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How to fight like a poet:
the socially engaged poetics of
anti-colonialism in Appalachia

By Grace Ann Rogers

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation summa cum laude
and
for Graduation with Honors from the Department of English

University of Louisville

July, 2020

“[I’m still working on a name...]”

Appalachian poverty has been a common subject in national media since Lyndon B. Johnson’s declaration of the War on Poverty in 1964 in Martin Co., Kentucky, and the discussion of environmental degradation in the coal producing regions of the Appalachian Mountains has similarly grown to prominence in recent years. That said, much of the conversation about Appalachian issues on the national stage has been simplistic, linear, and too often spoken in the voices of people who are not from the region. Works like J.D Vance’s 2016 book “Hilbilly Elegy” and Diane Sawyer’s TV documentary “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains,” offer a one-dimensional illustration of the nuanced problems at hand. They argue that the people are poor, pitiful, uneducated, and drug addicted, and the coal industry is bad because it disturbs pristine mountain views, destroys the environment, and makes the region’s inhabitants its victims. While it is true that the comings and goings of exploitative industries have made life in the region challenging, the story of Appalachian resistance and oppression is much more complex.

It is safe to say that every Appalachian person has their individual story of resistance, difficulty, and place in this sprawling mountainous region that spans from northern Mississippi to southern New York. The vast assemblage of differentiated experiences in the mountains is unwieldy and impossible to fully document through traditional archival methods. However, the people of this region share the seemingly inescapable social and economic structures that produce and reinforce systemic oppression: colonialism, capitalism, and globalization. These far-reaching social and economic structures are the forces that shape both life and landscape in Appalachia.

Upon European settlement of Central Appalachia and the Ohio Valley, the landscape was vastly different than it is now. While this might be glaringly obvious—especially to those who have traveled through coal and timber country to see the kudzu-covered hillsides, topless mountains, honeysuckle-infested forests, Dollar General stores, and flooded valleys—it is important to investigate exactly how this place has changed, and arguably even more important to acknowledge who changed it. Before European conquest, this region was inhabited by a number of indigenous tribes (the Miami, Shawnee, Iroquois, and Cherokee), people who understood their ecological community which allowed them to nurture both themselves and the landscape. As outlined in a chapter of Susan Sleeper-Smith’s 2018 book *Indigenous Prosperity and American Conquest: Indian Women of the Ohio River Valley*, the landscape of pre-settlement central Appalachia was densely forested with old-growth trees and speckled by diverse wetlands that provided ample foraging. Women cultivated corn in no-till mounds that yielded high quantities of the three-sisters crops that made up the majority of Shawnee, Miami, Iroquois, and Cherokee diets.

Upon arrival, European invaders tilled up the earth reducing soil productivity. They logged hillsides for farming, and drained wetlands—leaving them fallow and unproductive. These settlers were unaware of the biome they entered, and wholly ignored the natural contour of the ground on which they walked in favor of a fantasy of what it could provide for them. They were placeless, and there is ultimately no evidence that this placelessness has improved over time. In his 1968 essay “A Native Hill,” Wendell Berry asserts that, “We *still* have not, in any meaningful way, arrived in America” (11). Because the white settlers paid so little attention to the intricacies of the place they arrived, because they continued to use farming methods fit for the European landscape from whence they came, and because they ignored all signals of dissent

offered to them by nature, their relationship with American land has always been doomed to fail. The physical manifestations of this problem are manifold. There has been a drastic change in forestry in the region due to deforestation, the influx of invasive species, a swift change in topography via runoff due to inappropriate farming methods, and a change in forest makeup due to the lack of indigenous American forestry management (Dyer 1717).

While indigenous people frequented this region for hundreds of years, nurtured a complex understanding of place, and developed sustainable food-acquisition practices, the Appalachian settlers who stole their land seemed to be utterly placeless tending their tilled-up clay gardens on steep hillsides in the blistering heat. Somehow, this lack of connection did not prevent the settlers from framing themselves as indigenous to the region. As Stephen Pearson writes, “Positioning themselves as Indigenous victims of colonialism allows Appalachian Whites to remove themselves from complicity in the capitalist economy and permits them to inhabit a romantic image of anticolonial struggle” (166). While it is clear that white Appalachians have been repeatedly and painfully exploited by external capitalist forces that follow colonial models of subjugation, one must also recognize that the indigenized framing of Appalachian struggle is harmful, untrue, and ultimately serves to further colonial narratives and state interests. The truth is that most Appalachians view their relationship to place in the region as something special, something that runs deep. This conflicted existence of concomitantly occupying the role of conqueror and conquered in a singular location, of simultaneously loving and destroying a place, and of feeling deeply attached to and knowing very little about a place brings to mind a number of questions about the relationship between humans and the places they inhabit.

Robert Macfarlane explores this complex relationship in his 2015 book *Landmarks*. He argues that language is a critical site of investigation when it comes to the connection between

humans and their landscape. Language, after all, is one of the primary mediums through which humans express their thoughts and emotions. Macfarlane argues that the strength of connection between personhood and sense of place weakens in the wake of technological growth, globalization, and climate change (3). He also discusses the effects of language loss on human relationships to place. He writes, “As we further deplete our ability to name, describe and figure particular aspects of our places, our competence for understanding and imagining possible relationships with non-human nature is correspondingly depleted” (24). While this observation makes sense in relation to the increasing alienation of people from place through increased use of technology, it also speaks to the larger tragedy of indigenous language loss in the Americas. Many languages that were born here, that were produced in order to describe this specific place in detail are either dormant or endangered. Many of the Algonquin languages that were cultivated in this region are undocumented and spoken by a narrow few, or spoken in Oklahoma, and modernly used to describe places other than those for which they were created. Due to forceful removal and genocide of the people who possessed the words to describe Appalachia, the settlers now living in the region are woefully lacking the language necessary to describe their surroundings.

In his 1996 book *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*, Keith Basso illustrates a community with highly evolved linguistic traditions that describe and utilize landscape for both cultural and personal purposes. Among the Western Apache people, place names are imbedded with accompanying parables that exemplify the consequences of transgressing social norms. Many Apache people say places “stalk” them to catalyze self-reflection, and depict the utterance of a place name as the shot of an arrow (59). An in-depth analysis of this linguistic culture led Basso to the realization that landscape and

language interact to produce internal concept of locations that are, “‘detached’ from their fixed spatial moorings and transformed into instruments of thought” (75). Detachment from physical location, and distortion through the faulty lens of memory is what allows places to function as historical documents. He writes, “place-making is a way of constructing history itself,” and questions archival hierarchies that value written literacy over nearly all alternative literacies (6). Who is it that gets to decide which internal constructions of place (and stories thus embedded) are worthy of documentation? This question seems to hang over the text as a whole, which calls to mind the violence of Euro-centric documentation of indigenous American cultures, and the pain erased and justified through faulty archival norms. Basso’s account of Western Apache linguistic practices depicts the complex relationship between language and landscape, and how—when this relationship is nurtured—language can subvert colonial pedagogical models that value teacher as master, serve to increase place-based knowledge, and encourage healthy cultural norms.

If we recognize the connection between landscape, language, and colonialism, we recognize the power of language manipulation as a way to subvert, or support capitalistic endeavors. Through reworking standard colonial language, poetry can challenge the linguistic frame that upholds colonial structures. Cathy Park Hong’s 2007 book *Dance Dance Revolution* serves as an example of this capability. Hong’s protagonist is a historical guide in a fictional city called The Desert. The city’s few permanent inhabitants and many transient visitors initially spoke a number of different languages that have since co-mingled into an early creole that “is an amalgam of some three hundred languages and dialects imported into this city” (19). The use of this creole invented by Park Hong results in acute awareness to the place-based details of language and draws particular attention to the intense specificity of place present within a young

language that is presumably only spoken in a tourist city with few permanent residents. The descriptions of the surroundings are generalized, commodified, and ultimately placeless. The buildings are predominately named after other famous places and tourist sites: Paris Hotel, St. Petersburg Hotel, Belgrade Inn, Etc. Through the description of transient capitalistic placelessness in a city that embodies globalization's ultimate ideals, alongside the use of a creole that verbally expresses the sensation of being untethered from place, Park Hong plays out the effects of globalization in a heightened form in order to critique its underlying principles.

