

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY  
LEWIS HONORS COLLEGE

**APPALACHIAN ADOLESCENCE: A CREATIVE EXPLORATION  
OF HOME, NATURE, AND SOCIAL PROGRESS**

by

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## Abstract

The Central Appalachian coalfields provide a rich culture to the American landscape, often shielded from outsiders to the region. While prevailing stereotypes of the region describe those living there as two-dimensional, the identity of Appalachia has always been complex— whether through the rich history with labor struggles, gender equality, or social progress. Finding one’s identity in a place that has been so strictly held to its stereotypical perceptions can be difficult. This creative project draws inspiration from my own experiences in Southeastern Kentucky as well as a myriad of stories collected through archival research in the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Kentucky as well as oral interviews provided by Appalachians in the community. These manifestations take the form of a chapbook entitled *Appalachian Adolescence*, a collection of poetry detailing the complexity of rural identity with special attention to the intersections of gender, labor, nature, and coming-of-age narratives. Included in the chapbook are previously published works as well as new works produced throughout my undergraduate career. Blending the experiences of regional history with a modern perspective brings forth an image of the Appalachian heritage as contemporary and artistic where other creative perceptions depict the region as archaic. By highlighting these stories in a creative work, *Appalachian Adolescence* aims to deconstruct monolithic narratives of the region and to inspire future Appalachian authors to write and live their truths.

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## MISPLACED APPALACHIAN

I washed my hands of Appalachian earth,  
turned my back on gray skies I claimed since birth—  
no cool, dark mountains and cricks of my youth  
no cigar smoke smell enticing my sweet-tooth.

For years, it seems, I dreamed of the escape  
from stereotypes, pollution, and hate,  
filthy thoughts clouding the minds of those near  
when the twang in my hidden drawl appears.

But once I was gone, I looked all around,  
my ears latched onto a pecul'er sound—  
a woman singing "*go on, child, and roam  
but don't you dare forget your mountain home.*"

And all these years later, nothing has changed.  
I hear those mountains whispering my name.

## APPALACHIAN MUD

(part one)

We were sixteen and I'd never ridden  
a four wheeler before,  
but my tanned fingers curled into your t-shirt  
the first time I held you close.

I remember the rough smell of sweat,  
mingling with the cool mud  
though I couldn't see the trail  
peeking over your broad shoulders.

So I gazed up through the trees,  
and lay my head against your neck  
while the hum of the engine and the smell  
of your shampoo kept me company.

That night, I scrubbed the hardened dirt  
from my fingertips and behind my ears,  
but my soapy hands hesitated over my lips,  
afraid of scrubbing off pieces of you.

## I DO IT FOR YOU

I lay in your arms

    drinkin' the sweaty motor oil  
smell on your old t-shirt  
    while dirty hands left black prints  
on my jawline and shoulders  
    even after you'd had a shower  
but I don't mind a little graffiti.

I asked you once with eyelashes

    brushin' against your cheek  
why you had worked so hard  
    makin' a young body old  
knees poppin' years before  
    your hairline slid back  
in a voice more sincere than death  
    *I do it for you*  
But I never asked for that.

## APPALACHIAN MUD

(part two)

At eighteen, it was time to go—  
*there's no future for a woman in the hills—*  
Itching to leave since birth,  
now my bare feet couldn't take a step.

I would miss those redbud springs,  
the muddy summers, of course,  
our two straws peeking out of an autumn lemonade,  
and your hand in mine on a winter walk.

I would miss the accent  
dripping from the ends of my words—  
the one I couldn't find beautiful  
until you called me *darlin'*

Mostly, I would miss your  
strong hands tangled in my hair,  
tracing my curves against the landscape  
of the mountains, lying in the bed of your truck.

I'm no expert, but real love  
is not the thrill of a four wheeler  
racing through the mountains  
upset by each dip in the path ahead.

Real love is like mud—  
consistent, constant.  
And as long as there's dirt,  
I will love you.

## I FEEL SO TIED TO YOU

as you sleep I trace the contours  
of your nose your heavy brow  
my fingers brush your skin quietly  
their dance keeps you asleep  
the lullaby in my head a memory  
blurry now the details forgotten  
a cold spring night in the bluegrass  
libra moon hidden from sight  
of two lovers sittin' on the porch  
so careful their fingers linked  
no wonder I feel so tied to you.



