her head with difficulty and glared at him. 'Stand up, my useless son!'" (451).⁵ This pathetic scene recalls Jintong's earlier failure to rescue sister Qiudi from rape, but now his cowardice is worse since it is his mother whom he will not try to protect, earning him the lowest of all Chinese epithets, that of "unfilial son."

The Republic of Shame

Fifteen years later, in 1980, Jintong emerges from prison in the far north, where he had herded sheep and performed oral sex under compulsion for a hairy prison guard, into a new and different China. Over is the Cultural Revolution; gone are the Red Guards; and no more is the Dalan Village that he had known. In their place is modern industrial China, a waste land of ill-conceived projects sped forward by avaricious entrepreneurs for whom the only object is money and to whom the past is nothing but a heap of rickety hovels and outmoded rural environs to be bull-dozed, along with their old inhabitants if necessary, and flattened into landfills to accommodate the latest factory, hotel, restaurant, or tourist trap. Lost and fearful of all around him in a bus station, Jintong is astonished to see Parrot Han, Laidi's son by the Birdman, who is the ambitious proprietor of the Eastern Bird Sanctuary, a sort of avian zoo in the new Dalan City with a huge assortment of exotic birds. Parrot Han takes Jintong under his wing (!) and leads him home to see his now ancient, white-haired mother, Shangguan Lu, who has been evicted from the Shangguan compound, now annihilated by Progress, and has taken up residence in the hut near the abandoned pagoda on the outskirts of town. Mother Lu, the living embodiment of Chinese maternal authority, and the pagoda, signifying Taoism and Buddhism, China's ancient traditions of folk wisdom, are thus brought together to be marginalized and destroyed at once by the modern machinery of Capital.

Shangguan Lu's eight daughters have all died, but she perseveres, despite her eviction, in the face of the monstrous and fantastic dissolution of the China she had known, a China fraught with danger, oppression, and natural disasters but for all that more humane than the shameful and disrespectful world of venal capitalism. Mother Lu is still a mother, and she nurses Jintong through a feverish illness and even welcomes Old Jin, the one-breasted goddess of the old Snow Market, to see him—a reunion that results in his total reversion to infantile dependency, as Jintong resorts to her still fulsome bosom and retreats into infancy to escape the noise and furor of the new China. Old Jin, though, has modernized; she is now the queen of trash and

refuse, ruling with an iron hand a large company that recycles plastic and rubber. At length Shangguan Lu intervenes to stop her son's awful regression and offers him an ultimatum, as Commander Long had done. He can have Old Jin as a lover, but not as a nursemaid: "I've been a fool all these years, but I finally understand that it's better to let a child die than let him turn into a worthless creature who can't take his mouth away from a woman's nipple!" (478).

Thus Jintong is thrown into the onrushing river of modern life where predictably, he drowns. First, he is the kept sex toy of Old Jin, until she tosses him out when he fails to engage her drunken husband in a knife fight. Homeless again, he wanders into the clutches of Parrot Han's famously vicious wife Geng Lianlian, who only wants him, bathed and properly attired, to persuade the Mayor of Dalan, his old music teacher and defender Ji Qiongzhi, to provide a huge loan for the enlargement of the Eastern Bird Sanctuary. And when she throws him out, since the loan is not forthcoming, Jintong descends into a dark night of the soul, wandering the back alleys of Dalan until he is mugged and stripped by a gang of thieves and narrowly escapes a pack of wild dogs,⁶ only to throw himself desperately through the window of a new department store in pursuit of the breasts of the female mannequins and to discover, to his consternation, that "My god, there's no nipple!" (506).

Three years later and freshly released from the provincial mental hospital, Jintong now in his fifties returns yet again to Dalan just in time to find the authorities on the verge of destroying the old pagoda and his mother's little hut. Indeed, both he and the ancient Shangguan Lu are about to be ground to dust when they are saved by Sima Ku's son Sima Liang—the same who with Sha Zaohua had saved Jintong in the sorghum fields from the bullies who pursued him. Sima Liang, himself a money-drenched and helicoptered capitalist, plucks them from danger and sets Jintong up with a fancy shop, a sort of Chinese Victoria's Secret, which Jintong christens the Unicorn Bras-siere Shop. Business goes well until Jintong makes the mistake of allowing himself to be seduced by the daughter of an old family enemy, Wang Yinzhi, who steals the shop from under his nose and, like all the other heartless, aggressive women he has known, kicks him to the curb and has it her own way at his expense.

If, as some observers have suggested, this novel is the story of a modern China where Chinese men have been emasculated, have lost their manhood, or have failed to attain it because they are never even weaned,⁷ it is nevertheless the story of the survival of Chinese men and women who continue to persevere as tragi-comic beings in an absurd world, a world in which there cannot be heroic men like Sima Ku or natural women like Shangguan Lu, but only their shadows in vain pursuit of substance, a dream that leads them, like Sha Zaohua and Sima Liang, to leap from their high-rise apartment buildings or to reflect, like Jintong, on the "Listlessness, that great emptiness," that he felt when he "envisioned himself as a withered blade of grass rooted in a barren land, quietly coming to life, quietly growing, and now quietly dying" (464). In the end, Jintong takes his mother to the small church where she had met and loved his actual sire, Swedish Father Malory; there the white petals from a locust tree in blossom fall like blessings all about her; and Jintong meets his hitherto unknown half-brother, the new Pastor Malory. They recognize each other as brothers on sight, and in this happy union of fair-haired bastards there is the consolation that only true kinship can afford in a land where there is only the pretense of legitimacy and the façade of authentic human life.

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Endnotes

1. This paradigm, featuring the various stages of modern Chinese history, is also found in Yu Hua's famous novel *To Live* (1993) and in Lillian Lee's equally well-known tale *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993), both familiar to the West in translation and in cinematic versions.
2. The trope of the mother who bears numerous daughters while continually hoping for a son was popularized in the widely shown propaganda film *A Sweet Life*, circulated in 1979 in the attempt to persuade such mothers to obey the one child policy. Virtually every Chinese citizen saw this cute film, which ends happily with marriages all around after a good bit of dancing in the woods in slow motion.
3. The motif of the girl who morphs into a bird or butterfly to escape an arranged marriage also occurs in Mo Yan's short story "Soaring" in *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* (2001), where the village girl Yanyan actually turns into a beautiful winged creature and flies to the top of a tree, where she is eventually shot and killed by an arrow from the village headman. Lingdi's metamorphosis, though, is only imaginary.
4. The term "iron house" is one familiar to all who study modern Chinese literature; it is Lu Xun's grim characterization of Chinese society in his story *Diary of a Madman*, in which the madman believes he is trapped in an iron house where people, especially children, are being cannibalized.
5. Here we see not only Jintong's failure as a "useless son" but also his downfall as an impotent and absurd Oedipal pretender who cannot proceed beyond the stage of oral sexuality. These issues are plumbed in David Wang's article "The Literary World of Mo Yan," *WLT* 74, no. 3 (Summer 2000), 487-494.
6. North Gaomi Township is famous in Mo Yan's works, especially in *Red Sorghum*, for its wild dog packs, which originated from the Japanese invasion of 1937, when many villages were annihilated and the liberated village dogs gathered into voracious packs that roamed the region like wolves, preying on every vulnerable person and creature. They are, of course, symbolic of human viciousness high and low.
7. The so-called "rise of the feminine and decline of the masculine" in post-Maoist Chinese culture is a theory around which a scholarly debate has emerged, centered on the gender issues of postmodern Chinese culture. Jintong makes a textbook example of this phenomenon, but I think that Mo Yan parodies the type rather than simply illustrating it. Howard Goldblatt refers to the idea in his preface to the novel: "In a relentlessly unflattering portrait of his male protagonist, Mo Yan draws attention to what he sees as a regression of the human species and a dilution of the Chinese character; in other words, a failed patriarchy" (xi). Yet the women of Jintong's generation are really no better than the men, as evidenced in the conduct of Sha Zaohua the thief, Old Jin the tyrant, Geng Lianlian the miser, Commander Long the sexually frustrated fox spirit, and Ji Qiongzhi and Lu Shengli the cynical politicians—even the eight daughters of Shangguan Lu, who are admirable in various respects, are also flawed and unable to survive. All the truly admirable characters in the novel are those born before the advent of modern China: Sima Ku, Shangguan Lu and her mother-in-law, and Auntie Sun, the village

midwife who birthed Lu's twins and fought the Japanese soldiers who entered the Shangguan compound on that very day. The "regression of the human species" is generic in Mo Yan's works; it is not confined to the masculine, and it is not a mere postcolonial phenomenon.

Jim Webb: A Poet's Path of Resistance, or *The Bigger the Windmill, the Better*

Scott Goebel

*When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations.
When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness
and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.*

—John F. Kennedy

Poet Jim Webb's poems, plays, radio broadcasts and commentaries have inspired his activist and literary peers and are widely recognized as an important part of the Appalachian Literary Renaissance of the 1970s. Webb is a powerful presence, a man more important than any single aspect of his work. As Eddy Pendarvis has said, "He is an Appalachian icon" (Pendarvis interview). Despite suffering deep personal, financial and literary loss from three devastating house fires, Webb has supported and promoted his contemporaries for over thirty years through readings, publications, financial support, swarms¹ and radio broadcasts. He still continues to embrace and inspire succeeding generations of poets, writers and activists. We too often measure a poet's success by his bibliography. Even if he had no books to his credit, Jim Webb is a remarkably successful poet. To play on Jerry Williamson's words, Webb is certainly the most essential Appalachian poet that we should get to know.

The publication of Jeff Biggers and George Brosi's *No Lonesome Road: Selected Prose and Poems of Don West* (U. of Illinois, 2004) has brought renewed interest in writers of the Appalachian Literary Renaissance. Soupbean writer Joe Barrett's *Blue Planet Memoir* will be published in 2016 by Dos Madres Press. Work is underway to publish jazz poet Bob Snyder's *Milky Way Accent* and the Marat Moore collection in the archives at East Tennessee State University will be mined this summer for more of Webb's work. With interest running high, time is of the essence to begin collecting and cataloging as much as possible of the work of Jim Webb and others of the Appalachian Renaissance. It would be a severe loss to students of both Activist and Appalachian Studies if materials related to Webb and others are lost and forgotten.

Over the years Webb shared the stage at literary readings with such writers as James Still, Wendell Berry, Frank X. Walker, James Baker Hall, Richard Hague, George Ella Lyon and Gurney Norman. In 1982, Webb and his writings were featured alongside the work of Wilma Dykeman, Jeff Daniel Marion and Jim Wayne Miller in a four-month literary exhibit at the University of North Carolina Asheville. Webb's

latest publication, *Get In, Jesus—New and Selected Poems* (Wind Publications, 2013) was his first book-length collection after a long history of publishing in most of the region's important literary journals and editing an array of important anthologies such as *Mucked* (1978), *Strokes* (1984), *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel* (1984-1995). A chapbook, *Buzzsaws in the Rain* was published in 2000 by AppalApple. Webb's most famous poem, "Get In, Jesus" has been called the most famous poem in Appalachia. Along with iconic art by Robert Gipe, the full text of the poem has been published in 15 editions of T-shirts over the last 20 years.