Poetry can also challenge colonial interests by re-writing and re-framing existing archival documents, or collecting and presenting new documentary materials. Much of the archival and historical documentation that has taken place in Appalachia—in some way or another—upholds state interests and colonialism. These primarily non-fictional, historical, or archival sources pose a variety of problems. Some (such as the archival field-work of Jean Thomas) invest in the racist narrative that the mountains serve as airtight container that preserved untouched Anglo-Saxon tradition. Some (such as Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* and Helen Lewis' contributions to *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*) adopt the narrative of self-indigenization. And some simply give the illusion of offering all relevant information, when deficiencies are inevitable in any narrative or archive.

Because every person's perception of "truth" is different depending upon their personal experience, the narratives they have been taught to believe, and the inaccuracies of their own misremembering, it seems important to acknowledge and even embrace the inevitability of bias and wrongness. In order to produce documentary work that approaches "truth," one must also investigate the slanted individual experiences of all parties involved in any given event. Where declarative historical documents often rely on one singular narrative of "truth" (which is rarely

provided by the more oppressed members of any given group), poetry can provide space for nuance and privilege the emotions, sensations, and personal experiences of its speakers. This reframes the “truth” as being a complex composite value of many individual “truths” however different, distorted, or “wrong” they might be. For this reason, poetry can be an effective venue for cultural critique, linguistic subversion, personal exploration, and ultimately an admittance of this unavoidable distortion. Because historical documents are inevitably distorted through the lens of memory, personal bias, and accessibility (at the very least), the only archival practices that stand a chance of coming anywhere close to being “true” are those that acknowledge their own wrongness. This is not to say that a narrator or poem’s speaker should knowingly lie or spread false information, rather that they should be clear and upfront about the gaps in their own perception. While the word “non-fiction” implies that there is no fabrication involved, poetry allows space for nuance, messiness, and ultimately correction.

Rachel Zucker recognizes and appreciates this aspect of poetry in her 2019 manifesto “The Poetics of Wrongness/An Unapologia.” Here, the poet offers six “anti-tenets” that serve as a guide for those who wish to engage in the poetics of wrongness. Zucker asserts that, “wrongness is part of the human condition,” thus it ought to be embraced in the texts humans produce (7). Because humans are producers of documents, narratives, archives, histories, truths, fictions, and poetries, and because humans are inherently wrong, Zucker believes it must follow that, “our word people are no more or less wrong than real people and as writers we should try to be at least as alive and wrong in our writing as we are in our real lives” (14). This harkens back to the concept every person’s experience of oppression is different. There is no ‘right’ historical narrative because history involves human individuals. Our memories are poor, our emotional states are volatile, and even our most well-meaning historical accounts are self-serving to a

certain extent. With the embrace of contradiction, of unwieldiness, of “half-finished, crumbling stairs to nowhere” (13), poetry that appreciates wrongness inches ever so slightly closer to “truth,” although it’s unclear whether or not an absolute truth can ever be reached.

This particular capability of the genre is exactly what makes it such a fitting form for social engagement, activism, and advocacy, which brings us to the long history of folks who recognize this capability and use poetry as a medium for cultural critique or as an archival practice. While social engagement manifests in a number different poetics, one of its primary forms is that of Documentary Poetry (docu-po). Docu-po involves engagement with historical events and the people involved with those events through poetry. In his 2010 essay “Documentary Poetics,” Mark Nowac asserts, “Documentary poetics, it should be said, has no founder, no contested inception, no signature spokespersons claiming its cultural capital.” The community-minded, somewhat ownerless nature of docu-po, is reminiscent of oral traditions such as ballad-singing and story-telling in that it serves a particular social function—to spread information and spark social engagement—without placing focus on authorship. Although a poet must demonstrate skill at re-framing and re-organizing documents to create a successful documentary poem, the act of uplifting voices, or publicizing documents that the author feels should be more widely considered takes precedent over the author’s recognition. Docu-po, in a certain sense, functions like a knowingly biased archive by producing, collecting, and arranging documentary narratives and historical documents to make socio-political claims. Most importantly, it is a form of documentation that occurs from the ground up. It places the narrative control in the hands of the many.

One example of docu-po that inspired an invigoration of docu-po practices is Muriel Ruckeyser’s 1938 long poem “The Book of the Dead.” Ruckeyser uses court proceedings and

interviews to outline the events of the West Virginia Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster in efforts to raise public awareness of the industrial silicosis that resulted in the death of hundreds of construction workers. She writes into the testaments given by company executives, employees, and community members with subjectivity. Through this method, she offers social commentary, yet maintains a factual basis for her arguments by providing clear depictions of found materials. The piece differs from an archival document in that it also makes space for the speaker's emotions and observations. Nomi Stone's 2019 book *Kill Class* employs a similar method of docu-po. Stone's book emerges from two years of anthropological fieldwork Stone completed inside of faux Middle Eastern villages in the US curated on Military bases for training purposes. While much of the book focuses on the external details of Stone's surroundings in and around the military base, there are many moments of personal reflection and reference to the speaker. Stone writes, "Anthropologist, why are you in this story?" thus acknowledging the conundrum of attempting to produce accurate anthropological and historical documents (80). The speaker is always present. Even when erased within the writing, they remain on the other side of the text pulling the strings. There is no way to escape that fact, thus the author is always faced with the question of whether or not to include their-self in the text.

Mark Nowak, on the other hand, uses a slightly different style of docu-po to impart anti-capitalist messages. Rather than weaving his own voice throughout historical texts or narratives, Nowak primarily relies upon juxtaposition of primary sources to produce social critique. He chooses not to include "the anthropologist" in the poem. That said, social critique is still undeniably present within his texts through the rearrangement of documents that would not otherwise appear in the same space. In this sense, Nowak's work very much fits the bill of an archive that acknowledges its own bias and amplifies varied and detailed information from the

voices of many people in order to produce a detailed account of everyone's individual and often conflicting "truths" in one place. Rather than perusing an archive organized by geographic region, alphabetical order, or chronology, the reader peruses an archive overtly organized to engender social critique. In his 2009 book *Coal Mountain Elementary*, Nowak intersperses news articles of mine disasters in China, quotes from lesson plans written by the American Coal Foundation, testimony transcripts from West Virginia Miners, and photographs of coal communities in West Virginia (Nowak) and China (Ian Teh). The tension among these verbatim documents produces gut wrenching and powerful commentary on the dark underbelly of exploitative industry without the aid of any direct commentary from Nowak himself.

While documentary methods produce highly effective social engagement, there are other poetics that are capable of similar critique. Acknowledgement of distortion through the lens of individual experience inevitably leads to exploration of the personal. Natalie Diaz's *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012) serves as an example of the intersection between personal and/as political. Diaz's poems describe the speaker's experience of life on a Mojave reservation and depict her brother's chronic meth addiction. The book constructs a narrative of the speaker's experience of family, love, indigeneity, oppression, resistance, and addiction all of which are inseparable from the political injustices that shape the conditions of her personal life. Diaz creates space for her internal landscape and acknowledges its relevance to colonialism and capitalism. Within this political and personal narrative, she also allows herself to veer into moments of distortion and surrealism that give weight to emotions, metaphors, and spirituality rather than valuing external 'truths' over internal realities.

Juliana Spahr employs similar strategies to blend the personal, political, and internal throughout her oeuvre. In *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005), she acknowledges the

atrocities that followed the September 11th Attacks and depicts the effects of global atrocities on her own emotional landscape. She juxtaposes the description of her peaceful immediate surroundings and the details of global disaster. Spahr's comparison illustrates that it is nearly impossible to avoid playing a role in globalization (especially as a white American). Spahr's writes, "During the bombing, beloveds, our life goes on as usual... This makes us feel guiltier and more unsure of what to do than ever" (69). As the speaker grapples with their own complicity in capitalism and colonialism, their life goes on, and they are unable to affect global change in any lasting way. They are simultaneously at fault and blameless, and their personal relationships are inseparable from the political and financial systems that dominate the social structure of their life.

