



THE LITERARY JOURNAL OF  
BIG SANDY COMMUNITY & TECHNICAL COLLEGE

# Cut-Thru Review

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## Alex Tackett | Where Nature Rules

My family's ancestral hollow – nameless by tradition – is the most serene spot in all Kentucky. Leading the way is the winding, ancient path, anew by coarse gravel.

Rushing through our precious land, the cool, clear creek babbles over the silt, sand, and smooth stones. Soft is her song.

Gentle is her stream. Despite her docile nature, she has cut the mighty soil. The bank is lightly decorated with veritable flora: wilful grasses and whimsical daisies and a rainbow of wildflowers. Their earthy scents swell and mix with the dust creating the most natural aroma ever to bless one's nose. And up the ancient path is Tadpole Hole, obscured to invisibility by ash white birch and elm. Its residents dash and splash from end to shallow end. Standing before the scarcity of water, one can hear the melodic whippoorwills calling, "Whipherifyewill! Whipherifyewill!" Their tunes strain higher and higher then drops to a quick, deep note. They and other birds soar amongst the branches and brambles. Throughout the forest, the wind sways the trees and knocks down several fresh green leaves. Back down the gravelly road, near the exit, sits a shack. It stands where nature rules and the trees have all sovereignty. It is haphazard and humanly but has been woven into the scenic tapestry by its oak brown colour, creek stone chimney, and oak brown walls. The land may not build a house, but it forms a home.

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**Alex B. Tackett** of Ligon is an FCECA student at KCTCS. A lifetime of nature walks and family heritage inspired his passage.



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## Bill Loftus | An Immigrant's Story of Appalachia

Appalachian Days Writing Contest

### Honorable Mention

Once upon a time back in the fall of 1990, I came from Florida to Appalachia, where I had also been an immigrant, to teach at Prestonsburg Community College. In the most often used terms, I was “not from around here,” my wife was a “brought in,” and my son, well, time would tell.

We settled along a place called Little Paint and immediately were cautiously invited into a local clan known as the Howards. We had an adopted father and mother, a set of brothers, sisters, cousins, and all sorts of assorted other folk who had land that stretched quite a bit along each side and up into the mountains along the creek that ran right in front of our place and then through the center of the holler. This story tells the tale of one of the oldest of the Howards: Alta Mae, who was mother to our adopted father, Reuben Clay, and his brother Harold. Harold actually lived in Martin County, but he visited his momma daily, as did Reuben Clay. Reuben Clay lived next to his momma, with a large garden between them. On the other side of her house lived her older aunt who was also her sister-in-law. The important part of this story is to share that Alta Mae was the teller of all the history of this family, shared from the time we arrived until we knew enough to be fluid in the family. We gardened, babysat, as well as being babysat, visited, went to funerals, weddings and all the things that families do together.

Now Alta Mae from the very beginning took a shine to my missus, and those two became right friendly and their relationship kinda followed the ways of grandmother and granddaughter. My wife would visit her often at her small and slowly dilapidating and collapsing house. When you visited that house, you felt like you had entered the beginning of all time and were careful where you stepped because at times you could almost feel it collapsing inward. It was small but basic. She had birthed her babies in that house and cared for her children and her grandchildren in that house. It was a place that always smelled of something cooking or being prepared to be cooked, and it seemed like every time you knocked on the back door she would come wiping her mouth on her sleeve or wiping her mouth with her hand while coming directly toward you with a hug as she said, “Where you been gone so long, child?” To her, everyone was a child, and she was the keeper of that title until she left the Paint to die years later, but that’s another story, that kinda starts with the story I’m settling in to tell you.

When she wasn’t in her house, she was mostly outside working with her flowers and roses or tending to something in her gardens. She grew everything and had grown everything at some time, and she would point to places all around the holler and tell you that that’s where the beans used to be or where



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the animals were kept; one thing or another of a time long ago and now beginning to pass from her and her memory as girl, bride, mother, and just Alta Mae. I always enjoyed listening to her tell of going up and over the mountain to visit her mommy at her homeplace on the other side of the mountain, which she did on a daily basis. Arthur had been the mailman when they married and he rode a mule through the creek to distribute the mail to everyone along the Paint. I also enjoyed hearing her stories about her childhood in a family that never stopped having babies, and she, being the oldest daughter, had the responsibility for helping to care for them. She said she always had a baby on one hip or the other and she would tell of begging her mommy to “please stop having any more babies.” No matter what bit of history or story she would share with you, it was teaching the history of this place that I was slowly coming to know, enveloping me in the culture and ways of the mountains. It was as if I needed to know all this, sure as it might be on some as yet undelivered test, to see if we could belong, maybe even somehow succeed, since we were “not being from around here.” Once I even tried to calculate that if I survived that test and if my son married a local girl and they had kids, and their kids had kids and once more, that maybe then, my wife and I finally might be from around here; that would be as special as the ending of this story.



Alta Mae Howard

Anyway, this story is trying to get you back to Alta Mae’s house. It was about five years after we came to the Paint that Alta Mae’s aunt and sister-in-law passed, leaving available the doublewide trailer in which she had lived until the end. It was shortly after this that her sons decided to move Alta Mae into that trailer, as it was safer, cleaner, newer, and was not collapsing onto itself. I remember one time standing and talking with Alta Mae and swarms of termites were coming almost from everywhere in that old house, but she just kept talking about the beans being almost ready to pick and can. She was not at all interested in moving to that trailer and fought them as long as she could. Taking Alta Mae out of that house was like taking away a part of her. From the time she married Arthur, her life had been in that house, and she was not willing to give up all that was com forting to her. It was her past



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and it held her memories of her life with Arthur. With time, the brothers got her declaratively moved and settled into that trailer. She never complained, but you just knew that she had wanted to live the rest of her life and die in that house with all its memories and love and everything that she held important.

Anyway, we are getting closer to what happened when the boys decided to burn and bulldoze that house back into the earth, like a cremated and buried human being. Though neither mentioned it, somehow you knew that despite their rationalizations about safety and the like, a part of them was also dying that day. You could feel that unstated funeral take place, as from out our back door we saw smoke rising where Alta Mae's house once stood. There had been no proclamation that the burning and dozing was coming; it just happened. My wife, son, and I bundled up on that early spring day, with a slight mist falling, to watch the smoke rising and billowing, the boys busy tending and containing the fire. Alta Mae was nowhere to be found — just the robins singing the funeral song and the budding of the apple blossoms on the tree down along the road in front of her house serving as roses on a casket. We stood and quietly reflected on a time and place slowly passing before our minds and through our lives, as immigrants within this family and holler. We were a mixture of anger and sadness, confusion and disbelief, and all the things that can't be described in words but that make tears stream slowly down your cheek, into the falling mist and mingled with what came to embody Appalachia to us.

When the fire ceased and every memory of that house had been bull dozed even and smooth, the earth began to reclaim that human space and the strangest thing began to happen, as if Alta Mae had left something cooking on that old stove in her kitchen. Amongst the early weeds that fought for space in that fresh and lonely patch of land, small flowers, mostly petunias and other small annuals, began to grow and populate that ground, growing higher and higher into the space where once stood that house. The perfect outline of her house held the wondrous site of flowers. We and others began to say that the angels had come and brought them as tribute to Alta Mae. People came to see the magical flowers, taking pictures, letting little children run in and among them. Sometimes Alta Mae would just wander in them, with a beautiful smile upon her face.

I always believe it was angels that deposited those flower seeds on the grave of that house, repaying her for her sacred duties done day by day, month by month, and year by year in the holler called Little Paint, in the land of Appalachia. I still to this day have some of the seeds from those magical flowers that bloomed that summer, and my wife treasures a picture of Alta Mae dancing in her flowers on a beautiful warm afternoon. What I got to experience as an immigrant to Appalachia was one of the mountains' many magical and mystical happenings. Now in my 23rd year as an immigrant, I can set a person down beside me after saying in a Chicago accent, "Where you been gone so long, child," and



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tell them a bit of what I have been privileged to have learned, that they have perhaps never seen, nor will see, or have just forgotten.

Alta Mae was born May 20, 1910, and died in a nursing home of old age and dementia at 12:20 a.m. on May 22, 2000, two days after her 90th birthday. That's the day she went to heaven to be among the angels, and the day this year that I shall plant a few of those flower seeds in a pot in my yard so the angels come to see how my wife and I are doing in our immigrant life here in Appalachia.

I am sorry to say that time has also taken Reuben Clay and his brother, Harold. I'm sure they are with Alta Mae in heaven, stopping every day to visit with their momma, as she is with her mommy.

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**Dr. Bill Loftus** is Professor of Psychology at Big Sandy Community & Technical College. He has taught at the college since 1990, has a "Ticket to Heaven," writes stories that intend to make people cry happy tears sometimes, is getting kinda cranky with age, and still adores and loves his wife, editor, and life partner.



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## Candice Caldwell | Lost at Sea

Whenever I bite the dust, I want to be buried at sea. I want my ashes to be thrown into the waves and carried off to faraway places about which I've only ever been able to dream. I want my ashes to become part of the earth so that even though my body may be dead and gone, my spirit will forever live on. I may never truly be dead. A part of me may become sand and sink to the bottom of the ocean and provide a space for coral to grow on; another part of me may get carried off to shore somewhere and get picked up by a bird so that I may one day become part of the dirt that fertilizes a tree. As long as all these different parts of me keep sustaining living creatures, I can never fully be dead. I will be alive in every tree, in every seashell, in every animal, in every human that eats or breathes.