## MAMAW'S HANDS

Her hands work faster than the old Singer gathering dust in the hallway closet. The machine would do just fine but her hands were far better at pulling together the memories from her bag of scraps, weaving tragedies, comedies, stories of love ingrained in the threads. The fabric from Papaw's work pants, my uncle's Carhartt jacket that finally tore last time we had a big snow, dresses from babies that turned to shirts in passing seasons, and a brand new yard of something that she bought to bring the whole quilt together.

Working with an eighth grade education and rearing six youngins at the same time, Mamaw would never let you see how much she didn't know. She didn't know much about calculus but she could do long division to make sure the contents of the pantry kept everyone fed. Her grammar wasn't quite perfect but she taught us all to write in cursive before we could speak a full sentence. Mamaw wasn't a scholar, but she taught us lessons in her kitchen more valuable than I ever learned in a classroom.

What mamaw did know, she showed with her hands. Hands that smoothed hair to give forehead kisses, hands rolling fresh biscuits on a Sunday morning, hands sewing like she was now. Sewing together fragments on her family tree; weaving intricate patterns reminding us of our home. And I just lay here watching the stories come together from underneath the quilting frame; my tea parties secure beneath her protective hands.

## ONE WINTER WEEK

Monday, I went to visit you:  
I had the day off for MLK day,  
what fourth grader doesn't  
spend her days off in a hospital.

Tuesday, I was in school all day,  
but I was thinking about you.  
My birthday was coming up  
and we were going to share it.

Wednesday, I couldn't see you.  
I went to piano lessons after school as usual  
and didn't hear the news until I was  
home.

Thursday, it stormed all day long.  
It started the night before  
and I can still remember the way it  
shook the house.

Friday, we buried you.  
The rain had turned into snow,  
and it made a dangerous hike of the climb  
to your new bed.

Saturday was my birthday.

Sunday came but never left.  
The family gathered together for a dinner:  
for you and for me  
and yet we still weren't together.

My birthday is on Saturday again next year too.  
As I have grown over the past decade,  
I feel your presence in myself:  
my Appalachian twang,  
my snarky attitude.  
Maybe you aren't gone at all.

## FROM MY GRANDMA'S PORCH

If I stand on my grandma's back porch,  
to watch cool mornings where mountaintops  
peek around pools of gray fog,  
I can see everything—  
the Big Lots parking lot,  
La Peña Mexican Restaurant.

On my grandma's back porch  
there are no images dripping in sepia colors—  
no Shelby Lee Adams or poverty porn,  
no images taken two weeks ago  
edited, printed in a magazine  
to make it seem like a lifetime has passed.

From my grandma's back porch  
I sit and watch the cars weave  
through roads well traveled,  
search for deer hiding between trees—  
not desolate, deplorable, dead—  
a portrait of Appalachian *life*.

## AUNT PEGGY

Razor scooters in a cul-de-sac,  
cold ham and cheese sandwiches,  
*wait thirty minutes before gettin' back in the water,*  
blue raspberry smiles, and popping sparklers,  
how the sunny days remind me of you.

The rain does that to me also,  
singing music my grandma wouldn't like  
against the percussion of a Kentucky thunderstorm,  
hiding under the stairs during a tornado warning—  
(I always knew I was safe with you there).

Most often when I think of you,  
I think of a warm voice reminding me,  
*you don't want one of these baby,*  
a Marlboro dangling from a bony finger.  
Warnings I wish you'd have listened to yourself.

When people think of the smell of a cigarette,  
they smell that death-stricken stench  
that sticks to your clothes,  
poisons your breath,  
but I think of you.

You smelled like Coppertone summers,  
Hot-n-Ready pizzas,  
ice cold Coca Cola,  
Thanksgiving carrot cakes,  
And, yes, even cigarettes.

Those cigarettes that remind me  
of a cold and bleached-white hospital,  
of being assured of remission  
just to find out, months later,  
that doctors can't always work miracles.