In her 2011 book *Well Then There Now*, rather than focusing on one specific event that causes global upheaval, Spahr focuses on her relationship to a number of different specific places. She attempts to reconcile her personal relationship to these places with the violent history they hold. In addition, she attempts to think through her own role in globalization, capitalism, indigenous removal, and ecological destruction. Spahr begins the book with the poem, "Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours" which outlines the speaker's experiences as a tourist in France. Her simple description of place and personal experience is distorted by a "translation machine" (15). Spahr illustrates the intensely personal nature of the relationship between a person and the landscape they observe. The "truth" of the landscape is distorted by a person's emotional reactions and lived experiences.

Similarly, in her 2001 place-based book of poetry *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You*, Spahr investigates the use of, "the dirty word of 'we' (a word that is especially troubling in Hawai'i with its complicated identity politics)," as she describes in a 2003 interview with Joel Bettridge.

In her poem, “gathering palolo stream,” she writes, “A place allows certain things and certain of we of a specific place have certain rights,” (19). This particular place, the stream, is a place for gathering, yet it flows past an unused parking lot, buildings, and a fence that, “gets locked at night,” (25). The stream is meant to be a resource for indigenous Hawaiians who are afforded the lawful right to access shorelines to, “gather plants, harvest trees, and take game,” (31). Despite the presence of this right on paper, private landowners make it impossible for indigenous Hawaiians to access the land that was stolen from them in many parts of the state. As a white colonizer present on Hawaiian soil, Spahr investigates her own relationship to the place, and attempts to find a way to speak clearly against colonialism while still acknowledging that she is not Hawaiian. Through the use of the word “we” Spahr explores the concept of unity and connectedness in place while also making clear that people within the “we” are subject to different experiences of place due to the injustices of colonialism. She writes, “This is about how certain of we have rights on paper yet not in place,” (26).

Spahr’s work and her view on the function of autobiographical narratives in poetry exemplify the effectiveness of poetry as a means for social change. In the 2003 interview with Bettridge, Spahr responds to questions about the autobiographical nature of her work with the statement that her poems, “were not written with a desire to tell about my self or my achievements (dubious or worth). Rather there was a desire to tell about how my self fit or not with others and how when the fit happens, even then the fit is difficult, it can also be transformative.” This seems to speak to the power of poetry as a space in which the line between fiction and non-fiction becomes somewhat irrelevant. If the story is based in personal narrative for the sake of personal narrative alone, it becomes ineffective and unaware of its own distortion. Instead, socially engaged poetry attempts to view personal truth as it relates to the truth of others. It creates a

space in which the author might attempt to see the “we” or the larger group of people who are connected by place or history, while also resolutely acknowledging that amongst the we are many varied accounts of history and oppression.

Overall, the tools these socially engaged poets use to impart anti-colonial, anti-capitalist views through poetry have enabled me to produce my own socially engaged text, “Into Nowhere.” The influence of these poets manifests in a number of iterations throughout my series of poems. The first section, “Flat Bottom In-Laws,” is a series of anagram poems created only from the names of plants that have been cataloged on the farm where I grew up. Because the poems are produced from lists of the flora and fauna that are produced by an amateur naturalist who is the descendent of white settlers, they are highly incomplete and likely inaccurate. The poems are made out of resources that are both provided by the landscape, and understood by the placeless humans who currently inhabit the region. This acknowledges the concomitant limitations of our resources and knowledge of place in Appalachia. Meanwhile, the body of these poems catalog my emotional reaction to the landscape at hand and depict scenes of Appalachian gentrification, capitalism, climate change, and history. This maneuver takes direct inspiration from CD Wright and Natalie Diaz.

In “Title Supplied by Cataloger,” I respond to and reframe information from the digital Jean Thomas archive at UofL. This is in the vein of more strictly documentary poetics inspired by Mark Novac and Juliana Spahr. Through this series, I grapple with my gratitude for documents that depict East Kentucky cultural traditions coupled with the knowledge that these documents are drastically skewed by classism and white supremacy. “Translation Museum” delves into my personal experience of the landscape and the effects of capitalism on my changing relationship to place which takes from Juliana Spahr’s exploration of the relationship between personal and

political in *Well Then There Now*, and similarly attempts to think through the distortion caused by translation: whether it be from French to English, from English to Chinese, from visual image to thought, from thought to word, from visual image to camera, from roll of film to archive, from archive to me.

All of these issues culminate in “The Thing that Held the Whole Thing Together” which attempts to express the unwieldiness of the project itself. Although I set out to write a series of poems that makes a clear statement about capitalism, colonialism, and climate change in Appalachia, I was ultimately unable to do so. Instead, I discovered that all of the pain, all of the distorted history, all of the place, all of the placelessness, all of the systemic oppression, all of the global systems that enforce that oppression is impossible to digest. It would be counterproductive to a project that means to document and express the nuance of these issues to simplify the matters at hand. If one wants to write poetry that is socially engaged, they have to engage with the fact that their perception will never be clear enough to take everything in, digest it, and regurgitate a linear, “right” narrative that’s completely devoid of all nutrients.

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Into Nowhere

By Grace Ann Rogers

I. Flatbottom In-laws



“Uncle Brett with Two Children ca. 2003”

My Uncle has spent the past twenty years rambling about a patch of overgrown East Kentucky farmland two miles back Flatbottom Road where I grew up. The following poems are anagrams produced from lists of the plants and animals he cataloged and categorized on his many long walks over the years.

This photograph depicts one of our earliest visits to Flatbottom Farm as a family.

1. **Flowers/Weeds**

To Dawn's Red Lent Lover:

You vigil early, darling
dew. I prayed
your hewn
cliff cow would trill

a drunk, droll ballad
to the torpid town crab.

Go to bed and say, *We're not ice*
clouds, velvet,
gumballs, or wine.

All women aren't sisters.
We'll offer fond dirge,
flood, rot,
chew the dill.

2. Mammals

No work
 at the Dollar
General
 but you
 boycott
Mama's tomato skins.

Locals cut
solar wire out
 of spite.

 I explore
blithely
 conquered
sky, face
 that climb at
 sunset in
a goddamn
 moon fog.

3. Birds

Holler dew dwelt there with torpid growth. Pokeweed grew.
 Concrete words dominate hillbilly talk. A rockslide blocked
 the old road. Oilbirds swarm our landlocked childhood home.
 Unbaked ovenbirds burrow caked in cow-poop. Dark water rolls
 into the Ohio to join

coal-dreg and American
 Synthetic Rubber runoff.

Earbuds off.
 Breathe in
 space/time
 continuum.
 Morph, write.

Enlightened rich say *Act from abundance*,
 but, lord, we're running out of avocado.

New reporters know crucial place-talk: Import, garbage, power plant, brewery, renewable, deplete,
 delete, wifi network, brand, weed, workweek, perc up, regrow.

Othersiders hex
 the sidewalk below.

Wrinkled beguilers ringbark
 hewn, arrow-like poplars.

We red druidic warblers sorrow
 for lopped arbors.

4. **Grasses**

- A. A moon fog, mudflat bog, sassafras boar.
- B. Toxic tactless guilt/benign release.

- A. Stringbeans, sexes, obituaries:
- B. Motors out-clang a calf/moo off algal debts.

5. Trees

Hawk:
Fisher, prayer, appealer.

Karmic
payment complete.
There's nothing

to do but nap,
unclench
the geo-mandible,
listen and hear
a honeysweet
creek

cluck in tune
to an orchestral
cockerel caw.
Crack!

Furious Bach. Breakup
of opaque
brook silt
earth-falls its
track by memory.

6. Fungus/Lichen

At our awful
 edges, our endzone,
 lustful leftwing fluff
 usurps a bony calf's
 melodic midnight
 howl. Moonshine escape

tour guides haul
 asphalt, a hottub,
 and log-penthouse.

Upbeat tweakers chauffer
 vehicles down the mud
 road, bring watercoolers
 & watercolors.

The willingest
 tow out fallow loam.

Hobo utopist men,
 take mushrooms
 in pristine nature.
 Talk about the poetics of
 this and that—anything: twigs, finches
 mutiny, wifi. sewage.

Drunk little hun,
 you gentrified
 our escarpment.

