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In a Land of Plenty: A Don West Reader

Don West

Constance Adams West

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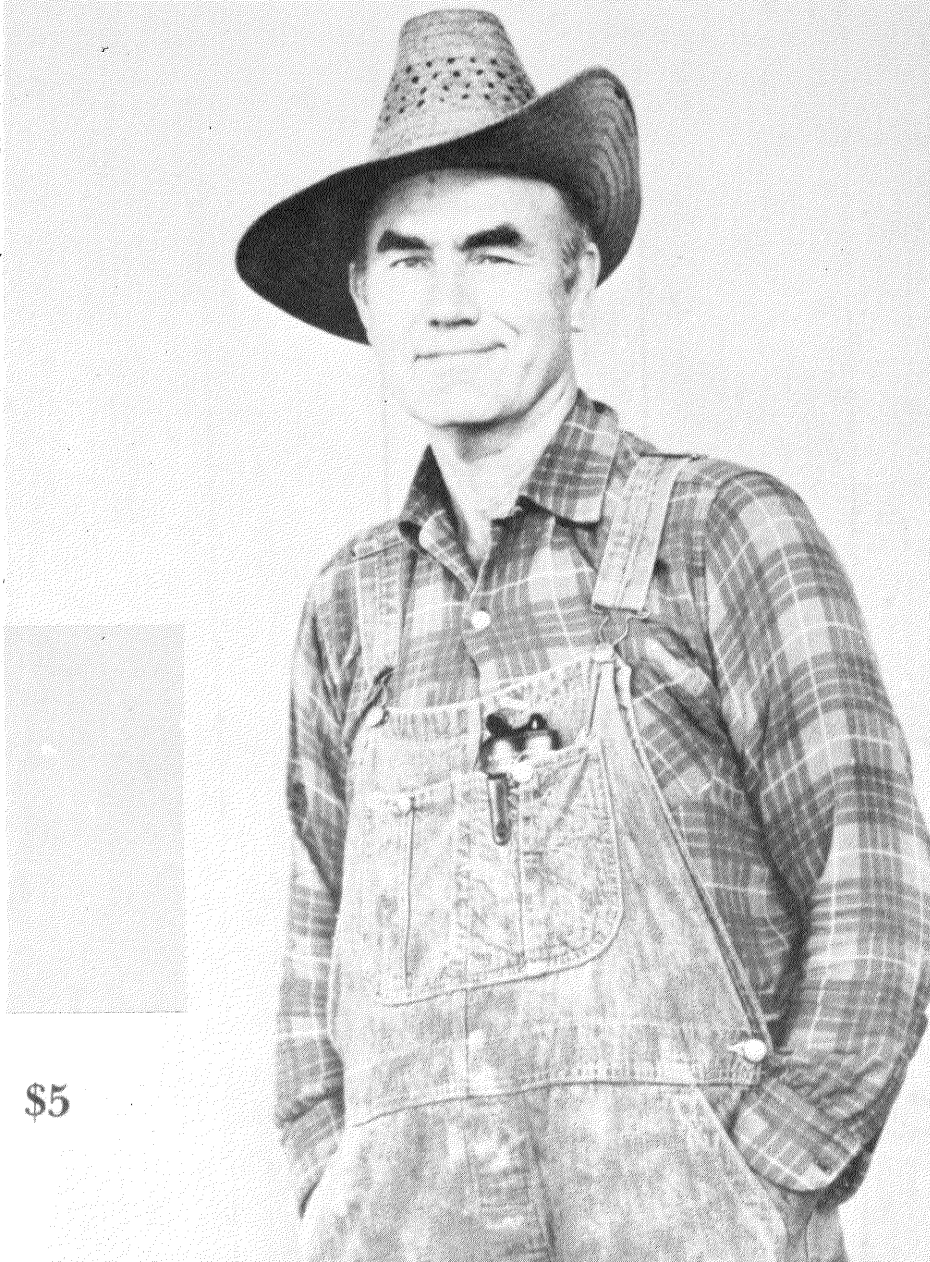
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In a Land of Plenty

A Don West Reader



\$5

In a Land of Plenty

A Don West Reader

With sketches by Constance Adams West

West End Press

No Grants

This book is not supported by any grant, governmental, corporate or private. It is paid for, directly or indirectly, by the people who support and have supported Don West's vision, and it both reflects and proves their best judgment.

—The publisher

No Copyright

Purposely this book is not copyrighted. Poetry and other creative efforts should be levers, weapons to be used in the people's struggle for understanding, human rights, and decency. "Art for Art's Sake" is a misnomer. The poet can never be neutral. In a hungry world the struggle between oppressor and oppressed is unending. There is the inevitable question: "Which side are you on?"

To be content with things as they are, to be "neutral," is to take sides with the oppressor who also wants to keep the status quo. To challenge the power of oppression is the poet's responsibility. Such action helps to preserve and build faith and hope in humanity. Nothing raises the spirit of a people more. This is the major mission of poet or artist.

Thus no copyright, no effort to restrict use. Groups or individuals are welcome to reproduce or use any or all parts of this book.

—Don West

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In a land of plenty

In a Land of Plenty

*Up, up mountain toilers
And hear what I tell
In a land of plenty
There's hunger and hell!*

*We dig and we shovel
We weave and we sweat
But when comes the harvest
It's little we get...*

*O this is the story
Of you and the rest
And if I am lying
My name's not Don West.*

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Aside from material originally published by Don West, we credit the following publications: *Mountain Life & Work*, where the stories "Thoughts of a Kentucky Miner" and "Tobe-Boy," the essay "Appalachian History" and the interview titled "Mountaineers Fighting for Freedom" first appeared; *The Appalachian South*, for "The Death of Old Major"; *Sing Out!* for the article "Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls"; *The Unrealist*, for "Interview with Don West"; *Orion Magazine*, for "Jesus the Quiet Revolutionary"; and *West Virginia Hillbilly*, for "Romantic Appalachia." Poems by Don West are scattered like seeds throughout the nation's publications; we salute these, without attempting to list them. The article on Don West, "Portrait of a Mountain Boy" by Jesse Stuart, was first published in *The Cumberland Empire*.

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Editor's Note

This is a lover's book and not a scholar's. We have tried to bring Don West's poems, beloved by thousands for five decades, together in a time frame roughly parallel to their actual production, while also repeating much of the arrangement of his most successful volumes, namely *Clods of Southern Earth* (1946), *The Road Is Rocky* (1951), and *O! Mountaineers* (1974). And we have included some of the prose writing that Don is best known by, roughly by date as well. Since Don, like any good singer or storyteller, is constantly reassembling and recombining his material, this is as close as we felt we could come to the accuracy of his intentions. Scholars may find the early volumes in the rare book rooms of the libraries.

And, in a few places, we have included the testimony of Don's cohorts as to his early life and the work that grew out of it. In the essays by Jesse Stuart and Roy Smith, which lead off the first and second sections respectively, we have chosen material which gives some background principally to Don West the poet, while reminding us from time to time that this man has also been a farmer, preacher, worker, teacher, and organizer. The greatest slight here is to Don West the organizer, foe of the Klan and the southern right-wing newspaper editors alike; but his name is already entering the history books, and we suspect there will be no lack of writing about his deeds, in common with so many other fine and decent men and women from the Southern Mountains.

But this note is intended to instruct, not to detain you. It has already taken far too long to see Don West's words back into print. Not a moment longer!

John Crawford, Publisher
West End Press
June 1, 1982

For this second edition, we have restored, at Don's request, some of the popular poems from the volume *O! Mountaineers*. They are printed in a final section of this book.

June 1, 1985

Portrait of a Mountain Boy

by Jesse Stuart

When birds were flying back across the empty fields of Spring, and crows were building their nests in the tall pine trees, it became a busy planting season for the settlers in Devil's Hollow. The chestnut oak tan bark had to be carted over the muddy Spring roads to Ellijay, twenty miles away, the nearest railroad station to Devil's Hollow. It was a two days trip, but the sturdy mountain people of Gilmer County in Georgia did not mind the hardships of life, for they were rugged as their native hills.

In the Spring of 1907 the farmers were exceedingly busy, plowing the steep slopes and planting their corn, cane and potatoes. It was a busy time for Jim West. His young wife gave birth to her firstborn. He was a robust boy. She named him Don. Jim West helped with the house work and planted his crops while his young wife and first son were slowly gaining strength.

The house in which the young Don West first saw light was a log shack. It was a single room, 16 by 20, with one window without panes. The seasoned logs of the house had been cut by Don's forefathers who had lived in the hills for generations. Old Kim Mulkey, Don's grandfather, had been justice of the peace for over twenty years. In this crude cabin Don lived and grew to manhood. At night he could see the stars through the rough clap-board roof and feel the winter wind through the spacious cracks. Don began to work regularly at six. He had his share of the farm chores to do—get water, wood, feed the hogs and mules, and help his mother milk. He soon realized what the seasons meant in the mountains. Even as his grandfathers, farther up the Cumberlands in Virginia and Kentucky, had learned to time the seasons, so did he learn their significance. Cropping time meant hard work. Autumn meant gathering the crops. That was all the world Don West knew. Days just came and went somewhere. He did not even know what a Sunday School was, and never attended one until he was 15. He had only been able to attend school four months out of the year.

When Don reached fifteen, he was six-two and weighed one hundred and eighty. His pants fit him tightly and showed a portion of his long shanks. His home-made shirts flared open at the neck and his long arms dangled far below the short sleeves. The neighbors were alarmed at his physical size and strength. He could carry the butt end of a cross tie from a white oak tree and load it on the jolt wagon to be carried to Ellijay, or by himself load good-sized saw logs.

Don was fifteen with five school terms to his credit. He had done much reading at home—all books of high seriousness. At this age he began riding

a mule to Oakland junior high school, seven miles away. But by this time, living in the mountains had grown harder for Jim West. There were now seven children in the family, and the father had been wrongfully accused of reporting moonshine stills. In the mountains, a "reporter," that is, one who notifies the revenue officers of illicit traffic in whiskey, is of all people despised the most. He either gets a bullet when he is not thinking or a plenty to talk about. It was a decision for Jim West to make. He could either stay in Devil's Hollow and fight it out or move. He chose the latter.

Then Don left the hills which had been so dear to him and impressed his early days. The chopped hill slopes running down to the lonesome waters of Turkey Creek...here was the old log house where the wind whistled through the cracks, and the old apple trees in the yard. The fallow fields where so often the mother and children dug crabgrass from the corn rows as Jim West plowed the middles. But now they were to leave these scenes behind and take up a new life.

Horace Mulkey, an uncle of Don's, had early entered the war. From his experience in the trenches he had seen the need of more education and less fighting. He was able to get Don a place in the Berry School at Rome, Georgia, to work his way through school.

We find Don West just a backward mountain boy at Berry. His manners were rough. His feet were big and his legs long and awkward. He didn't like to mix with people. His hair often grew long and became shaggy. His clothes were old and out of date.

But before Don had been at Berry long his teachers began to take note of this lanky mountain boy who was almost a walking question mark—always seeking to know. Berry is a great school for giving just the kind of training for such a boy. Don made well in his academic work. Teachers came to be glad to have him in their classes. He became a splendid athlete—taking part in the mile, two mile, cross country and dashes. He threw the javelin and discus. He achieved distinction as a high and broad jumper—making a final record of six-three on the high jump in college.

To climax the end of his third year at Berry, a dispute arose about a certain man G. who was a good friend to Don. This man G., a faculty member, was forced to leave. Don found himself taking a conscious stand for the man, and left Berry immediately.

His new life was stringing wires and climbing telephone poles for the Southern Bell Telephone Company. Don found his new companions congenial but constantly on wheels, painting the little towns red. He began to grow tired of this. He had kept up correspondence with several colleges, among which were Berea and Lincoln Memorial. With his three years of high school work he had finished enough to enter the freshman

class in Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, Tennessee, when word came from Hugh Trent Ramsey that he would be accepted to work his way. At Lincoln Memorial Don soon became an outstanding leader among the students. He was made president of the YMCA, Student Volunteer Band, literary society, and his class; was captain of track, and was on the Blue and Gray staff. Don organized and worked in Sunday Schools in the isolated mountain districts—namely the long strip of land between the backbone of the Cumberlands and their foothills, known as Poor Valley. Don made a splendid showing at Lincoln Memorial. He was highly respected by the students....

In the meantime, I may add, Don West supported himself financially, helped his sister along in college, and sent his father money to make a crop on. He worked more and made more money than any other college student because necessity compelled him to do so. He gathered laundry, swept floors, and washed dishes. The laundry paid him well.

The second year passed for Don at Lincoln Memorial. The third year came. He was weighted down financially, yet he carried baskets of food to the people in Poor Valley, when he had to borrow money to buy it. At this time he had his first real difficulty with the school administration. Don was asked to suggest reforms, as the administration was at that time going through endless streams of criticisms made by students. He suggested his reforms candidly, what he thought was right, and was expelled because he was not in harmony with the administration. The students and faculty banded together and reinstated him.

In May, 1929, Don West said goodbye to the mountains he knew and loved so well, as he had said goodbye to Berry and the chopped Georgia hills. Hills! Hills! Hills! They had become a part of him. He loved them. They were all he and his people had ever known, and his last year at Lincoln Memorial he became as these hills look drab in winter—contours of cliffs—dark—gloomy—but silent. He had undergone a period of surrendering that was long to wrinkle down in his heart.

Don had been seeking after a dream he had. He wanted to rise above the sour-wood sprouts on his father's farm. He did not rate, as it were. He'd lost his place in two schools. Was it his fault, he asked himself, or the fault of the institutions? Why had he had all this trouble?

The following September he entered the graduate department of Vanderbilt University. At Vanderbilt Don was soon recognized as an unusual fellow. He was made president of the YMCA and soon was one of the leaders in the graduate class.

After a year of graduate study in Vanderbilt, Don was awarded one of two fellowships to study in Europe. He took up the study of Denmark and her

many progressive movements. He spent much time in the International People's College, Elsinor, Denmark, and traveled over the continent extensively. After this experience he returned to Vanderbilt and remains a student there today [*ed. note*: 1932].

Don West is almost an unselfish human being. He works for money or he will work without it. He works among the mountain people—they feed him, he lives among them and they are glad to have him. His songs are of the hill people. Don belongs to them. He knows all the hardships they have to endure to live there. He is just as much at home working the cane and cabbage of Georgia or tobacco fields of Kentucky as in a Vanderbilt classroom. He spent one whole year in the heart of Kentucky's mountains, living the simple life of these people.

Don is now twenty-four years of age. Few young men, if any, have had such varied experiences in the course of a brief life as Don West has had.

In December [1931] his first book of poetry, *Crab-Grass*, was published. *Crab-Grass* has over half its poems in mountain dialect, which Don West handles in such a natural and attractive way. In his book are mountain scenes he loves and people he knows and loves, too. As a writer of mountain dialect and homely scenes which exist in the hill country, Don West excels. The walls of Devil's Hollow could not hem him in. Many disappointments and hardships have not daunted his courage and ideals.

Don West is a product of the hills. He will go back to the hills. They have given him his strength. The hills have given him his poetry—they have made him a man of doing things rather than saying. Don belongs to the hills—his character has grown rugged and beautiful like them.

—*Cumberland Empire*, July 1932

I.

Works from 1932-1946

Introduction

Once upon a time, not too long ago, authors wrote mainly about kings and nobles—the aristocracy. Many stories and poems were filled with debauchery and intrigues. Writers occupied themselves in turning out tales about the purity of lovely ladies and the daring of gallant gentlemen who never did a useful day's work in their lives.

The fact that systems of kings and nobles, of aristocratic ladies and useless gentlemen, were always reared upon the misery of masses of peasants, slaves, or workers was carefully omitted from most books. The idea that these same peasants, slaves, or workers might themselves be fit material for literature would have been heresy.

You may think this is a strange sort of way to begin an introduction to a group of poems. You may be one of those Americans who say you don't like poetry anyhow. No one can blame you for that. I've often felt that way, too. Maybe it's because too many poets write in the old tradition. Using an obscure and "subtle" private language, they write only for the little clique of the "highly literate" elite. But in spite of their high and mighty intellectual snobbery, one finds them, after all, concerned mostly with minor themes. Such literary gentlemen, writing only for the "elite," spurn the "crude" and "vulgar" masses. They still have eyes full of star dust. They see neither the dirt and misery nor the beauty and heroism of common folk life.

You say you want a poem with its roots in the earth; a poem that finds beauty in the lives of common people, and perhaps a poem that may sometimes show reasons for the heartache and sorrow of the plain folks and sometimes point the way ahead. I don't blame you. I sort of feel that way, too.

Does this sound like a strange notion about poetry? Maybe it is. Some people say I have strange notions anyhow. I don't know. Lots of things I don't know. I've been a preacher, and I've preached the working-man, Jesus, who had some strange notions himself about the poor and the rich and the slaves. I've been a coal miner in Kentucky's Cumberlands and a textile worker in Carolina. I've been a radio commentator in Georgia and a deck hand on a Mississippi River steamboat. I've been a sailor, a farm owner, and a farmer. I've been a school superintendent, and a college professor. And I've wondered why it always seems that the folks who work less get more and those who work more get less. That puzzles me some. I've a notion it shouldn't be that way, and some say I have strange notions.