And maybe it wasn't the cigarettes,  
maybe a lifetime of waiting tables  
in the smoking section, those heavy clouds  
finding a home in your lungs, your head  
as you just worked to keep a roof over yours.

Or maybe it was the lifetime in a coal town,  
industrialization, rich men from cities  
hundreds of miles from ours,  
polluting our air, taking your lungs.  
I'm sure the cigarettes didn't help, though.

Now "maybes" are pointless,  
rattling in my head like dice in our hands  
a snow day board game, and we gambled  
for your fate. And yet, four years later, I can't  
Smell a cigarette without a smile on my face.

LOVE THE COLOR OF RUST

*after "You're Not Alone" by Our Native Daughters*

Small hands press  
into my back as my heels

kick up the dirt  
to a beat only we can hear

and the rust  
from the chains

spreads across my hands  
like bows across a string.

The music, the trill  
of our youngest cousin

crying, *it's my turn!*  
the measures

of our solstice day.  
Orange handprints

spread across my face,  
my sister's, my cousins too;

they aren't mad—  
they love being young,

being messy, and  
before we know it,

*It's my turn!*  
Playground song plays on

the four of us,  
a quartet of girlhood.

Girls with fire engine hands  
to match faces turning crimson

in the late evening.  
Until we pass that red, loud,

love across all our hands—  
aunts, moms, and grandmas—

singing together that silly song  
And tonight,

rust colored bath water  
will drain in all our tubs.

## AFTER THREE DAYS INSIDE

Bare feet dance across the cold, wooden flooring,  
Winter in the barren hills keepin' 'em locked inside,  
but the girls don't let that get to them.  
Time moves so slowly at this age,  
and school wouldn't be back until the roads cleared.  
A worn-down voice breathes through the radio static  
*four more inches of snow tonight—*  
laughter rings through the bedroom, sighs erupt in the kitchen—  
*whoever's conjurin' all this snow oughta quit—*  
feet come down hard and the girls dissolve into a puddle,  
melting to each other's company as the snow  
melts off daddy's work boots.

The radio cuts off and momma is breathin'  
down their necks now—  
*girls come get your hair brushed—*  
giggles punctuate the thundering of excited footsteps.  
Cabin fever beckons delirium,  
and momma hasn't gotten a brush through their  
rats nests since the first flurry hit the ground.  
The eldest takes her duty seriously,  
sittin' on the footstool, tryin' to hold her neck up.  
Bristles tear through the thickness,  
as daddy's shovel tears through the snow.



## AMAZON FACTORY TOWNS

*“Plentiful new jobs at higher wages in places  
with cheaper housing sounds like a solution to inequality”  
Conor Sen, The Bloomberg Opinion 2021*

Coal dust swirls in circles on the shower floor,  
a bottle of Jim beam sits on the tub ledge,  
joints creak and moan from standing upright  
for the first time since the morning.

“Uncle Sam needs that extra shovelful”  
so Harlan County sits on the tracks—  
not permitting that black gold to leave its home.  
That is *my* home.

A home long too picked over by the Big Man:  
a land of extraction, exploitation, expiration  
and money only buys those bareback items  
while Miss Dolly sings “9-5.”

A home where the men all live underground  
and the women pray on the surface.  
and the youngins play in the empty houses  
after a mine collapse.

Did the Big Man see my grandmother sew flour sack dresses—  
see her dig through the garden, on her knees  
prayin’ that her double weddin’ ring quilt  
won’t be torn down the middle?

Now the Big's Man's gonna *lift the working class*,  
but are we on the ground?  
Big Man, don't you remember?  
    you *forced* us underground.

And not LBJ waging imaginary wars  
nor some other Big Man can keep us out of that hole.  
I know one thing for certain:  
    can't build no economy at the company store.

So keep your factories, Big Man.

I'll keep my purple mountains,  
my safe place carved from hillsides—  
dug under the surface by my grandfather  
    and his father.

I'll keep my promises of watching over  
the land that claimed me for my birth.  
I'll keep her safe from you, Big Man.  
    But you'll keep being greedy.