Webb's rich publication history exists despite the fact that much of his unpublished work was destroyed by a string of arson fires at his home atop Pine Mountain in Letcher County, Kentucky. While the spoken word lives in memory, the written word is often taken more seriously. Complaining to a neighbor and asking him to keep his dog out of your yard is one thing—writing a letter with the grievance elevates the discourse and tension. The written word, simply put, is more of a threat. The written word is more important to the writer as well, making Webb's manuscript losses difficult to bear (Webb interview # 2). While Webb has lost much in the fires on Pine Mountain, sifting through ashes of his literary life reveals a great deal about Webb and other writers of the Appalachian Renaissance.

Retribution by fire is a common theme in southern culture and a casual observer might wonder if Webb toned down his attacks against those in power. While the setbacks were real, in time Webb's bent for social justice has always returned to his work. Through those dark times, Webb's love of music and his humor, particularly his penchant for creating puns, has carried him back into the light. Jim Webb is a public figure in the coal region of Appalachia. He was Program Director for Appalshop's community radio station (WMMT-FM) for many years and, although retired, still hosts the weekly radio program "Ridin' Around Listenin' to the Radio with Wiley Quixote." Webb unsuccessfully ran for Letcher County (Kentucky) Magistrate in 2006. On his radio program, Webb often reads newspaper and magazine articles as well as poetry in a segment called "Delbert's Poultry Shop—the Finest in Fresh Appalachian Poultry," thus encouraging listeners to consider other views. Many listeners enjoy "Speaking Your Pieces" where he reads from a like-named section of Whitesburg's weekly newspaper, *The Mountain Eagle*.

Webb is also proprietor of a private campground on top of Pine Mountain. Wiley's Last Resort is the scene of fundraisers and celebrations for activist groups. These include Rotary Club picnics, music festivals, weddings, and gatherings to support sustainability and reigning in destructive mining practices. Places at the Resort are all named, often with some kind of pun. The pond, man made with a cement-block dam is called Walled-In Pond. The dam itself is called Wegiva Dam. A long hill on the property is called Faith Hill. On one side of Faith Hill is the Tiger Woods. On the other side—the Gump Forest. Webb has recently built a large music stage on a valley-fill (created by roadwork on US 119—not a mining project). At 70, Jim Webb has accomplished more than many give him credit for. While he began work on his property in 1995, his activism began taking shape in the 1970s when Webb, hoping to be the next John Updike, admits to being little more than a Rod McKuen wannabe during his early writing years.

Resistance Grows in West (by God) Virginia

Webb's early work focused on human emotion and his self-deprecating wit has been ever present. As his style matured he focused on the human condition. Over the

last 40 years his work has remained humanistic, focusing on injustices such as strip mining and mountaintop removal. While strip mining had been in use since the 1950s, it quickly took a turn in early 1970s with the advent of mountaintop removal, which has been called strip mining on steroids. The idea is simple—blow off the top of a mountain (the overburden), dump it into an adjoining valley (a valley fill) and scoop out the exposed coal. It is effective and most importantly, it is cheap. To date, well over 500 mountains have been leveled and dumped into valleys and close to 2,000 miles of streams in those valleys have been buried.

In 1975 things were going pretty well for Jim Webb. On track for tenure at Southern West Virginia Community College in Williamson, Webb was well-liked by colleagues and students and found much to like about the land and people of Mingo County. That summer Webb attended a festival near Pipestem, primarily to enjoy live music and a few beers. The event was a Save Our Mountains fundraiser and the evening would bring a dramatic change in Webb's outlook and literary voice.

The host, legendary activist, poet and preacher Don West, interrupted the music and announced the screening of a work-in-progress movie, "In Memory of the Land and People," by a young filmmaker named Bob Gates. For the first time, Webb saw aerial footage of the effects of strip mining. Images of the monstrous GEM of Egypt² in southeastern Ohio caught his attention. Webb knew the area and coal's importance there, having spent much of his childhood in Shadyside, Ohio (Belmont County) where the GEM raised hell on Earth. Webb hadn't given much thought to the extent, the absolute devastation strip mining caused, until viewing this graphic film. Webb says, "It just knocked me out" (Webb interview #2). Screening Gate's film, more than any other single event, marked the beginning of a transformation of Jim Webb's literary voice—his voice now called attention to social and environmental injustices, corporate greed and political corruption.

When strip mining hastened flash flooding and inundated the Tug River Valley in 1977, Williamson was devastated. Webb's socially aware writings began appearing in newspapers, literary journals, and on stage. As Wendell Berry was beginning to make the connection of people with the land a part of our collective consciousness, Webb's socially conscious writings also held the basic premise that people and the environment were inextricably one: The treatment shown one directly reflected the care (or recklessness) shown the other. In Webb's view, as the mountains were lost, so too were people. In the case of the people of the Tug Valley, the flood and resulting destruction had been hastened and worsened because of land that had been stripped. Reclamation was, as Harry Caudill famously said, "like putting lipstick on a corpse." Strip mining and timber clear-cutting devastated the mountains. Rain flows faster down the mountains when soil, trees, and other vegetation no longer exist to stem the flow, unstable ground gives way and flash flooding occurs. Homes are lost and lives are ruined. Less than two years after becoming aware of strip mining in Pipestem, Jim Webb's transformation to becoming a socially-active poet was in full swing.

With a rhetoric and language as harsh and visceral as the reality he perceived, Webb made his connections clear. In public protest, essays, poetry, plays, and literary publications, he blamed environmental irresponsibility and destruction of mountain land on greed, placing it squarely on the shoulders of the coal companies and on the corruption of public officials who allowed it to take place. Those who pay close attention to Webb's work understand that he has always supported miners, particularly where mine safety is concerned. Webb pragmatically understands that society will need coal for years to come and will also need miners to risk their lives digging for

it. The target of his ire has always been the greed of those in charge who dictate destructive mining practices.

Under the pseudonym of Wiley Quixote³, Webb's biting essays and commentaries first appeared in 1977 in the pages of the weekly newspaper *The Sandy New Era* in Williamson (Mingo County), West Virginia. The Tug Valley had been decimated by the Great Central Appalachian Flood. Government assistance was lagging as thousands were homeless, hungry and growing angrier by the day. Webb joined with many friends and locals in helping secure food and shelter for those in need. Webb pointed publicly to "King Coal" and, understanding the tradition of machine politics in Mingo County, he also pointed to government officials for working hand-in-glove with the coal companies by looking the other way on the joke of permitting and reclamation. Frustrated by the lack of government flood help, Webb, along with Jim Bartlett, James Hannah, Jerry Hildebrand, Detra Bannister, Ken Mills, and others founded the Tug Valley Disaster Center in Williamson (later the Tug Valley Recovery Center, or TVRC) to assist and advocate for victims.

Numerous folks, including Beth Spence, Nancy Adams, Marat Moore, Monica McCoy, Mills, and others had established the weekly muckraking paper to give a voice to the victims. To raise awareness of corruption at the expense of the environment and the people of the coal region, Webb created literary caricatures, riffing on the names of greed-consumed, crooked politicians and coal executives in satirical stories, allegories and editorials. He wrote vigorously, honing his new voice. With Bob Henry Baber, he published *Strokes* and *Mucked*; incendiary literary journals focusing on coal-region and flood issues. He joined other writers in the newly-formed and highly vocal Southern Appalachian Writers Cooperative (SAWC), and later co-founded the literary journal, *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*. Webb's life was full and moving forward.

As his writing flourished, a rash of events brought things to a halt. In short, Webb did not get tenure. With no job (and no prospects), Webb left Williamson abruptly, entrusting the care of his home and much of what he owned to others (manuscripts included) to a friend.⁴ He worked a cousin's canoe livery in Michigan for two summers as he continued to write. From a distance, he contributed to *The Sandy New Era* for some time. In Michigan Webb encountered what would be the next of several difficult periods. ,

While in Michigan, he lost a notebook of the summer's writings when it fell off the trunk of his car. He went back to retrieve it, but it was never found. Late in the second season of managing the canoe livery, Webb was involved in a tragic accident with an ATV while returning from work. Two young girls ran in front of him on a public road: one was killed and the other seriously injured. Webb was not at fault, but the experience affected him deeply. He spent the next two years traveling, visiting friends and trying to heal, eventually landing in New York City in 1983.

Webb stayed in New York with his older brother, Robb, an actor and voice-over artist⁵. He was surprised by the lack of encouragement from the New York poetry establishment. It was the complete opposite of the mountain literary scene and the supportive SAWC network. However, one night at Saint Mark's, the crowd took notice. In a relatively short time he broke into the local poetry scene and a publisher offered him a book contract. Imagine the joy of such an offer and the realization that most everything you'd ever written had been lost (in Williamson or Michigan). The contract was never signed, the book never published. Something more critical happened.

Webb left New York abruptly. He returned to Whitesburg, Kentucky to care for his father, Watson Webb, who'd had a debilitating stroke (he died 18 months later). Webb moved into the family home on top of Pine Mountain. In 1985, Jim Webb's

voice took a new turn. He arrived on the airwaves as a volunteer on WMMT-FM, Appalshop's new community radio station. Along with his actions and poems as well as his quixotic radio commentaries, he continued to decry the rape and mutilation of the mountains while airing an eclectic mix of music ranging from Americana to Zydeco, with a dose of Dylan thrown in for good measure.

One of the best examples of his early activist voice, using humor and naming names rings loudly in the poem "Buzzsaws in the Rain." In this poem, Bobby Byrd is, of course, U.S. Senator Robert Byrd. Rocky Pharoah is West Virginia Governor Jay Rockefeller. Arch Enema, Noah Flood, and Nasty Bunion are local politicians; Arch Moore, Noah Floyd, and Rasty Runyon, respectively.

Buzzsaws in the Rain

I know all the reasons

for ending the knee-jerk
assault on a steamroller,
these mosquito drill drone,
ping pong ball full of dead fish,
stinking, rotting, rancid slop bucket
full of pork barrel projects &
senate chamber glories (or
Bobby Byrd's thousand fiddles
playing when that great gash
slashes the Phelps Kentucky Pleasure Dome
in to)
blues

But none of them reasons
make any sense so

I just
got to keep
on thinkin about
Rocky Pharoah & Arch Enema,
Noah Flood & Nasty Bunion

Ka-thunk, Ka-thunk
past them
to them

Broke lung, bent back, can't pay for the truck
cause it's rollin over my leg, standin
up to be counted and they hit me in the head,
throw me in the garbage can & roll me over
the hill into the river on Sunday my one day
off till I start on the hoot owl

tonight too
blues

Yeah, I know all the reasons
but someday Rocky Pharoah
when they ain't nothin'
left to tear up
and the lines are straight and true,

Stand in that white house, look out on it all, all
that you've done. Then may you
ram your fist
through the pane, slice up
your arm, shit your blood, &
fuck a buzzsaw in the rain.