My only dream in life, thus far, is to travel, and it's something that I've never been able to do much of. Hopefully that will change when I get older, and I'll eventually make it out of the United States. So maybe my dreams of traveling have overclouded what I want done with my body after I die, but even if I do manage to be able to travel more when I get out of college and am able to afford it, I don't think I'll ever be able to visit everywhere that I desperately want to visit. Imagine: at least some part of me will be able to visit some of the places I've dreamed about since I was a kid, and that is good enough for me.

Being placed in a casket six feet under a pile of dirt doesn't hold any interest in me. In fact, it's like one of my worst, most terrifying nightmares come to life. After death, I'd rather be able to feel myself spread across the earth, traveling and adventuring in ways I never got to while actually living – compared to being inside a wooden box from the day I die until, well, eternity. Because, really, when given the option, why would I want my body's final resting place to be in a wooden box when, instead, I can have infinite more options until the end of time?

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**Candice Caldwell**, a BSCTC student, wrote her piece "Lost at Sea" in PSY 230, Psycho Aspects of Death/Dying.



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## Dalton Risner | Live Happy, Leave Beard

Many men in America's great history have had beards. Abraham Lincoln's beard won him the presidency, just ask Grace Bedell. I believe the beard holds power because it represents respect.

Some of the most revolutionary thinkers throughout time had beards, Plato, Socrates. The ancient Greeks regarded the beard as a badge or sign of virility. Even the Spartans, the manliest men to walk this earth, held the status of the beard so high that they punished cowards by shaving their beards!

In Kentucky, you must be eighteen years old in order to buy tobacco, but I was blessed to have a beard. This isn't the most appropriate example, but when I was fifteen everywhere I went I was able to buy tobacco. Why? Because I had a beard. For two years, I bought tobacco until the woman at the store asked to see my ID. She never had before. I gave it to her, and she laughed. She said, "I would have never guessed a seventeen year old could have a beard like that!" I wasn't able to buy tobacco there anymore, but that wasn't the point.

The point is that beards are reserved in society – for the rich, the old, and the wise. People are amazed that I'm only eighteen. I'm sure any of you who have beards get the same response from people when asked how old you are. "I thought you were twenty!" seems like the common reply. Older people actually pay attention to what I say. They think I have some knowledge; they think I'm respectable, just because I have a beard.

So wear it proudly, let it grow, even if it is just a little scruff. It will get you through the door. I believe the beard is a sign. The sign of a smart, respectful man.

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**Dalton Linden Risner** is a freshman at Big Sandy Community & Technical College. He writes, "I've had a beard since my eighth grade year, and I don't think I could live without it."



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## Gordon Lester | **The Mouths of Babes**

I had recently moved into a house on a tree lined, dead-end street in a quiet part of town and was working on a project in the office I'd set up in the family room when the doorbell rang.

I was surprised. I hadn't met any of my new neighbors, I wasn't expecting anyone from work, and everything had been delivered, installed, or transferred into my name.

Who could it be?

I peeked through the peephole and saw no one standing on the porch. I had left the TV on in the front room, so I decided the sound must have come from there.

I'd no sooner settled back down and picked up where I'd left off than I heard the sound again.

I glanced at the television on the way to the door.

There could be no doorbells ringing in old Dodge City, but there was still no one visible when I peered into my looking glass.

In this case, the third time really was the charm — for some reason, I finally opened the door and, lo and behold, before me on the stoop of my new home stood two girls who might have stepped right out of a Norman Rockwell painting.

The taller of the two, who seemed to be about eight years old, came right to the point.

"Do you have any kids that we should know?"

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I never had any children."

"Don't be sorry," she scolded. "It's probably not your fault."

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**Gordon Lester** is a native of eastern Kentucky who returned to the area in 2010. He currently teaches English and Appalachian Studies at Big Sandy and serves as online editor of the *Cut-Thru Review*. Gordon is a graduate of Sacramento State University and received his M.A. in English Education from Morehead State.



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John Holbrook | **Hell**

Words would leap from the paper if I were to describe the reality of this experience. Hell was not beneath the ground; Hell was found in the hot and humid climate of a modern-day meeting of two people. The meeting consisted not of two infamous beings, no jerky between Jeff and Albert, no tea between Hitler and Stalin, no jokes between The Joker and Loki, . . . but instead a casual day between two people whose names have no significance in history. Hell arose in the disconnection of the words espoused. We both heard the sound of a tree falling, but no tree was ever seen. Although words were said, they were said in an empty way: The words were but empty representations unstable and inappropriate for the construction of even a facsimile of meaning. The air might as well have been mostly carbon dioxide; we weren't using our oxygen for anything other than self-preservation. It was mental rape. Comical common sense communicated, "It's not me. It's you."

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**John Holbrook** participates in the Floyd County Early College Academy. "Thankfully," he writes, "that does not define me. I am a poignant polymath with multiple moods and fantastically fond façades."



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## Jonna Isaac | My Little Piece of Heaven

The aroma of fresh cut grass fills the air, the birds and crickets are singing their special tune, and a group of deer is grazing in the tall mountain grasses. The sunset is coloring the whole scene with a bright orange glow. Short, spontaneous conversations arise as we gaze at the beauty of nature. On top of the old rusty metal chair sits my grandpa, watching in awe as the eight-point buck peacefully picks at the grass. The humidity is, for once, ignored as he and I are amazed with the view. In the background, small waves in the swimming pool are rippling and creating the sound of what seems to be a waterfall. The cool breeze blowing through my hair enhances the melody of the insects, birds, and frogs that make up nature's orchestra. Here, we're secluded from everyone else. Not another noise could break the sound barrier made within the vast hills, which makes this my little piece of heaven.

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**Jonna Isaac** is a junior at South Floyd High School and a member of the Floyd County Early College Academy. She loves almost anything outdoors and enjoys spending time with family and friends.



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## Phyllis Puffer | Appalachian Wedding

The invitation is still taped to my office wall. It is an open rectangle five and a half inches by seven and three quarters inches, like a deluxe, jumbo post card. It has a wide border of tiny, elaborate, delicate designs in gold. The lettering of the message is also in gold writing. It announces the good news of a wedding reception. The youngest daughter of a local, highly regarded surgeon was being married. The actual wedding ceremony had already taken place in India where the groom's family still lived. The bride's family had permanently settled here in the eastern Kentucky mountains, and both the bride and groom were born here and were University of Kentucky students. This was the American celebration.

It was an evening reception at the arts center. The Mountain Arts Center is an unexpectedly large, modern, attractive, and well-equipped concert and drama auditorium for such a small and out-of-the-way town as ours. It's a major music center well known throughout the region and the beginning point of aspiring country musicians. On the evening of the reception, I putt-putted into the center's parking lot in my old jalopy and joined the expensive, well-washed and waxed vans and Suburbans already there.

The father of the bride stood back from the spacious entrance, greeting everyone in general and no one in particular with a broad, happy smile. He wore a dark, Nehru style jacket over long, white, gathered, traditional Indian pants. A couple of other men stood with him. This was a dark crowd, dressed in charcoal or black with occasional white in both Western suits and the traditional costumes of several countries. I watched the crowd from the side.

A young, slight, tall man in a costume I did not recognize came by. I stopped him for conversation and asked what country he was from. He wore a white turban, loose white shirt, and pants with a loose black vest. He gave me a quick, complicated response, which didn't answer the question. I tried again with the same result. I finally told him that

it looked to me that he wouldn't tell me where he was from. He smiled and walked on. I wondered whether he was from Afghanistan and was afraid to say for fear I would think he was a terrorist. Whatever his nationality, he was very good looking.

A young man came up whom I had seen around my college. Also handsome, he wore a Western suit and talked to me about going into teaching. I was a little surprised that he was not going into medicine, belonging as he did to a physician's community. The conversation ended with my being impressed with his dedication to a teacher's career.

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The large area with a wall of windows, where theatregoers usually gathered before performances and during intermissions, was filled with parallel rows of tables covered in white cloths and holding bouquets. The catering staff was in full action. The head of the operation dashed as fast as he could without running back and forth from one end of the area to the other. He had a fixed look on his face like a man under pressure. He and his assistant, a slim, young American woman in pants, did their work without interacting with the others in the room at all. It was as if they were completely alone. The boss had tightly waving hair that lay flat and hard against his head. It seemed as if his hair, skin, and eyes were the same golden brown color. He wore white Western shirt and pants. Perhaps he had come from India, as had the host family.

The men started drifting toward one part of the large reception area. The father of the bride and a few of his companions spread a large white cloth on the carpet. The cloth was like a sheet only larger. It was time for the Muslim evening prayer. The family was very religious, and I had been told that this man had led the community in building the local mosque. About fifteen men stood on the sheet, bowed, kneeled, and rose together in the movements of the ritual.

Our eastern Kentucky town quite remarkably possesses a Muslim community and a mosque. The Muslims are overwhelmingly medical doctors, responding to the needs of a medically underserved rural area to which US born and trained doctors generally are not attracted. Most patients who crowd their waiting rooms do not know they are Muslim though they know they are “something,” in the words of a townsman. They only need someone to cure them.