Maybe it's because of family background. You know, some people go in for that family stuff. I do come from an old Southern family. You've heard that one before, yes? Well, I don't mean what you think. Mine is a real old Southern family. Oh, I'm no sprig off the decadent tree of some bourbon,

aristocratic, blue-blood family of the notorious slave-master tradition.

That's what is usually meant. You know—the professional Southerners who claim to be kind to Negroes—the tuxedoed gentlemen, the silk-underwared, lace-dressed ladies coyly peeping from behind scented fans. No, I don't mean that. I'm more Southern than that. That represents only a small minority. My folks were the men who wore jeans pants and the women who wore linsey petticoats. They had nothing to do with the genteel tradition. Some were the first white settlers of Georgia, and some were already settled when the white ones came.

Yes, on one limb of my family tree hangs a bunch of ex-jail birds. They were good, honest (I hope, but it doesn't make a lot of difference now) working people in the old country. They were thrown in jails there because they were unemployed and couldn't raise money to pay their debts.

How in the devil a man is expected to pay a debt while lying in prison is hard to see. Maybe it satisfied the creditors to take it out on their hides. Anyhow, there they were, hundreds of them, and a man named Oglethorpe, who had a big warm heart and a real feeling for folks, asked the old king to let him take a group of these prisoners to the new land.

The king didn't warm up to the idea much at first, but finally he was convinced. These outcastes would make a nice buffer protection for the more blue-blooded settlers of the other colonies against the Indians and Spanish. The place later to be known as Georgia was just the spot. The colonies warmed right up to the idea, too. Nice to have a gang of tough jail birds as "arrow fodder" between them and the Indians. So, you see, Georgia was started. The plan worked.

Some Southerners love to boast about their families. And I reckon I do too, a little. At least none of mine ever made his living by driving slaves. There's nary a slave owner up my family tree. The old story that we don't look too closely for fear of finding a "horse thief" is commonplace, of course. Indeed, wouldn't it be shameful to find one of our grand-paws doing such a petty theft? Who could be proud of a great-granddaddy with ambition no higher than stealing a horse? B'gad, we Americans go in for big stuff! Steal a horse? No! But steal a continent, a nation; steal the lives and labor of thousands of Black men and women in slavery; steal a railroad; a bank; a million dollars—oh boy, now you're talking! That's the real class. Those are the ancestors America's blue-bloods worship. But steal a horse—aw, heck, the guy might have been hanged for that!

Guess I'd better tell you about that other limb on my family tree now. From what I can uncover, it had just two main branches with a few sprigs sprouting off. A forked sort of bush, you know. On that other fork hangs a white slave (indentured servant) in Carolina and a kind-hearted old Indian of the Cherokees in north Georgia. To make a long story short—though I think it is a beautiful, if tragic, one—this white slave girl and her lover ran away from their master in the Carolina tidewater country. The girl was

pregnant, but the master had been forcing his attentions on her and that was more than her lover could stand. They set out together toward the Indian country of north Georgia. Hearing the pursuers close behind, the man stopped, telling the girl to keep going and he'd overtake her if he got a lucky shot. He never overtook her. She went on and finally, weary and near death, reached the Indian settlement around Tallulah Falls in north Georgia. The Indians put her to bed and cared for her. The baby, a boy, was born. The child grew up as an Indian, married into the tribe and had other children.

This, then, is the other limb of our family tree.

Do you think I'm telling about this tree just because it's mine? You're partly right. But the main reason is that, to a greater or lesser degree, it represents the great majority of Southern whites. And their real story has never yet been adequately told. Some day I intend to do it, to tell about these people with rough hands, big feet, and hard bodies; about the real men and women of the South.

That old Southern family stuff that you've heard so much about, always meaning the aristocratic, slave-owning tradition, is worn about as thin as the blood of those families today. Our people, the real Southern mass majority of whites, are the ones the Negroes were taught to call "pore white trash." And we, in turn, were taught the hateful word "N-----." Nice little trick, isn't it? Hitler used it, too. And it is still being used today, by the whites from the big houses, who engineer lynchings and make it seem that the responsibility is the white workers'.

Our people, and the Negroes, made up about 98 percent of the Southern population before the Civil War.

In addition to all this, I'm a "hill-billy." My folks were mountain people. We lived on Turkey Creek. And what a place that is! Turkey Creek gushes in white little splashes around the foot of Burnt Mountain and down to the Cartecay. The Cartecay crawls and gurgles—sometimes lazily, sometimes stormily—down the valleys and hollows between the hills to Ellijay. Over the cataracts and through the folds these waters have gone on since nobody knows when—except that summer when the drouth saw sands scorching dry, and the river bed looked like a pided mocassin turned on its back to die in the sun.

Mountain houses are scattered along the banks of Cartecay. Mountain people live there, plain people to whom it is natural to ask a stranger to stay all night. They have lived there for generations—since the first white man pushed through the Tallulah gorge, and others came up from the lowlands to escape the slave system. Indians have also lived on the Cartecay. It was once their hunting grounds. But most of them were rounded up and marched west toward the setting sun. Mountain men on Cartecay have gone west too, in search of opportunity, but some have stayed.

The men who first settled the mountains of the South were fearless and freedom-loving. Many, in addition to the prisoners, came to escape persecution in the old country. They had been outspoken in opposition to oppression and denial of liberties. Some came later into the friendly mountains seeking a few rocky acres they could till and call their own. They fled from the ever-encroaching wave of slave-holding planters in the lowlands. The "poor whites" in slavery days found themselves burdened down with slave labor competition. Their lot in many instances was very little better than that of the slave. In the lowlands of the planters they were considered a blight upon the community. They were pushed off the desirable lands. Left to them were the submarginal, undesirable ridges or swamps. Many, therefore, fled to the great mountain ranges of north Georgia and other states, where freedom of a sort was to be had. Disease, starvation, and illiteracy were the lot of tens of thousands of these "poor whites" who were forced to live in the hard, unfertile regions of the South prior to the Civil War.

Now you may have thought, as I once did, that the old South was divided simply into whites and Blacks—slave and master—and that everybody supported slavery from the beginning. I was taught that in school, from the history books, about my own state. But Oglethorpe and the first settlers of Georgia were bitterly opposed to the whole institution of slavery. They fought resolutely against slavery ever coming to Georgia.

Here is what Oglethorpe himself wrote in a letter to Granville Sharpe, October 13, 1776:

My friends and I settled the Colony of Georgia...we determined not to suffer slavery there. But the slave merchants and their adherents occasioned us not only much trouble, but at last got the then-government to favor them. We would not suffer slavery...to be authorized under our authority; we refused, as trustees, to make a law permitting such a horrid crime...

But this isn't all. How deeply this idea of freedom and justice was planted in these early Georgians is further shown by a resolution passed January 12, 1775, endorsing the proceedings of the first American Congress by "the Representatives of the extensive District of Darien, in the Colony of Georgia." It said:

....To show the world that we are not influenced by any contracted or interested motives, but a general philanthropy for all mankind, of whatever climate, language or complexion, we hereby declare our disapprobation and abhorrence of the unnatural practice of slavery in America...a practice founded in injustice and cruelty, and highly dangerous to our liberties (as well as lives), debasing part of our fellow-creatures below men, and corrupting the virtues and morals of the rest; and laying the basis of the liberty we contended for...upon a very wrong foundation. We therefore resolve at all times to use our utmost endeavors for the manumission of slaves in this Colony....

There it is! There were men who indeed did not fit into a system of power and privilege for a few. But eventually their opposition was beaten down (though never destroyed). There went on a general infiltration of the blue-bloods who wanted slaves to do their work. Finally there was a civilization, a "culture," an aristocracy reared upon the institution of slavery, built upon the bent backs of human beings bought and sold like cattle, and upon the misery of the overwhelming majority of non-slaveholding Southern whites.

This, then, is the so-called and much-lamented "culture" of the "lost cause!" The basis of wealth and privilege was the ownership of slaves. This privilege was concentrated in a very few hands. The total population of the South prior to the Civil War was about nine or ten million. There were about four million slaves, some six million non-slaveholding whites, and, at the most, not more than three hundred thousand actual slave owners.

Culture, education, and wealth were limited to this narrow oligarchy of a few hundred families. Since the overwhelming majority of Southern whites owned no slaves whatsoever, they had little voice in government. The local and State governments were virtually executive committees for the slavemasters. For lack of free schools, ignorance and illiteracy were the lot of the poor whites who were bowed down under the heavy burden of taxation of a slavemaster government.

And so there grew up in these Southern mountains communities of non-slaveholding farmers, scratching a bare livelihood from the stubborn new-ground hillside patches. They hated the slave system and the slavemasters. Many of them refused to fight for the "lost cause" in the Civil War. They reasoned: Why fight for a system that oppresses us as well as the Black slaves?

Yes, these were my people. I come from the Devil's Hollow region close by Turkey Creek at the foot of Burnt Mountain in north Georgia. Earliest memories are woven around the struggles of my Dad and Mother to dig a living from our little mountain farm. Life always seemed hard—like an iron fist mauling them in the face, knocking them down every time they tried to get up. But they wanted their kids to go to school, get educated. We went, the whole bunch of us. There were nine kids, three now dead. All of the survivors today are progressive thinkers, working for a better South.

Yes, I got something in schools—Vanderbilt, Chicago University, Columbia, Oglethorpe, University of Georgia, Johns Hopkins, Maryland, European schools. But my best education has not been from classrooms and formal professors. My real education has been beaten into me by the everlasting toil and hunger I've seen, by the struggles in textile and coal mining centers, where our people were tolled down from the hills with fair promises of a better life; by the hunger I have seen in the faces of sharecropper kids; by my own sister, wife of a sharecropper, dying young from overwork and worry. It is this education of life—of prisons and jails for

innocent men—that caused a determination never to seek to rise upon the shoulders of others; to rise only when the great mass of plain people can also have a richer life. And some day we will!

I love the South. Like hundreds of other Southerners, I dislike some things about its customs and ways. But our folks have lived and died there. Our roots are sunk deeply from generations back. My own Dad died young—toil and hunger, too much work, and too little of the right kind of food are the only honest reasons any doctor could have given.

We had big hopes when we left the mountains to become sharecroppers in the cotton lowlands. But those hopes were dead long before we buried Dad in Hickory Grove Church Yard.

So I pass these poems on to you who may care enough to read. They are little pieces of life—and death—picked up along the way. May they help to kindle little sparks that will grow into big flames!

Blairsville, Georgia
June, 1946

This introduction first appeared in Clods of Southern Earth (1946).

Look Here, America

I want to tell, America,
About victory—
About sharecroppers, tenants,
Black men and Crackers.
And you must listen
And look
And think deep...

For tomorrow in a new world
You must lift your head,
America—
Proud of yourself,
Proud that a Georgia Cracker
Can clasp the hand of a Black man
And say:
“Brother!”

Look here, America.
Bend your head toward me
And listen.
Make your dreaming eyes to look
For I have tales to tell
And little pieces
Of twisted life
To show...

You must look, America,
And listen
And think deep.
For even I, a Georgia Cracker—
One of your own mongrels—
Am grieved
By looking
At what I've seen...

Anger

Words of the Toiling South:

“It came unbeknownce to us.
 Don't know when
 May have been when death
 Gnawed through to the heart
 Of our least one
 With hunger's keen teeth.
 Or maybe when six mouths
 Asked for food
 And six stomachs stayed empty
 Must have been slow.
 And we don't know when—
 But it stays, and we like it!”

The slow, groaning anger
 Of the South—
 Born of toil and hunger,
 Tearing at a million hearts,
 Taken in with bulldog gravy
 Or pinto beans,
 Sucked up with coal dust or lint
 Into the belly of the South,
 The great, gaunt belly
 Of a smouldering South!

No anger's in a dead man—
 But it's in the South,
 Slow, groaning anger
 In the toiling South!

Naked Words

Listen to me,
 You who call tyranny beautiful—
 I'll tell you a thing
 In plain talk,
 Naked words
 That have no subtle meaning...

I'll speak of velvet gowns
 On soft bosoms,
 Bought with pallid wrinkles
 And stooped young bodies
 Of those who sweat.

I'll speak of babies, too,
 Bent-boned and sallow
 Sucking on tired breasts
 At dusk time—
 Of Black hands,
 Hard as hickory
 In the warped plow-handles
 They clutch,
 And I'll speak of
A great deep sorrow
 That has no words
 To tell...

Hard old hands,
 Bent young bodies—
 Crooked, like old iron pieces.
 Wrinkles
 Pot-bellied babies,
And a great deep sorrow!

O listen, you—
 Listen to the Future!
 When the deep sorrow
 Of old Black hands,
 Tired breasts,
 Wrinkles
 And pot-bellied babies
 Find words to tell—
 When these bent old iron pieces
 Sit in solemn judgment,
 In terrible judgment!

Funeral Notes

We're burying part of him today
 In Hickory-Grove Church Yard.
 We can't put him all here,
 For his grave
 Spreads over a few rocky acres
 That he loved—
 Where peach blossoms bloom, and
 Cotton stalks speckle the ground
 On a Georgia hill.

Forty years he's been digging
 And plowing himself under
 Along these cotton rows.
 Most of my Dad is there
 Where the grass grows
 And cockle-burrs bristle
 Now that he's gone...

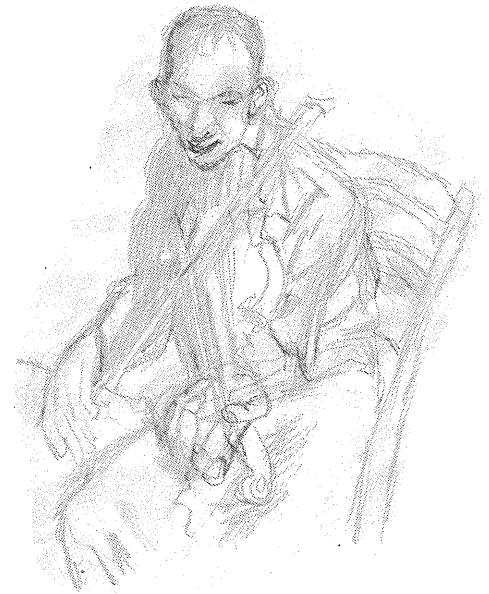
We're covering him in March days
 When seeds sprout.
 And I think next Autumn
 At picking time
 The white-speckled stalks
 Will be my old Dad
 Bursting out...

Toil and Hunger

Toil and hunger
 Took him away—
 My old Dad.
 While he ripped up
 The sad red earth
 His life dripped down
 In the furrow ,
 And Georgia's clay hills
 Sucked it up.

Plum trees blossom
 From sweat-salted earth
 And sorrow climbs up
 Through the leaves
 To scent the flowers
 On the blooming trees.

Toil and hunger
 Attended his birth ,
 And bury him now
 In the sad red earth.



Agitator

He stirreth up the people, teaching...

Listen...!

I'm still an agitator—

They've called me "Red,"

The color of blood
and a bad man!

But do you of the toiling South
know me?

Do you believe these things
about me?

You croppers, factory hands,
Black people,

Poor whites, and you young ones
who look into a grim future,

You who love the South as I do—
Do you understand?

Do you see that I am YOU,
that I

Still the agitator
am YOU...?

I am Don West, too—
the poet—

A lover of peace and quiet places
a working man

With rough hands that know how
to toil

When there is a job.

But the poet is
a cry for justice,

The agitator is the restless soul
of the toiling millions—

Stirring, stumbling, groping
toward a New World

A world of plenty and peace!

I'm the son of my grandfather,
of old Kim Mulkey.

His blood burns my veins
and cries out for justice.

I sing to a hurting land
and she responds

With deep sobs of misery.

She stirs

And anger sets on her lips.

I'm no foreigner.

Nobody

With calloused hands
is foreign to us!

I'm Jim West's boy.

The one

Who saw his Daddy die
young,

Overworked, underfed—
with pellagra.

It's not nice to say that,
to say that we have pellagra

rickets

hookworm

blacklung

starvation

In the hills.

But I was born on a rocky hill
raised on a mountain farm

Where my Daddy's sweat
salted down the red dirt.

I'm the son of my Mother
the woman who toiled

Along the cotton rows—
and I'm an Agitator!

And that means I want bread
and jobs

and homes

and clothes

and beauty

For all the hurt-eyed babies

I want songs

On the lips, and joy in the eyes
of you anxious mothers

Who scrub and hoe or weave
in a factory!

Do you hear me?

I love

These things more than I love
 peace and quiet
 Or the gentle murmur of
 Chattahoochee
 Dragging our hills
 down to the ocean.

I am speaking—Listen!
 I the poet
 in overalls
 Working man, Mountaineer
 Agitator...!

What Shall a Poet Sing?

What is a poet saying
 Down by a Georgia pine
 Where a broken body's swaying
 Hung to a cotton line....?

With his folk all burdened down,
 Pinched by hunger's pang,
 Whether he's white or brown,
 What shall a poet sing...?