## EULOGY FOR THE SUMMER

The sun does not shine bright on my old Kentucky home; it peers out around mountains into the caves of old mines—we spent our last summer of high school drivin' up the mountain until we got lost, faces stretched wide with laughter, lookin' around the truck bed at faces we've known our entire lives, listenin' to an old man on WSGS talk about somethin' we don't care to listen to, and hopin' a good song comes on—a perfect mesh of tobacco blossoms and old beer cans and while the prettiest girl at school wouldn't be caught dead in my truck, she'd spend afternoons flirtin' with me at the Dairy Bar, chattin' about prom and wearin' my varsity jacket in the cool evenings.

When summer came around again, three of my friends were underground with me, two off to college, and one strung out somewhere in the city. That pretty girl from last summer wants nothing to do with me and I really miss those days when I didn't have to use blackout curtains to get some rest before third shift.

## BLACK GOLD

*"I trust that we dwellers in the huckleberry pastures, which are our heath-lands, shall be slow to adopt the notions of large towns and cities, though perchance we may be nicknamed "huckleberry people." But the worst of it is that the emissaries of the towns come more for our berries than they do for our salvation."*

*-Henry David Thoreau, Huckleberries*

Black roots curl underground and all some see is gold—  
a gold with no shine or gleam.  
Value hides under the crust of this strange gold  
and diamonds drip from the seam.

A rich man pays us to dig up the gold  
in money we could never redeem.  
He built a little village so *we'd* have no gold,  
and picks the mountains clean.

He makes us crawl in mine shafts to get his gold—  
so dark we can hardly see.  
We die in the darkness surrounded by gold  
never again to be seen.

## SKELETON WAR

*after "Island of Lost Souls" by Robert Morgan*

My daddy was a skeleton  
by the time I was born,  
alive but down in a hole.  
He'd been in the ground  
since he was only sixteen  
chasing some other man's gold.

Daddy pulled me aside  
when I became a man  
and told me his deepest wish—  
*Stay out of the ground  
and stay out of trouble.  
Life will take care of the rest.*

I buried him young,  
ragged bones in the dirt,  
just as they'd been my whole life.  
Something told me the way  
to make sure my son never did the same  
was to roll up my sleeves and fight.

I rallied my men—  
boys like me—  
whose daddies all died the same way.  
Strong men, tall men,  
reduced to the marrow of their souls,  
pushing for a fair, even pay.

Our silent resistance,  
along the tracks,  
was really a sight to see.  
And when that silence caused violence  
by the men in charge,  
we didn't give up or flee.

I fought my way from the hole  
and into the sun  
to see the wreckage we caused.  
The light pulled at my eyeballs,  
looking up through my fingers  
and the sight here gave me pause—

Examining my digits,  
pale and crooked,  
porous in the morning dew,  
I realized then  
to my utter surprise  
that *I* was a skeleton too.

So if you'd like to fight,  
join my crew  
as we fight for a better day—  
just know that the strike  
like any good cause  
will have a tall price to pay.

The work underground  
is hard and dark  
But the work up here is the same.  
Revolution is coming  
and like it or not  
you've now become part of our game.

## WE GIVE OUR SWEAT

Eye sockets searching silently in dark caverns,  
A stop for salty springs,  
And dust that closes up your throat  
if you're lucky enough to become an old man.

*We give our sweat.*

Pickaxes become drills become heavy machines,  
But all machines need men,  
To hammer out the fine details,  
And to tunnel underground.

*We give our sweat.*

The strike of the ax,  
Ground teeth into the mountainside,  
Every man in the town  
On his hands and knees for his family

*We give our sweat.*

You'd think that sweat,  
That precious nectar, pulling the heat from  
the body's engine and turning it cool,  
Would be worth more than the coal,

*Our sweat isn't enough.*

And so we send our men,  
Bright boys who never knew nothin' different,  
Who spent their lifetimes watching their daddies die in mines,  
Too young to know to ask for more,  
*We give our blood.*

Pumping blood pumping coal  
To the center of the region  
To the center of the nation  
That bruised, broken, beatin' heart.  
*We give our blood.*

And outsiders call us hicks, and rednecks  
Tell us we're ignorant, lazy  
A number of things we've never been allowed to be.  
Call us all the same, when we're much more than that.  
*We give our blood.*



## ABOVE GROUND RAILROAD

You've heard the stories of railroads underground,  
Silent tracks, silenced voices—  
I heard that clacking of a coal-burning engine,  
pumping in the name of progress.