7. Reptiles/Amphibians

Afternoon at the unmown pagan hillside
burial mound: A moss caked stone

 nests. A forlorn, procumbent stem
 snakes. A blaring airplane

forges her pixilated
belt in knit fog. The sky's

habit, the blotchy
torso, the digestive
 system. The unending
roar of waking

 hours slide beneath
 my teeny feet. Time shifts and oughts,
swallow me. RIP
 rurality, RIP whooping
crane, hello

 hillsnake. Online in Astoria,
 my sister says, "seeking to purge
toxic masculine energy." I tweet,
 "Just ask a snake to
 swallow you whole."

 Am I unwieldy?
Am I whole? I stay
 outdated, diluted,
outta the blue. An unfinished
selfhood. I hold

out the sh
 of "hush,"
 the l of "doll,"
"echo's" o to lull

 you both. At night,
the airplane's
 soft asyllabic nonspeech enters
my dreamscape
 no habitat, no ease, no

hideaway. Only output.
 At sunup, green

humbly hoots
the motif
O thank you, oil leak
Thank you, crisis.

Thank you, surefooted,
streaky patterns
who permeate time.

8. Interesting Inanimate Things and Landmarks

Lithe deer appear
 in slant cedar
 shade. Moon-weak
 mama nymph frails. I trek
 the path-length marked
 by Uncle's sparkling

water can stalagmites
 or compulsions
 to consume.
 I recall his drunk years

and mine. The waterfall's
 fall won't
 end. I can't stop
 saying it. I was
 sent here on accident.

I'm tired
 of going on,
 but hear my lethal won't

 and think of gentle Lukas
 who died
 of [].
 Died of [I can't
 start saying it.]
 He []
 at nineteen.
 What, where,

how can we ever
 finish a sentence.
 We pull apart light
 unnamable rage
 that week
 I park walk
 halt athwart regret
 peel rhythm
 gather terror
 planet egg
 anagrammed earth
 who is the speaker
 rather tattler
 glottal throat rattler
 mortal prattler

shhhh...

Notes:

1. *Flowers and Weeds of Flatbottom Include: Butterfly Weed, Poison Ivy, Bloodroot, Ironweed, Goldenrod, Cat Tails, Clover Wild Senna, Green Dragon, White Trout-Lily, Ground Cherry, Dwarf Larkspur, Catchweed, Bedstraw, Roundleaf Yellow Violet, Small White Violet.*
2. *Mammals of Flatbottom Include: Bat, Coyote, Groundhog, Squirrel-types?, White-tailed deer, Bobcat, Mountain Lion ask Holly??!!? Opossum, Raccoon, Skunk, Eastern Cottontail, Gray Fox, Weasel.*
3. *Birds of Flatbottom Include: Whippoorwill, Turkey Vulture, Red-Tailed Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned-Owl, Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Wood Pewee, Carolina-Chickadee, Red-Winged Blackbird, Purple Martin, American Crow, Brown-Headed Cowbird, Baltimore Oriole, American Robin, Eastern Bluebird, Chipping Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Tufted Titmouse, Northern Cardinal, Wood Duck, Morning Dove, Northern Flicker, Downy Woodpecker, Red Bellied Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Little Blue Heron???, Ruffed Grouse, Northern Bobwhite, Wild Turkey, Winter Wren, Barred Owl, Purple Finch, White-Throated Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, Rose-Breasted Grosbeak, Blue Grosbeak, Common Yellowthroat, Jack Will's Widow, Bald Eagle, Red Shouldered Hawk.*
4. *Grasses of Flatbottom Include: Foxtails, Giant Cane, Bluegrass, Broom Sage.*
5. *Trees of Flatbottom Include: Eastern red cedar, American Elm Chinquapin Oak, Black Locust, Honey Locust, Sycamore, Tulip Tree/Tulip Poplar, Hackberry, Pawpaw, Shagbark Hickory, Green/White Ash, Hemlock (Eastern), Carolina Buckthorn, Kentucky Coffee Tree, Eastern Hop Hornbeam.*
6. *Fungus/Lichen of Flatbottom Include: Sulphur Shelf Fungus-Laetiporous sulphureous, Cedar Apple Rust, Turkey Tail, Dead Man's Fingers with a side of basmati rice, we're out of the corn smut sauce until April but we could whip up an algae bloom molé for now, and no the TV doesn't work, but we usually count the shooting stars or dance to the blinks of the AT&T tower a few ridges over. We imagine a pocket-sized man sitting in the tower switching his flashlight on and off all night. And by 'we' I mean me.*
7. *Reptiles and Amphibians of Flatbottom Include: Eastern Box Turtle, Snapping Turtle, American Toad, Tree Frogs, Moldy Tree Frog, Rat Snake, Hog Nose Snake, Eastern Milk Snake, snake that slithers into your dreams at night to remind you of the inescapable climate crisis and all you aren't doing, undeniably phallic snake that explains the green new deal to you in incomprehensible jargon, the snake you ask to swallow you whole who won't, and the snake who agreed to swallow you whole in a city of unending motion, the inside of the snake you see as you slide through her digestive system—isn't this what you asked for? Time has finally stopped, but it isn't as easy as you thought it would be. Still the hum of the bill that might pass before you say your peace, still the hum of the homework due, still the hum of your sister's empty bank account, still the hum of your oil leak.*
8. *Interesting inanimate things and landmarks of Flatbottom Include: The Bench Mark, the mossy place, the graveyard, the stone-fence, the lilacs all grown up around the disintegrated frame of a house, the lonely rock-framed well, the sparkling water can marking the trail, the old rusted plough left behind upon some family's desperate relocation to Indiana or Ohio, the waterfall, the water, the sparkling water can marking the trail, the white hotel whose walls are now gray and spray-painted, the spray-paint cans, the sparkling water can marking the trail, the solar panels, the sun, the sparkling water can marking the trail, the water, the water, the water, the water.*

II. Title Supplied by Cataloger



“Jean Thomas interviews fiddler Jilson Setters in a cornfield, Rowan County, Kentucky, circa 1926.”

Jean Thomas takes notes by hand while Jilson Setters (a pseudonym for James William (J.W.) (Day, 1860-1942), wearing a suit jacket and tie, performs with fiddle. They sit outside in a cornfield. Thomas transcribed the lyrics to ballads performed by Day, who she renamed after becoming his manager. Title Supplied by cataloger.¹

¹ From “Jean Thomas, The Traipsin’ Woman, Collection” in UofL Library Digital Collections.
<https://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/ref/collection/jthom/id/1511/rec/13>

Jean Thomas—b. 1881 in Ashland, Kentucky—called herself “The Traipsin’ Woman.” She rambled the hills of East Kentucky in search of authentic mountain music and folk art. She documented fiddle and banjo tunes and folk dances. Like many who collected folk traditions in the Appalachian region, Thomas viewed the barrier of the mountain range as a sort of airtight container in which “pure” Anglo-Saxon traditions were protected from external influence. In 1926, she encountered a fiddler from Rowan County who was blind. His name was James William Day. According to the UofL Archives and Special Collections, she became his, “press agent, she changed his name to Jilson Setters, secured recording contracts, and booked him (as the ‘Singin’ Fiddler from Lost Hope Hollow’) in theaters.” Because I have heard this story so many times—the story of a folk tradition collector who views Appalachian musicians as, “study Anglo-Saxons” who “have held safe and unchange the balladry of Elizabethan days,” (Thomas 7)—I am wary of the seemingly innocent narrative presented on the Archives and Special Collection website.

It is harmful to support this narrative in any way, seeing as Appalachian traditions borrow from a number of cultural influences. While English, Scottish, and Irish traditions undeniably influence the cultural expression documented by Jean Thomas, there is just as much African-American and Native-American influence on Appalachian music, dance, and craft traditions. Taking into account both cultural sharing across race lines in Central Appalachia, and outright cultural stealing perpetuated by white Americans, the implications of a white, educated, able-bodied woman with financial means re-naming an Appalachian musician to cart him around the country as a perfect example of what it looks like to preserve pure Anglo-Saxon heritage are uncomfortable to say the least. At the same time, I am struck by the prospect of a world in which no photographs or documents of my ancestors or of Appalachian tradition exist.