It was time to see what the women were doing. A short hallway led off one end of the reception area to a large room where the women were celebrating along with their children. The bride and her sister were wearing white headscarves as usual, but they were in saris, which were heavily embroidered with gold thread. The bride’s sari was green, a favored color in Islam. Every other time I had seen the sisters, they wore the loose, Middle Eastern women’s gown.

Here were noise and disorder as numerous, small, healthy, active children raced around.

The tables here were round, large, and crowded together. They were covered with white cloths and had bouquets in the center, just as in the men’s area. I talked with one of my friends, a physician like her husband, who was wearing a white headscarf, a long loose, navy blue dress, and a navy blue coat. The scarf was modestly tied closely around her head and neck. No glimpse of sexy hair or neck was available to tempt men.



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Two of the women fascinated me. They were hefty mammas, as they would say in the ghetto, not only tall but also broad, even rotund. They both dressed the same in powder blue gowns, somewhat in the design of choir robes. But more than that, they were actually veiled. None of the women in our area veiled. The women I knew wore head enveloping scarves of various shapes and colors, but whether they were from Jordan, Syria, India or born and raised in the US, only their hair was covered, not their faces. I was told these two women were from Palestine. Their hair was covered by identical white head coverings, somewhat like flat, cotton helmets, rather than the scarves of the other women. A matching crisp rectangle hung from their eyes to their chests. They moved astonishingly quickly as they chased after one or another child.

By this time, the caterer and his staff were setting up the buffet for the women in the hall outside their large party room.

On my way back to the men's area, I met the mother of the bride pacing back and forth.

She would go to the entrance of the big hall, then come back down the hall and repeat the exercise.

When she saw me, she asked, "Would you get Moustapha for me?"

About then her son, Moustapha, appeared. He was a very large young man and certainly handy for all sorts of a mother's chores.

Back in the men's area, I asked around the room, "Where is the groom? Who is the groom?"

Ordinarily, identifying the groom at a wedding reception is no problem.

They all replied, "You just missed him. He gave a little talk."

How disappointing. But something else was happening. A tall thin man started to talk into the microphone. He wore the same costume as the younger man I had talked with before who wouldn't tell me the country he was from. The speaker talked about peace, and I was impressed with his calm, dignified manner and his words. Later, I saw him talking to someone I knew. I stood near them, anxious to tell him how impressed I was at his words and thankful for them. The men broke off their conversation and my acquaintance introduced me. It turned out that he was a physician who was planning to move to the university city of Louisville over three hours away.

The host started going from one end of the hall to the other.



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“Go get some snacks. Help yourself to the snacks. But don’t eat too much!” with a big smile, “There’s more to come!”

I lined up with the men for the appetizers. I checked with someone before each dish to make sure it wouldn’t be so hot as to take the skin off the roof of my mouth. They understood. Many had lived long years in the US. They were accustomed to the ways of the native born and some of them were native born themselves.

A tall, dark, handsome man with a little gray at the temples motioned to me from a distance. I gladly walked over to him.

“Phyllis. Would you please ask my wife to come over? It is my turn to hold the child.” He made a cradling gesture with his arms.

Besotted of this three-year old daughter, he was seen holding her and watching over her at every public function since bringing her home from the hospital.

“Of course,” I nodded and went through the open doors and started down the hall.

I met his wife coming toward me carrying their daughter. Contrary to her tall Ali, she was small, wearing a stylish black dress with sleeves, shoulders, and collar of gray. Unlike most of the other women, she did not wear a loose, long, all-encompassing gown. She didn’t wear a headscarf either, though a light colored, filmy scarf hung over her shoulders as a token. They met and transferred the child. She returned to be with the other women, and he walked joyfully away.

This was the second time that evening that I had seen family members anticipate each other’s needs across the male/female social divide. Or perhaps they had made prior arrangements.

The father of the bride came through again. This time it was the main course. We lined up and again my neighbors helped me interpret the food.

It turned out that all the action was in the women’s section. That’s where I finally found the groom. He was the only man in the room. He was standing close beside the new wife at a small table in a corner, about to cut a cake. The cake was small, a single layer, plainly decorated. He wore a charcoal gray, Western suit. Both bride and groom wore around their necks heavy, thick, matching garlands of flowers like red and white Hawaiian leis.



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Ignoring the rambunctious children in the background, the silent, smiling couple, with a gathering of the women looking on, ceremoniously cut a slice from the cake. One of the women took photographs.

In the men's section, a middle-aged couple was arriving. These two were from India, as was the bridal family, but were not Muslim. They were Hindu. They said hello to me and the wife went back to be with the other women. The man remained with us, but soon became anxious and paced back and forth.

"Where are they?" He was worried about his recently married daughter and his son-in-law who were coming from Louisville.

"They phoned they would leave at five o'clock. They should be here by now." He paced toward the women's section. His wife reappeared, as if from long married experience she knew he would be needing her.

He asked her, "Where are they?"

She smiled, said a few words, and went back to the party.

Soon he was asking again, "Where are they?"

His wife returned again.

The "children" finally arrived. The wife in slacks and maternity top greeted her mother in sari and they went together to join the other women. The Indian daughter, a physician like her parents, was born and educated in Kentucky and had married a fellow medical student the previous year. He was tall, blond, and very Anglo-Saxon. The two made a striking couple because of the contrast in height and coloring. The husband was over six feet tall and the wife was under five feet tall. The tall husband sat down with his much shorter father-in-law. The older man was now at ease and went over the details of the delayed arrival with the young man.

The men were distributed at wide intervals over the hall talking quietly among themselves. They were in small groups here and there, and I wondered whether the groups were composed of men from the same country, such as Syrians with Syrians and Jordanians with Jordanians. Along one wall were several small boys about nine to twelve.

Some of them sat on the carpeted steps leading to the concert hall above. Ali was there walking back and forth with his daughter. Another man was there with a similarly young boy. Ali was not the only



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father to take an interest in his children. The party was coming to an end. One last trip to the women's section showed the crowded room to be in disarray. The tablecloths were soaked by children's accumulated accidents with cups and glasses of liquids. Scarved women conversed in little groups among the crowded together tables. The bride and groom now stood in front of another small table in another part of the room. It looked as if they were performing another marriage ceremony. The mother of the bride stood in the hall with gift bags for everyone. We exchanged smiles and thanks and said goodbye.

The caterer was cleaning up and I saw that it was OK to take one of the table bouquets home with me. The father again stood by the main entrance of the center, this time saying goodbye to everyone. It had been a good party.

It turned out that the gift bag held enough of different varieties of the pastry, baklava, to last two months.

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**Phyllis Puffer** received her B.A. and M.A. from the University of Michigan and her Ph.D. from Michigan State University, all in sociology. She has traveled in over 30 countries, mostly in the Third World.



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## Sheldon Compton | Cards, Jacks, and Wooden Guns

Appalachian Days Writing Contest

### First Place

Cards, jacks, and wooden guns with clothespins clipping rubber bands like bullets stretched tight and ready. These were my toys. My stories were of ghosts told by a frail woman, a Christian for decades, who told them as the truth, the way a grandmother and a good churchgoer will do.

My favorite toy was a wooden cowboy on horseback, dirty black chaps, green coat with a red bandana, dark steed beneath him at full speed. The green coat flying back from his hip in that imagined wind just enough to show his revolver. I always asked my grandmother, the teller of truth, what kind of gun the cowboy, soon named Jake, carried. She would look at the carved tiny gun, sit back and deliberate for a minute, sipping coffee. I like that she gave my questions a lot of thought.

“I’d say a Colt .45,” she’d say evenly. “Most of them carried that sort of gun then. Not later. Poppy, my daddy, carried an old .22 with him, especially when he was building shine stills or collecting from ‘em. And most of all when he went into town. But back then, it was that Colt. It’s a heavy gun, and powerful.”

She eased into her chair and sipped more coffee. Her eyes were sad and droopy. I’d not seen her face like this before.

“I’ll tell you a something,” she said. She set her coffee down. “A .22 ain’t powerful. I know because that’s the gun I shot Max Lowe with after he burned Poppy up in his hunting cabin.” She didn’t look away from me for a second. “It went in the front of his head, I reckon, and got stuck between the skin around his noggin and against his skull.

Made a round trip and came out the other side. All Max Lowe was left with was a couple blowed out cuts on each side and a mighty headache, I figure. That, and a bad awful grudge.”

The next two days I spent building a gun of my own from scraps of wood at the edge of the house. Two clothespins glued to the top once the wood there was smooth and whittled to barrel round. A circular saw would have been faster and a jigsaw to make the curves and tiny cuts nice, but none was handy. Plenty around, just none of them was going to be handy to me without sneaking. No time to get in trouble.



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To keep out splinters, I used sandpaper to smooth out the edges, my pocketknife to slice some grooves and a dimple dent in the end of the bar rel. The glue for the clothespins came last. I had a pocket full of rubber bands. Without any paint just yet, my gun was in working order by the end of the second day.

The last thing I took care of before going home when the street lights flickered against the evening sky was pop loose the clothespins, sand down the glue left there and toss the rubber bands.

“It’s the truth before God,” she said another night. “They had to go get your aunt Pebble out of the school room and tell her that Poppy had burned up. She was in the first grade. That’s just how they told her, that he burned up. They could’ve said it some other way, you know?”

