

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

**Scott Goebel**

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

—John F. Kennedy

Poet Jim Webb's poems, plays, radio broadcasts and commentaries have inspired his activist and literary peers and are widely recognized as an important part of the Appalachian Literary Renaissance of the 1970s. Webb is a powerful presence, a man more important than any single aspect of his work. As Eddy Pendarvis has said, "He is an Appalachian icon" (Pendarvis interview). Despite suffering deep personal, financial and literary loss from three devastating house fires, Webb has supported and promoted his contemporaries for over thirty years through readings, publications, financial support, swarms<sup>1</sup> and radio broadcasts. He still continues to embrace and inspire succeeding generations of poets, writers and activists. We too often measure a poet's success by his bibliography. Even if he had no books to his credit, Jim Webb is a remarkably successful poet. To play on Jerry Williamson's words, Webb is certainly the most essential Appalachian poet that we should get to know.

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Resistance Grows in West (by God) Virginia**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Under the pseudonym of Wiley Quixote<sup>3</sup>, Webb's biting essays and commentaries first appeared in 1977 in the pages of the weekly newspaper *The Sandy New Era* in Williamson (Mingo County), West Virginia. The Tug Valley had been decimated by the Great Central Appalachian Flood. Government assistance was lagging as thousands were homeless, hungry and growing angrier by the day. Webb joined with many friends and locals in helping secure food and shelter for those in need. Webb pointed publicly to "King Coal" and, understanding the tradition of machine politics in Mingo County, he also pointed to government officials for working hand-in-glove with the coal companies by looking the other way on the joke of permitting and reclamation. Frustrated by the lack of government flood help, Webb, along with Jim Bartlett, James Hannah, Jerry Hildebrand, Detra Bannister, Ken Mills, and others founded the Tug Valley Disaster Center in Williamson (later the Tug Valley Recovery Center, or TVRC) to assist and advocate for victims.

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

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

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

Webb stayed in New York with his older brother, Robb, an actor and voice-over artist<sup>5</sup>. He was surprised by the lack of encouragement from the New York poetry establishment. It was the complete opposite of the mountain literary scene and the supportive SAWC network. However, one night at Saint Mark's, the crowd took notice. In a relatively short time he broke into the local poetry scene and a publisher offered him a book contract. Imagine the joy of such an offer and the realization that most everything you'd ever written had been lost (in Williamson or Michigan). The contract was never signed, the book never published. Something more critical happened.

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

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

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

### **Buzzsaws in the Rain**

I know all the reasons

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

But none of them reasons  
make any sense so

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

Ka-thunk, Ka-thunk  
past them  
to them

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

tonight too  
blues

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

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

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

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

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

### **Back Home in Whitesburg, Kentucky**

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

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



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



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



Mosaic close up  
photograph by Nelson Pilsner



Walled-In Pond 2015  
photograph by Nelson Pilsner



shut you up” (Wildsmith 26)

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

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

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

### Power in the Coal Region

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

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

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

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

### Awareness

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

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

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

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

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

### A New Project; A Bigger Vision

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

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

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

### Looking at Webb from a Distance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Settling in on Pine Mountain**

Webb began writing in earnest again in 2002, after being laid up for several months with a broken leg. "While I was in the Tolly Ho House<sup>7</sup> I did write quite a bit. But I packed up the computer in 2004 when Jerry [Tolliver] gave me the house and I moved it across the road" (Webb interview #3). The plan for the Tolly Ho House, which Webb moved onto his property at great expense, was for it to serve as a kind of bed and breakfast to augment his campground. Webb's longtime friend, Lee Stevens (the Road Hogg) moved in and began a fifteen-month restoration which was completed in the summer of 2006. Stevens had moved all of his belongings into the house while he worked on it. Webb had yet to move any of his possessions into the Tolly Ho when, in September of that year, the most recent fire, the fourth on Pine Mountain, burned it

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

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

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

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## Endnotes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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