While sifting through the numerous grainy black and white photographs displayed in UofL’s Jean Thomas Collection, I became overwhelmed. I swam in a sea of mixed emotions and gray pixels. Strong tides of sentiment pushed me this way and that. I found no balance, no conclusion. Up from the South I was swept by gratitude to have access to photographs of regular people from my region only to be pushed back by a Northern wave of discomfort at the strange costumes (both traditional Anglo-Saxon and Native American) worn by Jean’s subjects. I was swept to the West by disquiet at the names and descriptions of the photographs provided “by cataloger” from Jean’s comments on the photographs. All the while, I remained entirely submerged in the overwhelming quantity of content in the archive yet somehow disappointed by all that is overlooked and excluded. More than anything, I simply felt strained in the eyes from staring so long into the salty water of my backlit computer. So I popped my head above the waves, stuck my feet in the sand, and went for a walk.

Subject: Dress, Buddha, Truth, Dogs, Democratic Primary, Stringed Instruments

In my childhood bedroom, I dial a friend, a fiddle tune collector, a musician, a documentarian, a religious figure, a Rhodes scholar, a historian, a retired high school teacher named John Harrod and ask for his thoughts on Jean Thomas. Harrod is an archivist and fiddle-tune collector who set out on his own documentarian journey in the 70s. He played music with fiddlers across the state and documented their music

His voice floats out over the land
line and remarks that anyone
who feels moved to document
cultural practices is on a
spiritual journey

but that doesn't mean
they are right. A spiritual journey
just like John Lomax and his son Alan Lomax, or
Gus Meade, or John Harrod, or the Buddha himself.

Sometimes people on spiritual journeys
lose track of the truth. He says

Jean Thomas was on
a spiritual journey
through the mountains but her pilgrimage
went awry.

And while he is saying this he is also saying
who do you think can win the Democratic Primary
and how will we combat climate change and did the
dogs stop digging up the peas—you might need
peas this Spring with an urgency
you've yet to experience.

And while I am saying
Bernie Sanders, and we will not,
and dammit the dogs dug them up again,
I am also saying it's only March,
but the poor pear tree has accidentally
bloomed and we're expecting frost Saturday night.

As he speaks, I write on the back of an envelope

*people communicating
across cultural barriers*

nobody really got the whole picture

*she tried
to dress him
up and re-imagine*

*him as this
figure of
the past*

Dear Pilgrim,

If taking
a photograph of this man
with a fiddle is your church,
you're liable to warp him
into preacher—a position he
never sought. I see now

why you feel you ought
to re-name him—
to be more
truthful about distortion.

Subject: Women, Men, Infants, Bonnets, Mountains, Clotheslines

After photograph by Jean Thomas: "Eccentric' couple with baby, Greenup County, Kentucky."

A pair of overalls hangs by its center in the black and white
air on the clothesline invisible behind them. The "eccentric" couple,

Jean Thomas calls them. He sits holding the fussy baby with clasped
hands, and she stands with squint-eyes. The "miserable" couple,

Google Translate calls them. There they are so opossum
beautiful, angular mountain aesthetic, coal-town-tastic, cornbread

authentic with baby and title supplied by cataloger. Their eccentric
faces shaded by bonnet and hat. A pane of overalls disappears

behind them. Invisible clothesline suspends like hell and the depthless
hill beyond lazes about all day in the archive sun. No depth in grainy

black and white. Eccentric couple and baby appear to be seated in a green
screen studio. The photographer says, "Quick! Look

miserable for the camera." So authentic you'd think they were actually
hungry. So authentic with eccentric swollen ankles, eccentric sagging

breasts, eccentric clasped hands holding baby, eccentric
hunger, eccentric title supplied by cataloger.

Fishtank

In the morning,
 you wipe the crust
 from your archiveyes.

You make breakfast, and wash the dishes,
 finger the delicate lace of wet fried

archivegg blocking
 the drain-hole, and get
 back to swimming

through the grey-white
 expanse of saltwater.

An endless stream

of black and white pixels sweeps you
 to the South. Your skin dries

to a savory crisp as you attempt to find the
 Searchive's edge. You whisper things like: "map" "oral

history" "fiddle tune" "only
 foothills" "photo
 graph" "my mother"

"queer"

"tomato"

"blood"

in hopes that sound-waves will tread up against a wall.

Maybe this seemingly infinite body

of water has a boundary. Maybe it is only a fishtank at the zoo.

Subject: Men, Women, Boys, Costumes- -United States, Log cabins, People with disabilities

After Jean Thomas photograph: "Idiot' man with child and three women by old wooden house and shed"

Cataloger writes: "Described by Jean Thomas as "Idiot Man" the man in this image is wearing overalls and putting his finger to his nose. The child, a boy, crouches on the ground wearing a headband with feather. A young woman (standing) and old woman (seating [sic] next to man on bench) wear a dress and blouse and skirt, respectively. The third woman appears to be dressed as a Native American in a buckskin dress with fringe. Title supplied by cataloger."

Drinking green tea and sitting
by the window with cold feet
watching the dogs get ready
for their walk, I filter this image
through my internal language
machine

The five of them sit in front of an un-chinked
wooden structure. Standing woman is
beautiful. Below her crouches
a young boy with feathers
fastened around his head. Presumably what he thought to be the garb of a Native

American. Beside him, large man in overalls and hat has
finger across his nose. Most of his face is hidden. By his side a
woman looks tired
and unhappy. To her left,
a smiling woman sits in buckskin.

She is caught with eyes
half closed and right arm awkward.

Subject: Men, Women, Violins, Stringed Instruments

After photograph by Jean Thomas: "Annabel Morris, Jean Thomas, Jilson Setters, and unidentified woman."

An unknown woman is joined by
 Annabel Morris (center), Jean Thomas
 and fiddler Jilson Setters/Blind
 Bill Day (a pseudonym for James William Day,
 1860-1942). Everyone is awake. The women look
 young and disarmed standing above him. They appear
 to be a distraction from his tired face. His bow slashes diagonally
 across the photograph as if to divide that above
 from that below. I imagine vibration through the wood
 body of his fiddle. All that remains of him
 the vibration of light-beam through lens, through rods
 and cones upside down, then right-side up
 again. Everything is dark and hard
 to see. Everything is watchable and tough.
 Everyone is awake. This was her
 prayer/preacher/golden ticket. His pupils,
 like a light, do not change through the body
 of the poem. The witness tree of my poetry.
 Their soft foreheads are tornadoes
 of *that's mine, give it to me*. But all he has to offer is
 a fiddle tune. A whirlpool. An endless loop of A part,
 A part, B part, B part. All that's able to be preserved.

Subject: Women, Handicraft, Textiles, Purses, Log Cabins

After photograph by Jean Thomas: "Allie Fair Robinette of Turkey Fork standing by porch of cabin holding straw purse and woven piece."

The rationing of food

and preservation of motion. The loss of
a calorie, a shadow that falls

upon an object that makes
another shadow, and the shadow that falls upon her

face. Generalizing language. Words like

stuff, thing, and object. The word
resource begins to take

on a new meaning when faced
with "true" indigence. Imagine the thin

woman holding
a child as she doles out

portions of boiled wheat for her kinfolk. During
wartime, depression, and plague: portion
out flour in teaspoons. Try not to eat the seeds

before planting time or drink the last of the beer.

In the image, a woman stands in front of her
porch holding

a thin piece of cloth. A shadow

falls upon it, falls upon her.

The shadow's boundary

overlaps with a crease down the center
of the cloth. The woman's face

is obscured by darkness. A tree
crowns her head. It splays out behind her

like a network of alveoli. Strong lungs
backed by white sky. Strong

lungs. We'll be needing those.

Notes

Thomas, Jean. *Ballad Makin' in the Mountains of Kentucky*. 1939. Oak Publications, 1964.

From “Jean Thomas, The Traipsin’ Woman, Collection” in UofL Library Digital Collections:

Jean Thomas: “The Traipsin’ Woman”

<https://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/biography/collection/jthom/>

Jean Thomas: “Eccentric’ couple with baby, Greenup County, Kentucky.”