Lost Leader

Why does he deal with themes obscure
 And other futile things
 While from the very mountain sides
 A cry for justice rings?

Why does he mumble to himself
 The praise he loves to hear
 When all around are working men
 Who toil with hunger near?

Come, whet those songs in common life
 And keep that body lean
 To flash bold strokes in freedom's cause
 With steel blades sharpened keen.

If you're the singer of the hills
 As some are wont to say,
 Why do you sing of mountain men
 In such a useless way?

Southern Nights

To Pop Smith

Southern nights in Georgia—
 You know them, brother—
 Cling like down
 Under the eagle's wing.
 Moon rides low over ridge tops
 Flicking pine needles
 At the sky rim...
 Rivers, old and brown,
 Slither and slide
 Down the valleys of Dixie—
 Till corn blades and cotton blossoms
 Shiver in the wind
 And night-time kisses
 The earth with dewy lips.

Beauty is Southern nights,
 Beauty is a tall sycamore
 On the bank of the Chattahoochee.
 Beauty is the somber face
 Of a Southern Negro,
 And the rhythmic lines of the mountains,
 A wild music
 Etched on a dusky sky...

Poets have sung of her beauty
 And I sing.
 But I say Southern nights

And Southern ways
 Are deceptive—
 Some are liars!
 I speak hard words
 Because soft words
 Hide a cruel South,
 A cold-hearted South
 With flesh in her teeth
 And blood on her mouth.
 Slow Southern rivers
 Murmur gently over bones
 Of dead Negroes.
 The river covers many a lie
 And so does the soft drawling voice
 Of the ruling South.

Soft Southern nights—
 Sharecropper's shack
 Blends into red plowed fields
 Mine shanties in Harlan
 Hide their ugliness
 Till sputtering lights
 Gleam like spikes of gold
 Half hammered into the mountainside.

Anger's Lullaby

Suck, little baby, suck long,
 Body mustn't be frail.
 Muscles growing firm and strong
 Daddy's in the county jail...

Laugh, little baby, laugh light,
 Two little eyes of blue
 Kindle a blaze to fight—
 Daddy is waiting for you...

Sleep, little baby, sleep sound,
 Under the Southern stars;
 Body growing hard and round
 To break the prison bars...

Hate, little baby, hate deep,
 You mustn't know my fears;
 Mother is watching your sleep,
 But you don't see her tears...

My South

To Lucy Randolph Mason

Oh soft flowing rivers
 With slender willows
 Clutched hungrily
 To your bosom—
 And red Georgia Hills
 Where cotton patches
 Speckle the ground
 With downy snow balls
 Like a spotted hound's back,
 And lazy pools
 The deep green of corn blades
 in June
 Glisten under a Southern moon—
 You are my South.
 I found life deep in your womb
 And I love you...

I love the sad solemn beauty
 In your mountains—
 The great Blue Ridge,
 Cumberlands
 Smokies
 Unakas—
 That stand like sentinels
 To witness the surge
 Of human passion
 Flowing through your ribs,
 Laughter and hate
 Of Southern toilers...

And I love you who toil
 In the dirt
 And factories
 And mines—
 You whose skin is ebony
 From a tropic sun
 And my own bleached brothers...
 I love the slow soft drawl
 Of your Southern voice,
 The way you love the sound
 Of silence

And the easy swing
Of your bent shoulders...

I've felt your deep sorrow
In songs you sing
And I've wanted to sing
With you,
To tune your songs
Into keen blue blades
Slashing at your chains,
The cruel chains of hunger!

*But your eyes were blind
And your hate was old
Your brain was warped
And your heart was cold...*

Oh, my South,
My cold-blooded South
With a Negro's blood
Smeared over your mouth
And a Negro's bones
Which you blindly make
A few charred coals
By a burnt-off stake—

You have drunk poison
And it turns you mad
Like a rotten cancer
Gnawing at your brain.

And I am grinding
The blades of my songs
To a tempered edge
To whittle on
Your cancerous brain...

Tomorrow you must wake
And white hands will clasp
Ebony
Bowed over a few charred bones
By a burnt-off stake...!

You are my South;
I'll hammer you
Into a beautiful song
For I love you...

Georgia Mother

I heard my mother laugh
And sing
Like the wind's song
Rustling fodder blades
In a hillside corn patch.
I felt her smile
And kiss my face,
Wet from a mountain rain.
My mother was young—
Fleet as a winging bird,
Straight as a bamboo cane
And the temper of steel...

I was a little boy—
Thought my mother
Eternally beautiful,
Fresh like mountain dew
And graceful as a jalap vine.
I was a little boy—
I didn't understand...

Today I gazed
On the anemic face
Of a textile worker—
Gaunt eyes,
Sunken cheeks,
Bent body...
A numb and senseless creature
Peered up at me
Beseechingly.
Sighs and sobs rent the air.
And I thought:
Is this the woman,
The lilting singer—
My mother,
When I was a little boy?

O my brothers!
You who sweat and toil and bleed,
Sound the union trumpets!
Beat the drums of rebellion!
Bind our hearts with steel bands,
Scatter the dogs

Who tear the vitals
 Out of women,
 Who turn toiling mothers
 Into gruesome creatures,
 Joyless,
 Half dead...

Factory Child

What chance now for Margarette Biggs
 To grow in stature, heart and head?
 She breathes foul dust and rotted lint
 Among the wheels to earn her bread.

And while her lungs are eaten out,
 Her eyes stare hungrily through space,
 Eyes that sink at eventide
 Within a sallow, longful face...

Better for her if she had gone,
 From womb of flesh into the earth,
 Or if she had not come at all
 To cause some woman pangs of birth.

Soon she will have a pauper's grave,
 Pitted deep in nameless sod...
 Another child for Potter's Field
 While churchmen sing and praise their God.

Look Here, Georgia

Look here, Georgia,
 Whatever you do
 You know the world
 Is looking at you.

Once I urged you
 To change your name,
 Put on a petticoat
 To hide your shame.

And I asked sharply:
Who's that dead
And whose blood's dripping
To make you red?

Then I shouted:
Shame on you
For all your lying
And your lynchings, too.

Look at your chain gang
And sweat box, too,
While all the world
Is looking at you.

Look at that worker
His skin is brown
Hung to a cottonwood
Above the ground!

But now, Georgia,
 I'm proud of you,
 Your people's courage
 And vision, too.

And look, Georgia,
 Listen to me,
 You won't need jails
 When our minds are free!

Clodhopper

I'm the Clodhopper—
 Have you heard about me?
 The lump that feeds the world.
 A lowland Georgia Cracker,
 Song singer from the mountains—
 A cotton-picking Brown Skin—
 I'm the Clodhopper
 That puts clothes on the world...

Who said:
 "Clodhoppers of the world,
 Unite!
 You have nothing to lose
 But your clods—
 Unite!"

Was that Jesus,
 Or another Jew?
 Or maybe it was me
 Said that
 And:
 "Down with the clodhopper joke!
 Up with the dignity of the clod.
 To every clodhopper a clod
 To wiggle between his toes!"

Isn't it written:
 "The laborer is worthy
 Of his wage,
 And the Hopper
 Of his clod?"
 If it isn't,
 I'll write it now...

Oh, I'm the Clodhopper
 Who makes the tall corn grow,
 The artist who smears dignity
 Through the speckled cotton patch.
 I'm the man who fills
 The belly of the world,
 And slips a petticoat
 Over her nakedness...

Miner's Widow

Take your pious prayers,
 You preachers of God!
 I'll bury my man
 Under coal-blackened sod.

Killed him while a-slavin'
 As you see him there;
 Jest another miner gone,
 Take away yore prayer!

See the workers murdered,
 You yellow-streaked men;
 Shouts of hell's damnation
 And a poor man's sin!

Barney, loved leader,
 Murdered like a dog;
 Shot you in the back, boy,
 From behind a log.

Barney, hated leader,
 Blood was on yore brow;
 Super's gunmen got you
 An' starve our younguns now.

Kid's a-cryin', Barney,
 Cupboard's cold and bare;
 Preachers come a-peddlin'
 Thur tales about a prayer.

Leave me here a-grievin',
 You have done yore share;
 You preachers of the bosses,
 Take away yore prayer!

Factory Winds

Dark winds,
Winds creeping down from the mountins
To stinky mills,
Callin' my longin's
Back to the hills.

Smoked winds,
Fouled with dirt from the sooty stack
Of a fact'ry,
A-scrougin' fer room
An' blackin' me...

Deep winds,
I feel them blowin' in the streets
An' when alone,
Numbed by the fact'ry's
Dull monotone...

Sad winds,
They've blowed sorrow an' sufferin'
From Northern mills,
An' drug my people
Down from the hills...



Harlan Portraits

I've seen beauty in Harlan,
In the trailing arbutus,
The dogfennel and pennyroyal
In the fence corners,
The forests dressed
In a foliage of
Rattleweed and ditney.
I've seen beauty when
Grey winter strokes his beard
With bony-white fingers,
And trees are skeletons
Of summer's glory...

But beauty
Never visits the coal diggers.
They live in the coal camps—
Dirty shanties,
Stinking privies,
Grunting pigs
And slop buckets...

Gaunt-eyed women
With dull hopeless faces
Cook soggy wheat biscuits.

Tall gaunt men
Eat soggy bread
And fat meat,
Gulp down black coffee,
Work all day—
Digging, digging,
Everlastingly digging.
Grime and dirt
And digging.
In their dreams they dig
And smell unpleasant
Odors.

For beauty
Is a stranger
To the coal camps...

I've Seen God

I've seen God—
 I've seen him smile
 In the several hues of a rainbow.
 I've felt his warm breath
 In the mists
 The sun sends up
 From the plowed dirt
 After a summer rain—
 And God was free...

I've seen God—
 In the tired eyes
 Of a factory worker
 Bound by the chains
 Of circumstance.
 I've felt God's pulse beat,
 I've seen his soul
 And heard him groan
 From the hungry throats
 Of miners' children
 In a Kentucky coal camp—
 And God was in prison...!

Last Wish

Climbin' mountins from sun to sun
 A-toilin' all day long,
 A-weavin' flowers in calico,
 Singin' a lonesome song...

Singin' a soulful song all day,
 Climbin' a rugged hill
 Since Jim was kilt by factory wheels,
 Workin' in Atco Mill...

Thur's one more hill afore I go—
 Hit's fudder up the sky,
 A windy knob whur fierce and low
 The storms pass Jim's grave by...

And one more wish afore I pass
 Out of this factory town—
 I want to see my people jine
 To tear thur misery down...

Down Cartecay

Trompin' down Cartecay
 Early in October.
 Heifer calves and Jack Frost
 Nibblin' at the buds...
 Trompin' down Cartecay
 Past the roarin' narrers
 Whur early comes the blossoms
 With the spring-time floods.

Women down Cartecay
 Cook thur scanty vittles,
 Fry them in a skillet,
 Bake them on a fahr.
 Saw mountain people
 Holdin' down thur feelin's,
 A-bustin' with repression
 As they allus are...

Trompin' on Cartecay
 Had a mighty feelin'
 Swellin' in my bosom,
 Bitin' at my brain.
 Felt I'd see them,
 See the mountain people
 A-movin' down the future
 Courage high again...

Over the Lick Log Hill

I

Shadders on Burnt Mountin,
Night a-comin' on, dusk dark.
Curtains bein' pulled like actin'
Over the sleepy hills,
Me a-settin' out so lonesome
Listenin' to whip-poor-wills.

Wonderin' where my man is—
He went away last morn,
Workin' in Lick-Log Narrers,
Runnin' a moon-shine still—
Wish it wusn't so risky
Over the Lick-Log Hill.

Wish I'd see my man come
A-trompin' over the ridge.
Wish my man had money
And didn't have to be
A-workin' in Lick-Log Narrers,
Allus away frum me...

II

Fetches him home by moonlight
Frum over the Lick-Log Hill,
Down the trace by Larmons—
My man, so cold and dead.
Revenues raided the Lick-Log,
Thur bullet went thru his head...

Wish it wusn't so risky
Over the Lick-Log Hill...

A-Callin' Home the Hogs

*Pig-o, pig-o, pig-o-o-ee,
Pig-o, pig-o, pig-o-o-ee.*

"What's that echo, Lurey,
Whitherin' down Oak Hill,
Over Devil's Holler
Whur the night's so still?
Set them whick'rin' shadders
Whimplin' by that tree,
Goin' toward the echoes—
Wonder whut they'd be?"

Pig-o, pig-o, pig-o-o-ee.

" 'Nother gin, Lurey,
'Cross the marshy bogs!"
'Hit's ol' Kim Mulkey
Callin' home the hogs.

"Since last mast season
When chestnut burs were spread,
Ol' Kim Mulkey's
Been lyin' with the dead.
Nearly 'bout a year now
Ol' Kim's been away—
Sumpen calls the hogs home
Eve of ever' day.

"Listen, Lurey girl,
The hush o' them frogs
When ol' Kim Mulkey
Comes to call his hogs.

"Lurey, hain't hit lonesome
Whutherin' through the fogs—
Voice of ol' Kim Mulkey
Tollin' home his hogs..."

*Pig-o, pig-o, pig-o-o-ee,
Pig-o, pig-o, pig-o-o-ee.*

"Hit's ol' Kim Mulkey
Callin' home the hogs!"

Trompin'

Whur you been, Joe Whitaker,
A-trompin' all around,
What are you cravin' now, Joe,
You goin' to settle down?

Ever think of olden days,
The laurel by the spring?
Ever see the mossy mill
And hear the river sing?

What you seed, Joe Whitaker,
In the big world outside,
Trompin' around in cities
And places fer and wide?

* * *

I have seed the world, Ellen,
And still a-trompin' on.
Seed a mighty ocean blue
And kings upon thur throne.

What have you done, Ellen Lee,
With yore eyes of blue-grey?
Ever changed yore smilin' face
And graceful girlish way?

* * *

I waited long for you, Joe,
Many a lonesome year,
Knittin' socks and hoein' corn
While wishin' you were here.

I'm waitin' now for you, Joe,
Nigh the old mossy mill.
You'll find me deep a-sleepin'
In the grave-yard on the hill.

Why I Love Jim

Since me and Jim got married
Hit's been sort of tight
To make ends come out even
And keepin' things right.

But I'm glad we done it.

Jim sometimes gits discouraged,
Says that he's to blame.
But that don't make no difference,
I love him jest the same.

I'm glad we married.

Cows to milk, pigs to feed,
Jim all tuckered out
Workin' in the new-ground fields,
Plowin' all about.

But it's good to live with Jim.

We have three little younguns—
Blue eyes jest like him.
Such contentment havin' them—
That's why I love Jim.

For One I Lost

Pale moon
Hung on a
Ridge-top
At midnight—
All is still.

Your song
Vibrates in
Dry leaves
Of heather
On the hill.

Pale moon...
 Your song—
 A frosty
 Grey night
 In September...

Corn shocks.
 White stalks,
 Bare fields
 And You—
 I remember!

Success

Two men had stopped
 At break of day
 Beside a cliff
 Across the way.

One man stooped down
 His hands in dirt;
 The other's feet
 Trod on his shirt.

One reached the heights
 And was renowned;
 The other man
 Lay on the ground.

Men speak of one—
 A man of fame!
 They never heard
 The other's name.

For truth is deep
 And few men know
 The other bleeds
 In dirt below.

On Piney Spur

Many a time with Laura Knight
 I went to tole the hawgs
 On Piney Spur whur foxes use
 Amongst the chestnut lawgs.

An' many's the time I've missed her since
 As through the hills I go,
 Trompin' the trails of Cartecay
 Whur wild red roses grow.

For when the factory got my Love,
 It slowed her dancin' feet
 Till she could skeercely climb the hill
 To whur we used to meet.

On Piney Spur the moonbeams play
 Around the pine tree's head.
 Hit's whur the wild-cat meets his mate,
 An' whur my Love lies dead.

The spruce trees stretch thur long sprigs down
 To smooth the lone grave over,
 And jalap vine entwines the mound
 To give my Love a cover.

Now foxes use on Piney Spur
 Whur Laura lies asleep.
 An' when the rain-clouds come down low
 The winds stop there an' weep.

Crab-Grass

It wonders me what fer
 Ye'r made,
 Crab-grass,
 Allus pesterin' around.
 In the corn down the creek
 And taters in the new ground,
 Crab-grass,
 Allus pesterin' around.

Didn't ye hear that squirrel
 A-barkin'
 Yan side of Still-House-Holler?
 Don't ye know my old hound dog
 Is ready fer to foller,
 And my rifle-gun is clean,
 Crab-grass,
 Allus pesterin' around.

Marthy won't let me see
 No peace,
 Crab-grass, while ye come
 A-peekin' thru the corn,
 And the sun-ball burns me so
 It's a botherment I'm born,
 Crab-grass,
 Allus pesterin' around!

Song of the Saw

Ever hear about the song of the saw,
 Ever hear of
 John McCarty...?

We were working a saw mill
 Twenty miles from nowhere
 On Troublesome Creek...