Webb holds nothing back. The graphic action and language expressed in the last stanza mirror the horror Webb sees in King Coal's stripping of the mountains. The poem leaves no doubt that Webb holds the power-brokers (public and private) responsible for the desecration.

It was during his time in West Virginia that Webb's play *Elmo's Haven* was produced. The play, set in two scenes, the governor's office and a bar called Elmo's Haven (modeled after Williamson's Red Robin Inn) depicts many of the villains that appear in *Buzzsaws* as antagonists in the play. *Elmo's Haven* is an indictment against the hegemonic power of Big Coal and pervasive corruption in West Virginia politics. The play illustrates how politicians and corporations collude to frame the discussion to cause people in the community to fight each other instead of those in power—an uncivil war on the local level.

Remarkably, little has changed in the coal fields since then. The Friends of Coal, an Astroturf organization backed by the coal industry, is still pitting family and friends against each other. Politicians, such as Senator Mitch McConnell, still cry about a "War on Coal" in order to maintain power. Those speaking for the coal industry refuse to accept that the thing that made coal so widely used—its apparent low cost—is what has caused its decline. Because of horizontal hydraulic fracturing, natural gas is now cheaper to use than coal (and burns more cleanly). Webb and others have tried to make the point that King Coal had declared war on the land and the people many years before.

Back Home in Whitesburg, Kentucky

On returning to Kentucky, Webb co-founded the literary journal *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel* in 1984, showcasing the writings of other like-minded writers, and remained very active with SAWC. In 1986, Webb threw a theme party which he called the Pine Mountain Tacky Lawn Ornament and Pink Flamingo Soiree. He asked attendees to bring a piece or handmade yard art, the goal being to create the tackiest lawn in Letcher County, Kentucky. Through 30 years of fires and setbacks, the annual gathering has never missed a year. Many times over, Webb has achieved his goal of owning the tackiest lawn in the county.

Now in Whitesburg, Webb was working on a new play and speaking out for timber and coal reform and for related environmental protections. Much of what Webb did was a call to action. Publishing as his alter-ego character, Wiley Quixote, he took to task politicians and overbearing corporations for their misdeeds. He was still naming names and making a name for himself. Dana Wildsmith says, "The problem was, yelling unpleasantries makes a guy both hero and hated. Someone's bound to try to



Elmo's Haven. Writers Cabin built by SAWC members and named after Webb's play
photograph by Nelson Pilsner



Webb at Elmo's Haven. 2015
photograph by Nelson Pilsner



Mosaic close up
photograph by Nelson Pilsner



Walled-In Pond 2015
photograph by Nelson Pilsner

shut you up” (Wildsmith 26)

In October, 1992, while Webb was attending a SAWC meeting at the Highlander Center, his family’s remote mountain home was burned to the ground. He lost everything he and his family owned. The official cause of the fire remains “undetermined.” Those close to Webb believe the blaze was purposely set in retaliation for Webb’s outspokenness. It is also believed that the blaze was intended, not to kill Webb, but to kill his spirit (Wildsmith interview). As one would expect, the incident was a major setback. While Webb did not earnestly seek publication in the aftermath, his radio audience was well aware that his efforts did not wane. Like West and many activists before him, Webb did not go easily.

Don West had paid the price for his activism. West, along with Myles Horton had founded the Highlander Center in Tennessee, the grassroots social justice center that held training for the Civil Rights Movement. West had been labeled a communist by the House Un-American Committee (HUAC), lost his own tenure-track teaching job, had seen friends killed, had been beaten and left for dead and had his home, books and manuscripts included, burned twice.

Webb was well-aware of power imbalances. He knew of West and knew many of the Soupbean Collective writers from Antioch Appalachia in Beckley (WV). He had lived in Williamson and knew the history of labor struggles, the deadly union violence at Matewan, the infamous Battle of Blair Mountain, and the long tradition of machine politics in southern West Virginia. Having this knowledge, Webb knew he’d face resistance if he crossed those in power in the coal region.

Power in the Coal Region

It’s appropriate here to discuss power. A two-dimensional approach suggests that power works to prevent the powerless from achieving change by taking action to quell grievances before, or as they are expressed. Threats or use of sanctions and violence push the powerless to the margins. Those not participating do so, not by choice but, because they are purposefully excluded (Fisher 144). As expressed by John Gaventa, a three-dimensional power-model goes even further. Gaventa has illustrated that power not only limits agency and action of the powerless, but that power can even work to shape how the powerless conceive the nature and depth of the inequalities they face. Or, power emboldens itself by shaping its opposition’s conception of reality and also shaping their needs and desires. This can lead to cultural fatalism, or apathy, since change seems hopeless. At the very least, it can lead to a lack of political and social awareness (Gaventa 11-13).

This model is often used to explain the popularity of “The Beverly Hillbillies” in the southern mountains. Even mountain people accepted (and found humorous) the negative hillbilly stereotype because it had been reinforced for so long. As John O’Brien, author of *At Home in the Heart of Appalachia*, says, “[my father] took the hillbilly stereotype to heart and all of his life believed that he was backward and inferior—a despair I, too, have been trying to escape all my life” (O’Brien A21). A close look at Webb’s poem “America” shows he is no fatalist. The speaker, using his rotting and broken teeth as a metaphor to illustrate the pain of being poor in America, refuses to give up on America. The speaker will “gnash & gnarl” and he “will gum [America] until he dies (Webb, *Get In, Jesus* 43). The speaker, like Webb, will not give up.

Gaventa’s model clearly shows power as a relationship, and being a relationship, it can be affected from *both* ends. As such, he suggests that the most effective way the powerless can affect change from an imbalanced position is by grassroots organiza-

tion or *rebellion*. Fifty years before Gaventa formally discussed this model relative to Appalachia, Myles Horton and Don West based the successful structure of the Highlander Center on grassroots activism. Change will not happen without awareness. *Awareness* is where Jim Webb comes in.

Awareness

In the early 1980s, Webb was an early member and supporter of organizations like SAWC and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth,⁶ a grassroots group fighting for social and economic justice. He participated in public protests and rallies opposing strip mining and mountaintop removal. By the early 1990s, Webb had become a visible agent for change through his writings and (carefully) through his community radio broadcasts reaching four states. His goal of raising awareness was working and, following West's earlier path, he had become a real and serious threat to the power balance.

The 1992 fire sent Webb into shock. He started from scratch in every aspect of his life. He stopped writing for a time: "I shacked up with friends in town and pretty much went into a funk. I immersed myself in the radio station"(Webb interview). After a year, Webb returned to the top of Pine Mountain, rented a three-room cabin across the road from his burned-out home and while his writing slowed, his radio work never ceased.

After living there for a year, he bought a computer and began writing in earnest again. When the old Pine Mountain Resort lodge (on the same property) came available, Webb moved into the larger lodge with his computer. About this time, his aunt's vacant house (a bit higher on the mountain) was burned to the ground. Then a third fire in 1995; his lodge home was burned to the ground. His computer was destroyed, again. He had no hardcopies of the last two year's work. His writing slowed again.

Those close to Webb suspect all three fires were intended to quiet him (Wildsmith interview). Webb himself talks somewhat around the issue. He suspects he knows who started the later fires and that the motivation may not have been retribution for his activism. Webb says, "I'm certain who burned me out the first time, but I've got no proof" (Webb #2). As to the arsonist's identity, Webb refuses to discuss it. Interestingly, local gossips suggest that the fires were set simply to collect insurance money. In fact, Webb refused to settle with his insurer, The Kentucky Farm Bureau. He battled them in the courts for over 15 years because they offered him less than half of the stated policy amount. In the end, Webb lost in court and settled. Out of resentment, it took him almost another year to deposit their payment in the bank.

While the fires did slow his writing, it did not stop him from being heard. Webb stayed on the mountain, moving back into the cabin a few yards away from the burned-out lodge. Webb's voice continued to be heard on the radio and at poetry readings all over the region. Webb was one of the few paid staff at WMMT. When the station first went on the air, there were many airtime gaps caused by a lack of volunteers. He believed that there should be no "dead" airtime and, while he had his own show, Webb created new shows to fill the gaps. He created "The Whole Grain Elevator" (featuring New Age music) and another show called "Picking the June Apples," featuring artists from the JuneAppal label (the music component of Appalshop). With his manuscripts destroyed and his writing at a trickle, Webb says, "I immersed myself in the radio station. I'd always loved music and the music at the [radio] station saved me" (Webb interview).

A New Project; A Bigger Vision

In 1995, Webb immersed himself in what may be his most ambitious project. He was able to purchase the 66-acre property where his rented cabin was located. The site of the abandoned Pine Mountain Resort was in ruin. The pond, which had once been the county's only swimming hole, had been drained and filled with scrub trees. Webb restored the pond and began developing the property as a private campground. His mission had a dual purpose to create a space for locals to enjoy the beauty of Pine Mountain and also to create a space for all manner of social and environmental activists to meet for planning, training or simply to relax and enjoy nature. In keeping with Webb's wry humor, the campground was named Wiley's Last Resort—the Private Campground at the End of the Whirled. It was a nod to his literary and radio history as well as a statement that this was where he'd make his last stand.

While we generally begin examining a writer's impact by studying his work, doing so with Webb presents a problem since much of his literary output has been lost or destroyed. Despite that, his writings and activism have significantly increased awareness of social and environmental injustices and influenced others throughout the region. And while he has recently published another book, *Get In, Jesus—New and Selected Poems* in 2013 (Wind Publications 2013), students of Appalachian history, culture and literature have to navigate through a lot of rumor and myth about Webb.

A common image of Jim Webb is that he's a radical hillbilly or an old hippie sitting on top of Pine Mountain decrying progress, coming down only to start trouble every time a tree falls. In reality, Webb is very intelligent, highly educated and believes that the more people know about the world around them, the better equipped they'll be to make responsible decisions and become informed citizens. In Webb's view, humanity and nature cannot be separated and, thus, an assault on the mountains is an attack on humanity. In essence, being good stewards of the land nurtures our humanity.

Looking at Webb from a Distance

While Webb is most often associated with his activist work, it is Webb himself who is most often overlooked. Jerry Williamson, Founding Editor of *Appalachian Journal* says:

[Jim Webb] is the most essential human being I'll ever hope to know, a great soul and in so many ways the symbolic soul of all these mountains and all of the mountain people, for being run over so much and burned out of his house twice and made to suffer for other's sins and for being a great lover of women and everybody's pal and for bearing up and for sometimes not bearing up and for being a soul into drink and into great storytelling and for taking us all to great heights and greater depths. He is Appalachia . . . (Beaver 100)

Webb wrote what's considered by many to be Appalachia's most famous contemporary poem. "Get In, Jesus" is in its 14th edition and has sold nearly a thousand copies at \$25 each (in T-shirt form).