She kissed my forehead then and left the bedroom, the one she made up just for me when I was sent to live with her and Papaw. The dark and how it made me feel surprised me, and the sound of the wind chimes outside surprised me. I was jumpy. I kept seeing Poppy in his cabin, but all twisted and black and however he must have been when they found him. I checked under the mattress for my gun. It was there. When the chimes started up again, I brought it out and placed it on my chest. Just a wooden toy, but Jake was there, too, on the nightstand beside me. All of us wooden.

I came to live with my grandparents when I was seven, two years ago. My mom and dad call about once a week to check on me, to check if I’m behaving. I’m always behaving now. I understood, even back when I was seven, what it meant to have two options – either live with my grandparents or go to a place where they put kids who set fire to their neighbor’s yards.

It was an accident. Me and Kent Sullivan were pretending to camp out like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett in the field beside my house. It wasn’t even a yard, like they say, just a big field far as I could tell. Nobody ever tended it. We took paper bags from the grocery store and cleared out a spot and set it with matches. It was fine for a little while but then the field, it being summer and everything, caught fast. The fire department had to come and everything within a quarter mile was warm from the flames. I remember most the smoke covering all of the sky, looking at it while Dad whipped me in the middle of the road with Kent Sullivan watching.

Nobody explained to me the place where boys go when they set fire to a neighbor’s yard, which I didn’t even know was a yard. I just liked when we came here for breakfast. Not just bacon and eggs and biscuits and gravy. Pork chops, fried potatoes and apples. Now it seems dark, even in the daytime. I wonder if the place where boys like me go is dark.



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Probably. Kent Sullivan could be there for all I know. Still, it was an option meant to scare me. I knew that when I was seven, too.

But that place might not have people who shoot other people in the forehead for burning things up.

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**Sheldon Lee Compton** is the author of the collection, *The Same Terrible Storm*, recently nominated for the Chaffin Award. His work has been published widely and been four times nominated for the Pushcart Prize, as well. He was a judge's selection winner in 2012 for the Still: Journal Fiction Award. He survives in eastern Kentucky. To find out more, visit him online at [sheldonleecompton.net](http://sheldonleecompton.net).



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## Sheldon Compton | **The Smallest Kindness in the World**

Appalachian Days Writing Contest

### **Honorable Mention**

There was a chance she wouldn't even answer the door. But Roy needed money, and there was nothing he knew to do but ask. He hadn't seen Jenny or her boy, Thomas, in five years. West Virginia had been his home, but he was back in Kentucky and looking for a way back without money.

And cancer, on top of that, to beat all. He had cancer, and no money. How could she not answer the door? He knew his daughter.

Jenny's address came from Estill at the gas station. Roy came back two weeks before and milled around at the station during the day playing chess, eating free cakes and drinking free coffee. He did this for long enough and asked during the whole time where Jenny lived, until Estill and the others finally figured they'd had enough with his stories and eating up the merchandise. They gave him the address and Pete, a worker for Estill, agreed to drive him to Jenny's place. Roy said he'd have some money for him in a few days. Of course, Pete believed him.

Pete dropped him at the mouth of Doc Calup Hollow, preferring not to drive straight into Jenny's driveway, he said. Roy didn't bother to mention the cancer, which was in his colon and was going to make the walk up the hollow, about five houses up, they said, more difficult. He could have and Pete would have carried him to the front door, but Roy saved his strength of persuasion for Jenny. No need to spend energy just because a little pain. Might make for better sympathy if he showed up at the door sweating and hurting and grunting. Jenny didn't know about the cancer.

As he walked the hollow, Roy practiced what he would say if a knock did, in fact, produce an open door. But the trip was shorter than he had figured on, and he had only time for a few scenarios before the house loomed out from the hillside, a tilting thing peeled bare of paint. From the windows Roy thought he heard laughter, the high giggle of a young boy. But the sound eased out of earshot.

He turned to his right where the dumpster for garbage pickup was leaning toward the creek running at the base of the mountain and on up crooked through the hollow. A plastic box meant for the dumpster had missed the mark. Spilled from it were a child's winter parka and random bits of cardboard and what looked to be the contents of a few ashtrays full of cigarette butts.



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Must have been the porch garbage box catchall. Some things never change, Roy thought. Before he left, he and Jenny and her mom spent a couple evenings a week on a porch tossing empty Pepsi bottles into his catchall box. They likely figured him lazy then, too. He never denied he had a lazy bone about him, but he figured ways to make things work, until he couldn't.

Wouldn't, Roy thought, not couldn't. But what difference did it make? People didn't change, and everybody knew that really. Somewhere in the guts of their guts they couldn't deny it. He played it so he looked out for number one all the way through to this point of his life, trading cars because one had more gas than the other, sleeping soundly while Jenny cried from hunger through the night. Messing with women his age or older and girls not his age at all.

He hadn't changed, and would not. He was here now to figure a way to get Jenny's food stamps so he could trade them for cash to get back to West Virginia to his new woman, named Vanessa. Everything was the same about him since childhood. Families in town poured pity over him like bathwater after his folks took off before he'd even learned to talk. This is how he learned to play it. Criticism or even outright hatred for his ways didn't matter to Roy, never had.

When Jenny answered the door, Roy resisted patting his hair down into place. He kept his arms at his sides. His flannel sleeves eased out and back in as he drew a breath and then exhaled. He wondered if Jenny noticed he was sick. She seemed to look through him at a spot in the sky.

Her eyes seemed less blue, dulled from the last time he'd glared into them half a decade ago, but she appeared healthy. A light from inside cast a shine on her hair, an auburn ribbon curving at her neckline as bright as her mother's in summer. He saw her ring finger was bare. Roy thought of Thomas somewhere in the house and what he might be doing.

Jenny stepped out of the doorway so he had to take a step back to protect his personal space. A pain came on him then, in the gut, but he kept straight, held his breath. Where to start, he thought, so he could get his hands on those stamps? He'd need to offer to make a grocery run for her, but without a car that wouldn't fly. He walked the hollow to get here and there was no vehicle in the driveway.

There had still been not a word spoken when Jenny leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips, not on the cheek but the lips, the way she did when she was knee high and still losing teeth. She turned then and left him on the porch hearing the easy click of the door closing.

When his legs allowed, Roy shuffled down the steps, noting the grass overtaking the yard, the poor condition of a Japanese maple that must have been planted before Jenny rented the house. He could



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come help with some repairs. Time enough to do a little painting and work on the yard. Thomas could even help him. Time enough to jump over the moon.

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Tamera Tuttle | **Dear Self**

I understand that you are greatly excited for the new college school year to get underway. This is a wonderful time for you. That is all except for your writing 101 class. I am painfully aware that you feel this class is the true embodiment of displeasure, agony, and pure uncensored evil.

Furthermore, you loathe the class and you feel that this class will be the end to your academic career. This, I also am aware of, is a result of you not being very good at grammar, which extends into your writing. Another fact that has not aided your writing in any way is that too many people have had little to no faith in your writing abilities. They have always assumed that you would fail and perish because of your, what they thought to be, weak and feeble attempts to write.

Throughout all that you have endured, you didn't let it affect you, even though you knew you were not the best writer. However, of late, that has changed. This is a result of you allowing them inside your head so that they may dismember then continue to rip your limbs to minuscule shreds from the inside out. And for what, one little piece of work? Of course, you felt that it was the foremost of your talent, and what did they do? They judged and condemned you and in your opinion your unparalleled creation without an end in sight.

After what you have endured, any strong spirit would break under all of the aching. You need to pick up the pieces and continue on your path to greatness. It is not the apocalypse just because you weren't perfect. No one on the planet is. Therefore, if you give in to all of the painful judgments, then you give them the power. You are the only one who needs control of your future. It is what you create. You can do anything as long as you focus and stay true to your vision for the future. You do not have to pay any attention to the mindless ridicule. You had a strong spirit before the pain; you may obtain that state again. You just have to believe that you are able to do anything and that nothing is impossible.

– Anonymous



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## Thomas Matijasic | Saving the World One Blanket at a Time

*Much have they oppressed me from  
..... my youth,  
..... let Israel say,  
Much have they oppressed me from  
..... my youth;  
..... yet they have not prevailed  
..... against me. – Psalm 129*

“Dear Lord, I want to make my life meaningful. I would face death at the hands of a savage people if it be your will. I would gladly take up the martyr’s cross and suffer humiliation and disgrace to glorify your name. Let me befriend the leper, give sight to the blind, bring hope to the hopeless. But God, I just can’t take this banal existence the bishop has laid out for me. I just can’t take it anymore.”

That is what I prayed to God day after day after day. I didn’t think that he heard me. I wasn’t sure he was there at all. I was alone, alone in the mountains. Alone with a people I didn’t understand and who didn’t understand me. And the bishop kept sending me blankets, blankets and used clothing. Trucks and trucks full of blankets and used clothing and other junk affluent people were sending from all over the country to clothe the naked of Appalachia. They were sending it to ease their conscience about the misdistribution of wealth in America. Somehow sending a blanket or a bike with no chain would make them feel better about having an abundance of material possessions when others had so few. I would get so damn sick of folding blankets that no one needed. But

I guess it is the thought that counts.

My Episcopal congregation was relatively small. The people of Beriah County viewed the Anglican tradition as a little bit alien, a little bit too Catholic, but the bishop believed it to be fruitful ground for the planting of seed. Most of the people considered themselves to be Christian but were unchurched. Poverty was rampant. Twenty-two percent of the work force was unemployed. Over a third of the county had an income, which placed them below the poverty line. Virtually no industry was located within the county, though some men did work the mines in neighboring counties while others commuted more than one hundred miles in a day to work at the Bluegrass Auto Plant.