John was a sawyer—
 Ran a hot steel saw
 Sixteen hours
 Thru long Georgia pines.
 Loved to hear
 The song of the saw
 Ripping thru the guts
 Of a yellow pine,
 Loved to sing about
 His wife and baby
 Back home...

John was young.
 Muscles bulged out
 Like iron hoops
 On a whiskey barrel,
 Soft blue eyes
 That laughed like a child's...

* * *

The belt slipped
 That Saturday.
 John's belly struck the saw.
 Ripped him open
 Like a yellow pine log,
 Straight thru the belly...

We picked up the pieces,
 One on the saw dust,
 One on the slab pile.
 We tried to fit
 The bloody things together
 Before burying them
 Under a tall Georgia pine...
 But somehow they wouldn't fit.
 Our hands were messy
 With blood and grime.
 We were clumsy
 And felt cold
 Under a broiling sun...

No one wanted to go
 Tell John's wife and baby
 Twenty miles up Troublesome.
 We pulled straws
 And it fell my lot...

Nancy just looked
 And said nothing—
 Looked out thru the pines.
 Tall yellow pines
 Like John loved to saw.
 I wondered if she listened
 For the song of the saw,
 For John's big voice singing,
 If the splotches of sky
 Clutched by the little fingers
 Of the pine trees
 Reminded her of John's blue eyes
 And his laugh,
 Soft, like the sound
 Of a Southern wind
 Walking thru the tree tops.

Should I Have Said

I said I would ask nothing of you
especially love

But you should love me only if you
found no escape,
if it filled you full
to overflow

On a pungent grey December night...

What was it, then, we touched that night
in stillness

Where a pulsating fog tantalized
a sad-faced moon,

When soft shadows of stars were in your eyes—
we touched and heard,

Like a low sob-moan from the throat
of a dying wind-song
in the tree-tops—

A broken song crying in the dark...

Why, in such ineffable moments
could I not say

That asking nothing is just a way
of wanting all—
a tilted face
with deep warm eyes
a laugh, half pain,
a word unsaid,
and the ecstatic feel
of touch of flesh
and two white jasmines
that are your breasts...

Or should I have said, O my Love,
you've come too late,

For I have nothing left to give,
or, how many times
can your heart ache
for an absent face?

How many years can your love penetrate
the mist
and dark
and leaden dusk?

How long can you feel the touch
of absent lips
and hungry hands
the cryptic pulse
of responding love
palpitating
deep inside
your slender self...

Or should I have said my road is long
I camp beside many more
who follow it
hungry as I,
Asking nothing save the memory of
a broken song
to keep—
a face
a smile
a meaning look
From deep, warm eyes.

Lucy

I bring you grey leaves, Lucy,
To decorate your hair,
To blend into its fragrance—
You knew that I would care...

I bring you heart-leaves, Lucy,
And lay them on your breast—
Your body once so vibrant
Is now laid low in rest...

I bring you galax, Lucy,
Small leaves of red and brown,
To place upon your bosom
Now softly scented down...

I bring you rose-buds, Lucy,
And place them on your brow.
You gave me love while living,
I'll give you flowers now...

In Potters Field

In Potters Field
 No rich man lies.
 No marble tombs
 Point to the skies.
 No prayers were made
 Their lives to save
 Before they met
 The pauper's grave.

In Potters Field
 The rag-weeds grow
 With red-nosed briars
 Along the row
 Of hedge and thorn
 That circle in
 The rotted dust
 Of working men.

They sleep there now
 Soft dust to dust
 In earth's cold breast
 As all men must.
 Six feet of dirt
 Is life's whole yield
 To those who lie
 In Potters Field.



In Memory of Claude Teague

For His Wife

The dog-wood and the honey-suckles blossom
 In April when the blue is in the sky.
 The new sod by the farmer's plow is broken,
 'Tis not the time a man would choose to die!

Oh death may wear a coat of many colors,
 Striding down the fall-time or the Spring
 When all the earth is waking from its slumber,
 When robins build their nests and thrushes sing.

Now that I'm gone away life will seem harder—
 You'll miss me and you cannot be at rest,
 For you will see the sorrow of our children,
 You'll have an empty feeling in your breast.

But you will go ahead with all the planting,
 You'll measure out the seed into the row.
 And you will tramp the trails around the bottoms
 Where we have trod together to and fro.

When April comes again and dog-woods blossom
 I wonder if my fields will take to weeds,
 Or will my faithful plow again be busy
 Tearing up the earth to put in seeds?

And when the crops are ripening in the Autumn,
 The fodder rustling gently as you pass,
 Oh will you feel my laughter in the corn-blades,
 Will you hear my footsteps on the grass?

These old red hills are stubborn as they're silent,
 It's hard to dig a living from their dirt.
 But you and I have fought and loved and plowed them,
 We've felt the joy of living and its hurt.

Oh April brings its winds so full of blossoms
 To blow the clouds across a sunny sky—
 A time for life and work and love and laughter,
 But not the time a man would choose to die.

Night on a Mill Hill

Dark scrambles down between ridges
 And hugs the village
 To her bosom...
 Around the edges
 Sounds squeeze out
 And float for a while...

Then listen to a Southern night,
 Listen to old ballads
 Full of misery
 Throbbing on the dusk—
 “Twenty-one years
 Is a mighty long time.”
 “Will you miss me?”
 “Left my home in Georgia”
 And “That lonesome valley.”

Songs pour out the sorrows
 From the lives
 Of Southern toilers,
 And songs wake up new hope...
 The huge mill lies slumbering
 By the creek bank,
 Furnace half aglow—
 Like the blazing eyes
 Of a tiger
 Waiting to tear the limbs
 Off its prey....

My Folks

I love the lonely mountain home
 The garden fenced with rails,
 The corn-patch up in Lonesome Cove
 And ridges streaked with trails.

I love the spring, the apple trees,
 My mountain-mother's way
 Of tucking bed-quilts over me
 The end of every day.

But things I love I cannot have,
 There's harder stuff for me—
 Just now and then my thoughts go back
 To how it used to be.

Now mother's back is bent with toil,
 My father's steps are slow.
 He totters weak behind the plow
 Along the cotton row.

Prayer

They said I didn't pray,
 The people in the church...
 I saw a silver spray
 Bathing a slender birch.
 Saw sycamore trees
 With white leaves caressing
 Pools colored like the sea,
 Deep blue and blushing.
 I saw cows quiet feeding
 On the green pasture grass,
 Saw birds at the mating
 And a lad and a lass,
 An old farmer working,
 Digging weeds from his corn,
 Heard a child singing
 At the break of a morn....

Feeling these, I bowed and stayed,
 But they say I never prayed!

Conference

We didn't say much.
 Jim's table had a few scraps
 And an old bone
 On it...
 The landlord came
 A-cussing for rent...

We didn't say much.
 Jim was all down in the mouth,
 And I was down, too.
 Jim had a nickel.
 I had eight cents.
 We didn't say much,
 There wasn't much
 To say...!

The Thief

Tom Wilson is a thief;
 He stole money
 To buy corn-bread
 For his children
 When the wolf stalked the door.

Tom Wilson rots in prison...
 Tom's children go ragged
 And hungry,
 For Tom Wilson is a thief;
 He stole bread for his six children
 When he was laid off.

Cornelius Vandermeulin is a gentleman.
 He drives a limousine...
 He owns the factory
 That Tom worked in...
 He works men

On death-colored wages
 And spends his winters
 Where warm breezes
 Blow on a sunny coast...
 Men curse and fear Cornelius,
 Working men with a tiger light
 In their eyes...
 Tom Wilson was one.

Tom had six mouths to feed
 The winter
 When he was laid off...

But Cornelius Vandermeulin
 Is a gentleman—
 Tom Wilson is a thief....

Hungry Old River

The little ripples of the River
 Purred gentle and smooth
 Like a house cat,
 Or the soft feet of a jungle beast
 Stalking the forest edge.
 Summer's moon glittered
 From the waters
 Like little diamonds
 Speckled out
 Across a velvet bosom....

"I shall never forget that night
 On the River,"
 A man said.

Hunkered in the shadows
 Toes on the bank
 The people waited
 And watched.
 The great warm Heart
 Of the people
 Bled

And sorrow dripped down
 To be licked up
 By the forked little tongues
 Of the sparkling waters....

Out there—
 Beneath those flickering diamonds
 On the velvet bosom,
 One of the people was caught
 And the hungry old River
 Guarded his prey
 With jealous jaws,
 While the big warm Heart
 Of the people
 Bled....

"I shall never forget that night
 On the River,"
 A man said....

Stillborn

I wasn't lonely then, little One.
 I could feel you there,
 Felt you kick and claw inside
 And your kicks filled me full,
 So full I thought my heart
 Would burst
 And joy
 Drip down
 Like rain-drops
 In April....

So I made a song
 To sing—
 A song of creation.
 The song was full of you, too,
 As April was full of violets
 Breaking through.
 And I thought the whole world

Was pregnant,
 Bursting out.
 It throbbed
 Like I throbbed,
 Full of you....

But you are still, little One,
 And I am empty
 And my song is gone—
 The song I made to sing
 So full of you....

Tenant

Gripping a pick
 A shovel, a mattock, a hoe—
 He drove steel for bread
 Where the railroads go
 And mixed his sweat
 With Georgia clay
 Digging the bed
 Of the new highway....

And now he walks
 With blistering toes
 On the concrete road
 Where the traffic goes.
 And his old stiff bones
 Are warped and bent—
 He starves himself
 To pay the rent
 On a tenant farm
 In Georgia....

Lula Moore

Lula Moore, say why'd you leave us,
 Why'd you rob us of yore smiles,
 Leave our mountains drooped with sorrow—
 Go so many lonesome miles...?

Springtimes now don't show that gladness
 In that ol' time singin' way
 When yore laughter rang an' sparkled
 By the banks of Cartecay....

Lula Moore, you left us lonely,
 An' the river doesn't sing
 Like when glidin' on its ripples
 You crossed to the laurel spring.

Ever' mornin' now you'd find me
 Nigh the mossy kivered mill,
 Whur the heart-leaf an' arbutus
 Make a carpet on the hill....

Fer with ever' sprig an' blossom
 Bloomin' from thur leafy floor
 Comes the memories of past mornin's
 And of you, my Lula Moore.

* * *

Here's the why I left, Jim Mulkey,
 Though I loved the river hills;
 I thought hoein' corn was worsen
 Than a-workin' in the mills.

I was young and all a-hanker
 Fer soft silk and fancy lace
 And the stuff them furren ladies
 Has to purty up thur face.

But now, you see, Jim Mulkey,
 How the factory is a kill—
 Thought I'd cotched up with my hoein',
 Went to workin' in a mill...!

Look, Jim Mulkey, at them wrinkles!
 All the blood's gone from my face—
 Shet away from sun an' daylight,
 What's the use of fancy lace?

Bill Dalton's Wife

Hit shore was painful
 The way Bill Dalton's wife
 Lay up thar on Bull Creek
 An' suffered out her life.

The granny women from
 Over on Wolf Creek's head
 Come to tend the labor
 An' thar found Lizzy dead.

The babe was crossed, Bill said.
 The doctor wouldn't come—
 Bill was powerfully in debt
 An' couldn't pay the sum.

Unity Is an Ax

Old Kim Mulkey
 Lean and stooped
 Heaves and sweats
 On a Georgia farm—

Say, Kim, wipe your eyes, old man!
 Forget your skin
 Is black or white.
 Pull back the scales
 That hide you
 From the future!

You read your Bible, Kim,
 And you know a farmer
 Lays ax to a fruitless
 Apple tree....

Unity is an ax, Kim—
 The ax of wisdom—
 Sharpened in the University
 Of Toil and Hunger.
 It's a mighty weapon

In the hands of croppers
 And workers.
 It chops down fruitless trees.
 It is like a keen scythe
 Mowing down greed
 And exploitation.
 It's a sledge hammer
 Battering at the shackles
 That bind men.
 It is poetry and song
 On the lips of those
 Who have long been silent.

Wipe your eyes, Kim. Look!
 She waits to greet you.
 Shake her hand.
 Don't mind the dung on your own—
 She likes them oil-smeared.
 Look up, Kim, greet the Future,
 Give her your hand!

Home-Coming

And I've come back to you,
 Mountain Earth—
 Come to laugh
 And sorrow
 And sing—
 To dig my songs up
 From your soil
 And spin a melody
 Of corn blades,
 Top-fodder,
 Crab-grass,
 And a clean-plowed furrow.

I've come to sing and grope—
 With a people who know
 Deep songs,
 Who stumble up
 A long crooked road....

I've come because
 Your great silent agony
 Echoed everywhere
 And the weary foot-steps
 Of my old Dad
 Still sound upon the mountain
 Where his sweat dripped down
 To water your dirt....

And I Have Loved

I have loved—
 The bigness
 Of everywhere...
 Of living,
 And the little things—
 The soft beauty
 Of a flower in bloom,
 And a blood-red sun
 Caressing the swollen breasts
 Of a pregnant spring earth....

I have loved the mystery
 Of dark, somber rivers
 With little ripples gnawing
 At the red earth,
 And a splashing mountain stream
 Splitting its heart
 On jagged stones
 As it slips to the bosom
 Of the deep green river....

And I have loved
 The calloused hands
 Of a Kentucky coal miner,
 The sad, solemn eyes
 Of a hungry child,
 The bent shoulders of a
 Georgia sharecropper

Digging crabgrass from
 His new-ground corn patch;
 The splash of Mississippi
 Against a tow of straining barges,
 The strong words of river boatmen
 And the way hard men can
 Love each other;
 The clash of steel on steel,
 And the sizzle
 When men pour liquid steel
 Into puddling troughs....

And I have loved
 The trusting grip
 Of a little child's fingers,
 And the soft, yielding feel
 Of a lovely woman,
 Body close to mine,
 Eyes deep and warm....

Harlan Coal Digger, 1934

Home...a box...
 on four pegs...
 Oozy, drippy shoes...
 Acrid odors
 From under the cat-scorcher...
 Gummy clothes...aching body...
 A little whiskey...warms up
 the damp spots...soothes...
 makes hurt places quit aching...
 Makes you feel good...forget...
 laugh...laugh in the face of a
 big black pit...laugh at ragged kids...
 hunger...ugliness...love...the smell
 of a woman....

Harlan, Kentucky
 December 25, 1934...

Church bells ringing...
 Jesus, born
 in a stable with mule
 manure...Jesus...died for us all...
 laugh...
 Sweet land of freedom...watch out for
 company gun thugs...if you're a
 union man...if you are not a union man...
 you ought to be...Charlie Lewallen shot...
 at night...
 thru the back...
 Charlie's wife has nine kids....
 It takes unity...
 to build the union strong....
 Watch out!
 It could happen here!



Highlander Youth

I hear the deep groan
Of abiding pain
Scourging the hills
With a crimson stain
Of mountain blood....

A cunning power,
O Highlander Youth,
Now grips your throat
To kill the truth
I'd have you see!

Up, you Highlander,
And hear what I tell,
A world of plenty
Is a world of hell,
While you sleep on!

You Highlander Youth,
There's yet the right way
To dream your dreams
Of the coming new day
And hills of peace!

Up, up, you sluggards,
You mountain men,
Who fear no devil,
Nor snare of sin—
Shake off this hell!

Georgia Sharecropper

Between the plow handles—
Dawn-break,
Soon in the morning....

Stooped shoulders—
Eyes full of hope,
Furrow on furrow

Around a stubble field.
Dirty sweat streaks the belly,
Drips from overalls,
Mixes with dust—
All day, all day....

Dusk time—
Tired bodies,
Smell of mule sweat
And stable manure....

Supper—
Corn-bread
Sow-belly
Pot-licker....

Sleep—
Scent of rye-straw
From a bed tick
And dreams:

Between the plow handles
Soon in the morning.
A deep plowed furrow,
Little cotton plants
Seed still on,
Bursting up...
Sweat oozing.
Corn-blades streaking
A new-ground hill-side.

And
Two eyes full of hope....

Cracker Boy

You are more than a dirty kid
In patched overalls,
You Cracker boy...
The hills are yours—
Fragrant forests,

Silver rivers,
And an enduring people
Are your heritage.

Dreamers. Thinkers—
Tom Jefferson,
Abe Lincoln,
Fred Douglass...
Builders!
Builders of a new world.

Rise up, you Cracker boy.
Sing your ballads,
Dream your future,
Exult as you plow the dirt
Or weave the cloth.
Yours is the useful life.
And
Only the useful
Endure....

I've Been a Poet

I've been a poet,
A maker of songs.
I've sung of the toilers I know—
Of hate, sorrow, love, and joy...
I've flung my arms wide
And staggered through a Georgia
Corn-field at midnight
Where a slow Southern wind,
Like the kind fingers of a mother,
Caressed my aching body
To soothe a numb yearning
For something I'd lost.
I've tasted the emptiness
Of unrequited dreams
And days when I forgot
How to sing....

Dark Night

My brain is an old pile
Of scrap iron tonight.
My music is the jangle
Of rusty plows banged together
On a Georgia farm—
My songs are twisted pieces
Of old cast-off iron
And steel corroding....