The speaker of "Get In, Jesus" (presumably, Webb) is a hippie, hitch-hiking through the mountains in the late 1970s. Passed by car after car, which the speaker presumes is because of his appearance (long hair and beard), he is picked up a pair of "card carryin / sad lost-eyed / burned out / John Greenleaf / in Detroit Citiers." They welcome him to the back seat by saying, "Get in, Jesus." They question him, offer him wine from a paper bag, referring to him always as "Jesus." Initially resistant to play, the speaker denies the label, but slowly begins to consider what it would be like to

be Jesus, eventually embracing the idea and playing along with the two men. As the speaker steps out of the car, one of them asks, "Are you really Jesus?" The speaker replies, "If I was Jesus / You think I'd be / Thumbin'?" While that rhetorical question might seem intended to assure the men that he was not Jesus, it can be easily argued that if Jesus were to appear today, he very likely might be hitch-hiking. Everyone in the car seems transformed in some way. Writer Richard Hague has called it "the most famous poem in Appalachia." Oddly enough it is not a protest piece. Of this poem, Williamson says it is:

... the great poem of Appalachian loss, the sweetness of our togetherness in loss, and how we get redeemed, which only through kindnesses done to the least among us. I'm telling you that being mistaken for Jesus by two "lost-eyed [in] Detroit-Citiers" is more than just a funny joke in a poem. It's an image of martyrdom. (Beaver 101)

Williamson's commentary is high praise on the poem and the poet.

In some ways, Williamson's words reflect Beat generation poet Allen Ginsberg's perception of the beatific. "The point of Beat is that you get beat down to a certain nakedness where you actually are able to see the world in a visionary way," Ginsberg once wrote, "which is the old classical understanding of what happens in the dark night of the soul" (Scumacher 261). In that sense, Webb amounts to an Appalachian equivalent of Jack Kerouac's and Allen Ginsberg's literary inspiration, Neal Cassady, who embodied the essential nature those writers sought to depict. While he was also a writer, Cassady was better known for his ability to live in each moment. He was a friend to everyman and compatriot-inspirer to the Beat Generation and later the Magic Bus Driver for Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters' Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test journey across America.

John Clellon Holmes, defined "beat" in his November 16 1952 *New York Times* article, "This is the Beat Generation"

More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself. A man is beat whenever he goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number.

This is an apt description of Jim Webb. He has been characterized in much the same way, in poems and stories by Richard Hague, Dana Wildsmith, Hilda Downer and others.

Settling in on Pine Mountain

Webb began writing in earnest again in 2002, after being laid up for several months with a broken leg. "While I was in the Tolly Ho House⁷ I did write quite a bit. But I packed up the computer in 2004 when Jerry [Tolliver] gave me the house and I moved it across the road" (Webb interview #3). The plan for the Tolly Ho House, which Webb moved onto his property at great expense, was for it to serve as a kind of bed and breakfast to augment his campground. Webb's longtime friend, Lee Stevens (the Road Hogg) moved in and began a fifteen-month restoration which was completed in the summer of 2006. Stevens had moved all of his belongings into the house while he worked on it. Webb had yet to move any of his possessions into the Tolly Ho when, in September of that year, the most recent fire, the fourth on Pine Mountain, burned it

to the ground. Lee Stevens was out of town when the fire hit but he lost everything he owned in the blaze. No one was hurt, but the building was yet to be properly insured. It was devastating for Stevens and was yet another serious hit for Webb.

The recent publication of Webb's selected poems and renewed interest in his work and his contemporaries has inspired him. He identifies himself as a poet, yet he is not a writer with a regular routine. Webb's periods of high production are often tied to inspiration, available time and a place to work. While he has always been a collector, Wildsmith suggests that after losing everything in the fires, Webb became obsessed with gathering mementos (Wildsmith interview). However, living in a modest, three-room cabin, things get piled up pretty quickly. Inside Webb's cabin, the small couch and kitchen table are usually stacked with flyers, posters, books, CDs, and sundry incarnations of pink flamingoes. Yet, always within sight is an ink pen, wrapped in a composition notebook—the sign of a writer aware the muses call at a time of *their* choosing.

Having invested so much in his radio program, Webb regrets that his shows were not recorded. Some of his best work has appeared live on the radio and exists only in the collective memory of his listeners. He does not begrudge the radio show for taking time away from his writing. His experience shows that “the written word is no more lasting than the spoken word” (Webb interview #2). Webb has sauntered a raconteur's path, using the oral traditions and storytelling so long a part of southern mountain culture. Because he has continued his efforts on the radio, it's clear that his voice of resistance has not been quelled by attempts (real or imagined) to keep him from stirring the pot of community awareness. It is good to know that the poet is alive and well in Jim Webb—and still at work. As importantly, it is good to see interest in Webb and his social and literary efforts running high. Today's regional writers owe much to Webb and contemporaries who were on the forefront of taking charge of our own stories and histories.

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Endnotes

1. For more information on the term “swarp,” see “An Appalachian Relic: Notes on Swarp” by Richard Hague (footnotes by Jerry Williamson) which appeared in *Appalachian Journal*.

2. The GEM of Egypt was a Giant Excavating Machine used for coal and overburden extraction in Ohio's coal region of the Little Egypt Valley.

3. Webb created used the character Wiley Quixote some time before the DC Comics character of the same name appeared in print.

4. This would mark the beginning of a series of losses of Webb's writings. Much of Webb's writings and other belongings in Williamson were disposed of while he was out of town.

5. Robb Webb has been the announcer for CBS's *60 Minutes* for many years and also for *The CBS Evening News with Scott Pelley*.

6. Kentuckians For The Commonwealth (KFTC) was founded as the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition in 1981.

7. The Tolly Ho House was owned by Webb's neighbor and lifelong friend, Jerry Tolliver. When Tolliver sold the property for road improvements to US 119, Tolliver gave Webb the house.

Frank X Walker's York and the Exploitation of an Eroticized Wilderness

Jimmy Dean Smith

—*Those people are much pleased with my black Servent—*
Their womin verry fond of carressing our men.
 Captain William Clark, 15th Octr 1804

Seventh grade history does not prepare you for the amount of sex had on the Lewis and Clark Expedition. A summary of what took place in January 1805 suggests how “a thrilling and humanly complex adventure” (Parini 82) can be drained of its sensuality and thus made dull enough for public history. On its website, *National Geographic* describes the party’s activities of that month *in toto* as “The Corps [of Discovery] attends a Mandan buffalo dance, performed to call buffalo to the area” (“Lewis and Clark Expedition Timeline”). But this is how William Clark¹ describes what happened on one “Saturday,” January 5:

a Buffalow Dance (or Medison) [...] for 3 nights passed in the 1st Village, a curious Custom the old men arrange themselves in a circle & after Smoke a pipe, which is handed them by a young man, Dress up for the purpose, the young men who have their wives back of the circle [...] go to one of the old men with a whining tone and [request²] the old man to take his wife (who presents necked except a robe) and—(or Sleep with him) the Girl then takes the Old man (who verry often can Scercely walk) and leades him to a Convenient place for the business, after which they return to the lodge, if the Old man (or a white man) returns to the lodge without gratifying the man & his wife, he offers her again and again. [...] (we Sent a man to this Medisan [Dance] last night, they gave him 4 Girls) all this is to cause the buffalow to Come near So that They may kill thim[.]

As in other entries in the “American Epic of Discovery” (Moulton), the writer assumes a scientist’s stance befitting President Jefferson’s charge to Meriwether Lewis regarding “the people inhabiting the line you will pursue [,including] the state of morality, religion, & information among them” (310-11). But Clark’s anthropological distancing slips away with this entry’s penultimate parenthetical remark: it is not only tribal elders but also the white men who perform “the business.” Today we can only imagine how the white men’s fickle commitment to objectivity would dumbfound a horrified Institutional Review Board.

One of the Corps’ “white men” was, in fact, Clark’s African-American slave York,

whose account of January 5, 1805, is imagined in the Kentucky poet Frank X Walker's collection of persona poems titled *Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York*. In *Buffalo Dance* and its sequel, *When Winter Come: The Ascension of York*, Walker essays the "reclamation of mute voices" (*Buffalo Dance*, "Preface"), most prominently that of William Clark's slave, an unofficial albeit crucial member of the Corps of Expedition. *When Winter Come* is the more shapely, more controlled, and more politically mature re-vision of the Corps' epic story and York's place in it, allowing more room for the voices of others—York's father and mother and his heartbreakingly un-named wife. (I mean that Walker, like the historical record itself, makes a point of erasing her identity.) The collection more deeply examines the ways that naming, re-naming, and un-naming open others' bodies and their land to exploitation. The latter volume is, however, perhaps *too* comforting, a volume to admire for its cohesion. *Buffalo Dance* is the wilder volume, more capable of startling, and it is the one on which I will focus.

In the opening stanza of "Buffalo Dance," York describes, and contextualizes, the dance:

young men leaped an circled 'round the fire
 dressed in whole heads and horns, some in tails
 all singing for the return a Katonka,
 an begging seasoned warriors to gift them
 with they courage an hunting skills
 by passing it through they favorite wives. (2-7)

York, it seems, is a better anthropologist than Lewis. He understands *why* the young men share their wives. A historian, Brad Tennant, speaking with NPR's *Day to Day* in the year *Buffalo Dance* was published, 2004, clarified why such "gifting" took place and why young men invited the white explorers to join in when the elders had sex with their wives: "If a person had intercourse with a woman, then that woman had intercourse with her husband, then the power from one person to the next would be transferred [...] and here you have this new group of people who are seen as being very special, as having 'big medicine'" ("Lewis and Clark ... and Sex"). The introductory poem in *Buffalo Dance*, its incantatory prologue, has York invoking his muse (his enslaved wife) and yearning for the words—or literacy—to write her a letter about how "the Arikara an Mandan think me / 'Big Medicine' / Katonka, who walk like a man" ("Wind Talker" 21-2). Brad Tennant goes on to emphasize how York, the buffalo-man, contributes to the exchange of power—"York[s] dark skin and physique suggested very big medicine. One Arikara warrior had York spend a night with his wife and sat outside the lodge to keep the two from being interrupted"—which Walker versifies thus:

Now, I ain't a perfect man, [. . .]
 but I don't know how
 to bring offense to a man
 who ask me to his lodge
 an leave one a his wives to pleasure me
 while he stand guard
 out front.

Capt. Clark an his men say it wrong. [. . .]
 Them want me to be shamed
 but I can't find fault

with a man who think so much a me
he want his wife to hold my seed. ("No Offense" 7-27)

York, then, not only politely accepts the generosity of his host, but recognizes (cf. Jefferson's instructions to the Corps) the spiritual and moral dimensions of this Arikara practice as well.