How a man stolen from his birth waters,  
his mother's womb, winds up free  
and bound again. Sold legally, again,  
plantations turned coal mines in the hills.

They brought them in droves—  
black, white, foreigners with a new language  
rubbery in their mouths.  
Brought us in equal parts to prevent unions.

*But mining is dangerous no matter what color you are,*  
I heard someone say,  
and where there are black miners,  
what follows is the UMWA.

He said he knows a thing or two about  
working for a fair even pay;  
not separate nor equal  
just workin' every day.

That was the first time I saw our complexions in such a light.

## WOMEN ARE GETTIN' INTO EVERYTHING

They said they'd hire one of me  
for every four of you. That was in '78,  
so maybe I should count my blessings  
but if I hear one more person say  
*women are gettin' into everything now*  
I'm gonna lose it.

Of course we're getting into everything—  
They'll actually pay us for busting our ass in  
the dust and the dark. What would I do otherwise?  
Raise a family? With what money?  
I got none of my own.  
I don't wanna lose it.

I saw the world differently under there, driving  
carts designed decades ago for a male body,  
doing work women did for generations—  
y'all only got mad because you thought it would  
affect my ability to make new coal miners,  
I'm gonna lose it.

See, from birth, women are given dolls, spatulas tools of domestic  
labor, But if I had my choice 'tween a pickaxe and a broom handle  
I'd be hammerin', chippin' away at the earth's core,  
singing songs my sisters on the surface wrote  
to the tune of that solemn beat.  
That oughta keep me from losin' it.

Because I know none of y'all's stories mentioned us  
the divine feminine of an underground cave  
fighting the stereotype and the superstition  
and the men who don't want us there  
but won't let us live anywhere else.  
Maybe it was never ours to start with.

EVELYN WILLIAMS

I heard a story of a woman  
who came from where I come from  
but lived a life so differently from my own—

Second generation born free  
taught me a lot about lovin' the land,  
holdin' on to what you care about,  
livin' with the fear of it being taken.

*All I know how to do is be an activist*  
I heard her say. She didn't want no one  
to tell her how to use her land, her home,  
Taught me how the best way to be is independent  
'cause they'll abuse you otherwise.

She shared her stories—  
the lynchings that happened in our hometown  
the white sheet marches through townships in the county  
things my history teachers thought  
I shouldn't see exposed to her young eyes.

So when I hear her say,  
*Someone will go to jail*  
*and someone will go to hell if you come on my property,*  
I have no choice but to join her cause,  
Plant myself on that long-softened grass  
burrow myself into the fearless nature  
she had to adapt, and I only adopted because I cared.

## THERE ARE NO MOUNTAINS IN CENTRAL KENTUCKY

It was the last day of the first March  
since I had moved out  
I could not figure out what was missing:

The weather was warmer,  
days were longer,  
I was driving with the windows  
rolled all the way down.

The city taking its first sip of spring,  
kids playing hopscotch on the sidewalk,  
and my hair twisting into blonde knots  
as I drove through the loud intersections.

My new home came alive  
but yet something was wrong  
with this perfect Spring day.

I hadn't seen my hometown since December.  
I hadn't sipped Shamrock Shakes with my best friend  
or gone hunting for the prize Easter egg with my little sister.  
I hadn't driven down Highway 15 since  
the expansion that took twenty minutes off my drive home  
had first ripped away pieces of our mountains.

For decades, this is how I welcomed spring:  
from the purple bedroom in my parents' house.

Summer would bring memories of chlorine-stained hair  
or riding through the mountains on the back of an ATV.  
Summer means skeeter bites and cookouts—  
building a fire on an old strip job.

Autumn would welcome the *Black Gold Festival*,  
eating chicken on a stick while remembering a time I never knew.  
Autumn is Hazard High School football games while watching  
the Appalachian mountains turn into a mosaic of orange and red.