I've wanted to heat them
In a white-hot forge
And hammer them
Into long keen blades
The color of steel
Dipped in blood....

But tonight my songs
Are rusty pieces of iron
With edges snarled
And twisted
To bruise and lacerate
Sensitive fingers....

Soon in the morning I shall rise
To hammer a new song
Out of these old pieces!

Seeker

I've always been a seeker,
Restless and wary.
I've sought beauty
In a morning fog
Sleeping on the bosom
Of a sluggish Southern river,
In the mists of a rainbow
Climbing up from plowed dirt
After a summer's shower,

And in the silence
Of mountain stillness
Before a storm....

I have also sought love
And found it—
In a tenement house,
A lonely mountain cabin.

I have found love,
Joy
Sorrow
Fear—
Leaning on the bowed shoulders
Of a toiling mother,
A Southern field hand
Grabbing the white locks
That speck the red hills
Like a spotted hound's back....

Yesterday I found dreams
In a ditch digger's mind,
And poetry on the lips
Of a cook...
I looked again
And found music
And the rhythmic throb
Of toiling millions—
Feet beating the earth in unison—
And I thought
It is like the pregnant feel
Of a highland evening
Before a storm
Breaks on the mountains....

Prophet

for Claude Williams

He could not live just for himself
And mutter of his doubts and fear;
He chose to challenge men to strive
To bring a fuller kingdom near.

He could not stop to make a prayer
Amid disheveled tenant shacks.
He saw the hungry children there
With mothers stooped and bent of back.

Voice of the Cracker

To Charlie Gilman

I'm the voice of
The Southern Cracker,
Once silent, inarticulate.
But I'm learning to look
And talk straight now,
Listen to me...
For you've listened to others—
Unfriendly voices.
Because I was quiet,
Laboring with arm
And back muscles
Beside the silent slave,
My voice was not heard....

I'm learning that
The blood of my fathers
Made revolution
And hammered beauty
Out of a wilderness,
That America's dirt
Has sucked up my sweat
To keep soft hands soft
And make pot-guts potted,
While hunger and rags
Disease and illiteracy
Shriveled the souls
Of my own children...
Oh, I'm the Cracker—
The Red-neck
Clod-hopper
Mountain hooger hill-billy—
The "white-trash" nobody.

And you've heard
That I'm the lyncher
Of Negroes,
The man with the hood and night shirt!
But I tell you
You've heard falsely!
For the pattern was set
From the big houses
By those who now point

The unfriendly finger at me,
 Who taught me to hate
 And say "N-----,"
 And the Negro to hate
 And say "white trash"
 And both of us
 To despise the Jew....

Oh, I'm the Cracker,
 And I'm learning—
 Of *unity*,
 Not *hate*,
 To look
 And talk straight...!

Pineville, Kentucky, 1946

News item: Twenty-four miners killed by explosion. Company had sent men to work in mine after it was condemned by federal inspectors; twenty bodies sealed in mine.

Twenty-four miners,
 A blast and a boom
 Twenty-four bodies
 In a drift-mine room.

Some of them Negro,
 All of them brave—
 No segregation
 In this common grave!

Twenty dead miners
 In a common tomb—
 Shake yourself, mountain,
 To give them room.

Twenty together
 Is no lonesome road,
 Each helps to carry
 The other one's load.

The great deep sorrow
 For those who died
 Cannot be buried
 In a mountain side.

Go, America,
 And bow your head
 Where Four Mile Hollow
 Has sealed her dead!

No Lonesome Road

for Byron Reece

Once I too said that all men walk
 A solitary road
 And that each one must grope alone
 And drag his little load.

I thought that I must walk forlorn
 Upon that lonesome street
 All hedged about with granite walls
 Of pride and self-conceit.

But now I've learned that all can trudge
 Upon a common way
 Thru moonlit night and stumbling dark
 Or in the flaming day.

And men cry out in word and name
 As they are passing by
 To those whose faith and fortitude
 Have shoved them near the sky

Like Galileo at the stake,
 Jesus nailed to a tree.
 Cold bleeding feet at Valley Forge
 Are on that road with me.
 And I would not forget the men
 Who dig and plow the soil
 And those who fight that all shall live
 With simple lives of toil.

It is no lonesome road we tread
 Though so the cynics say.
 The poet, farmer, working man
 Must walk a common way.

Thoughts of a Kentucky Miner

Don West first published this story under the name "Mack Adams" for *Mountain Life & Work* in 1936. It was later republished, with the comment that the author was "perceptive, sensitive, philosophical, and certainly a writer" and "must have had much more to say and we would like to bring it to our readers." As Don relates the story, "When I wrote it I had been in a Kentucky jail for several weeks. I used the pen name because I knew the magazine would print nothing under my name then." But once asked, he sent the magazine a poem under his own name, which was rejected. (It was "A Time for Anger," later set to music by his daughter Hedy West and recorded by Peter Paul and Mary.) Finally, as Don tells it, when the magazine's sponsor, the Council of Southern Mountains, "was taken over by the younger element in the 1960s, this same story was reprinted again under my name."

* * * * *

Lame Shoat Gap looks like an old house sunk upside down in the mountain. Smears of dawn daub the east, filter through murky fog, and rest above Dark Hollow. Scrub oak bushes are silhouettes on the rock cliffs; look like corn shucks full of sausages hanging from the rafters. Everything is quiet, like a farm before roosters start crowing.

Down below, Dark Hollow lies snoring. Huge folds of dusk wrap her up in black blankets. Here and there lights flicker out from a miner's shack, like spikes of gold half-hammered into the dark. Dark Hollow's where we live. It's just like the name. Darkness loves that hollow; comes early and stays late.

We slope downward on the other side of Lame Shoat, trudge along to the creek trace; then start up Razor Back to Greasy Gap and down to the mines. Brown beech leaves carpet the dirt. They hide rocks and dead limbs. We stumble. The leaves rustle apart and back together like ripples on a mill pond. Withered beech limbs claw at our faces. They slap and sting with the sharp December morning. Carbide lights sputter. A sudden breeze snatches the blaze and is gone.

We are six brothers, all six feet. Never been to school. We just know the strength of six feet of muscles. Our shoulders are bent, hunched forward as if trying to fend a blow. When we walk our long arms dangle down 'most to the knee. We are not as good to look at as we used to be. We mine coal. Miles back into the bowels of the mountain we burrow, like a wild animal clawing its hole for hibernation. Our days are lived in the dark, bent in a strained crouch like you've seen a football team before the kickoff. Our heads set well back between the shoulders; necks bent sort of like a goose-

necked hoe. That makes a large Adam's apple. Our eyes curve upward as if we study the weather. The mine is full of treacherous horse-backs—slate flakes that drop without warning. They leave a hole the shape of a horse's back, and crush whatever they fall on. We're always looking upward.

We are sleepy. Getting up at three o'clock every morning, tramping over Lame Shoat to the mines, is tough. Even for muscles like seasoned hickory, warped in the sun. We've done this since we were big enough to lift a chunk of black coal.

We are a solemn group. Never know what to expect next. Maybe a gas explosion. Maybe a horse-back. One brother is minus an arm. A horse-back got him. Knocked his carbide light out. He was working in an isolated room. For half a day he lay there in the dark with half a ton of slate rock crushing his arm. We missed him at night and went a-looking. His arm was ground up in a bloody mess. We managed to drag him out to the drift mouth. The doctor was gone. The arm stayed that way till next day. But he loads ten tons of black coal now. He loads ten tons with the one long arm.

Mostly we stumble on toward the mines in silence. Now and then a limb slaps back. One curses. Another grunts. His foot plunges into a hole. A round rock turns an ankle. One falls and grabs with his hands. We slide down bluffs, catch slim hickory saplings to hold us back. Dark traces across the mountains, worn by stumbling feet. Dark entry, jet as the coal that lines its sides. Hard black coal down in the ruts of the earth. Bodies as black as that coal. Lungs the color of mashed poke berries. We breathe black air. We spit black spit. Our lives are dark. Our minds are cramped.

Occasionally there are scant snatches of conversation. Mostly it's about our conditions, our kids. Down there in Dark Hollow where we never see daylight except on Sundays, where blackness likes to hover like a smothering cloud, shut out from the light of decent learning, our kids are struggling to grow up.

But this is America! We are part of her. Our fathers hewed the wilderness and fought the Revolution. Our fathers were dangerous men. They believed in right. They took their guns and went barefooted with Washington. They made a revolution. And there may come a time when we are dangerous men, even the one-armed brother. For every day we look and say: "God, must our children follow our stumbling feet! Is there no sunshine of new life, of intelligent learning, ideas that will penetrate even the dismal depths of Dark Hollow?"

Our kids, they're all that matter now.

Tobe-Boy

Old Shug Cantrell stooped his shoulders to the plow handles. Red Georgia dirt crumbled up and dribbled down under the plow beam. Little clods tumbled out of the furrow like brown field mice stirred out of their nest. Dead ragweeds snapped and lay down under fresh soil.

Furrow on furrow the man and the old mule stumbled around the mountain side. A bunch of dominecker hens scrouged into the row, snatching greedily for bugs and grub worms.

At the end of each furrow of stubble, Shug kicked the lever that loosed the turner wing. The wing flopped over and was turned down the hill for the back furrow. Shug plowed with a hillside turner—a contrary plow. Sweat ran down into his eyes. It dripped from the mule's belly in little dirty streams.

Down the swag below, his woman grubbed at the sourwood and locust sprouts. She swung an old grubbing mattock. Her long arms reached high overhead in rhythmic circles—like the motions of a fiddle bow at a square dance. Now and then a thorny locust sprout slapped back against the woman's body. She stopped and raised her dress tail. Carefully she pulled the sharp thorns from the white flesh of her thigh. Soft April winds felt good blowing against the smarting scratches. They wafted the scent of peach blossoms from the big plantation across the road.

Come dusk, Shug unhitched the trace chains, tied the lines to the gears, and led the mule down to the branch for water. Almost caressingly he smoothed the ruffled hairs where the chains had rubbed. He patted the old mule's nose and picked a few cockle-burrs from his tail.

The mule had tromped the furrows of many plowing seasons. His ear muscles had long since ceased to function; the big ears flopped down like the drooping leaves of a tropical plant. His hip bones stuck up as if made for hat racks. One eye was blind. Most of his teeth were gone. The old man fed him on corn meal dough.

"Whoa, Tobe-boy. Take it easy." Shug was currying him down with a corn-cob. He talked to the mule as he would to a man-person. "Take it easy, Tobe-boy. Curryin's half feed they say. Got to plow a crop with you, Tobe-boy. Many a row we'll tromp this summer. Thought I wasn't going to have no mule. But you're a mule awright, Tobe-boy. Shore, you're a mule!"

The old man pulled the bridle over the flopped ears. The animal staggered into the stable, rubbing a high hip bone against the door facing. Shug heaved a deep sigh. The new mule, it seemed, could pull a plow. Didn't look so handsome, but he could "shake a plow stock awright!"—as much as Shug could stand anyhow.

His other mule had died that spring. Old age and the hard winter had

finished him. He just lay down in the stable and passed out. Things looked pow'ful tough for a while. Shug still had four small kids at home to feed. The few acres of rented hill-side was all their living. He had swapped his onliest milk cow and the seven laying hens for the old plug mule. The kids needed cow's milk, but the cow didn't plow. Crops must be plowed.

Shug turned from the stable door, dragged out a double-foot cultivator from the shed and tightened its handles. He picked up a dull-pointed bull-tongue plow. Holding it on the old piece of railroad track, he hammered the point to a sharp edge with the back of a poll ax. These were his working tools. Sap was up; frogs were croaking. Spring was here and that meant plowing.

Dark had already settled when the woman called from the house that supper was on the table. Shug picked up the slop bucket by the pig pen and stumbled up the rocky foot-path.

The feeble flicker of a kerosene lamp lit the room. Kids crowded around on the slab bench that ran along one side of the table. Shug sank down in a wire-bottomed chair on the other side, both arms resting on the table. Fatback with turnip 'sallet' tasted mighty good after a day between the plow handles.

Shug hardly heard the roar of the auto motor stopping in the yard. He didn't know the sheriff and Mr. Harper, the landlord from the big plantation across the road, were there till Lump Blalock called out: "Hey, Shug, come out here. Want to see about that mule yuh got."

"Mule!" A cold shiver ran down Shug's backbone.

"Got a fifa* agin' that mule, Shug," the sheriff said. "Chig Padgett owed Mr. Harper here twenty-three dollars and fifty cents. The mule stood good. Mr. Harper must be protected."

"Fifa! But I swapped Chig Padgett my cow and seven layin' hens for this mule. He's mine—all I got to make a crop with. I can't—"

"Too bad, Shug. But it can't be helped." Sheriff Blalock's voice was smooth and ingratiating. "Jestice is jestice, yuh know. Mr. Harper must have his jest dues. We'll give yuh till tomorrow—either raise cash money or we'll jest be obleeged to take the mule. Mr. Harper shouldn't ort to lose his jest dues. He must be protected."

"Cash—cash!—why, we swapped our cow, our onliest cow—"

Shug stumbled around for the words to explain.

"Can't help that, Shug. Mr. Harper here must be protected. Jestice is Jestice, yuh know. Course he got Padgett's cow, but that don't nigh pay the debt. Here's a notice from the court. We'll see yuh tomorrow." The sheriff handed Shug a piece of paper with some writing on it. The old man wadded it between his crooked fingers.

Sleep didn't come to the cabin that night for Shug and his old woman. They sat before the fire, staring into the red embers, and long after the *Fifa: a lien or mortgage.

embers had died down they sat there glumly slumped on the hearth stones.

Shug missed his oldest boy, Reef, who'd gone off looking for work. He wished Reef was there. Reef'd know something to do. He'd allus helped. He bought them the cow Shug traded for the mule. Reef said it was so the least ones wouldn't be rickety in the legs like Lourindy Mealer's younguns; their legs were bowed so they couldn't hem a shoat in a ditch.

They hadn't heard from Reef now in a long spell—not since rumors were narrated through the hills of a mine explosion where Reef worked. That had been a pow'ful botherment to Shug and his old woman.

The old man sat there with toes stuck in the ashes. He remembered his oldest boy as a little tad. Back in the mountains where they'd lived before moving to the cotton country, little Reef would clamber a-straddle of the mule's back behind Shug. All day long they would ride through the mountains looking for strayed yearlings, or shoats turned out on the mast. Shug was strong then. He had a young mare mule, too. Name was Allafair, and no better ever struck hoof to gravel. The two, the man and the mule, would turn their furrows against the best in the mountains.

Come daybreak the old man bestirred himself. Dawn flickered in the east; then flamed like a burning brush heap. Dusk clung for a little while around the swamp edge. Then the sun-ball rose up clean and round, looking like a big new-ground punkin cut half in two and stuck up in the sky.

Chickens cootered around the door steps. The pig squealed and rooted at the pen poles. Down at the barn the old mule brayed and pawed the stable door.

"Dad burn it! That mule!" Why did he have to start pawing and braying the first thing? Shug would have liked to make himself think he'd had a bad dream.

Ten o'clock and Sheriff Lump Blalock. Old Shug sagged down on the wagon tongue. He saw them halter Tobe-boy and lead him from the stable. He watched his tail swish the air as he ambled off up the road, his big ears flopping back and forth. Tobe-boy turned his head toward the house as they led him by. He blinked the good eye and switched his tail up over the hat-rack hip bones. The old woman sat on the door steps. Her eyes were bleary.

Shug got up from the wagon tongue and stumbled against the double-foot cultivator. Then his toe struck the sharp point of the bull-tongue plow. Over across the branch he saw the hill-side turner standing on the furrow.

He stogged off down a cotton row. His foot kicked the dead stalks and they snapped off at the ground. Frogs were croaking. Sap was up. It was April, spring—and cropping time.

Mountain Life & Work
Winter, 1940

II.

Poetical Works from 1947-1951

Prose, 1962 and 1966

Introduction to "The Road Is Rocky" (1951)

by Roy Smith

When I was asked to write an introduction to this book of poems I thought it was all a joke. Who am I to write something to be published about poems? I thought. I've never been to college. I'm a working man, a plumber by trade and occupation. My fingers are rough and blunt ended. I have a hard time keeping my nails clean—most times I don't. Why should an uneducated "red-neck" who works for a living with his hands be asked to do an introduction to a book of poetry?

After thinking on it a while I changed my mind. I remembered what it meant to me when I first began to read Don West's poems. It was the first, and only, poetry I ever read and liked. It made sense to me. It stirred me down deep. It made me see like I hadn't seen before.

Yes, I thought, it is nothing but good and right that a man like me should write about Don West and his poetry; that a nobody, a Georgia Cracker who knows the hard knocks and the cost of Jim Crow and discrimination to his own people should write. I knew I was the sort of guy Don West writes for and about. We come from the same kind of people. He gives us words to tell our troubles.

So I forgot my blunt-ended thumbs and the fingernails I can't keep clean, and sat down to try to write.

To begin with, I'd like to tell you about the author. I've learned it by many years of personal acquaintance. I'd like to tell you this because you can't separate a writer and his writing. To know one helps to appreciate the other. What I'm going to say is the good truth, too. I wouldn't say it different if tomorrow was the Judgment Day.