As David Cowart remarks, symbiotic re-visions of precursor texts "reveal . . . the natural, perhaps universal grounding of the symbiotic text in a reading or deconstructive rereading of the host text" (30). In his preface to *When Winter Come*, Walker writes that his "book is about deconstructing accepted notions of history, love, marriage, and freedom while simultaneously reaffirming the power of literacy and the role of mythology and storytelling in exploration of the truth. . . . It seeks to validate the voices of enslaved African Americans and Native people during a time in American history when their points of view were considered invalid." These recovered voices are often ironic, as in a poem titled "Concentric," in which Walker impersonates Sacagawea, pointedly enclosing the word *savages*, in quotation marks: "I laugh quietly when I hear the party complain / that when the 'savages' circle up it's hard to know / who is in charge. As if even a circle need a captain" (4-6).

The rhetoric of Walker's York is not so wry. Instead, Walker gives his York persona poems an air of weary didacticism: York wants or needs to correct the official story. For example, in "Role Call" (*sic*), the first poem in *When Winter Come*, York does not so much reflect on the facts of history as explicitly foreground the writing of national myth vis-à-vis the facts of national history:

To hear hero makers tell it
wasn't nobody
on the great expedition but captains.[. . .]
An though all the books praise the captains
the most valuable members a the party
was even lower than privates [. . .]
The real heroes be old cowardly Charbono's young squaw [Sacagawea]
and Drewyer, another man full a both French
and Indian blood. [. . .]
And then, there was me, just along to cook an carry,
to hear them tell it, [. . .]
This story be born a my own spit and memory
it be the only thing I own outright
an I gives it to you freely. (1-40)

Walker's extended impersonation of York and consequent highlighting of the Corps' "least significant member"—at least among the "hero makers"—focus our attention on the process of mythmaking. "To hear them tell it" is how history gets made. Walker proposes to interrogate that practice.

One remarkable text, Walker's revision of Lewis's entry of May 31, 1805, suggests how intently the poet probes the "hero makers'" rhetoric. I quote extensively from Meriwether Lewis's journal entry for that day to show what he includes and what Frank X Walker leaves out of York's revision of the official account:

The hills and river Clifts which we passed today exhibit a most romantic appearance. The bluffs of the river rise to the height of from 2 to 300 feet and in most places nearly perpendicular; they are formed of remarkable white sandstone which is sufficiently soft to give way readily to the impression of water The water in the course of time in

descending from those hills and plains on either side of the river has trickled down the soft sand cliffs and worn it into a thousand grotesque figures, which with the help of a little imagination and an oblique view at a distance, are made to represent elegant ranges of lofty freestone buildings, having their parapets well stocked with statuary; columns of various sculpture both grooved and plain, are also seen supporting long galleries in front of those buildings; in other places on a much nearer approach and with the help of less imagination we see the remains or ruins of elegant buildings; some columns standing and almost entire with their pedestals and capitals; others retaining their pedestals but deprived by time or accident of their capitals, some lying prostrate and broken others in the form of vast pyramids of conic structure bearing a series of other pyramids on their tops becoming less as they ascend and finally terminating in a sharp point As we passed on it seemed as if those scenes of visionary enchantment would never have an end; for here it is too that nature presents to the view of the traveler vast ranges of walls of tolerable workmanship, so perfect indeed are those walls that I should have thought that nature had attempted here to rival the human art of masonry had I not recollected that she had first begun her work.

The extended metaphor rather brilliantly compares the great “architecture” of the America wilderness—“elegant ranges of lofty freestone buildings”—to that of the civilized world. (And it is worth noting that Meriwether Lewis, who was more or less raised in Monticello under Thomas Jefferson’s tutelage, calls “nature” and not God the architect.) But Walker does not respond directly to that metaphor when he revises Lewis’s “hero making” journal entry. That is, he does not so much engage in a “deconstructive rereading of the host text,” locating and exploiting the aporias in the host text, as impersonate York and thereby construct an entirely new metaphor especially suited to his slave’s consciousness.

Here is “Sandstone Thighs.” It begins with an epigraph drastically edited from Meriwether Lewis’s journal entry for that day. Now there is no extended architectural metaphor. Instead, as he develops his poem, Walker focuses on an anachronistic definition of *romantic*:

the hills & river cliff which we passed today exhibit
a most romantic appearance . . . they are formed of
remarkable white sandstone
—*Meriwether Lewis, May 31, 1805*

After many campfire talks between lonely men
'bout who seen the best parts a the most
beautiful gals, the argument was settled
when we float by tall wide cliffs
so soft on the eyes it cause all the men
to whistle, shout an carry on
like we was passing a porch full
a bare-legged women
showing off a little more than thigh.

Knowing my place, I sneaks a few glances
over my shoulder an stare at the pretty
white legs in the face a the river. (1-12)

In “Discipline and Hope,” Wendell Berry writes: “I do not know how exact a case might be made, but it seems to me that there is an historical parallel, in white American history, between the treatment of the land and the treatment of women. The frontier,

for instance, was notoriously exploitive of both, and I believe for largely the same reasons” (162). The erotic conflation of nature with women is, in fact, an important theme in *Buffalo Dance*, as it is throughout American cultural history. Walker’s poem partakes of that familiar imagery for subversive reasons. It continues, for example, into the next poem in the collection, “Mouths and Waters,” in which York refers to a waterfall as “a wide wet woman.”

Throughout *Buffalo Dance*, sex (or “romance”) is on York’s mind, but it is not usually prurient, as it seems to be in the explorers’ astounding reaction—whistling and carrying on—to the “sandstone thighs” they encounter in the Missouri Breaks. More often, York focusses on his love—and affection and friendship—for the wife he sees only occasionally, on “Sundays and Christmas,” as one poem’s title puts it. She is a slave in Louisville who is constantly available to her master and other predatory whites:

I cares plenty for my wife
but I been told a slave can’t truly know love
being as Massa an white mens in general
have an takes certain privileges with our women.

I suspect the deepest hurt in the world
be . . . standing on the front porch
while the massa part her thighs

But what else but love
make you hold that woman even tighter
try to rock her back to whole. [...] (1-13)

Similarly in the poem titled “No Offense”—the one in which York sleeps with a man’s wife while he stands guard outside—York compares that act of spiritual commerce with the bought-and-sold sex of “the slave quarters, back in Kentucke / [where the white men] have they way / with any girl child or woman” (19-21).

This predation—slavery as culture of rape—was, and to a great extent still *is*, suppressed by the “hero makers.” But York’s response to the sandstone thighs, the way he averts his eyes rather than be seen looking at them and deriving some kind of sexual pleasure from what are, after all, rock formation, is the result of a far more familiar myth. In a 1988 issue of *Studies in the Humanities* focused on “feminism, ecology, and the future of the humanities,” Patrick Murphy described the literary trope of the “two-pronged rape and domination of the earth and the women who live on it” (87). Walker’s poem incorporates another yet cultural motif, one that Angela Davis has called “the myth of the black rapist.” While Walker contends, in the preface to *Buffalo Dance*, that he will “[a]llow [. . .] York’s own distinct historical voice [. . .] to surface while suppressing [*sic*] my own twenty-first century activist voice,” readers must recognize that York seems to have fore-memories of Emmett Till. “Knowing [his] place,” York averts his eyes. Till, of course, was not the only African-American male ever to “forget his place.” American history is rife with incidents that coalesce around the Till lynching, incidents that cast all African-American men as potential rapists³.

Thus, York turns his eyes away from the sandstone thighs, only glancing at their eroticized beauty; what he sees he must see secretly. Thus, Walker foregrounds the exploitive nature of the man/woman civilization/nature dualisms Wendell Berry mentions; that is, Walker’s York reminds us that the phrase *rapacious land policy* has the word *rape* buried not too deep within it. In his preface to *Buffalo Dance*, Frank X Walker describes his project as “[t]he reclamation of mute voices.” The voice that is

muted in the York poems speaks an explicit sexuality of the American wilderness, one that recognizes the confluence of eros and "Big Medicine" in the virgin landscape but also one that, in the discomfiting anti-erotics of "Sandstone Thighs," adds the bloody promise of Euro-American hero myth to the whole exploitable West.

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Endnotes

1. Throughout this article, I preserve original spellings and punctuation from the *Journals* and Walker's York. *Sic* should be presumed.

2. The original editorial insert at this point in the manuscript was written by the editors of the University of Nebraska Lincoln *Journals* website. It read [*NB?: request*]. The editors of the website apparently were postulating that Lewis (or Clark) had omitted the word "request" in the sentence.

3. It says something that Walker's definitive statement on the river-as-woman (see also the aforementioned "Mouths and Waters" [28], as well as "Her Current" [12] and "The Portage" [20]) is "Mythology," whose semiotically alive title appears to be a trick on the reader. (Significantly, the preceding poem is titled "Ananse" [42].) The "mythology" of the poem's title is

that of the African-American male's sexual endowment. When York returns from urinating in the river, his white companions tease him with "Boy, was that river cold?" He answers, "No Sir, but it plenty deep." What appears to be a simple dick joke, however, explodes with intertextuality. Walker alludes, obviously enough, to Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," but even more pointedly to Richard Pryor, whose 2000 box set was titled *And It's Deep, Too!*

The Impact of Coal Mining in the Evolution of Appalachian Kentucky Literature: A Retrospective

James B. Goode

My topic is one dear to my heart because of my deep connection to the coalfields of Appalachia. Both my grandfathers were coal miners and my Daddy spent 40 years in the industry—much of that as a rank-and-file, union, underground coal miner at the International Harvester Mine at Benham, Kentucky. The drama that played daily in my family's life and community has been paramount in my writing and prompted me to a lifelong pursuit of reading, studying, and writing about the literature related to Appalachian coal communities.

A poem I penned about the emotionally intense drama of life for coal miners appeared in my 1993 book of poetry *Up From the Mines* and sets the stage for this brief talk*:

PIECING THE COAL QUILT

These are the laboring ones of the tired, the poor.
Tempting tons of fate poised above their battery lights
The sky so black, no seams of sunlight break across vision
To reveal the nature flaws waiting to claim a life to dust.
And spent for what?
For the survival of man?
For the whims?
For the pleasures?
From darkness they came into the world
To toil in darkness
And to darkness will return.
I have been to their funerals.
Sometimes in the coal camp houses
Caskets wet with tears
Roll from the detached steel hands of morticians
Across the vision of innocent children
Who wonder? And Why?
About a world of such sadistic appetites.
And What For?

About such games of chance.
They become wiser among the screams of grief.
Callouses form and thicken
As hundreds of pallid faces pass the motionless head
In the open casket.
Some pause in awkward silence,
Some in frenzied tears
Over the men who never look like themselves,
Were never taken because they wanted to be—
Never because God wanted them to be.
These are the union ones of the tired, the poor.
Brotherhood is in the cigar smoked space of union halls.