Winter is *Christmas in a Small Town*  
local businesses joining together for a winter parade.  
Winter brings the mountains closer than any other season  
as everyone huddles together for warmth in the hollers.

And then, it dawned on me,  
why this spring afternoon felt so different,  
like the warmth enveloping my new urban home  
for the first time since October:

This had been the first March that I hadn't seen a redbud tree.

## HATEFUL JANUARY

Winter's always been my favorite season,  
but I hate when it gets too cold.

Mercury tips below 30  
and all hell breaks loose.

It's too cold to sit with the earth  
on porch furniture buried six inches under.

Too cold to walk among leaves  
so I'm skatin' in sneakers down the sidewalk.

Too cold to splash in the crick  
with hands frostbit just from checkin' the mail.

But do you know the worst thing about the cold,  
the hateful January frost?

It's too cold to brave the curved roads  
connectin' my hill to your holler.

And far too cold to spend another minute  
without you in my arms.

Maybe winter isn't my favorite season at all.

## FLOOD

A week of rain  
thunder echoes in the hollers  
river rises an inch or two  
not enough to mean nothin’

A week of rain  
thunder echoes in the hollers  
river rises an inch or two  
little water in the basement  
not enough to mean nothin’

A week of rain  
thunder echoes in the hollers  
river rises an inch or two  
little water in the basement  
let the dogs sleep upstairs tonight  
not enough to mean nothin’

A week of rain  
river racing outside your porch door  
maybe you have a tall truck  
maybe you can drive up the mountain  
bring your dogs and your weddin’ photos  
let the kids sleep through this mess

A week of rain  
river runnin’ into your livin’ room  
but maybe you don’t have a truck  
maybe the river rose so high it meant somethin’  
and now you’re in the attic clutchin’ your babies  
tellin’ them it’s gon’ be alright  
and will it?

A week of rain  
now coursing through your holler  
and you don't know if your buddy's alright  
but you know he can't swim  
water over his roof  
sitting on your own roof  
just you and the dogs and the younguns

A century of rain  
and the coal mines didn't plan for this  
that river that bathed you in the hot summers  
taking your whole holler  
and no one is coming to help  
but your neighbor with a boat  
half your neighborhood an underwater town  
a ghost town  
a mess of that sticky river mud and dirt  
you ain't thinking about the mold  
of the high school diplomas  
the wedding photos  
that are swimming in the streets

A week of rain  
draining off the side of the mountain  
nowhere to go so it falls on us  
'cause that coal that kept the lights on  
that kept our families fed  
that kept our home alive  
was baring its ugly teeth

A week of rain  
and the river recedes  
but not enough.



## A BRIDGE

I want to stifle  
this feeling in-between  
girlhood and womanhood,  
awake and asleep,  
two lightning strikes.

But I'm having trouble  
feeling vulnerable  
writing about myself;  
I'm only 22,  
I have little to say

How can a voice  
represent a region?  
How can a girl  
be the image  
of her home?

I just try  
to do it right;  
soon that in between  
will close  
and I may not notice it.

## GREEK APPALACHIAN

I read something the other day  
about how white americans  
feel a calling to where their ancestors came from.

And maybe that's true—  
I do want to roam the shell-sharp beaches,  
dip my calloused toes in the *cyclades*,  
feel the waves take over my soul,  
bring me to where my grandparents came from,  
where my cousins still live.

But I'd have to saw myself in half,  
take a pickaxe and dig out my other pieces,

The pieces of me that want to look for frogs,  
playing in cricks, swinging on rickety vines,  
covering myself in that rich red *Appalachian mud*.  
that ancient, romantic, dirty place  
where my grandparents came from,  
where my cousins still live.

And if these two halves of myself,  
the one in the Mediterranean  
and the one in the Kentucky river  
were to never come back together again,  
who would I be?

## MAGIC

I'm far too old to believe in fairy tales,  
and I usually don't.

But sometimes, when I reach my hands  
into a cold stream,

watch my grandmother's hands at  
her quilting frame,

listen to a song about a time  
I've never seen,

or stare at a picture  
of you and me,

yes these things are real  
I'm sure you'll see

why I can't help but believe  
in magic.