When I first knew Don West, he was the preacher in a small South Georgia town. Now I didn't like preachers any better than I'd liked poets, though I'd known more preachers. I didn't like preachers because it always seemed to me like they covered up the big sins and stressed the small matters, the sins of the little folks. Don told me later I had the Bible to back up that feeling—something about straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel.

But when preacher West came to visit our home the first time I was not warm in my reception. In fact, when I heard he was a preacher I was just about ready to boot him out, or try it. I didn't like preachers none too good, as I said. He seemed to overlook my rough attitude, though. I think he must have liked it, for I found out later that he didn't like the kind of preachers I didn't like any better than I did. He came back to see us again. I finally joined his church and he baptized me!

Since then I've known Don West intimately and in many jobs—as a school superintendent, college professor, journalist, editor, deck hand on a Mississippi steamboat, farmer and as one of the army of the unemployed. I've read his stories, editorials and poems. I've listened to his sermons and radio talks. I've seen him in everyday living. One thing I've learned: above everything else he is a warm, friendly human being with great courage and deep devotion to the welfare of his fellow humans.

Don West is the poet laureate of the common people of the South, if not all America. I say this without fear of contradiction. What other people's poet in America today has had his work circulated in mass quantity as he has had? His last book, **Clods of Southern Earth**, made a record-breaking sale by tens of thousands of copies. His publishers reported more than 13 thousand copies sold before the book came from the press!

How many other American poets of any class have enjoyed such mass circulation of their books?

But Don West is more than a poet, more than a writer whose works get mass distribution. He is also a veteran fighter in the ranks of the people for the rights of man. For many years his has been the one clear, steady, courageous and hopeful voice raised in the deep South in behalf of the common people, Negro and white. Don West is the voice of the inarticulate South, the spokesman for the millions of toiling poor, the champion of the down-trodden and oppressed.

He is more than a Georgian and a Southerner, though he is intensely both of these. He is a citizen of the world who knows of the heart yearnings of the people everywhere.

This is true, although more than anything else Don West is a poet. I have my own notion about what a genuine poet is. I think the poet is a many-sided man. He is a prophet, a creator and a teacher. The poet is also a lover of his fellow beings who has a hunger and the ability to express their inner yearnings and the beauty of the common life. He is also the agitator who stirs the people to struggle for a richer life with greater beauty.

Usually we think of America as a land where poetry has been trampled underfoot by a mad commercial spirit which dominates a profit system. There is a great deal of truth in that, too.

That is why big shots in the literary world are shocked when a man like Don West comes up from a Georgia sharecropper's stock with a singing voice, sturdy feet planted among the people, and a keen eye toward the future, and with a book of poems that gets mass distribution.

They can't understand. These poets who write little pettyfogging nothings for each other, to be circulated in a few hundred copies, can't understand when textile workers, coal miners and sharecroppers buy and

read a book of poems. They can't understand when a people's poet comes stalking up out of a Georgia cotton patch, a nobody, with big rough hands and feet, towering six feet three, like the proverbial bull in a pretty little China shop, and has his books grabbed up by the tens of thousands.

But I understand. I may be a working man, but I'm nobody's fool exactly. I know that the people know more than those who look down their noses at us think we know! The people know that Don West is one of them. His voice rings with sincerity and authority. There is about him, too, a quiet, proud dignity which commands respect even from his enemies.

And he does have enemies. Any man of his stature who fights for and is loved by the people has enemies, is always hated by the people's enemies. The Ku Klux Klan, the Talmadge gang, the reactionary editors of Georgia hate Don West. His clear voice, warm with a human throb, is a dangerous threat to all they stand for! It is the old story over again—the prophets stoned, jailed, burned at the stakes or nailed on crosses!

In 1948 Don West was teaching at a university in Atlanta. He was one of the best-liked and most popular professors on the staff. Students crowded to his courses. But his courageous social-economic-political views brought him under an unceasing attack from the reactionary press and the Ku Klux Klan, as well as from certain infantile left political elements.

At this time the university was angling for a large donation from William Randolph Hearst. Now even a high school kid in Georgia knows that Don West and Hearst don't go together!

So the university turned Professor West out!
The Hearst money came through shortly thereafter!

As an anticlimax to an already sordid drama, the university held a big memorial service on the campus during which the name of one of the fine old native stone buildings was changed to the Phoebe Hearst Memorial Hall!

Prostitution, of course, is not confined to houses of ill fame in the red-light districts of our cities!

I tell you all these things, as I said, because you can't separate the poet from the poetry. If you are a working man I know you'll like these poems. If you are one who believes in the future and the rights of man, regardless of your class, I know you also will get much from their reading.

They come up from the heart of the southern people. Moving and living among the people, seeing and feeling their hurt, the author sets it down in burning words. Look for that. Don't look for pretty little nothings with butterfly wings.

But read them, you'll see what I mean!

Speaking of the Poet

Speaking of the poet—is he not a double man? Is he not a man of two selves, who lives with the people and of the people, and the man who lives alone?

Refining, developing, hammering out inside himself the thing he sees in the people, the poet brings it beautiful, or he makes it ugly. It's the thing inside the people the poet brings out....

How can the poet speak when he has not walked with the people, when he has not been inside their hearts? And how can the poet sing whose own heart has not been broken?

Poetry will come from the South—and songs to sing. Our land is more than materialism and greed! It will come—up from the subsoil of folk life, from the broken lives and hearts and troubled souls.

And the poet himself will move among the broken pieces scattered in the darkness, and his voice will call—in trouble—not always sure, except of hope, of faith and hope....

The poet will piece the torn old scraps together, and there'll be beauty, there'll be hope and a way toward the future. No dark voice of despair is the people's poet!

Even the twisted old pieces will shed beauty, the beauty of human dignity, of being part of a person.

But how can the poet speak if he has not been inside the heart of the people, if he has not lived there, if his own heart has not been broken?

For the poet takes upon himself the hurt of other men, the ache of other hearts....

There's Anger in the Land

In the summer of 1950 I picked up a Negro hitch-hiker in South Georgia and brought him across the Chatahoochee at Eufala, Alabama. As we crossed the river he began telling me the story of how his brother was lynched and his body cut down from the limb and flung across the doorstep of his mother's shack—broken, bloody and lifeless.

Oh, there's grieving in the plum-grove
And there's weeping in the weeds,
There is sorrow in the shanty
Where a broken body bleeds...

For there's been another lynching
And another grain of sand
Swells the mountain of resentment—
Oh, there's anger in the land!

And a woman broods in silence
Close beside an open door
Flung across the flimsy doorstep
Lies a corpse upon the floor!

You'll not ask me why I'm silent;
Thus the woman spoke to me.
Her two eyes blazed forth anger
And her throat throbbled agony.

Let the wind go crying yonder
In the tree-tops by the spring,
Let its voice be soft and feeling
Like it was a living thing.

Once my heart could cry in sorrow
Now it lies there on the floor
In the ashes by the hearth-stone—
They can't hurt it any more!

Did you ever see a lynching,
Ever see a frenzied mob
Mill around a swaying body
When it's done the hellish job?

Yes the night was full of terror
And the deeds were full of wrong
Where they hung him to a beech-wood
After beating with a thong.

Oh, there's grieving in the plum-grove
And there's sobbing on the sand,
There is sorrow in the shanties—
And there's anger in the land!

Sad, Sad America!

Oh, America—
Sad, sad America!
Once you stirred the souls of men
In dark places
And shook the smug oppressors
By declaring equal rights for all men!

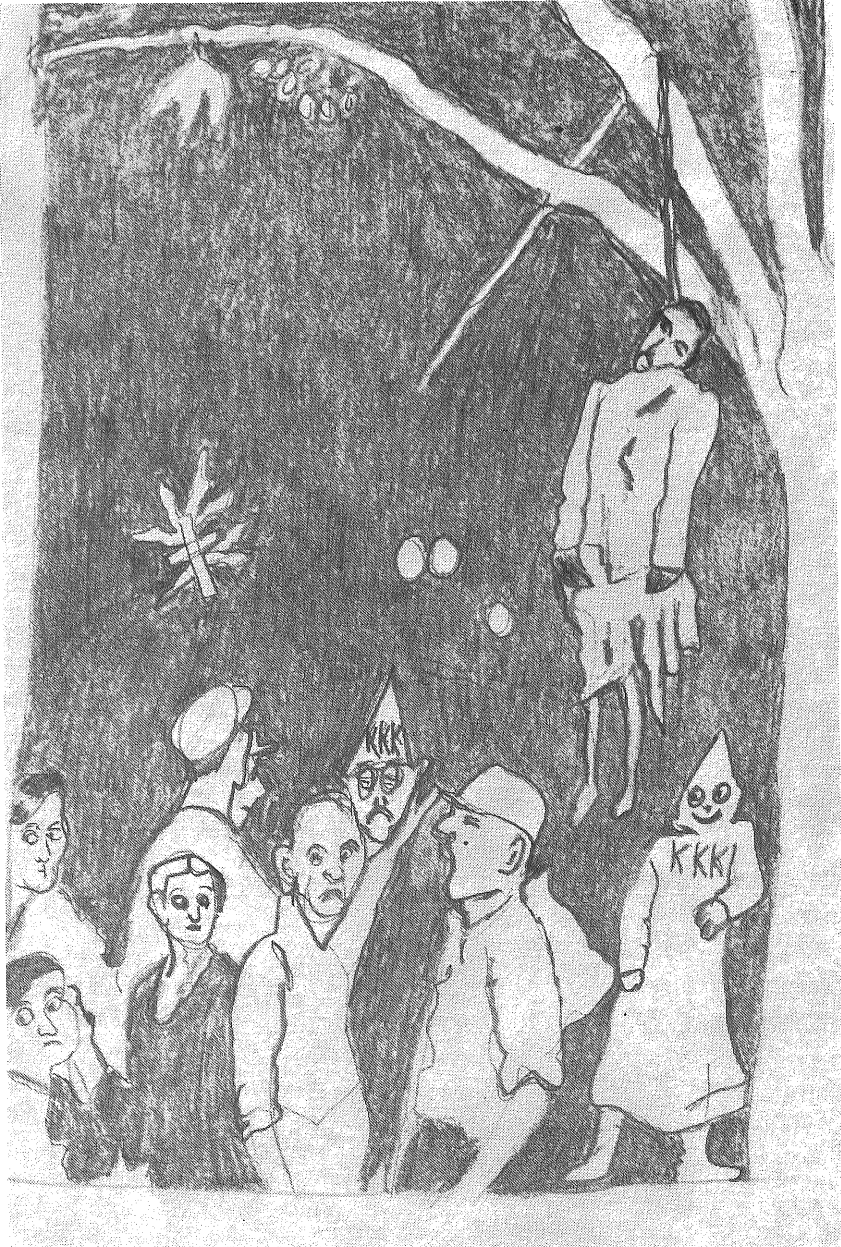
Oh, my country,
Land that I love!
You have known glorious days
In your morning years!
The strength of your rugged arm—
Sinew of the pioneer—
Was raised against the tyrant.
To breathe your name
Roused hope in bruised breasts
Of the humble in every land
And despots cursed you
With angry hearts!

But now, my country,
You eat a bitter fruit,
And I must eat with you!
You are betrayed by those
Who breathe your name
With honey love-words!

And I, at this moment,
Walk in silent sorrow
By this rumbling river of time,
For these are sad hours—
Saddest in my country's history!

Oh, America!
Sad, sad this hour
When you rattle the atomic sword
And your bombs blast
Innocent brown babies
Eight thousand miles from these shores!

Sad, sad the day
When men in Asia
Despise my country,
When women in Africa hate my country,
And men and women of all the world



Look with fearful gaze
Toward her Statue of Liberty!

Sad, sad the time
When only the world's tottering
Decaying dictators
Look to America
With hope in their eyes!

Oh Listen, You

Oh you who own the mines and mills
And you who own the tools,
And you who are their prostitutes
In pulpit, press or schools—
It's time for you to listen close
To what I have to say,
For surely as the sun comes up
There'll be a judgment day!

Now we who sweat and toil and bleed
To make the wealth for you
Are learning fast what makes us strong,
And you're just but a few.
Oh I am one who speaks for those
Whose voice has long been quiet
And I'm the one whose Love was slain
That black and bitter night!

My Mary with the laughing eyes
Was once so gay and fair,
Her breasts were two white jasmine buds
And chestnut was her hair.
But what I loved the most was killed—
The death shone in her eyes,
For love, alone, could not live there,
With fear it always dies.

So listen you who own the guns
And you who cloud our day
By pious word and poison phrase
To turn us from the Way—
As surely as the sun comes up
There'll be a judgment day!

If Sometimes Sorrow

If sometimes sorrow lies heavy
upon my verse
and sad thoughts burden my lines,
remember me as one who walked
in dark places, too, and who saw there
the broken pieces of young hopes...

For I'm the poet of the sad and sorrowful,
of anger and love, and the poet
of despondency and hope
of joy and pain, and hunger, too...

And I say each soul has all of these—
each man and woman.
I'm the poet of all,
but especially of hope—
of faith and love and hope.
Sometimes a man or a woman
is overcome—
and I sing for them, too.

I remember a night in San Antonio,
a door with a woman's face,
a hand outstretched, lips parted,
and I remember a dusty house—
no lips, no hands—just empty space!



And there was a time in Tennessee
with one who dwelt there, dear to me.

And I deny that love only lives with joy,
I've seen her smile on an outcast boy!

In Michigan beet fields—
two thousand miles from Texas—
I saw a migrant mother
unload from a cattle truck with her dead baby
clutched tight. Her fingers had made little ridges
in the baby's cold flesh!

In Illinois, in the cattle's hay
dark-skinned babies see the light of day!

Ten million fingers on human hands
reaching out, through the grass and limbs—
grabbing the cherries
asparagus, tomatoes,
apples, potatoes
and berries—
things on your table.
Look on the shelves of your grocery store!
Is there anything there a human finger
has not touched in the fields...?

Eat the strawberry dessert,
enjoy your food,
for it's been made rich
by sweat and blood!

In Georgia, deep in turpentine pines,
where the wood-birds chatter
and the jasmine vines
climb wild and free
onto the limbs
of the live-oak tree—
the shacks of workers
are all the ugliness
you'll see!

On a New Year's Eve
I saw three musicians singing
to a drunken American tourist
in a Monterrey bar.
Outside on the street
a little beggar girl

run down by a car,
a beautiful little beggar girl
with cold, bare feet!

In Alabama, I remember it there,
black body swinging high in the air!
A human body swung to a tree
Is an ugly sight for the eye to see!
And ashes scattered
by a burnt-off stake
is the meanest odor
that men can make!

On a Florida road I saw a wreck—
two Negro men, unconscious,
on their backs. I saw an ambulance
drive off and leave them there,
for they were Black!
Those men had brothers fighting in Korea—
for what...?

Oh, there's joy and sorrow and love and pain,
and those down now shall rise again...!

Oh, Pity Those

(For those who backed down under pressure)

Pity not the poor,
The hungry mass
Who fight for bread midst human tears,
But pity those
The liberal class
Once brave with words, now cowed by fears!

Oh, pity those,
The liberal men
Whose words were brave when times were fair
But now their lips
Are tight and thin—
We cannot hear them anywhere!

Battle of the Migrants

On the morning of December 15, 1949, eleven charred skeletons were found huddled around a makeshift washtub stove near Rotan, Texas. They were the family of a Mr. and Mrs. Manuel Perez. It had been a bitterly cold night and the Perez family had tried to keep warm. They had migrated from the Rio Grande Valley, richest food-producing section of the South...

—Harry Koger Report to President's Commission on Migrant Labor

They were a migrant family
 Nine little ones in all—
 A father and a mother
 Late in the Texas fall.

They'd been a-picking cotton
 So soft and snowy white—
 The day was stark and chilly
 And colder was the night

The night was cold and dreary
 And ice was on the ground;
 Inside the shack in tatters
 The children huddled round.

The time was near to Christmas
 When Christians always say
 Christ being born of Mary
 Makes this a special day.

It burned that night to ashes,
 The hut and all within,
 But who can tell the sorrow,
 Whose is this mortal sin?

Eleven skulls next morning
 Were lying in a heap,
 The skulls of workers' children
 And workers' flesh is cheap!

Description of a Woman

(For one I knew in New York)

She sat there, well dressed,
 sophisticated.
 Cold, glassy eyes,
 with the look of old butcher knives;
 Thin, cold lips
 drew her mouth into sharp
 narrow lines—
 feelingless slits.
 Her face—
 hard—mirrored a little soul
 squeezed dry...
 Her voice—
 brittle, like the crackle
 of dead rag-weeds
 with no sap...

She spoke of Christian works—
 but the most striking thing
 was the stony stare
 of those cold eyes,
 sharp like cat claws
 and with no sign of the warmth
 of a woman...!

I Saw a Hungry Child

I saw a hungry child in Texas
 and its eyes held more tales
 than I can ever write!

Who knows how it feels
 to see a hungry child?
 Who knows better than the mother
 of the child I saw?