<https://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/jthom/id/643/rec/6>



“Allie Fair Robinette of Turkey Fork standing by porch of cabin holding straw purse and woven piece.”

<https://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/jthom/id/578/rec/3>



[8](#)

“Annabel Morris, Jean Thomas, Jilson Setters, and unidentified woman.”

<https://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/jthom/id/1343/rec/57>



“Idiot” man with child and three women by old wooden house and shed

<https://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/jthom/id/1371/rec/1>



Thanks also to John Harrod for sharing personal stories, opinions, and resources in relation to Jean Thomas' archival work.

III. Translation Museum



“Salt Lick Knob near Owingsville, Kentucky, 1920.”²

*Poems written in social isolation on my family's farm at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic:
Late February 2020-early April 2020.
Bath co., Kentucky.*

² From the Caulfield & Shook Collection in the UofL Special Archives and Collections.
<https://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/cs/id/5821/rec/6>

I heard this time has already passed

A wash-pail and stones
lie about
what was once the foundation
of a home. I pray
and greet the lingerers. Salute tense
air embedded along the once
door. Notice an animal scream
at the narrow gulley's head. Hide
and beet-red innards populate the path
back. I turn attention to the course
of breath as if this is the last
moment. The last turkey tail
plucked for broth, the last *I am in love*
with you, moss-patch, the last
cigarette, the last time this water
fall was heard, the last rustle
of my Mother's clothesline
in mid-May, and the final
sound of me turning
my hopes up as the folding
path wears away.

Poem for Almost Turkey Season

A walnut can surely be unskinned

by a tractor wheel

but also by many

a kinder method.

Either way, it's too late

to be eating

last Fall's rotten walnuts.

It remains

unclear

how the pants found their way

into the tiller tines,

but what we do know is

they weren't any of our pants.

Our arms are tired from doing all we can.

You see, the air

is drier than you'd think up here

and you ought not set a fire

until sundown.

We learned this the hard way.

Boundary

The night I put all of my belongings
into Google Translate was the same
night I decided to change my name
to “Area.” My first word was
“tree.” My first phrase was
“Dollar Tree.” My first anxious
uttering was, “Is it just me
or did that tree bloom earlier than
usual this year?” My first love
said unto me, “Area,
you are the least involved in capitalism
person I know.” My first step was
aimed at a butter dish. My first day
of fast was followed by congratulations
from all the women in my life. The lonely
well, the sinkhole, the space to fill, the
sweltering summer heat, the lake,
the binary, the nothingness,
and the reflection of my grief
walked into a bar and said, “the
translator really fucked this one up.”

Poem for Setting a Brush Fire

The moon glances down on our shoulder-
high pile of honeysuckle
in April. The month is over, another
weight dropped on our shoulders
in a pile of *dear April oh how the
moon is well on our shoulders*. This is neither a pain
we can bear, nor near enough water
to fill the cistern. It's not
a moon nor a symptom nor
a bank account. It's not my
body, my refusal, or my rightness.
This is something. It must be
burned. In the good days, we took
out our instruments and danced. We aimed
our faces towards the next thing
and waited with impatience for more
and more pleasure to come our way.
Now, we slump with a very bright glowing
pain and nothing else. On the best days,
we project hope into something like a future
but not exactly and imagine ourselves
reminiscing on the bad times. These are the closest things
we have to moments.

Dog Life

During the day, I untie loose ends and remove old barriers, fences, and rotted trellises while you loosen soil, carry five-gallon buckets of spring water up the hill, and pull ticks off the dogs and yourself. At night, we set fire to the uprooted rot I found and piled in the daylight. We pull out the lawn chairs to watch crisp coals undo. You say this is practice for the real-life equivalent of your childhood painting that hangs on the porch behind us: the top half a fading scene of acrylic flame engulfing the globe, and the bottom half a glacier encasing the planet. The two ends of another useless binary. Drunk as the skunk smelling dog we whine and drift off in the freshly mown lawn only to wake and begin the cycle again. While I see no real alternative to this spin of things, I sense we'll grow tired of our circle soon enough. I've become swollen from all the rotgut wine, and your spirit's starting to look saggy around the middle. As our centers each disappear beneath the pear patch twigs we're trimming, I think of the goose god Geb and his egg Isis. It must've been something like this to toil in Egypt and know no-one but your own siblings (and the hoop of sun that crowns your head). As the sunset falls over our daily burn-pile, I gaze to the south for Canis Major where lies the dog Sirius, known to the Egyptians as Isis in the sky, but no one ever taught me how to find the constellation, I've only read about it online. The milky firmament crackles as the night deepens its hold, and I look from one star to the next, as if to confirm something doggish in the diamond eyes of a memory of a memory of light. A library of light stares back at me, and to each of the doglike candidates I let my sternum whisper the memory of an ancient magic, an old request for companionship and protection. If it's you, Sirius would you follow at my feet for a while? Could you weather the unending rigor of awareness at my side if only for a moment?

Dog Life II

The girl dogs wake themselves in the vineyard and remember to deaden the last coals, to wash their faces in the garden bucket, to fill the water-pail again from the hoopsnake-infested spring, and to pluck many pieces of tender lettuce. You see, these particular girl dogs have some practice at repetition. This is a loop of sameness in isolation, so they hula hoop until it's time to text again *I don't know what I'm doing with this weak is a great night to come to the house and get coffee with me tomorrow if y'all are free.*

The girl dogs move their hips in circles and dig holes for greenhouse poles. They watch the news and load the dishwasher and spend most of their time blogging and re-blogging the forsythia and the underbelly of the hay-bail and wait for the buzz of their phones when it's time to text again, *I just got home from the woods I just got to work I love you I'll have a great weekend and love y'all I'll be home in a little while I'm so glad you like it I'm sorry you're not feeling well I just got to work and "I wanna" is a little weird.*

The girl dogs braid birthday flower crowns from early vetch then put them on and take them off. At dusk, they pull out the wine and chairs in the vineyard (again) and ask for each-others guidance through the flatlands of their emotional landscape. They traverse the arid sameness of desert, or icecap, or prairie, and discuss the merits of vacation, and the merits of going to every place Laura Ingalls Wilder ever lived in comparison to the merits of staying put. They discuss the rules for walking in the woods during turkey season, the loaded gun, and the concept of one's life as weaponry amid an era of biological warfare under a police state. And when the phone rings they always pick up.

A postcard from my parent's bathtub to the office of unemployment including a five-year plan:

In the first year, extract my emotional body from the sternum where it currently resides. Ideally, it will be spread out over the course of my physical body like peanut-butter and once that is done it will be time to move on to nourishment and art. In the second year, with a good solid base of silt and the person I love, I could grow anything here including a human child, but I would never do such a thing. Can you imagine the pain of being born? All the charge of livingness bound into a frame the size of a seedless watermelon. The size of a raisin is similar to the size of the eyes of my mother who buys our supplies, and the shape of a grape is similar to the splotch on the tape of the farmer's mistake. Rewind and play again his early okra burial and the venomous frost. Try again and again for three years to get it right. Wake up and wonder why I'm still lying on the same red couch in my same parent's house.

Poem for my beloveds in a time of crisis pt. 1

From here, there is nowhere to go
but into the woods for a walk
in the callous below the belly
to masturbate. Show me how to mourn
a planet we put moss over.
We cocoon ourselves in last
year's leaves and try to find some
rest, some liquid state, but
comings and goings still
accompany our every
move. There is a piece
of toast in the toaster
I watched brown and brown
for a minute while you made dinner and a
rock wall I watched disintegrate over the course of my life.
I remember a piece of fish overcooked
which is to say there was really
no going back and God with all
the environmentalists who raised me,
I knew the world would break
open at some point in my life,
but I thought at least we'd have enough
time, enough energy.

Mossy Place

I inhale this space which was once
my church, and is now a young
forest overrun with honeysuckle imported
by the USDA to hold soil in place on
deforested cow slopes. Two male cardinals spat
and flutter down a tree together as one
crimson droplet they shimmer
apart and onto the next branch.