Many of the young people moved off after graduating from high school. It isn’t that they hated Beriah County; they just needed to find work. A lot of them came home on the weekends, just like their parents and grandparents used to do. A few took to growing marijuana or making crystal meth in

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order to make a living. Others took to smoking marijuana and using crystal meth to take up time, much to the heartbreak of their family and friends. The marijuana wasn't so bad, but the meth really tore families apart.

I remember when I was a young seminarian. The world was complicated but my direction was clear. America was extricating itself from a war in Southeast Asia and African Americans were taking their place at the political table, but there was still much work to be done. We were going to build a new church, a church that would be in the service of those left behind. Just as Jesus ministered to the poor, so we too would redirect and redefine the mission of our church away from reinforcing the status quo of materialism and hedonism. We would raise up new flocks for Christ and the sheep of these flocks would graze in new pastures of grace and contentment. We were sincere, idealistic, and so incredibly unrealistic that it almost brings a tear to my eye to think about it.

So the bishop sent me to St. Meinrad in Beriah County. I was so happy. This was a place where I could really make a difference. I was single and full of energy when I arrived in Sailor and the place was exactly as I imagined it to be. Sailor was a community of less than two thousand souls, with a post office, small supermarket, a Dairy Queen, and a dollar store. Four lawyers operated from small offices near the county courthouse, where they initiated lawsuits against one another and spent most of their time running for local political offices. A small clinic attempted to heal the wounds of the unfortunate.

The church was housed in a singlewide trailer located at the juncture of two main roads three miles east of the downtown area. I was expected to live in the trailer/church and hold services in the living room each Sunday. I had a congregation of 26 people. More than half were saints who had moved to Beriah County "from the North." "From the North" was an expression that local people used for anything or anyone who originated from outside of Beriah County. You could be from Florida, but if you seemed a little different, talked a little funny, you were "from the North." If someone said you were "from the North," it wasn't a compliment.

Members of my congregation included the family of a physician from upstate New York, a psychologist, the family of a legal services attorney, a couple of social workers, a couple of "tobacco" farmers, and a few businessmen (one owned the local Dairy Queen). We gathered, we prayed, we folded blankets and used clothing and gave them to the poor.

At Thanksgiving, we prepared gift baskets for the needy, and at Christmas, we distributed toys to underprivileged children. I made speaking tours throughout the Midwest to raise money for our ministry, and I could be convincing. I made notes on the things that I saw in Beriah County – of shoeless children and single mothers struggling to make ends meet; of men who abandoned their



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families out of shame that they could no longer find work; of fifteen-year-old girls who wed older men because their families could not support them. I could make the statues weep with tears and hardened men would throw twenties into the collection plate. And everything I said was true, but no matter how much we collected, it was never enough. No matter how many blankets we folded, we could not cover the pain of poverty or the despair of the abandoned. The truth is, they had blankets, but they didn't have hope. They believed in God, but didn't have faith in His ability to save them. After years working in the vineyards, I began to wonder if He had the power to save me.

“Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth.”

“If they do,” I thought, “what a hopeless place it will be.”

Ironically, the poor we tended rarely came to our Sunday services. The congregation grew slowly. In time, we raised enough money to build a sturdy, picturesque brick chapel.

An Episcopal congregation “from the North” donated an electric piano so that we might add music to our worship service. Over the course of thirty years, we gained respectability and a few of the Baptist ministers would even greet me when we passed on the street.

I lived in the trailer once the chapel was built. It was comfortable enough and served as proof that an Episcopal priest could remain humble in spite of his calling. Parishioners occasionally stopped by and I regularly visited the sick and worked among the poor. I counseled drug addicts and alcoholics. I offered my sympathy and a little cash to unwed, pregnant teens. I encouraged young people to stay in school or get job training at the local community college. I never missed a meeting of the Beriah County Ministerial Association or a diocesan council. But mostly I read, folded blankets, prayed and grew old. I was in the mountains but not of the mountains.

My isolation was complete.

I was well into middle age when I met Lynn on a speaking tour to raise money for our humble little church. I gave a guest sermon at St. Gilbert of Sempringham Church in Troy, New York. Afterward, I attended a brunch in the church hall. A young woman – thirtyish – came up to me holding a plate containing a Danish roll to ask about some of the things I had said about the people of Appalachia in my discourse. She was rather short, with dark brown eyes and extremely pale white skin. It almost looked as if all of the blood had been sucked out of her. But I was captivated by her gentle smile and seduced by her confident manner. I don't really remember how I responded to her questions. My mind was confused by lustful instincts and I couldn't really think straight. We met again for drinks



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later in the evening and I'm afraid I let her have her way with me. We parted in the wee hours of Monday morning. Actually, I fled her apartment like yesterday's whore and moved on to the next stop of my tour.

When I finally returned to Sailor, I found a letter waiting for me. I'm sure that you already know that the letter was written by Lynn. I feel it unwise to reveal the more personal and descriptive passages in the letter, but she did express a strong interest in my work and a stronger interest in seeing me again. Oblivious to the potential for scandal, I invited her to come and visit me in Eastern Kentucky. She did, and our romance blossomed. The bishop presided at our wedding ceremony at the cathedral in Lexington and more than 20 people came to the reception, which was held in the cathedral basement immediately following the service. It all happened rather quickly. We really didn't know each other very well.

My trailer was certainly more than adequate for my needs, but it somehow seemed shabbier after Lynn moved in. She didn't complain much, at least, not at first. Certainly, members of our small congregation welcomed her with open arms. Unfortunately, my pay remained the same and there were few jobs available for someone like Lynn who had a degree in library science. Still, I must admit that my nights were warmer during the first couple of years of our marriage.

Lynn was intelligent and well read, but Sailor lacked the intellectual stimulation that upstate New York could provide. Our conversation became stagnant and the trailer seemed to get smaller and smaller during the winter months. Petty grievances became major sources of irritation. We unloaded trucks with used clothing, folded blankets, and distributed them to the poor. We listened to tales of hardship and woe. We consoled the grieving and patiently listened as they elevated the dead to positions of glory that they never occupied in life.

The television and the radio were our only windows to the world outside of Beriah County. Certainly, Beriah County had produced its share of celebrities. There was Josh Biglow, the pornographer, and Alvin Di vine Prophecy, the famed radio evangelist.

Dorothy Bunbee came close to hitting the big time in Nashville's country music scene.

But all of these favorite sons and daughters became famous after they left Beriah County. Who remained?

I was overjoyed when Walt Crosby came to Beriah County as the new pastor of Sailor's First Methodist Church. He was young, handsome and seminary trained. Lynn was also happy to have a new friend.



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Walt was a Louisville native and had come to Sailor to save the wretched and the poor, the weak and the lame, and he found them...belonging to other churches or no church at all. Still he labored, as did I. First Methodist was one of the largest and wealthiest congregations in Beriah County and the members of the congregation took great pride in their new, young minister. He was a breath of fresh air, giving new life to an elegant corpse. He had lots of plans, but the heavy hitters in his congregation had their own plans, and they didn't include working among the poor, at least, not beyond giving Christmas food baskets to a few elderly residents and some toys to lure underprivileged children to Vacation Bible School for a couple of weeks during the summer.

Walt was a frequent dinner guest. We shared his frustrations. He was busy, but lonely.

He was energized, but his energies were being diverted, maybe even subverted for the glory of the community "leaders." Church members kept introducing him to eligible young ladies, but he found none to his taste. Well, actually he did. Unfortunately, she was married – to me. I should have seen it coming, but I didn't. I was actually glad that Lynn had found a kindred spirit. They were close in age and shared similar tastes in art, music, and literature. I don't really know when their relationship moved from friendship to romance, but I'm guessing it occurred over a period of years, moving at a glacial pace, until it just happened. I could slowly see my satellite move out of my orbit and into his, but I was powerless to do anything about it. It was simply a matter of physics. I was hurt, but I didn't really blame her.

Walt asked his district supervisor for a new assignment and he left to become pastor of a large church in Lexington. Lynn waited an appropriate period of time, and then she left the trailer. She obtained a position at a branch library in Lexington and moved to an apartment. We were quietly divorced a year later. In some respects, I was relieved. The tension was gone and there was more room in the trailer, but less conversation. I had more time to fold blankets.

I'm sure the deterioration and eventual dissolution of my marriage was the subject of a considerable amount of gossip. Strangely, no one spoke to me about it. Everyone acted as if Lynn had never existed. I was some sort of ever-virgin bachelor living alone in my singlewide cell. Was Lynn even real at all or just the product of my imagination? What sort of surrealistic purgatory was I trapped in anyway?

And then it came.

We had floods and forest fires, flu epidemics and ice storms, but the wind was never a formidable enemy. The mountains didn't suffer tornadoes. That was a challenge flatlanders faced. We were protected here in the mountains, or so we thought.



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We sure had plenty of warning. Johnny Scoldwell, the local weather forecaster, had been telling us for days that conditions were right for a tornado. It was just too warm for late winter. With warm air moving up from the Gulf and cold air moving down from Canada, some sort of climatic explosion was bound to occur. The first series of twisters swept across Indiana and central Kentucky on the last Wednesday in February and they cut an impressive path of destruction across the Bluegrass, but we were spared. The wind broke against the Pottsville Escarpment and the Escarpment stuck out its chest and turned back gust after gust.