And who knows how it feels
 to be hungry?
 Who knows better than the child itself?
 America, why don't you ask?

You're big and overstuffed
with good things—
why don't you ask?

Why don't you say:
Hey, kid, how does it feel
to have an empty belly?
How does it feel
to gnaw a mouldy crust
and sleep on old gunny sacks...?

Does the belly get to be
a mighty big thing, kid,
when it's empty...?

Why don't you ask,
America?

Advice to the Would-Be Poets

On a bright Sunday in 1950 I sat in a meeting of "Texas poets" in San Antonio and listened to a lot of verse about a lot of things—a lot of things beside life and people with their hurt and trouble and hope and pain. I heard poems in praise of practically nothing, and poems in praise of MacArthur as the great Christian gentleman and champion of democracy. And I thought: "Oh Lord, how long? How long, Oh Lord, until poets learn to go to the people for inspiration, for poetry?" And I wrote these lines there.

Away with pious references
To patriotism and to prayer,
As the naked child is born
Let the truth lie cold and bare!

If there is a thing to tell
Make it brief and write it plain.
Words were meant to shed a light,
Not to cover up again!

Old Maria of San Antone

On a day in December, 1950, I saw old Maria lying on her rusty iron cot in a woodshed on San Antonio's Westside. The floor was the ground. A dirty, broken bowl sat on a three-legged table which sagged against the wall. No heat, no food, few friends. The old woman had been sick there for three years. Of Mexican birth, she was not eligible for any kind of public relief, though her two sons had fought in World War II. A kind neighbor, almost as poverty-stricken, shared a few scraps. This whole Westside area, made up partly of migrant farm workers, reeked with poverty. A few scrawny mequite bushes with roots sucking the dry earth gave only an ironic figleaf covering for the ugliness which abounds there!

Old Maria of San Antone
Stretched on her iron cot—
A sagging stool, a broken bowl,
A woman now forgot—
Except for one, her only love,
That dark, insistent Death!
For these past years he's lain with her
Sucking away her breath.

Drawing her close with rude embrace
He takes his time at rape—
A sluggard one, half impotent,
But she cannot escape!
He holds her there in that crude shed
With dirt the only floor.
He lay with her all of last night,
And now he's back for more!

He feels her lips, her thighs and breasts,
As other wooers have—
Those lovers, poverty and want,
Who dragged her near the grave.
And old Maria lying there
Unable to resist,
Unwillingly gives in to him—
He needn't now insist!

How sad if I should see this thing
And think there was no way
To end such ugly rape of life
And bring a better day.
But oh, that you, my only love,
Could know this thing I see,

That you might have an angry heart
And join the fight with me!

If I Could Find a Key

If I could only stir the heart
Of those who labor hard and long,
Arousing there the godly spark
That makes men fight against a wrong!

If I could find a secret key
To open wide the hearts of men,
I know that then we all could see
The beauty buried there within!

Limitless Man

The Kingdom of Heaven is within you

Let us sing of man today—
Man unlimited,
Man the thinker
And the lover—
Conscious of himself!

Two billion years are gone
Into the making
Of limitless man
And the miracle of his mind
And heart
Conscious of
His unbound future...!

I said let us sing of man—
The worker—
With a new world
Locked up inside himself,

Overdue
Bursting now
To show the beauty
Of man unfettered
Through the next
Two billion years....

Indivisible

And I can never separate
the face of the woman
I love
from struggle,
and the people...

Always and always—
wherever it is!

We Poor Are Strong

For those to whom the future belongs

We poor are strong—
We have to be
To bear what's always been our lot.
We've fought the wars
Across the sea
Where sons in thousands lie and rot.

We've laid the tracks
And cleared the fields,
We've dug the mines and built the schools
And from our toil
Rich are the yields—
For those who own production's tools!

We poor are here,
 We've always been—
 And always will the preachers say,
 But sin can't kill
 The dream of when
 Our toils will bring a better day.

So pity not
 The humble poor
 Who struggle daily for their bread,
 For they shall live
 Forever more—
 To take the world for which they've bled!

The People Know

The people know more than they tell—always.
 The people know they don't have to live in
 misery forever, that they belong to each other,
 that they belong together...

But the people don't always do as they know...
 Sometimes the people mistake... Sometimes they
 forget that they know... Sometimes the people
 forget that love loads the guns against their
 misery...

But the woman I love must not forget... Not for long
 must she forget... She was intended to be a goad, bringing
 songs to be needles in the people's conscience.

The woman I love must not forget... Her beauty, a knife
 in my own heart, belongs to the people, and her heart
 is good and clean and courage is in it...

For the people hunger...and the people know more than
 they tell...and always the hunger...and the future
 belongs to those who hunger...

The people know...!

Jesus, I Would Speak with You

Jesus, I would speak with you—
 I'm a man with calloused hands.
 You were once a worker, too,
 And I think you'd understand.

Always you were with the poor—
 Toil and hunger was their lot,
 And you noted Dives door,
 None so small that you forgot.

"A dangerous man," they said,
 As you spoke for common men,
 When you gave the masses bread
 And overlooked Mary's sin.

Jesus, you were in a jail,
 Framed by leaders of the land.
 Did your courage ever fail,
 Do your churches understand?

Jesus, did you ever doubt,
 As the future looked so black,
 When they beat and marched you out
 With a cross upon your back?

No Road Back

Words to one who asked why I don't get over my "youthful concern for justice for the poor" and go back to being "a respectable and acceptable citizen."

There is no way back—
 Only the road ahead!

Only the people's road
 Ahead—
 Rocky with ruts,
 With bridges blasted.

But it won't be rocky
 Always.

We'll build new bridges
On the road to the rich green valleys
Of the new earth!

Love—
In the hearts of the poor
Blasts mountains down!

There is no way back—
To feudalism
Slavery
Or the fascist dream!

My eyes are blind
In that direction—
There is only the road
Ahead...!

I've Heard Men on the River

I've heard men on the river talk—
as we pulled the barges,
as we sat our watch
through long night hours
by muddy waters...

The river's like us
they said—
a live thing,
a slow thing
with many little forked branches
bundled together,
depending upon each other.

The river is a sluggard—
but she knows where she's going,
she gets there!

The river wears out many a steamboat,
but she's still here—

and will be tomorrow
and the next day.
She'll be here next year,
and next life-time!

The Mississippi bundles up
a lot of little waters,
and she knows where
she's going...!
The river's like us,
they said.

Four Gifts for Man

I am he who sings
of the beauty of living—
the life process—
two cells united
from whence come many;
the inner surge
compelling male to seek
the female
and she him;
the love of a man for a woman
and she for him...
The sex in it, I say,
is clean and holy.
I say no function under the sun
in the life process
is unclean...

And I speak of death, too—
the ugly places—
the changing of death into life
and their unity.
I say there is no life
without death
and no creativity
without blood and struggle...

I will lay no yardstick
to the life process

nor attempt to measure
 the rumbling river of imagination
 flowing into a sea of eternity
 and the half-sick joy
 of old memories
 burgeoning up from inside...

I will erect no formula
 to cramp the dreams of men
 nor will I preach obedience
 to any law that blinds the eyes
 of adventurous man
 and dams off the stream
 of creation...

And I say I know no sorry people
 on this good earth
 nor mean.

I only know the strong and weak,
 with pride and without,
 rebellious and defeated,
 human, with love, or without...

Four gifts I crave for man:
 Love, that makes him human,
 Imagination, to realize it,
 Pride because he is,
 and Courage to be...

The Dangerous Ones

The dangerous ones—
 Find them, and they are
 The dissatisfied
 The cross-breeds of love and sorrow
 Of hope and anger—
 The prodders and goaders,
 The provokers, agitators,
 Trouble makers
 And the lovers...

Dangerous to the few,
 The parasites
 Who suck the blood of the people!

Such a one is the peace-maker
 And builder, too.
 He's the little man at the bench
 And the poet who speaks to the little man.
 He's the black man in the furrow,
 Who sees the sun coming up
 Soon in the morning
 From between the plow-handles,
 The red of the sun seeps down
 Through his eyes to the heart.

The man in the furrow
 Knows the power of the sun
 To break open a seed,
 To make it sprout and grow,
 He knows the power of hope, too,
 And of sorrow—
 To break open a human heart,
 To break the shell of an old world
 And sprout a new!

These are the dangerous ones!
 The woman of passion,
 The man with a dream
 Who send words as tormentors
 To stir the souls of hungry men,
 Who weld the twisted old scraps
 Into a chain of links
 Strong with the strength
 To drag the world
 Toward her future!

And Now I'll Tell You Why

To the memory of Ella Mary Wiggins, youthful leader of the great Gastonia textile strike in 1929. She was murdered on a Sunday afternoon when a gang of company thugs, hidden in the brush, fired upon a truckload of workers as they drove along the public highway.

Now let me tell the reasons why
I've sung my Mary's praise
And how my heart was lost to her
In all a thousand ways.

It was not only that she was
As pretty as a flower
Nor that she made my pulses beat
At ninety miles an hour!

My Mary was a worker's child
Close by a river town,
She loved to watch the river men
And boats go up and down.

Her eyes were two deep water pools
Tinted with hazel nuts
Her lips had kissed the rain-bow's tint
Her breasts were buttercups!

But when she left these mountain fields
She toiled from soon till late
A-weaving cloth from cotton thread
Inside that factory gate.

The time was hard for working folk
Until the union came
The lives of workers in that mill
Were never quite the same.

My Mary was the kind of girl
Who knew what they should do
She stirred the people by her words
And by her spirit, too.

Then those who own the guns and tools
By methods foul and low
Struck out to kill the people's hope
And keep their wages low.

Their thugs were hidden in the brush
Along the public way
They shot my Mary, cold and dead,
That fatal Sabbath day!

I saw my lover wounded there
Her blood flowed red and fresh
I held her gently in my arms
And felt the chilling flesh.

Her heart beat slow and softly, then
It fluttered like a bird
About to make a sudden flight
When some rude sound is heard.

We laid her deep in mountain earth
Beside this sarvis tree
And when it blossoms come each Spring
They smell of her to me.

And many a night on yon sad hill
I've sat beside that tree
And felt my Lover's hand in mine
And had her talk to me.

Her spirit walks now on these hills
And looks through open door
Where toil and hunger share with love
Homes of the humble poor.

But sparks she lit in lowly hearts
Burn deeply with a glow
And fueled by man's eternal hope
The flames flare up and grow.

And where there's trouble in the land
Or strife in any place
Wherever people strike their chains
I see my Mary's face!

Let Love Take Her Place

Written in a Chicago burlesque show

Listen!

Let a working man speak of love:

Impotent fornicators,
Pimps of a profit system!
You who make big business
Of selling a woman's body,
Putting love on the auction block,
Making ugly her beauty
Dragged across your obscene stage!

And you who would chain
Women down inside a whore house
Or burn hearts out
Inside a sweat-shop—
Listen!

Let a working man speak of love:
I'm tired of this mockery,
And I'm not ashamed
Of the beauty in love!
I say let her take her place—
The spark at the core,
The energy in the human atom
One day to blast to oblivion
A system of preying
Upon helpless women—
And the dogs who defend it!

Let love take her place,
Clean and holy
And unashamed—
A cause for the endless hunger
And the only thing
That can satisfy...!

I Walk with Winter

For one who no longer walks by the Chattahoochee

I walk with Winter still
Though Spring goes striding by.
She holds my hand
Cold as her own
Where trembling, leafing trees
Suck deeply by this river's bank.
I walk with Winter now,
Streaked with jacquard stripes,
Saying nothing
From a weighted heart...

Sad thoughts fill me now,
For you did not come with the dusk
As the teasing little tongues
Of the brown-barked oak had said:

"Yes, she'll come. She'll come again
At twilight on the hills
Making soft the night
With her lovely, haunting face!"

Close by the Chattahoochee now
I tramp these withered leaves—
Once vibrant with a surging sap—
Which laugh mockingly
At my stumbling steps...

It had just never seemed to me
That somewhere you
Would not always be
Waiting—

Waiting there for me,
As these sour-wood sprouts
Wait and stir
With life's rich sap
At Spring's first touch...!

But I walk with Winter now
And through her thin and icy lips
She speaks and says
That comes the time
When life stirs deep,
You'll come

Though others sleep—
 You'll come again
 Across the night
 To ease this pain!

Futile Effort

Today I said I would not have
 Of her a single part,
 But I would go about my work
 And put her from my heart.

I rose at dawn and with the sun
 Was digging in my field,
 Trying this while to keep a thought
 Upon next autumn's yield.

I drove the cattle to the range
 Across old Piney Peak,
 And harnessed up my mules to plow
 The corn on Turkey Creek.

A futile effort, all of this,
 Since Mary's gone from me,
 For though I look at weeds and corn
 Her face is all I see!

Question

Who knows the strongest bond?
 Who knows why one heart
 Can rest in another
 And only there...?

Who can explain the emptiness,
 The deep, ugly ache
 Of a man
 When the woman he loves
 Sleeps with another...?

Who can walk
 Through the night darkness
 And see clearly...?

Pain and a Goad

Once there was a woman
 Who came to me, clean and willing,
 And beautiful, without fear.
 I say without fear, especially,
 For fear in a woman's eyes
 Kills the heart...
 Where fear controls
 Love has no room!

And I said:
 This is the blossom of dreams,
 The flower from the roots
 Of all longings—
 The full and perfect woman.

Then prudence came,
 Dragging fear with her.

I wondered, and wandered,
 Went about looking
 At the world's sore places
 And some of the beautiful.
 I was weak, and stumbled,
 And fell down.
 Sometimes I asked:
 Is there anything left?

But a man can never look too long
 Inside himself,
 His soul would wither
 And his heart dry up!
 The poet must look out—
 With the people,
 Mix his yearnings with their hunger
 And his sweat with the grime of others.

There was a pain and an ache and a goad
 Inside,
 A goad that kept driving.
 And I said:
 Ache on inside there,
 If you need any help
 I can give it!
 For I know those who hide their hurt
 And keep hope alive in hunger.

I know the creators, the working men
 Who, with chains around them,
 Are forging the hammers
 To smash those chains!

Who Is He that Knows?

What is love, and where is living?
 Who is he that knows?
 Has he stumbled through the dark places
 And felt the hurt of those
 Who cry in silence?
 Has he wanted to meet death
 And talk it over?
 Has he known tears
 And the sob of broken hopes...?

If you should ask me
 Where are love and living,
 Should I say where men are not alone...?
 Or, in the sunshine,
 In movement, in the deep blue of eyes
 Color of lake waters,
 In the dark and in tears,
 In broken songs and old hopes?

Should I say:
 Love is in living
 And living is in love...?
 Is love the feel of a touch
 In its absence,
 To breathe the breath of the ages,
 To make intangibles as concrete
 As rocks on the mountains
 And as lasting...?

What should I say
 If you asked me:
 What is love...?

And I've Learned

I knew a woman once,
 one of the people,
 beautiful of body
 and generous of spirit
 and I loved her...
 I loved her simply
 and honestly, and because
 of herself...
 I entered her heart
 and she came to mine...

A man, or a woman, can never
 run away from it—
 from love and from struggle.
 Once they've tasted
 they can't run away
 to hide...

Space and time wear on,
 years multiply,
 but a stubborn love
 is an insistent thing!

I walk with the people,
 but wherever I look
 she is there.
 So near—
 So far away...!

And I've learned of sorrow
 and a stubborn love.
 I'll put them in my songs
 for tomorrow...

I Shall Remember

On strange and different roads
 with struggle,
 clouds black overhead
 and the deafening roar of thunder
 everywhere,
 I shall remember a time—
 a time of singing
 and a woman's eyes—
 eyes that never leave me
 alone...!

The Death of Old Major

I braked the pickup to a quick stop. It was past midnight. The trip to town had been longer than expected. I was in a hurry, but there in the middle of the dirt road just off the highway stood Old Major, our stallion. The headlights glistened on his sleek hair and sparkled when the glow caught his eyes.

His head was not held high now in the usual proud way. It drooped low. He stood headed toward the barn holding his left hind leg up. A cold chill ran up my spine. I knew something bad was wrong.

I got out of the pickup. Major raised his head and nicked feebly. Seemed that he wanted to say he had been waiting for me. I saw at a glance what had happened. Across the highway the pasture gate was open. Careless city hunters must have left it open. Major had walked out on the speedway. When a big trailer truck hit him, knocking him into the ditch, he had struggled out, hobbled as far as he could, and waited.

He nicked again and winced as I passed my hand over the bloody leg. Both bones were broken about a foot above the hoof and the hip was smashed. One could move the leg back and forth, limber as a rag. I knew that this was the end of old Major.

Major wasn't really old. We said "old" only because we loved him. He was only five years. His full name was Ideal's Major Allen. That's the way the registration papers read. He was sired by champion Beau Ideal, and was himself already a prize winner. Hedy, our younger daughter, and her sister Ann had raised him from a gawky colt. They were as proud of him as he seemed to be of himself. Hedy taught him to shake hands, to lie down for her to mount and other tricks. She had watched him grow to be a big stallion with white stockings who walked as if there were springs in his hoofs. He was a Tennessee Walker.