I wait for some unity
to emerge, offer up lint
and spare change from the depths
of my canvas pockets. I'd give you this
dead nettle chimichurri and a loaf
of dried up bread if you'd only allow me
one more dance party. I listen for an answer, for
subwoofer through the thin oaks, the curly sycamores,
but there is only the sound of redbirds,
so I return to the hard work of pulling up
bush honeysuckle—the only really green thing of spring just yet
which is how you know
it's too good to be true. The heart
shaped leaves speckle the ground around my old
sanctuary now unmossed by the invasive

plant. I pull up root after root for hours until my hands are
raw. My lower back compresses, and I find myself
crying and praying in child's pose
on the forest floor. This is a music video
for a fiddle tune and Jean Thomas watches
from heaven confused, but planning a festival
somewhere nearby on a kudzu covered power line.
This is a music video for a hot new dance track,
and I am the party where you'll
find someone whose face you'd like to see crack
open in response to your very existence.

Cow Life

I count eight turkey vultures circling
overhead on my walk. Their red heads

blur as one red blood-cycle on the perfect
blue. I try to find the centerline of their

whirlpool—is it me they hunt? I dance over five
cow bones pressed into the asphalt. I move

from within my body on the road in the world
beneath the sky and across the long-field. I do it

for me and for me and for me. In the valley,
far off the road, I find the vulture's pivot

point. A rotting picked-over cow carcass begins
its year-long disintegration into the creek

bed. What a tender center to happen
upon—the memory of the knowledge

of the coming of death. The inescapable,
oft avoided truth that all of this—the hip

swinging, the long-field, the for me and for
me and for me, will culminate in carcass—scattered

in an out-of-the-way gulley and down the creek
to the larger creek to the little river to the larger river

to the even larger river to the strong sweep
of a gulf. Beyond it the indifferent seas wash

time towards and away from a fathomless tide
of exultation and affliction in the mitochondria of the living.

Out of Nowhen

Out of the window
Mama calls for *supper time*.

Out of spinach it's another mush
pile plate of nothing meal. Into the corn

another affair, a secret meeting
in the stalks. The dew and the dawn

because it's hard to stop
loving. People claim to follow

the dog's red tail out of the
woods. Out of bread,

we are hungry. We clutch
our empty bellies as cattle stop

to watch the rotten tree grow
while the "can't hold it up"

moans out of grief for her lost
wetlands from somewhere

along the abysmal outskirts
where a man retreats

into the realm of joy and begins
his work. Out of nowhere

the marijuana task force
flies over out of nowhere

the president out of nowhere
the police out of nowhere

the priest out of the spring
a slim layer of limestone

and the clay. It's tilling time
again. Choose a new patch.

The old one's dead. Straight lines
and curves made out of dirt

form an unexpected sculpture

drooped in youth—grown up

out of childhood. What you were
familiar with on the air and in the

airwaves is that the flesh of sin
is never going to be again. It's not

something, and you can too. This, the
profound change and rooting

upwards. On the hill, floods push up
grasses and mark impenetrable curves

with cliffs and upright walking paths, with
fake roots filled to the source land. Corn,

water, and butter straight from the limbs
of a tree. A dry well without a well. Your

grandfather sang, *oh you never miss the water
till the well runs dry*, and you, walking down

the unpaved road sing to his tune under your
breath, *oh you never miss the water till*

*the best button on the high-speed
rock-wall took your man (or maybe*

he just went to buy cigarettes), as you glance up
a small boy on the porch of a rundown trailer shouts

Look there! In sort of an old fashioned way he says,
a line we thought disappeared years ago. Look there! An

*unexpected image went into childhood
bending to a small size. The place where*

*the old house once was is beautiful
with many straight lines and loops—irises*

rise all in a square. And just when
you think you have it unraveled, the cops

come out of a thick bed of Northern grass
rooted in lies. And just when you think you

have it figured out, out of nowhere the where

Poem for my beloveds in a time of crisis pt. 2

From here, there is nowhere to go

but into the streets

in the wound along the thigh

to bellow. Mourn

the moss itself covering

a wound so deep we

burn last years leaves and

try to find some humanity

in the peppered air,

the liquid state, of

police brutality

always evading

justices. Restless ghosts

accompany our every

move. There is a spray

bottle with vinegar

in my backpack

and a rock wall you built

waiting to be dismembered over

the course of events

raked over which is

to say there is really

no going back and God with all

the racists who raised me,
I knew the world would break
open at some point in my life,
but I thought at least someone
would stop it from bleeding
out under a burnt sun.

Sinkhole

Here is the Hickory tree, here is the hay-bail, and here
is the dog. Here is the collapse and opening, failure

and introduction, open space provided by loss. Autumn
and vacant branches. Nuts drop into my cupped spine, I

smash my feasting palm to the cavernous expanse below
chewing and swallowing. My cavity filled with meat of the very

Earth I feed. The very earth that feeds me. The very Earth
I feed. The very Earth that feeds me. The very water—this process

of exchange, this space—the reward
of loss. The loss of a reward. This liquid bubbling
from below, this liquid

sinking down, this dog
moving my surface
about with her paws. This source,
this opening,
this failure.

IV.

The Thing that Held the Whole Thing Together

With a nod to Mark Nowak.



Keith Basso—an ethnographer who studies landscape and language among the Western Apache people—describes the past as a place. According to him, human sense of place is more of an internal compass—an imagined landscape—than a physical reality.

I'm tired of trying to keep track of
 everything happening on the inside // everything happening on the outside

On the outside
 tulle adorns
 a mossed city tree. Droplets of
 thawing snow cling to its gossamer
 grid and blades of grass push
 through its pink.

Basso says memories are too faulty to trust, so we create an
 internal geography of the past in order to navigate the present.

On the inside, pastel auras
 of sensation buoy and overlap
 into murky brown amoebas
 of thought that will not fit
 the template. Bodily magma
 emerges along fault lines of
 the gossamer grid bursting where
 colors meet—Is there anything
 faultless enough to trust? Can land
 scape end?

The Western Apache people use 'place-talk' to teach social norms. They embed parables in the places that surround them, and when a community member exhibits socially unacceptable behavior, they say the name of a place, an arrow of wisdom directed at the wrongdoer.

A Western Apache place named Sá Silí Sidáhá (She Became Old Sitting).

I notice in line
 at the coffee shop
 I can't even accurately
 remember the shape
 of my home landscape.
 I feel out of place, or rather
 placeless with these
 headphones in. A man
 and his dog enter my field
 without asking. I shoot
 my arrow: An East Kentucky
 place named Salyersville (An Old
 Woman Puts Milk in the Cabinet
 and Forgets Her Toast is Ready
 While Nursing Her Mother Through

the Late Stages of Alzheimer's).

Out of left field, the distorted vision of my home landscape: the mossy place, the limestone creekbed, the hillside towering above a rock-stacked spring bent through the lens of my reoccurring dreams. A refraction of the "real," but somehow the only "real" I possess now that the runoff and honeysuckle have carried away the terrain of my childhood.

In an interview with Kentucky country musician Tyler Childers, a man from Colorado comments on Childers' songs: *There's so much story and place. It's funny because when people talk about coal country they talk about that there's not as many jobs as there used to be and there's an epidemic of drugs going on. People talk about Boulder they think about legal weed and Birkenstocks. A lot more happens here than those two things, right?*

I shoot my arrows:

An East Kentucky place named Sally Ann Mountain (A Man Breaks His Leg Spelunking upon the Sight of Something Beautiful).

Here is the way most conversations go between an Appalachian and an outsider:

O: You are in pain.

A: Stop victimizing us.

O: You aren't in pain.

A: Acknowledge our pain.

O: You are in pain.

A: Stop victimizing us.

O: You aren't in pain.

In a Q&A about female union organizers in Appalachia, historian Jessica Wilkerson says, "Insider/Outsider framing is just garbage."

The sparkling water can marking the trail, the bud light can along the road, the night-time brigade of four-wheeler lights floating across the long horizon, the fresh cigarette butt by the barn, the Panasonic portable radio and fireball uprooted after a flood, the old codeine bottles pulled out of herb beds, the arrowheads pulled out of the fields, the rope pulled out of the tiller tines, the shoes pulled off of my feet.