“You shall not pass,” said the mighty rock formation. “I will protect God’s people!”

But God had other ideas, and he decided to humble the people of the highlands. I began reading Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ* on Thursday afternoon and continued reading it into the night.

“How do I empty myself?”

“How do I truly become a temple for the Lord?”

I forgot to watch the evening news.

I had no appointments on Friday morning so I slept until 7:30 a.m. The radio warned of severe storms headed into the mountains by late afternoon. When I looked out my trailer window, it was a beautiful morning, not a cloud in the sky. I walked outside and noticed that it was unseasonably warm. What day was it? It was March 2, a new day, a good day. I walked over to the church and couldn’t help but observe that St. Meinrad was a beautiful chapel of fine brick and mortar. Surely, this fine building, small though it was, gave glory to God, as much glory as a medieval cathedral or a bishop’s palace. This is what God sent me to build. I should be satisfied. Thy will be done.

I ate a baloney sandwich for lunch and returned to the church to begin polishing the floor. As I labored, less and less light filtered through the stained glass windows. I turned on the radio and heard reports of tornadoes touching down in Indiana. The storm was moving eastward. Severe weather was no longer a prediction, but a certainty. The reports grew increasingly ominous as the afternoon wore on. I needed to take precautions. First, I gathered up bottles of water, candles, and some food and stored these items in the sturdy, cinderblock basement of the church. Next, I contacted elderly residents who lived in trailers or dilapidated houses and offered to shelter them in the church basement until the storm passed. Several accepted my offer and I drove through the county picking them up. By 5:00 p.m., the sky had an eerie glow with a mixture of sunlight and dark clouds, but the dark clouds were winning.



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They were blotting out what was left of the light. By 5:30 p.m., local residents were receiving phone messages to seek shelter immediately. A tornado was headed our way. I went out onto the highway to flag down passing motorists and offered them shelter in the basement. By 5:45 p.m., it was no longer safe to stay out of doors. The sound of a freight train was howling through the trees as eighteen refugees hunkered down with me in the basement of St. Meinrad. I led them in prayer. It is often said that there are no atheists in a foxhole during battle. I can assure you that all prayed fervently in that basement during the tornado. The chapel above our heads took a direct hit. Though all were prayerful, I suspect we all prayed for different things.

Some prayed for their lives, for God to spare them. Others prayed for relatives. I prayed for martyrdom. I just knew God had sent that tornado to Beriah County to take my life and carry me to glory. I had little else to live for. What other explanation could there be for this freakish weather event? I was ready. I was ready for the mental anguish and continuous banality of my life to end. This would be my reward, to be swept away like a divine particle into the next dimension. But it didn't happen.

The wind abated, though the rain continued for another forty-five minutes after the big wind had moved on through. We slowly emerged from our subterranean shelter. I was the first to resurface. All I could see, in every direction, was rubble. Groves of trees snapped or uprooted. Houses were without windows, roofs, or siding. Fast food restaurants were without signs, walls, or service. Insulation was scattered about in bushes and tree branches, mixed with other pieces of wood and debris. My trailer was gone, though parts of its metal structure and the furniture inside were probably strewn about the county. For all intents and purposes, St. Mein rad had been swept from the earth, a total loss – or was it?

The brick walls of the church were gone, but the roof was not swept away. It had collapsed onto the concrete foundation and floor of the church. It was getting dark, and I had to find a place for my refugees to stay. They were in shock as they wandered aimlessly about the wreckage that was once a house of God. They had an air of disbelief with regard to what they were witnessing. It was as if they had suddenly been transported to war-ravaged Afghanistan or some other horrible Third World place. “No, no, this can't be our home!” But it was.

Emergency rescue teams were on the scene as soon as the storm passed. Cots were placed in the health department, school gymnasiums, and church halls that had been spared. Those not directly affected quickly brought food and clothing to the shelters in order to help their less fortunate neighbors. Thankfully, no one in Beriah County had been killed, not even me. I was puzzled.



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After sleeping the night on the floor of the health department foyers, I walked over to the ruins of St. Meinrad and tried to envision the future. My immediate concern was where to live. The church basement was still intact. It had running water and electricity. I was certain that I could secure a cot, a microwave, and a small refrigerator and dwell underground like a holy gopher. For some reason, the idea amused me.

I picked about the debris and began to move small pieces of the roof from the floor. As the morning progressed, more volunteers began to appear in the devastated section of town. Several members of my congregation began to help me clear the broken wood and shingles from the pews and altar. Many of the pews were still in good shape. The altar table remained unbroken and the bottles of wine, which represented the blood of Christ, were undisturbed. The unleavened bread of the Eucharist, which represented the body of Christ, was safe within the sacristy, as were the holy oils used in baptism. We were all amazed by this discovery. Several of those assisting me called it a miracle. At first, I didn't know what to make of it. I just kept working.

On Sunday morning, the members of our church family gathered at the home of one of the faithful to hold a prayer service and give thanks to God for sparing our lives and the lives of others in the community. The bishop contacted me later in the day to offer what assistance he could. A friend drove me to the Big Mart at Paint Creek, and I obtained those items necessary to allow me to nest in the basement of what had been my church.

On Monday, it snowed. It seemed like a cruel joke. Despite the dramatic change in the weather, volunteers, the National Guard, and emergency workers all began to invade the zone of destruction. Heavy equipment moved in and the governor toured the area, making promises of aid. Do nations of money, cleaning supplies, food, clothing, and blankets followed in short order. Truckloads of items "from the North" arrived with college students who spent their spring break helping the victims of the tornado. For three or four weeks, great progress was made, but eventually people had to return to work or school or whatever life pursuit they were engaged in, and we were left to figure it out.

I was lying on my cot, in the dark, wrapped in a donated blanket in my underground sanctuary when it all began to make sense. I had trouble sleeping. I dreamed that people were holding me down with my arms outstretched. Then someone placed a large spike in the palm of my right hand and began to pound it into the flesh. I wrenched in pain with each successive blow. I would awake, terrified, covered in sweat. My mouth would be dry.



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After getting a drink, I would again lie on the cot, close my eyes, and attempt to sleep. I would return to the dream. Now my left hand would be nailed to the wood. I would again wake from the horror of the dream. In the morning, I was too exhausted to do much of anything that was constructive.

This routine continued for several weeks before I understood what God was trying to communicate to me: “The Church has no walls.” Of course, that’s what it must mean. We hide behind the walls of a church to pray and then go outside and act as if our lives were unchanged by the experience. We were both in the world and of the world, but we needed to be in the world, but not of this world. We should not hide behind the walls.

We must go beyond the walls of the church to spread the word of Christ.

Somehow, this revelation emboldened me. I jumped into my vehicle and drove to Lexington. I asked for an unscheduled audience with the bishop. Few things are unscheduled in the daily life of a bishop, so I had to wait a very long time as churchmen and members of the laity scurried in and out of the inner sanctum. After what seemed like hours, I was admitted into his presence. He greeted me warmly, with a hug, and invited me to sit in a chair opposite his desk. I rambled on for a bit – about the storm, about St. Meinrad, about my parishioners. He sat and listened patiently, with his hands folded, as if in prayer. Eventually, I told him of my dreams and my interpretation about what they meant. The expression on his face began to change. He looked concerned, so concerned that I finally stopped talking.

“Father Dave, I understand that you have been through a tremendous ordeal and no one has greater sympathy for you than I do.”

“Your Holiness, I know this all must sound a little crazy, but—”

“I have some difficult things to discuss with you, Father Dave.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“It won’t at first, and it isn’t easy to say. I’ve discussed St. Meinrad with the finance committee and we have decided not to rebuild.”

“That is a surprise, but one I can live with. I don’t need a church building. I told you, I had a revelation that told me the Church has no walls. I don’t mind living in a little concrete basement. I don’t mind holding services in people’s homes. That is what I’m trying to tell you. That is the way the Church was meant to be.”



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“Oh, for God’s sake, get ahold of yourself, Dave. We’re Episcopalians, not a bunch of Pentecostals. You’ve labored in Beriah County for 30 years, but look at the results! Your congregation is pitifully small and there isn’t much of a chance that it is going to grow any time soon.”

“But I think if we try this new approach. . . .”

“The soil there is barren. You can throw down as much seed as you like, but nothing is going to grow. What does start to grow is choked by the weeds and the thistle. No point throwing out good seed after bad.”

“What...what do you suggest? I’ve literally devoted my ministry, my entire adult life to building the congregation at St. Meinrad.”

“And don’t think that I don’t appreciate what you have done. The Church will take care of you. Look, there are a couple of openings for chaplains in some assisted living facilities and prisons. You can work at that until you reach the age of 62 and then you can retire.

You don’t have a family, so I’m sure with Social Security and your Church pension, you will have enough money to live reasonably well.”

“But I don’t want to retire. I think I still have something to give.”

“Of course you do, Dave. That’s why I am suggesting you become a chaplain. There is a wonderful position open in Bowling Green that I need to fill.”

I didn’t really hear anything else that the bishop had to say. I just sat there with a sick smile on my face contemplating my future. It has always amazed me that when one is emotionally devastated by something, people will chatter away as if nothing is wrong. Do they really think the affected individual is listening?

When the bishop finally stopped talking, I stood up, nodded politely, and left the room.