Sacrifice is there—
Quilts pieced for the yet unborn.
These are abstract ideas,
A religion the selfish corporate fat
Fails to comprehend.
Here, they fight oppression and discrimination
For a place in a world of hungry dogs lapping away the land.
These are the fearful ones of the tired, the poor.
Their hollow eyes watch them leave
In mountain fog.
Miners taken alive from the houses and
Pulled hard by the hungry mouths
To the black holes are watched
As they climb the hillside.
Women sit in empty rooms finishing coffee,
Counting years
Filled with each separate hour and minute.
All time passes . . .
Anonymity
Spent for the survival of men?
Spent for the whims?
Spent for the pleasures?
These are the dead ones of the tired, the poor.
Tombstones rise above the hill.
Names disappear here.
Deeds become lost
Emptiness resides in the sound of rustling grasses
Scratching across these cold stones.
Earth is the master—
Claiming back to dust all living things.
Rows of miners wither.
Coal cars rust on the side tracks
Beside the honeysuckle graveyard fence.
These are the young ones of the tired, the poor.
Their hair sweeps away the past.
In their ears mechanical mining machines grind eerie tunes.

These are siren songs
Whining through damp corridors.
Shuttle cars cough ripped coal on the long rolling belts
As they lick toward morning.
Tipples eat.
Young faces harden in the tunnels without end.
Coal dust traces the lines on their hands—
Maps of quilts telling stories
Of men
Spent for the survival and whims and pleasures.
I have been in their eyes.

Many times I have known their vision,
Spoken their words as they have thought them
Bathed in coal dust and immersed in dark caverns.
I have seen my quilt pieced long before my birth.
I have seen the toil soaked in every thread.
My battery light has been the words
Searched out of the darkness
And I write of them
Who from darkness came into the world
To toil in darkness
And to darkness
Shall return.

Thousands of coal themed literary and journalistic works have been published in the United States since the 1800s. Kentucky is more than an apt representative microcosm of the influence this industry has had on Appalachian letters over the two-and-a-half centuries. But because of time constraints, I can highlight only a few literary works that exemplify the canon of coal literature seated in the Commonwealth.

Coal has often been called “the rock that changed the world” and Kentucky is no exception. The mineral has had far-reaching effects at every social, political, economic, and environmental level within the Commonwealth and region. Even with the decline in the coal industry in the search for cleaner alternatives, the industry still remains prominently embedded in Appalachian culture.

Coal began to be mined in the early 1800s, but the real peak began at the onset of the 20th Century. From the turn of that century through the late 1960s, over 20,000 coal camps emerged in North America to support the voracious appetite for steel production and energy generation. Many were located in remote locations where, in the infancy stages, miners and their families lived in temporary housing, sometimes tents or quickly constructed bunk-house structures. Hence, the assignment of “Coal Camp.”

According to historical documents, the first recorded person to discover and use coal in Kentucky was the Virginia physician and explorer Dr. Thomas Walker who, in April of 1750, used the mineral to fuel his campfires near where Barbourville in Knox County is located (“Historic Sites”). In 1820, the first commercial mine, known as the “McLean drift bank,” opened in Kentucky near the Green River at Paradise in Muhlenberg County, producing 820 short tons. Production totals in Kentucky grew to 100,000 tons by 1843, one million tons by 1879, and 42.1 million tons by 1920. By 1923, the all-time high United States employment of 704,793 bituminous coal and lignite miners was reached. For the last several decades, Kentucky has consistently

ranked among the top three states in total coal production. In 2011, 400 mines in Kentucky produced just short of 107 million short tons of bituminous coal, putting it behind West Virginia with 135 million, and Wyoming with 336 million. The number of full time miners in 2011 was 19,102 (Kentucky Coal Education). This incredible rapid growth of the coal industry had a significant and lasting impact on the theme, setting, plot, characters, and arc of the literature of Kentucky in American letters.

The effects of coal upon the literature of Kentucky—particularly across genres—has been significant. For purposes of this paper, literature is loosely defined as poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and drama—what is generally referred to as Belletristic writing, as well as the considerable academic writing that has examined the region from a historical, political, psychological, sociological, and critical perspective. A 1988 article written by Stephane Elise Booth titled “The American Coal Mining Novel: A Century of Development” offers an important look at a historical accounting of the evolution of the American coal mining novel. Booth divides the article into five time periods: 1) The rise of industrialization, 1876-1895; 2) The ascendance of the United Mine Workers of America, 1895-1910; 3) The era of opulence versus poverty, 1910-1929; 4) The Great Depression and World War II, 1930-1945; 5) The postwar era, 1945-1981 (125). Since the publication of Booth’s article, one could add at least one additional overlapping time period: The Rise of Environmental Awareness 1962–Present.

Booth credits Upton Sinclair’s 1917 novel *King Coal* for bringing coal camp issues to national attention by illuminating the plight of the rank-and-file miner. His examination of the feudal state created by mining companies beginning in the early twentieth century highlights how coal companies exacted control of workers like they were ruled by medieval lords in an ancient kingdom. Most of this practice resulted from an effort to maintain the skilled workforce required to populate the remote isolated locations of the coal mines and to produce the maximum profits for their shareholders.

In these feudal states called coal camps, workers and their families were treated brutally. There was no democracy and little or no privacy. Many companies employed spies and kept detailed records of such things as marital infidelity. Miners, in some locations, were required to purchase all their needs from company stores and often remained continuously indebted to the management who owned them. Every worker was expected to show total loyalty and give their lives to the enterprise, if need be. If a coal miner were to be killed, the family would immediately be asked to move from the camp. No one who didn’t work for the enterprise was allowed to remain there. Sinclair’s book led the call for social reforms at a time when industry moguls were at the zenith of their power.

Although Sinclair was not an Appalachian, his novel sets the stage for what was to follow in major works by Kentucky authors.

Prominent themes during these periods included: 1) a persistent romantic mythology; 2) the tension and conflict generated by an outsider/insider cultural phenomena; 3) a strong cross-cultural context; 4) unionization and conflict; 5) the politics of paternalism; 6) violence associated with coal mining; 7) health issues including black lung, trauma injuries, and death; 8) land ownership, including the passionate debate over mineral and surface rights; 9) coal’s impact upon environmental issues. Highlighting a dozen major works that expertly develop a number of these themes, including eight novels and four historical/social commentary works, spanning a period from the turn of the 20th Century to the early years of the 21st Century, captures an important snapshot of these themes.

One of these early literary works influenced by coal was 1908 novel *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* written by Paris, Kentucky native John Fox, Jr., which examined the impact of the coal industry on Appalachia and the boom-and-bust cycle of the period. Fox had first-hand knowledge of this period, for his family had coal interests in Southwest Virginia near Big Stone Gap at the foot Black Mountain, the highest elevation in Kentucky.

Fox's novel develops one of the early refrains found in Kentucky coal themed fiction—the pioneer “insider” challenged by the flatlander “outsider.” This conflict resulted when the capitalist/industrialist came into the isolated areas of the Appalachian Mountains in search of the rich timber and coal reserves still abundantly available in the post-Civil War period and who clashed on various levels with the established rural mountain people who had settled there in the 1800s.

The novel's central love story, between the “insider” mountain girl June Tolliver, a member of the Tolliver clan who has been feuding for over thirty years with the Falin clan, and the outsider, flatland “furriner” John Hale who is a geologist/coal prospector determined to develop and exploit the vast coal reserves in the area. The novel is set in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, although one of the clans lives in the adjoining mountains of Eastern Kentucky. This area was replete with lawlessness resulting from feuding and tensions spawned by increasingly intense outside investment in industry, of which Fox himself had been a part. But the novel also records and illuminates the local way of life: simple entertainments, religion, agriculture, and crafts.

Another of Fox's novels, *Trial of the Lonesome Pine* turned the tables and brought a young boy from the mountains of Eastern Kentucky to the Bluegrass to set the contrast between two vastly different cultures. This novel was also a national bestseller. After advance sales of 100,000 copies, the book eventually sold two million copies. It was adapted for the stage and produced at the New Amsterdam Theater in New York in 1912. Cecil B. DeMille wrote, directed, and produced a film version in 1916, while other versions appeared in 1914, 1923, and 1936 (“John Fox Jr. (1862–1919)”). All this exposure helped perpetuate the local color movement in American literature and a national interest in this mysterious, isolated culture.

Many major works focus on a sociological cross-cultural contexts, primarily because of the recruitment of experienced ethnic miners from the older, well-established coal fields such as those of Pennsylvania and Birmingham, Alabama. This allowed for race and class to become prominent in the literature. David Duke in his seminal work *Writers and Miners: Activism and Imagery in America* suggests that many of the novelists who had coal culture as a central theme “were both fascinated and disturbed by issues of class, ethnicity, and race; most wrote about these themes from a decidedly middle-class perspective” (68).

James Still's novel *River of Earth*, published in 1940 during The Great Depression and World War II period, clearly poses the conflict of rural Appalachian Kentucky life with the then firmly established industrial mining camp of the Depression years in America. In this novel, the socio-economic nature of the setting produces the preponderance of the conflict. Brack Baldrige, a skilled coal miner, thrives in the industrial milieu of the coal camp. His wife Alpha, on the other hand, is in clear contrast to Brack who is mostly inept at farming and, despite the obvious risks and unpredictability of his wage paying job as a coal miner, continues to pursue the illusive job and subsequent economic rollercoaster with the coal company:

the narrative supports Alpha's lament for the loss of place and roots, warning of the new

lifestyle's treacherous unreliability. Thanks to coaligarchy Appalachia's old socioeconomic fabric of extended family ties, self-sufficiency, and barter was torn apart by the feverish spread of corporate-ruled boom towns and an intoxicating influx of cash currency. When the winds of finance capitalism inevitably shifted and camps withered, the natives found themselves with neither cash nor land upon which to support their families. (Salyer)

At this point in Kentucky history of coal mining literature, there was not yet an emphasis on the environmental impact of coal mining. The cultural and social shifts coupled with the economic flux brought on by coal mining was more at the center of the arc of this story. This novel is more about socio-economic issues and the attendant politics. "While Brack Baldridge is generous, hard-working, and even philosophical at times, he sees no danger in the industrial forces transforming the hills" (Salyer). It is interesting to note that the story is told from the viewpoint of the Bladridges' unnamed seven year old son. This allows a more objective view of what is being played out before the eyes of a boy who does not understand everything that is happening in his tumultuous life. This acts as a kind of symbolic bridge between the preindustrial naiveté and the brutal reality that coal mining brings to the equation. In some ways akin to John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, *River of Earth* is set in a similar time, during the brutal years of the Depression. "Still devotes much of the novel's first and longest section to exploration of the conflict between farming and coal mining, between establishing an 'enduring' home and accepting constant migration" (Turner 72).

One of the most important books in the post-war era was Harry Caudill's 1962 *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, a stinging indictment on the exploitation of men and nature by the richest coal barons in the United States. This book drew national attention and is credited with having gotten the attention of John F. Kennedy, prompting the War on Poverty movement of the 1960s. In 1973 Caudill published his only work of fiction set in the coalfields of Kentucky, *The Senator from Slaughter County*, a revealing novel that chronicles the story of a shrewd, powerful Appalachian political boss, Dr. Tom Bonhom, M.D., who is vastly better educated than his fellow mountaineers.