A Western Apache place named Chaa Bi Dalt'ohé (Shades of Shit).

It's funny because I can't seem to digest anything.

I want more than anything to tell you how capitalism has affected the environment and sense of place, in East Kentucky but I'm not entirely sure how it has.

A Western Apache place named Goshtl'ish Tú Bil Sikáné (Water Lies With Mud In An Open Container).

If you were a history teacher, I would ask you: When will landscape end?

It feels so soon. Looking
 up from his laptop, my
 friend says, “come thru,
 green algae.” It’s hard to digest
 anything at all. Don’t over-intellectualize our culture // don’t call us ignorant
our identity’s changed and that’s where we’re at and we were born in this place.

In a nightmare, I run into [] at []’s funeral and have to ask [], “How did you know []?”

I wake up and write in the notes on my phone “for podcast interview remember to ask ATOMO
 who are some of the ghosts—living or dead—floating around you daily?”

A Western Apache place named ‘Istaa Hadaanáyolé (Widows Pause For Breath).

How is it that anyone can get anything done in a place like this—a place where everything hurts?

Rock piles cleared out of the fields in generations past, empty bullet shells scattered across the
 cowhill, an entire cemetery of unmarked graves for children who died of Spanish influenza, a twenty
 mile radius of forest overtaken by bush honeysuckle, a thread snagged by the blackberry briar.

A Western Apache place named Kolah Dahch’ewoolé (She Carries Her Brother On Her Back).

I’m tired of coming
 to conclusions and making claims,
 though it was fun to pretend—
 if only for a moment—that I am
 the speaker of this poem, that this
 is my voice, that some essential kernel
 of self exists indistinguishable
 from the rest of the galaxy. Maybe,
 I am just an encasement meant
 to fence in a corner of the milky
 way. The overlapping light of stars
 both newborn and waning
 undulates in my ribcage as I overflow with breath,
 with question, with the start of an
 utterance. How might an open
 container address climate change
 in Appalachia when the concepts of climate,
 Appalachia, and change all remain
 unclear? *There is so much in them, there’s
 so much story and place.* I shoot
 my arrows: Olive Hill Soldier Farmers
 Hope Means Winetown Slade Artville
 Wheel Rim Blaze Maize Wrigley.

Near the end of the interview, Colorado man asks, *Are there some people that are, in some ways in your mind, just really struggling with that [the economy]. What are they going to do next?*

Tyler responds, **I mean, yeah just as much as there is everywhere. There's a lot of good things to be said about where I'm from...** I chop onions with my laptop precariously balanced on the toaster saying, "yass, Tyler," as my eyes well.

We took a pretty heavy hit as a people just because our whole entire economy was based around coal...all of these people were employing hard working individuals. I flip over to search tab for "tear gas treatment" and start putting baking soda and bottled water in my online grocery deliver shopping cart.

And then once the thing that held the whole thing together went down...that was that. It's you know I mean we've had a time or two in our history where our identity has changed and that's where we're at and we were born in this place, but originally—we were the first West. You had to be crazy to move out there and try to settle this area, "Crazy," I echo later that evening putting on my pepper-print mask and my goggles and my gloves and walking downtown past the distillery, past the boutique, past the gallery to the courthouse. "You had to be crazy."

and then a bunch of crazy people went out there and tried to do that, and their identity was—we were—frontiersman, and then people on the East coast started to recognize the wealth of...what's the word?

Resources.

Tyler says, **Resources. That's the word. The wealth of resources. I'm not a history teacher or anything.**

Colorado man interrupts, *No! We don't need to go too deep here or anything. I just...it's a beautiful part of the country. And I've been lucky enough to spend some time in Eastern Kentucky hitchhiking around and playing music and meeting people...*

A Western Apache place named Ndee Dah Naaziné (Men Stand Above Here And There).

I'm tired of pretending
language can be
clear. It wouldn't matter
what language I spoke to the
moon. I move my mouth to find no
sound, only light comes out. This is
how my body moves when I have given
up on drawing lines with language
and landscape ends and there is no
place-talk for my milky lips
to form nothing

concrete to fence in but still
 lessons to be learned and no
 more wisdom arrows there is
 no ground to grasp at
and we can't let this
identity that we've not
really even had that long
hold us back it would
 not matter what language
 I spoke to the crevice I
 want to read a whole page
 of run-on sentences I want
 to smoke a whole silo full
 of cigarettes this is self
 care day hunny I want to say
 things like 'thing' and 'stuff'
 and 'dooickey' the body
 that held the whole self
 together went down if you were
 a history teacher I'd ask
 you *Are there some people*
that are, in some ways in
your mind I guess I
 should clarify that yes
 I am from Appal
 achia, but no I'm not
 from coal country I'm
 from a county bordering
 coal country that never
 had a thing to hold it
 together this open
 container of me takes
 place outside of the
 designated boundaries
 of pain, but *we don't need*
to go too deep here or anything

Wilkerson says, "the middle-class women couldn't absorb what was being shared with them."

I shoot my arrows:

An East Kentucky place named Town & Country Foodmart (If You Steal My Credit Card Information Again, My Mama Will Kick You Out of Drug Court).

An East Kentucky place somewhere halfway between Moon and Martha (You'd like To've Never Seen the Sun Again in the Quietest Holler for a Fiddle Tune).

My therapist advises me to use “I feel” statements when I get overwhelmed, so I sit in my bed and say *the thing that held the whole thing together went down*, or rather, “I feel” *the thing that held the whole thing together went down*.

A good smelling
famous poet presses between the two of us
as she makes her way to the stage
in all black to read another poem about
birth. When she is done, I lean into the cave
of your chest and say, “Scatter
my ashes. I am dead.”

I feel cyborgish with these headphones in.

I feel like my body hurts and my mind hurts and lord does my heart hurt, and how the hell does anyone get anything done in a place like this—a place where everything hurts?

I build a brown mush
hill, the Riddle/Whaley Graveyard, Appal
achia, my Mother’s face, a version of the past,
solar panels, a worst-case scenario called
‘cowpocalypse,’ the time I went home
at 2 am and the creek was up so high I
couldn’t get to the house so I slept
in the car until dawn when the water
receded. In the notes on my phone, I wrote:

I came home two weeks ago with a burn ban and no rain
for 40 days. Daddy was boiling sorghum over kerosene camp
stove instead of his usual brush fire in the yard. It rained the day
I left, and nearly every day since, and now I’m here with no one
to call, no cell service, waiting for the water to recede. I’ll sleep in
the car tonight if the rain doesn’t stop. Not the end of the world.
Or the end of the world? Everything’s quite biblical.

I say to my dad, “There’s a certain kind of shtickish ‘look at me I’m from Appalachia’ writing I just can’t get behind. Like, do you really believe she’s ever killed a chicken?”

My dad says, “it’s not exactly cultural appropriation, but, I guess maybe you’d call that ‘found poetry?’”

I shoot my arrows:

An East Kentucky place named Supercenter I-64 Motorplex (Quiet Down I Can Hear You from My House).

An East Kentucky place named Shoulderblade (Breathless from an Endless Climb).

I just...it's a beautiful part of the country. a minute ago, when
I tripped up on resources I meant to say that it was fun to pretend—if only for a moment—that the speaker of this poem could make the world a wieldy place, the speaker wakes up and writes in the notes on their phone:

Nightmare where I am running as fast as I can muster down the interstate during the apocalypse. We stop at the McDonald's for food but they don't make our order right. They run out of fries. No refund. We overhear a woman talking about all the banks being closed. Any money you had in the bank now null. We forgot to withdraw.

The speaker tells their boss about the dream and their boss laughs, “of course the apocalypse would be cash only.”

Wilkerson says, “they wanted people to just do right by them. Why is that so...it shouldn't be so revolutionary.”

An East Kentucky place named Confluence (She Was Swept Away Where the Creeks Meet).

A Western Apache place named Túzhi' Yaahigaiyé (Whiteness Spreads Out Descending To Water).

Notes:

Tyler Childers on eTown: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-E-Jlt6AtM>

Keith Basso “Wisdom that Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache People.”

Talk with Jessica Wilkerson at the Lexington Gathering on her new book “To Live Here, You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice.”