Was this God’s will? I don’t really remember walking out of his office or out of the administration building. I don’t remember walking past the cathedral, with its impressive stairs and twin spires. But I must have walked for quite a while and then I stopped and tried to figure out where I was.

I knew that I was close to downtown and the neighborhood wasn’t very pleasant. There were some warehouses and storage facilities, a few small rundown, shotgun shacks.



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I spotted a homeless man in an alley drinking from a bottle he kept in a paper bag. It was difficult to judge his age. He might have been 50, or a 30-year-old man who looked 50.

He was seated with his back propped up against that wall of a building. He was wearing a filthy pair of jeans, worn-out tennis shoes, and a dirty white T-shirt covered by a tattered suit jacket. His shaggy brown hair went in several directions at once and his face displayed an impressive three-day stubble. He didn't seem particularly interested in me or in his surroundings. I approached him with a degree of caution.

"Ah...excuse me, young man... I seem to have lost my way. Can you tell me where I am?"

It took him a few seconds to reply or even to look at me. When he finally looked up, he squinted, then laughed. "You're halfway to hell without a bottle to fix you."

He raised his bottle above his head and laughed again. It was a spontaneous laugh but certainly not a pleasant one. "Would you like a swig?" It would have seemed rather snobbish for me to have refused and I am an Episcopalian, so I took him up on his kind offer.

I wiped the bottle top off with my shirttail before taking "a swig." It was a rather harsh red wine with a kick. It was certainly not a wine I would normally have purchased myself – not a very good vintage, so to speak. However, given the circumstances, it did make me feel better. I returned the bottle to my newfound friend and sat down on the pavement next to him. I asked his name and he said it was Newton, Newton Pike. He laughed again and passed the bottle back to me. He asked my name. I said Dave and we both laughed.

I passed the bottle back to him. So it went until the bottle was empty and the light of the sun was beginning to fade. I assured Newton that I could remedy the situation if he could take us to a liquor store. He knew just the place.

We walked over to the liquor store, and I bought us some cheap wine. Then we returned to our preselected positions in the alley and consumed the contents. Too much wine and too much tension made me fall asleep. The light of the sun woke me from my slumber.

My jacket, wallet, and shoes were gone, as was Newton Pike. I began to wonder if his name was really Newton Pike. No matter, I took this to be another sign from God

I walked around for about two hours in my stocking feet looking for where I had parked my car. Eventually I found it and drove around Lexington until I found a car lot. I sold the car for \$700, then



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walked to a shoe store and purchased a pair of tennis shoes (cheap ones). I next located a thrift store and purchased an old jacket.

I took the bus downtown and walked around giving away what remained of my cash, with the exception of two 20-dollar bills that I hoped would feed me for a few days. I felt this was what God wanted me to do. I was making a leap of faith, like Francis of Assisi. I was letting go of my material possessions. I was taking God's message of hope and redemption to the poor and the weak and the forgotten. I was going to see Lazarus under the rich man's table for the first time.

And I tried.

I soon discovered that sleeping outside was unpleasant and rather dangerous. I dreamed that there was a community of the benign homeless in Lexington – poor people helping one another survive as the prosperous ran about in blind ignorance of their saintly struggles. It was a dream.

Life on the street was nasty and brutish. Many of the homeless I met were mentally ill, simpleminded, or addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. Those who did not fall into one of these categories were broken by the strain of their lifestyle. It was hard to find a good place to sleep.

Spots under a bridge or overpass were overcrowded and hard to come by. There were plenty of alleys, but they were dangerous and offered little protection from the elements. Rats were also a problem. You don't see them in the day, but they are plentiful at night, and they are very hungry.

Once my money was gone, acquiring food took up much of my time. I climbed into more than a few restaurant dumpsters in order to fetch someone's half-eaten dinner.

Gradually I learned where the soup kitchens were located, and I shuffled into line with capitalism's other refugees. Soup kitchens were also warm and dry. Some have a lavatory. I really learned to appreciate having a warm place to go to the bathroom. Eventually I established a routine, rotating on particular days to one of several church soup kitchens in the downtown area.

Man, being a social creature, seeks companionship. Eventually, I made a friend. My newfound friend was Ralph, a middle-aged black man who was missing his two front teeth. We met at a dumpster behind Tiny's Restaurant. A cook had just thrown out a fresh pile of garbage, so we both knew the eating would be good. He made a fierce expression with his face and growled so as to scare me off, but I was hungry and made an equally fierce expression and growled right back. That made him laugh and he suggested that we split our treasure. I agreed to the arrangement, and we dined together in high style.



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I suppose the first thing people noticed about Ralph was his hat. He always wore a black baseball cap with the letters “CIA” embossed on the front.

“Did you ever work for the CIA?” I inquired.

“Naw, I just found this hat and I liked it.”

“It’s a good hat.”

After eating our fill, we walked together without saying much and decided to bed down for the night in a narrow alley. We found some card board for bedding. There were three other men sleeping in the alley, but no one spoke. In the wee hours of the morning, we were awakened by revelers exiting a nearby tavern. One of the inebriated bar patrons wandered into the alley to relieve himself. Before he could get his zipper down, two of the homeless men who were already in the alley jumped him and knocked him to the ground.

A fight ensued and Ralph grabbed me by the shoulder and said, “Let’s get out of here before the cops come. This don’t look good.”

We fled into the darkness with the shouts of violent men ringing in our ears. It was clear that Ralph was looking out for me.

In the morning, we walked to the Salvation Army kitchen for breakfast and then spent the rest of the morning sitting on a bench in a concrete park, watching people make their way to work. Everyone looked so purposeful. First came the garbage trucks, doing their morning rounds. Next, the restaurant workers appeared to man the grills and the coffee machines. Buses soon appeared, and commuters filed out and ran to their offices. Later, shoppers appeared, and policemen, and people just out for a stroll. We watched them all. No one noticed us. We were like the streetlights and benches, the pigeons and the bike racks. Ralph and I were part of the scenery.

“You hungry?”

“I could eat.”

“Okay, let’s panhandle a little and raise up some money for lunch.”

It took us a couple of hours to raise enough money for a sandwich. We had nothing but time. With our wealth in coins, we walked to a greasy spoon and bought a sandwich and split i.e. sat on a different



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bench at a different concrete park and watched. In the early evening we went looking for a good dumpster, then for a good place to sleep. So it went, day after day, until the weather got colder.

“I’ll be moving south for the winter. You want to join me?”

“No, thank you, Ralph. I believe I’ll stay right here.”

“Your choice, man, but it can get mighty cold and icy come January.”

“I appreciate the warming.”

We shook hands and Ralph walked to a truck parked near a warehouse to ask the driver for a lift. I walked back toward the center of town to look for a place to sleep.

About a month after Ralph jumped into the truck for his southbound adventure, I was curled up in an alley trying to get some sleep and a cold rain began to fall. By morning, I was soaked to the skin and had a toothache. I was tired of being homeless and tired of eating other people’s garbage. I was just plain tired and didn’t really know what to do. I made my way to an Episcopal shelter for homeless men and identified myself to a member of the staff. This caused a great deal of commotion. The receptionist had to contact the director of the shelter, who had to call the personnel director at the diocesan office, who had to contact the chaplain of the shelter, and so my presence reverberated through the entire church bureaucracy. After several hours of waiting in the reception area, a natty little man appeared in clerical garb and identified himself as the shelter’s chaplain. He showed obvious signs of irritation because he was called in on his day off. I had to fill out some papers. After some questioning, I convinced the chaplain and the director of the shelter that I was, indeed, Father Dave, the former pastor of St. Meinrad in Beriah County. They, in turn, phoned the personnel director, and he contacted the bishop. No one really knew what to do with me, but I was assigned a bed at the shelter.

No one wanted to take responsibility for an Episcopal priest dying of exposure in the streets of Lexington during the winter.

I am rather certain that during the following weeks there was a considerable amount of discussion about my fate. I was not included in the aforementioned discussion.

However, I was given the position of Assistant Resident Caretaker at the shelter and I was awarded a permanent bed and free meals. My duties include helping with the laundry, cleaning the restrooms, serving meals to our homeless guests in the soup kitchen, and other duties as assigned. A load of used



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clothing and blankets just arrived from the North, so I am currently folding blankets for distribution to the poor somewhere in eastern Kentucky.

---

**Thomas D. Matijasic** is a native of Youngstown, Ohio. He earned a B.A. from Youngstown State University, a M.A. from Kent State University, and a Ph.D. in History from Miami University. He has taught at Big Sandy Community & Technical College since January 1, 1983. Dr. Matijasic has received four BSCTC Great Teacher Awards, five NISOD awards for teaching excellence, and the 2006 Acorn Award. He served as President of the Kentucky Association of Teachers of History (1994) and served three terms on the Kentucky Heritage Council (1994-2006). Dr. Matijasic has published more than 20 articles and 30 book reviews, the most recent entitled, "It's Personal: Nixon, Liberia and the Development of U.S. African Policy (1957-1974)," WHITE HOUSE STUDIES (2011).



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## Avram McCarty | April Rain

There is nothing quite like a warm April rain, droplets  
trickling down the feverish skin of man the thermophile  
exciting his nature, plucking at his heartstrings.  
For his love of tepid rain is like his love of woman.  
To him it is tender to the touch, a candid pleasantry  
of nature, soothing to the skin – galling to the bone.  
Nature has its way of deciding the temperature.