Bonhom's start is as a well-paid coal company doctor who has an unsuccessful run for a local political office as a reform candidate. His defeat turns him to gathering political power from the influential rich instead of from the voters. He amasses a political machine that controls Slaughter County for over three decades. He brings jobs, schools, roads, and millions of state and federal dollars into his county. At the same time, he unwittingly creates a society of people who become hopelessly dependent on government aid and unthinkingly encouraged to destroy the countryside through strip mining. His critics claimed that Doc Bonham was an opportunist who rose as his community sank. Yet through it all, he remained as American as apple pie, and when the governor appointed him to fill an unexpired term in the U.S. Senate, he went there a hero.

The 1976 book *Watches of the Night* was Caudill's sequel to *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*. In this commentary, Caudill recounts the federal and volunteer efforts to "save" Appalachia that occurred during the 1960s and early 1970s, finding the efforts largely lacking in effectiveness. In 1983, Caudill also published *Theirs Be the Power*, a book chronicling the power moguls who built the coal industry in Eastern Kentucky.

An important work in the study of American labor history in the coalfields of Kentucky is Alessandro Portelli's *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* which examines a broad spectrum of issues within a culture that has often been beset with violence and bloody confrontations in its long history of class struggle, poverty, labor conflict, industrial exploitation, rural isolation, and questions of absentee land own-

ership. Italian oral historian Portelli's attempt to research the music of labor protest emerging from Appalachian Kentucky (including such voices as Florence Reece, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Sarah Ogan Gunning) also led him to a deep interest in writing about the complex issues infused in coal culture of Appalachian Kentucky.

According to Jesse Wilkerson, a reviewer of Portelli's book:

chapter themes include the living memory of the Civil War; religious traditions and what they tell us about culture and class divisions; timbering and mining in Appalachia and the tension between having a job and respecting the land; the development of company towns and coal mining culture; how miners experienced life in the coalfields, from finding work to surviving the physical dangers of mining; the discrimination and social changes experienced by women, immigrants, and African Americans in the coal towns of Harlan; the 1930s labor struggles of the communist-led National Miner's Union; the United Mine Workers of America in Harlan; the music and literary traditions of Harlan County and their role in the folk revival of the 1960s; migration and the Vietnam War; the civil rights tradition and the War on Poverty; and the Miners for Democracy movement and the Brookside Mine Strike of the 1970s.

James Sherburne's 1973 novel *Stand Like Men* explores the struggles in the coal fields of Harlan County, Kentucky during the years of the Depression. Quentin Begley Keen in his review of this novel says that "[Sherburne] . . . has written a stirring story of love and hate, good and evil, hope and despair around a central theme of oppression and depression" (67). This is the story of the first 26 years of protagonist Breck Hord's life, a young miner who is facing numerous dilemmas in his life in the Harlan County coalfields—forced to participate in decimation of his ancestral land abandoned by his family because of the Broadform deed; becoming the principal supporter for two families because of a crippling coal mining injury to his father and the marriage to his pregnant girlfriend Bonnie Brae Burkett; the onset of the Depression which led to the coal companies reeling back with wages, work hours, and benefits; the emergence of unions and the attendant strife created with the coal companies, most prominent being the Battle of Evarts where four people are killed and dozens wounded.

Keen says that this novel is filled with "shootings, lootings, burning of soup kitchens, ambushings, fist fights . . . It is the retelling of the Harlan mine troubles which were presented to the world by novelists, and reporters for the *New York Times*, *New Republic*, *Nation*, state newspapers, and other publications" (69). Sherburne's novel is a commentary on poverty, power, greed, strong mountain people who resist the coal company oppression, and those who trade their birthright for a few paltry dollars.

Karen McElmurray's 1994 debut novel *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven* plowed a new furrow in the literary fiction of Appalachian coal mining. McElmurray, a highly educated and award winning novelist and creative non-fiction writer, has deep roots in the coal mining county of Pikeville where her parents and grandparents were born and lived. The story is set in Mining Hollow, Kentucky, with three central characters: Ruth Blue Wallen; her husband, Earl; and their son, Andrew—each with paramount struggles in their past and present.

Ruth has made a fanatical turn to God and religion in a world that has ostensibly defeated her spiritually, emotionally, and sensually. Ruth's past includes a mother who ran away, leaving Ruth with her father, Tobias, who then is driven deep into fundamentalist religion, an act that deeply impacts Ruth, following her into adulthood and affecting her marriage and relationship with her son.

Earl, a frustrated World War II veteran and former musician, is now married to the unhappy Ruth and locked into making a living as a coal miner. He has had to

forego his dreams of being a successful musical performer. Their son, Andrew, has discovered that he has homosexual desires and affections toward a handsome boyhood friend, but is faced with the dilemma and consequences of expressing something that is considered sinful and abominable in rural Kentucky.

Much of the story of these “Strange Birds” is told in dreamlike narratives and through symbolism. This novel tells a more personal, familial story of dysfunction, propelled by life dealing disappointment at every hand, not all of which is a result of the setting in which the characters find themselves. Albeit, that the low point for Earl is to be a coal miner and not a musician; for Ruth, to be married to a man who is depressed and disappointed by his fate; and for Andrew, to be present in a place that is highly moralistic and does not allow for more liberal views of self or others.

Appalachian author Silas House has published two novels that have coal mining at their center—*Clay’s Quilt* (2001) and *The Coal Tattoo* (2004). The latter is set in Kentucky coal mining country in the late 1950s and spans 11 years to the end of the 1960s. The novel focuses upon two sisters who are orphaned when their father is killed in a coal mine accident. Their mother, insane with grief, takes her own life. Twenty-two year old Easter, the older sister, is conventional, a churchgoing woman who sees her life as performing her duty. Seventeen year old Annet is fun-loving, somewhat wild and scornful of authority. Annet marries twice and divorces twice. Her second marriage, to the mine manager and son of a mine owner, ends violently when she learns that his company plans to strip mine the ridge above the home her family has occupied for more than a century. A “Coal Tattoo,” is the mark coal leaves on a miner when it strikes hard enough to cut his skin and leave a coal impregnated scar that signals that he is a survivor of a dangerous accident. House based his title on a country song of the same name written by Berea composer, Billy Ed Wheeler (Gordon).

The protagonist of *Clay’s Quilt* is four year old Clay Sizemore who, after his mother is killed, finds himself orphaned and alone in the small Appalachian mining town of Free Creek. He slowly learns to lean on the residents of this coal camp as he adopts them as his family. Matronly Aunt Easter is always filled with a sense of foreboding, bound to her faith, and to the Appalachian art of quilt making, a symbol for the patchwork that the community contributes in what becomes Clay’s life. Characters such as Uncle Paul, Evangeline, and the fiddler Alma, help Clay fashion a quilt of a life from the seeming hodgepodge of treasured pieces that surround him.

Rapid industrial development spurred by two World Wars and the subsequent demand for steel production led to emergence of the unique culture of the coal camp—a society that became a kind of urban-like mix of ethnicities living in close proximity in the wilderness of eastern Kentucky whose sole purpose was to mine the rich veins of abundant coal found there and ship it north to the Chicago and Pittsburg steel mills. The remoteness of the place demanded much of the coal companies and their employees.

In order to maintain a stable workforce, the company had to front a considerable investment in domestic infrastructure required to establish most of the conveniences that life at the turn of the 20th century demanded. The nature of the enterprise and its location brought about stifling coal company paternalism, the absence of democracy, labor strife between emergent unions and their adversaries who held the purse strings, physical dangers leading to persistent health issues, an alarming incidence of alcoholism and mental issues, environmental concerns endemic with an extractive industry, contentious land ownership struggles, conflict between insiders and outsiders, and ethnic divisions and segregation within the social structure of the camp, to name a few. All this gave rise to the raw material of engaging writing, creating the

landscape that provides the drama that is the impetus for the arcs of great stories, the conflicts that want resolution, the characters who will move through the scenes, and the indelible plots rich in the life of this place called Appalachia.

Although the primary focus of this short paper has been to present a retrospective on how these themes have been handled by a sample of prominent writers, it also draws attention to the dearth of a more in-depth scholarly study of the significant impact coal mining has had in the evolution of Appalachian Kentucky literature. I encourage someone, much younger than I, to go therefore and write a comprehensive work on the numerous volumes of the past and those emerging as part of this rich literary heritage.

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Book Review

Marguerite Guzmán Bouvard

Eschatology Escadrille; Elegies and Other Memorabilia by Gary Walton. Kentucky:
Finishing Line Press, 2013. \$12:00.

Gary Walton's poems in his fourth book of poetry have us floating in a world that is digitalized, wired, and that we are thoughtlessly despoiling. His poem, "The Lack of Bees," reminds us that "something is happening / to the fabric of nature / a decided pull towards entropy / and confusion and chaos . . ." And yet that poem is also a touching elegy to his mother reminding us that the earth is what nurtures us in the same way as the people who loved us. One of his poems, "Pathetic Fallacy Redux," is a stinging love poem to the earth that he describes in the most original detail, concluding that it is sacred:

The sky today is shocking
Blue like the instant
You realize you've touched
A bare wire with your
Tongue and the tingle numbs
Your lips and sparks shoot
Hot and menacing before your
Eyes: gold and scarlet haloes
Appear like rainbows at the edges
Of your vision, even while your
Body hums with the implacable
Current . . .

His poems are not only about how lost we are in an artificial world, but also how we are having a dialogue with the nature that surrounds us, "the wind whipping around the house, / white ice coating the trees, / fog rising from the frozen creek bed." In so doing, he has a wonderfully inventive way with words: "the arabesque of scudding sky," and "the imperious night." He is not only creating poems, but also fashioning words that have their own music that propel us to dazzling new discoveries in one poem after another.

Walton also writes about the depth and duration of love, not romantic love, but the

love in the elegies for his father, mother and friend that remains when they disappear. These poems remind us that what is important in life is not social status or fame, but the way we traverse our everyday lives, the commitment, the hard work and especially the ability to give of ourselves. He has a unique way of revealing what distinguishes a person, such as a voice that rises above setting and crowds to twirl out its own reality as in his poem, “Danny’s Voice: An Elegy”:

I always thought your voice
Was out of place and time . . .
It’s basso profundo seemed crafted
To the contours of the North Carolina hills,
Specifically built to shout from one hillside
To another, to holler above the hollow . . .
Such sweet resonance seemed too much to
Be confined in these constricted concrete
Walls called a university; too free and full of
Vital essence to fit into these claustrophobic
Cubicles and chocked hallways, always yearning
Like a captured brown bear for his chance to
Break out and scamper head down and breathless
To the cover of unshorn grass and an untended
Stand of burly locust trees . . .

Despite the enormity of the problems he reveals, Walton has a sense of humor that reminds us of how narrowly focused we can be on the small things in our life. At the end of a poem that catalogues the terrible problems on this earth from the different kinds of plastic that ruin the ocean, to fracking, to chemicals in our aquifers, Melissa Moon complains because she broke her fingernail. That poem alas represents how many of us are living in a bubble of ignorance about the problems of climate change, but does so with humor.