Principles of derivation exist in the quaint sanctum of man:  
Bliss before beauty, beauty before all that remains.  
An eloquent man is an elegant man. A man is good  
for what he brings not for what he has brought.  
The warm rain of April reminds him of this.

His candor is unrivaled, his courtesy unmatched  
For the love of another is the propriety of man.  
Without it he is soulless, a hollow image of matter.  
The warm April rain reminds him that life still exists  
and he himself is not gone but the world has its caveats:  
The right has left, the back has gone forward, the down have risen –  
All surface to lay claim to the environs of a new life.

A warm April rain leads man to believe that direction may change,  
that light may irradiate the shadowy clamber of tomorrow  
in hopes that we may climb, in hopes that we will not fall.  
April rain descends down, goading us into a worthy plight.

---

Avram McCarty is a former BSCTC student.



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Charles Evans | **Regret**

I look back now  
and realize you're not a goddess.  
You are a set of lips,  
the first set  
on a porcelain body.  
You are chained pants  
and heavy metal,  
rocking bass  
and butterfly bellies.  
You are the swallowed  
taste of bitter,  
the lingering scent  
of regret and lavender.  
You are the itch in my palm,  
the stain on my suit  
that won't wash away  
even with OxiClean.  
You are the past  
on a pedestal,  
the outlining moment  
of manhood  
etched in a denim jacket.  
You were the first  
of many things to come.



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## Charles Evans | One More Draw

Smoke ring halos  
and ashen hell,  
burning deeper with each draw;

Stress dissipated  
with exhaled exile,  
exhilaration brief;

a Camel ride through  
Erebus in search for Elysium.

## Charles Evans | Untitled

The stars sit upon the waters,  
millions of suns sitting, thickening  
rays ephemerally reflect, ponderously  
pounding in dreamer's eyes  
wishing lightly for nothing, stodgily  
holding desires adrift, heavy  
hearts, we carry so often,  
when our dreams sink, gravely  
as our heads float among the rain clouds ethereally.

---

**Charles Evans**, 20, lives in Lovely, Kentucky. Charlie likes to write, play guitar, and hike. "Each kind of coincides with one another," he says.



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## Helen Faith | Clothes Catcher

Beware the Panther Cat, my dear,  
Which roams the mountains here!  
Be warned by its screeching, womanish cry;  
Be warned, oh my dear, lest you die!  
Just one way to survive the mad cat:  
First, remove your fancy pink hat;  
Strip the clothing from your body –  
Fear not if it all seems naughty –  
And cast each piece onto bushes and trees  
For the charging Panther Cat to seize.  
In its jaws the clothes will be shred –  
Better them than you, my dear, to be dead!  
So beware, and run, and come out again,  
And friendly arms will enfold you then.  
If you walk these forests alone – if you dare –  
Wear clothes that you don't mind leaving there!

## Helen Faith | Journey

My cloud has been cement,  
Its shadow dense and dour.  
  
Come the acid rain, I fall,  
Desperately grasping  
At wisps of belief.  
Decades later, a mountain, a storm cloud,  
Lumbers forth,  
And I climb an endless necklace  
Of sorrow laden rain.  
The sky yet unknissed, the shadow baneful still –  
I hope.



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## Helen Faith | Spider, Man

Spider on the ceiling,  
Spider on the floor:  
Spider, tell the reason  
That you breathe no more.

The many tiny creatures  
That you're wont to slay:  
They still breathe, oh Spider;  
They still, oh Spider, play.

Spider in my waste bin,  
Spider out the door:  
Did you go to Heaven?  
Was your life so pure?

Or, Mongo, just a pawn  
In Life's great gaping maw,  
One day feasting on lifeblood,  
Then crushed by natural law?

Spiders in the world today,  
Spiders near and far:  
Look to your fellow creature,  
For where he is, you are!

---

**Helen B. Faith**, who grew up in Philadelphia, PA, has enjoyed creative writing for most of her life. In addition to her poetry, she has written rough drafts for two novels and one play, and she encourages fellow writers to investigate National Novel Writing Month for a fun challenge. Grateful for the educational opportunity, Helen plans to continue her studies toward a degree in speech pathology.



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## Ken Slone | There Are Two Great Blue Herons in My Life

There are two great blue herons in my life:

One spends his time, eats his fish, drinks his water (I saw him dip  
... his bill two mornings ago.),

And shrieks his shrieks near John's Creek.

He is the only living creature these days who spends his time creek side  
Except a few fishermen, most of whom come and go but do not remain  
long enough to find redemption.

My heron wades when the Corps is not releasing white caps  
... through the dam,

Or he stands on a favorite rock that, when not submerged,  
Informs him the stream level is just right.

His dislikes include the roar of contractor mowers or the sounds of loud  
children at play – especially all those horrid school groups who spill  
.... from long yellow limousines.

Upon their arrival, he squawks in flight  
Downstream toward the Big Sandy  
Where he no doubt has his favorite dead tree limbs  
And rocks – perches from which he can  
Continue his life – Godlike, beside, but apart.

My other heron may have doubles, triples, or more.  
I see him or one of his brothers each time I take my boat  
out of its marina slip onto Paintsville Lake.  
Yesterday morning I thought I was fishing  
In the shallows out near the big island  
When a cardinal on a limb, wearing a black mask,

Pointed him out to me.  
He was standing tall on an eight-foot tall wooden perch  
Put there just for him. The Corps realized  
On this island there was an absence of dying timber.  
I took out my binoculars, saw him clearly, spooked him,

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So he glided to a lay down alongside the water.  
The lake was quiet this early Saturday morning –  
No overpowered bass boats made wake  
after wake Like they do on weekend afternoons  
And after quitting time on weekdays.

I kept trolling silently toward him until I could see his eyes,  
Wild like a walleye's.  
He saw me unaided while I needed the magnification of binoculars.  
I glided too close in, and my heron predictably flew across the island –  
Godlike, beside, but apart.

## Ken Slone | **Winter Rain in Mountains**

Our mountain stream is raging today  
After a two-day downpour  
That dropped feet of snow on DC, Pennsylvania, and Jersey.  
Last spring we laid down a new metal roof  
That sings to us in rain.

Oh, our outside cats hate the rain.  
We know by the way they behave  
When rain is approaching  
And by the way they huddle along the door crack  
For a little warmth for drying.

That Crosby, Stills, and Nash song about everything  
Being easier now that there are two cats in the yard  
Must be the reason we make them stay outdoors.  
Their disdain for rain  
Seems only to make our winters wetter,

For they have no power with the Gods.  
Their only influence is on us, their feeders.  
A moss covered rock on the stream bank



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Is as wet as the rocks inside the stream itself,  
Who are wet as ice cubes.

Rocks do not speak to me as do the trees,  
But if this one did, I believe it would be in accord with our cats  
On the subject of rain.  
After seeing water drip onto a rock for a two-day span,  
I can't help feeling sorry for the rock, and I tell it so.

Our singing roof must be the only hard surface  
Happy about the torrent.  
I believe in spite of its moss coat  
My rock capable of being concussed  
By the unceasing heaviness of rain drops.

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Professor of English **Ken Slone** received the Great Teacher Award in 1999 for teaching his students to take pride in their Appalachian heritage and to write from their hearts. His book of poetry, *At Home in the Mountains*, was published in 2001. His book, *Mountain Teacher – An Eastern Kentucky Teacher Tells His Story* was published in 2005. After earning his graduate degree from Xavier University, Ken returned to his home county of Johnson. He is retired from Big Sandy Community & Technical College after a 36-year teaching career. He does freelance writing for SLS Consulting, Pasadena, CA, and he and his wife Debbie spend winter months on the beach at North Myrtle Beach, SC.



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## Matthew Smith | I Read Her

Your life is more than a page  
from a dusty book  
buried deep in a collection  
of meaningless words.

Your life is flowing with  
fresh ink.

The quill continues to move  
as the tiny world reads  
with suspense.

You will never go out of print.  
Intellectuals will remember  
your soft story  
of love and motion.  
You will revive the English language.  
Eyes grow and drop  
on the fictional city of your legend.  
Without intention,  
you birth a new philosophy.

No one's pages turn like yours.  
The room is damp  
but the coffee is strong enough  
to take you to bed  
on a winter night.  
Your smell grows better with age -  
like a charming bookstore in the  
French Quarter  
with old world maps on the walls.

To some there is a world,  
but to me you create a world  
with prose.



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Elbow to hip like great leaves -  
I turn them to know you more.  
A book will fall in and out of  
memory as it releases.  
I never release the leather bound  
cover of your skin.

## Matthew Smith | Our Private Civil War

I stood on the frontlines waiting for Moses to read the law.  
Eyes watched those who were slain come back to life.  
Every blade of grass was breathing and holding thought.  
At that moment I cried through the trees,  
“Why is this happening to me?”  
But then I heard a violent whisper cry through the battlefield gates.  
“Beauty is dark, but still within sight.”

Every heart beats with an incredible rhythm.  
Mine is no exception.

It was at that moment that I left the muggy waters of war.  
The trenches of crusades past will clean themselves with rain.  
I am a man among many who will cast his fortune among the peaceful.  
Death will find me when she is ready.  
I will not search for her as light that leads back to the mud’s deep roots.  
Weightless, we will sleep below the silent, cryptic clouds.  
Tomorrow will be the freest day of our lives.

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**Matthew Smith** received his B.S.S. and M.A. from East Tennessee State University. He teaches Sociology at BSCTC.



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