Gary Walton is a most unusual poet who speaks to us in so many different ways, with dazzling and original words, with a truth telling that awakens us like a cold shower or unexpected weather.

The Ties (and Times) That Bind Book Review

Rhonda Pettit

Drone String, by Sherry Cook Stanforth, Huron, OH:
Bottom Dog Press, 2015, 89 pages.

Tangle by Pauletta Hansel, Cincinnati: Dos Madres Press, 2015, 106 pages.

Sherry Cook Stanforth's first collection of poems, *Drone String*, draws its title from the world of traditional music, one she knows well. A drone string is a recurring bass note against which individual melody notes respond with harmony or dissonance. The drone pipe of a bagpipe instrument is a common example of this sound, but Stanforth, a song writer and musician, knows it from her mother's mountain dulcimer. "Drone string" has such rich potential for metaphor. Time itself is the drone string against which we live out our lives. In Stanforth's case, she has carried forward her family's musical talents, performing with her parents and others as a vocalist, flutist, and harmonica player, with several recordings to her credit. She has added teaching and writing to that mix, as founder and director of the Creative Writing Vision Program at Thomas More College, as co-editor (with Pauletta Hansel and Michael Henson) of *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*, and as an Appalachian poet whose work has appeared in a range of publications. And with her husband she has raised four children—as well as bees—in the same kind of music-rich tradition she experienced.

Family, music, poetry, place: these are the melody notes in *Drone String*. The book, dedicated to Grandma Mary, includes two family photographs. Its poems fall into three sections titled from lines that recur in several traditional songs: "Who'll Rock the Cradle?", "Who'll Sing the Song?", and "Who'll Rock the Cradle When I'm Gone?" With section titles like these, on top of the subject matter, a reader might expect more of a sentimental journey than a life or lives examined. The book works hard to counter that expectation.

This happens early in the first section with "Shopes' Field," a place name in Georgia connected with the poverty-driven work of picking yams. The poet is on an I-75 road trip with her grandmother at the wheel who is

rolling eyes at my love
for hominy and banjos, tossing good

old Dixie right under the bus—
*Only good path is the one
 leading straight outta here.*

The poet then recalls the story of her grandmother's work in that field as a child while others were on their way to see the film *Gone with the Wind*. This allusion is not just a touch of realism. The poem leads the reader to understand by implication, amplified by the allusion, what the poet realizes: nothing removes the stain of nostalgia for the southern rural life like the bleach of poverty. This is far from an original observation; it has been a recurring theme in much of southern and Appalachian literature. However, the poem serves as evidence of the poet's relative proximity to ancestral poverty and hardship, a position not without value in any time but perhaps especially in our time of the diminishing middle class; as such the poem cannot be dismissed as merely a personal anecdote. In fact, it suggests how broadly speaking the literary "personal" can be.

Several other poems play this anti-nostalgia melody. "Great Grandma's Crow Lament," written in her voice, reveals the touch of violence that can follow certain folk beliefs, such as the presence of a crow predicting death. After killing the messenger, she later issues a warning of her own: "Hear me good, girl: / set your mind to lose whatever you got / in this world, 'cause nothing steals back time / or keeps a man in place once he's called." The poem offers a case of belief transforming into wisdom, thus working against stereotype as well as nostalgia. I was reminded of another poem written in a grandmother's voice and reaching a similar conclusion: "Grandmother Watching at Her Window" by W. S. Merwin. Later in *Drone String*, a mother's accumulated wisdom is passed on to her offspring. In "Dog Day Cicada," the poet and her young daughter consider the web of life as a spider kills a trapped cicada.

"Indulgence" and "What Mary B. Remembered" also play against nostalgia. "Tree Hugger" demonstrates in part how sentiment cannot save a tree that stands in the way of a new garage, and "Child Fiddler" focuses on hard work and natural talent in the middle of what seems to be gruff father love. "Lost Claims" and "Mikey" describe the inevitable loss of property and home, and "Family Reunion, 1979" depicts the "bad girl" who got away with no regrets.

In terms of form, the book offers variety: narrative poems, lyrical poems, persona poems that capture authentic voices ("Granny Stella Was a Chicken-Chopping Mama" sings you straight to the—never mind, I don't want to be the spoiler), free verse poems conscious of their syntax and others in a run-on freefall of language gathering energy in accumulating sounds and images, and prose poems. "App, Too" is a prose poem written in a punctuated run-on freefall mode, an identity manifesto that strums the string of ancestral connections from Georgia to Cincinnati, hills to hills, as if to say: "I'm here and I'm dear, and Here is a big place." She convinced me, though I confess I was already leaning in this direction; the larger the place we're from, and the more of a place we have to love (even if we don't wish to live there), the more likely, perhaps, that we will take care of it.

Regardless of form, all of the poems are characterized by rich sound and imagery ("... then slippers // snap along the night-smudged hall") and deftly handled rhetorical moves. There are ghosts, storms, a flood, visits to Cherokee and Celtic ancestral homes, music, death and dying, and the lives that follow. The one poem that had the least appeal for me was "Accident," where the same accomplished level of writing is used to find the silver lining in a range of dark clouds, a strategy more useful for surviving those dark clouds than for making a poem that concludes, "this, our purpose."

Stanforth had already alluded to this general idea several times in the book; the need to state it flatly seems superfluous. That aside, *Drone String* has much to offer as a personal, familial story set in its (and our) larger context of time and place. It gives us much to think about if we read it with the attention it clearly deserves.

* * * *

For obvious and practical reasons, we need to distinguish past from present, see them as distinct regions of time and experience. Since human DNA and memory reveal how limiting those categories are, it is not surprising that accomplished poets explore the two, as well as the bleeding boundary between them, in their poetry. How do past and present correspond, echo, penetrate, and twist into shapes of meaning that are both bittersweet and revealing? Pauletta Hansel, named Cincinnati's first Poet Laureate in 2016, offers several possibilities in her fifth book, *Tangle*.

Like *Drone String*, Hansel's *Tangle* includes photographs and draws on family, self, loss, and Appalachian roots. The "tangle" in this work is how these elements in their past and present variations are both connected and complicated. The book's five sections—"Here, Where I Am"; "Familial Tremors"; "What She Leaves Behind"; "Memento Mori"; and "What Called Me"—reveal by their titles the poet's refusal to follow a strictly linear script. But the book as a whole flashing back and forward is only part of the story. Individual poems frequently embody past and present no matter where they occur in the book. What holds this collection together, makes even of tangle an art form, is the poet's love of words, of language honed by both craft and a thoughtfully examined life.

"Pomegranates," the book's opening poem, recalls the recent past, "The winter the blood stopped," signaling that the "unrelenting possibility / of life inside my own" was over. She spends that winter eating the red, seedy fruit famous in Greek mythology as the symbol of fertility and rebirth; it "breaks open / on my tongue," writes Hansel, suggesting that the poet will give birth to her voice. It is as if she had eaten the seeds of a *poem*granate. This pun is not as silly as it appears. Hansel, an educator and former arts administrator as well as a lifelong writer, offers her strongest collection to date.

There are numerous poems about writing—"tried to write about me, 14," "The Purpose of Poetry," "Writing Poems in Spring," "Now," "The Hermitage," "A Few Things You Should Know About Poetry," to name a few—that appear throughout the book and particularly in the closing section. What "called" her was not just poetry, not just the natural world or the particularities of her life, but the attentive seeing that all of these require and that has the potential to connect us. In "The Hermitage" retreatants on the grounds of the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse are linked to the natural world and each other by "a web illuminated / by our solitary / attention." Even a poem ostensibly looking back at her father's religious calling, "My Father Evangelizes, 1956," reveals an early influence, love and love for the word, that echoes through Hansel's work today: "I stand here called to Wisdom / by words," the father tells his congregation; "I am not wise, I said to him / and he said, *Read*." In the closing stanza, the father's traditional religious belief tangles with Hansel's aesthetic:

Come now, let words
wash over us
as water over rocks,
and though our sins be scarlet,
they shall be as snow, though
they be crimson red

they will be as wool, freshly shorn.
 I say to you now, *Read*,
 be one with Him
 and with each other
 through words.

The poem serves both memory (of the poet's father) and prophecy (of the poet to come). It is easy to imagine the possible generational and religious differences between any father and daughter; whatever they might have been, if indeed there were any in Hansel's case, does not matter. Her poem privileges connection; the personal recollection is thus a path to the poem's wisdom, implied rather than explained.

Connection, of course, is inherent to tangles as it is to attentive seeing, vision often being the first way in which we connect with objects and all life forms around us. What follows in and around both is imagination. Hansel's poem "How to Look" imagines the universe of particulars that resides within the body as well as far beyond it. I was struck by the craft and content of the lines,

The nearest stars
 are so far away.
 It takes a very sensitive
 receiver—clouds, birds,
 constellations all
 have something in common.

The line breaks deliver "clouds, birds" as constellations themselves, and as separate entities that share traits with the "constellations." Each of these items is also a "receiver" as is the reader of the poem. The poem closes with "the one real possibility / we are all of these things." One big tangle in concise language. Hansel put into poetry a version of what astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has written: "We are all connected: to each other biologically, to the earth chemically, to the rest of the universe atomically." One big tangle.

Though Hansel's tangles may embody connection in a positive sense at times, they never reject their embedded contradictions. A tangle also represents a condition or situation we may need to escape, whether physical, psychological, or intellectual. The book opens with a rebirthing metaphor (and as demonstrated above, its red color echoes through several poems the book), but Hansel rejects the conventional poem-as-child metaphor: ". . . our / poems are not our children. / They quicken outside our bodies, / run from us before they speak," she writes in "Of What We Make Our Poems."

Other poems push back against assumptions about Appalachian upbringing. There is humor but no nostalgia for rural Appalachia in "The Outhouse," its skanky characteristics leading to the figure of the Appalachian poet as an outsider in Appalachia: "I was a town girl. All I knew / was polished white, / clear water took away / whatever you put there." In "Grandpa Noah Fishing, Circa 1938," a memory of her grandfather fishing with dynamite closes with his funeral, one that Hansel couldn't attend:

. . . I had bigger fish to
 fry, in college learning
 I was Appalachian
 even though I'd never learned
 to bait a line
 or much of anything my Grandpa knew.

I'd read my books late into the night
and sleep till they brought
morning to me
those summers till I got too old
to want to be there at all.

In this we find the tangle of the past moving into the future; of identities lived and perceived, actual and expected; irony in the poem serving experience rather than being served as the point. Other poems in the confessional mode practice the art of withholding with great effect. In a poem's landscape, sometimes not knowing everything means knowing the right thing.

Any good collection of poems offers more than what can be discussed in a review, and *Tangle* is no exception. According to a Facebook announcement, Hansel in her role as Cincinnati's first Poet Laureate plans to "connect people to poetry and connect people through poetry." The poems in this collection, combined with her years of teaching and mentoring writers in this region, suggest that both people and the art will benefit.