Major was indeed the family pet, our favorite of all the colts and mares on the place. Proud, full of fire, he seemed to have more sense than any animal on the farm. He even seemed to know about children and how to treat them. He actually seemed to love them. Hedy would ride him standing up or even standing on her head on his back, child-like, to show off. When little Judy Hall, our neighbor's four-year-old, wanted to ride, Major would plod along like an old workhorse. Once the toddler lost her balance and came up on his neck. As she clung to his mane, Major lowered his head and let her slide to the ground unhurt. But when I mounted his head went up, his eyes sparkled, and he was off like the wind.

He was a big tease, too. If one of us went into the pasture where he grazed, he would come galloping full speed straight at us. When almost upon us he would suddenly stiffen his legs and skid to a stop. At such times his big brown eyes would twinkle as if he wanted to say: "You thought I was going

to run you down, didn't you?" Then his nose would nuzzle our pockets for carrots or apples. He dearly loved both, and seemed to think our sole purpose should be to carry pockets full of them around for him.

But there on the side road old Major whinnied feebly and let his head drop low. Somehow I could hardly believe this was the end. Only that morning I had felt his powerful muscles under me as I rode him over the road in a vigorous workout. I was thinking how I would write Hedy and Ann about it. They were away in college. How could I tell them that a truck hit Major and we had to put him out of his misery. For I knew he had to be killed, but I couldn't do it. It would be too much like killing one of the family. I went to get the vet.

The half-wakened vet rubbed his sleepy eyes. It was on the morning side of midnight now, but Claude, the feed mill operator, came along. I was glad, for I didn't feel like helping with the job.

Old Major was standing in the same tracks on the dirt road. He really looked old now. It may have been my imagination, but his eyes held a despondent look as I looked at his low-hung head and heard the familiar nicker.

I walked away into the darkness. I didn't want to see Major fall. I didn't want to see his body lying by the roadside ditch, cold and stiffening. Come daylight I would get John Hall to take the tractor and drag him away. I wanted to remember old Major as he used to dash across the green sod, head high, mane flying, ears back and that impish twinkle in his eyes.

*The Appalachian South
Fall/Winter 1966*

Hard Times Cotton Mill Girls

She was singing:

Hard times cotton mill girls
Hard times cotton mill girls
Hard times everywhere.

The voice was a high soprano. The sound drifted through the log cracks of the cotton house where I played at the edge of the cockle-burr patch. My aunt Mattie sang as she washed dishes. Our people always sing. The clatter of plates and forks was an undertone to the high clear voice.

My aunt Mattie was a spinner at the Atco Cotton Mill. It was a Goodyear plant. Our Grandpa Bud West moved his family from north Georgia mountains to the foothills of Cartersville in 1915. My own family still lived back in the mountains. We dug a hard-scrabble living from the steep hill patches. Corn and beans and collards and tomatoes. A cow, a few sheep, chickens, yearlings, pigs, a few bee gums and a pair of wiry-legged mules.

We peeled tanbark, hewed cross-ties and hauled 15 miles to Ellijay where the railroad ran. We got \$3 or \$4 for a load. It took all day, from before daylight till after dark. There were no driving lights. Knowing mules kept the wagon on the single-track road. Sometimes it rained and we were stuck. My Dad would hunt a pole or fence rail. We prized and pushed and the mules finally pulled out.

We took lunch of home-made rye bread or wheat biscuits. Once grandpa Kim Mulkey gave me a dime to buy lunch. I got some loose soda crackers and cheese at Sebe Burrell's store. That was plumb different.

Now we were visiting grandpa Bud West. Back in the mountains Dad had hitched the mules to a covered wagon. Kids piled in on top of quilts and mule fodder. Rough roads made a three-day trip. We camped along. Some slept in the wagon; others made a pallet underneath.

I listened to the singing. It was about work time. Aunt Mattie would hitch the big iron-grey Woodrow horse to the buggy and drive six miles to the mill. It was a twelve-hour night shift and she had to get going.

"Cotton Mill Girls" was her favorite song. She sang just like she was making it up out of her own self. Like it was her story being told. I listened. I listened a lot of times and learned it. After the sound of Old Woodrow's iron-shod feet and buggy tires on gravel died down I tried singing it. I wanted to sound just like aunt Mattie:

Worked in the cotton mill all my life
Ain't got nothing but a barlow knife
Hard times cotton mill girls
Hard times everywhere

It sounded right good, almost like aunt Mattie.
And I went on:

When I die don't bury me a-tall
Hang me up on the spinning room wall
Pickle my bones in alcohol
Hard times everywhere.

Thought I did pretty good on that one, too, raising voice in the sad tragic-humor of it.

Then I repeated the part about the barlow knife. That I could understand better. Once old Santa made me about the proudest kid in the mountains when he left a barlow with the usual peppermint stick and orange in my Christmas stocking. The barlow was the poor man's knife. It cost only a dime. It still tempts me. Every time I see a knife with a Barlow label on a counter I want to buy. Reckon I've given Hedy at least a half dozen.

But the stanza that fetched up the most vivid imagery was about the body on the spinning room wall and bones in a pickle barrel. I shut my eyes and

leaned back on the cotton pile. I saw it plain as the sun-ball coming up over old Stover Mountain on a summer morning. A girl's body hung on a wall. Under it was a big wooden barrel just like Grandma used for kraut or pickle beans. The body and bones were my aunt Mattie who had just gone down the road lickety-split in a buggy behind old Woodrow.

Thinking on it made me sad. But I sang it again at the top of my voice there in the old cotton house. The more I sang the sadder I got. I loved my aunt Mattie and the thoughts of her hanging on a wall, in a pickle barrel, brought tears.

Why should this be? So beautifully young, so kind and understanding to a young mountain kid? Hung on a wall and pickled in a big wooden barrel. I got real mad!

Our family was close, loyal. An injury to one gave pain to all. The kid knew something was wrong. The song told it. Some of aunt Mattie's hurt was there. Maybe injustice was sensed, tragedy. She worked a sixty-hour week for \$4.

I liked that song. I sang it again, all the way through.

Years ago I learned a little more about folksongs, how they may ease pent-up feelings or ease the pain and bear the hope of a people. But "Cotton Mill Girls" still has a special place. I never hear or sing it without that haunting feeling. It is always my beautiful aunt Mattie, now long dead after fast-fading young years in the mill. It is her singing again, her body on a wall and her bones in a big oak-starved pickle barrel.

When I taught "Cotton Mill Girls" to Hedy she worked it over a bit with family history and used it on one of her albums. It got scattered around in the great "folk revival" of this century. Others sang it.

As I write this I am in the New York home of Harry and Rachel Berkowitz. So warm, so generous, so like our own friendly mountain folk. They make every effort for my comfort. They know I love folk music. Rachel plays a passel of folk albums. One is a Folkways selection of international folksongs by the Pennywhistlers, a woman's singing group. The American song on the album is "Cotton Mill Girls."

I sit here listening. Remembering my aunt Mattie and the Atco Mill in Georgia. That is her song, always her song to me—even when Hedy sings it. I still see the hanging body and pickle barrel. I wonder what the song means to the Pennywhistlers who may never have seen the inside of a cotton mill. And I recall Richard Dyer Bennett's distinction between the folk singer and singer of folk songs.

Rachel and Harry are Jews. In the mountains the only Jew we kids ever knew was the pack peddler. He came every year. There were no hotels or cafes. He slept and ate in mountain homes. Ours was always a stopping place. Coming in from cornhoeing we saw the big black oil cloth pack leaning against the logs on the piazza. We knew it meant an exciting even-

ing. He would open the ponderous pack, spread out the vari-colored items before our eager eyes. I don't recall my parents ever buying anything. We had no cash money. But the peddler left my Mother a scarf. We called it a "fascinator," and she carefully folded and packed it away in the clothes shelf on the wall. When neighbor women came she took it out to show. She made lovely piece-work quilts far more beautiful. But this "fascinator" was a thing of whole cloth from strange places off yonder beyond the mountains.

The pack peddler brought news, too. We had no newspaper. Cotton mills were being built in the foothills, he said. Even women and girls got jobs with cash money for pay.

This was talked in many a mountain home. The eternal struggle to dig a living from stingy hillside patches caused the talk to spread. The notion was that it might be better to leave the mountains for the cotton mill jobs. My grandpa Bud had six growing-up kids. He decided to leave Cartecay and go down to the mill at Atco. I remember it. Everything was packed in the covered wagon. In Bartow County he moved on a few farm patch acres. He would raise some cotton and truck crops. Grandma would peddle them on the streets of Cartersville. The bigger kids could work in the mill. That might make it a little easier.

But my parents always said they didn't want their kids to go to the mills. My Mother said she would take in washing, scrub, wear her knuckles to the bone to keep up out of the mills. In 1918 we left the mountains to become sharecroppers in the lowland cotton fields.

As I grew up I learned more about struggle—and folk songs. I learned how Yankee corporations from Lowell, Falls River and other places came South looking for hungry people and cheap labor. Part of it was when grandpa Bud had to leave his truck patches and go to the mill. He died working there at \$5 a week. We didn't know the name "brown lung" then. And in the 1934 period I saw log chains stretched across the gate at Atco with armed guards to keep out flying pickets. Like most Southern cotton mills, Atco is still open shop. J.P. Stevens doesn't have a monopoly on that.

But the most poignant learning was in seeing my aunt Mattie's vivacious youth wilt. In a few years from a lovely girl to a burned out, shriveled shell. And this for \$4 a week.

Like thousands of other southern mountain women dragged down from the hills by fair promises—at Gastonia and Marion in North Carolina, Elizabethton and Happy Valley in East Tennessee and the Cabbage Patch in Atlanta—the mill got her. It filled her lungs with dirty lint. It hung her up on the spinning room wall. It pickled her bones!

It buried her under Georgia's red clay dirt!

Sing Out! (1962)

III.

Poetical Works of the recent period.

Interview with Don West

What sparked your poetry, when did you begin writing?

We were extremely poor. We dug our living from steep hillside patches. Life was hard. It seemed to be mauling my Dad and Mother in the face with an iron fist. We lived far back in the mountains. Folk songs, ballads and tale tellings were our main recreation. My Mother sang a lot. These were the early influences that sparked my poetry.

Who were your influences at the time?

My mother, Dad and Grandpaw Kim Mulkey. My Mother taught us that song can ease hurt. Grandpaw Kim taught us that the white man started the scalping practice, and that a human is a human regardless of color. Grandpaw had a long white beard down on his chest. Whenever I thought about how God looked, it was the spitten image of Grandpaw Kim.

In the preface to one of your books you say that the poet is "a man of two selves...a man of the people and a man who lives alone." What did you mean by that?

It's essential for the poet to live with and know the people, their inner hurt, hopes, yearnings. Here he may get much of his poetry that must be hammered out inside himself. He may often be alone for the hammering, for telling of what he has found inside the people.

You also say a people's poet is not a cynic. Do you see poetry and art as having a role to play in the struggle for a more human society?

The cynic is on a dead-end alley. In the great great tradition the finest creative spirits have joined the struggle for a more human society. I most certainly wish to be counted in the group.

A lot of established poets and critics are down on activist art and political poetry. They draw a distinction, for example, between the human being who has social responsibilities and the artist and poet who does not. What is your view?

Yes, the old argument of "art for art's sake." But there really ain't no such animal. The poet, the artist, is never really neutral. In a hungry world the struggle between oppressor and oppressed is unending. Those who are content with things as they are side with the oppressor who also wants to keep the status quo. Challenging the status quo may be the unforgivable sin, but it is definitely the people's poet's responsibility. Such poets, or

artists, bring a message of faith and hope in humanity. Nothing raises the spirit of a people more. This is the major mission of the poet and artist.

*People are usually surprised to learn that your book, **Clods of Southern Earth**, sold 15,000 copies before coming off the press and became one of the most popular books of poetry in the country since Whitman's **Leaves of Grass**. When was it published and what were the reasons for its popularity?*

Clods of Southern Earth was my fourth published poem collection. It came out in 1946. A lot of ferment was brewing. Working people, particularly in Appalachia and the South, were stirring with resentment and hope. The 1930's had seen cotton mill workers and coal miners in grim and courageous battles for freedom and decency. They were met with gun-thug terror and violence. Gastonia and Marion in North Carolina are examples in textile. Harlan Country, Logan, Cabin Creek and the battle of Blair Mountain showed the coal miners' mettle. Biding their time, workers regarded defeats as merely temporary. In the 1940's the CIO was still stirring fresh hope and action.

Clods of Southern Earth was published then. It spoke simply and directly. There was no question of which side it was on. It dealt with the needs and feelings of the poor. My view is that poetry is a medium of communication. I strive to communicate. Nor do I believe that the poet who has something to say needs to string a bunch of four-letter words together and call it a poem. I remember seeing a letter in my publisher's office in New York once from a Tennessee union local ordering a thousand copies of **Clods**. They were being given as Christmas presents to each local member. At an autograph party in a leading Atlanta bookstore, eleven hundred were sold in one day. It was in hard and paper cover. I always insist on paper cover so it can be cheaper priced for those who have little money for books.

I suppose I should say my poetry reflects my living. I've really always lived pretty close to the raw edges—I hope to the cutting edges—of history. I thing this has helped my poetry to speak to and for the oppressed.

Although your poetry is known in the Appalachian region and is admired by many of our younger poets, your work has not been included in the current anthologies of literature and poetry from the region which are now in use in Appalachian colleges. Why do you think this is?

For the same reasons that when the gun-thug terror reigned in the coal fields those Appalachian colleges with their poetry anthologies raised no voices against corporate violence. Back then the Council of Southern Mountains was strictly "neutral." It resembled then the anthology collectors now. Those of us involved in the miner's struggle were not welcomed by the Council, nor in the pages of its magazine, *Mountain Life & Work...*

Do you still see a spirit of independence and struggle that poets can communicate?

Much of the potential is still here. Unfortunately, the ugly "dumb hill-billy racist" stereotype is too widespread. Like the Black people's history, ours was also left out of the books. Our people have been cut off from much of their positive heritage and history. The mountaineer's pioneering opposition to chattel slavery, the many heroic struggles of miners and cotton mill workers are examples. Some of the great labor songs have come out of Appalachia. "Solidarity Forever" was born on Cabin Creek in the stark battles of the early 1900's to become known internationally. "Which Side Are You On?" came from the cruel struggles of the 1930's in Harlan County. In those times when gun thug violence terrorized the coal camps, mountaineer workers lived the slogan "One for All and All for One."

All this is the kind of stuff the people's poet must work with.

The Unrealist, 1979



Poems Collected in **O Mountaineers!**

The Poet-Man

And what shall I write to you
 My children,
 You who are the blossoms of our springtime?
 Shall I speak only the agonized words
 Of despair,
 Disaster, hypocrisy, death
 Or that our land no longer
 Has in its loins
 The liberating forces of youth?
 Must it be the egocentric loneliness
 Of man alienated
 Or that the missile bomb
 Is the only symbol of modern science?
 Must I tell you that man thinks
 Only of himself
 That man, the eternal hunter
 Has finally found understanding in death?

No, my children, this is no voice of death.
 I would tell you to question,
 Believing assumptions are not final
 Nor are ideas killed by bombs,
 That in the midst of delusions
 Man is still alive...

I would tell you that suicide
 Is not man's destiny
 Nor is death escaped by hiding
 Behind obscure abstraction.
 I would say man's sensibilities,
 Sharpened by his poets and philosophers,
 Engineers of the human spirit,
 Will raise him above the missile symbol
 Of science as death.

Neither will I tell you to withdraw
 From an ugly world
 But walk there as I have walked
 Being not conformed to it
 Nor overcome by the violence
 Sex and death
 Of a dehumanizing mould...

I would write to you
 Of faith in man.
 The poet-man, ever the dreamer,
 The believer
 Writes to a continuing future
 With permanence...

To the splendor of man I speak,
 Of a marvelous creation
 And of love
 In a future of man the master
 Of himself...

I speak unashamedly of love
 Of human value, the worth of a man
 That he is inviolable
 That the Star Chamber went out
 On tortured groans
 With the Bill of Rights
 And the Gas Chamber
 With the cries of six million
 Murdered Jews.
 And never again
 Must the concentration camp
 Hiroshima or Nagasaki
 Symbolize and measure
 The worth of human flesh and spirit!

I would speak to you, too
 Of a heritage
 Distilled from dreams and sufferings
 Of strong men, yet tender.
 I would say to you
 That this is a time for wakening
 A time for the grand epic
 Yet to be written
 Of man's concern for his fellows
 Yet to be enacted
 In the market place...

Suicide

for Byron Reece

A bullet
 A body slumped
 An empty room

A final note
A cloud of gloom...

It was such a lonely land
For the sensitive poet
For the thoughtful man...

The Kennedy Baby

Conversation in a West Virginia clinic

"You heard the news about
The Kennedy baby bothered by reporters?"
The miner's widow asked.

"I did, and got all choked up
Waiting there in a Kanawha clinic
For Molly Brackenridge
To have her full-time child.
Molly from up on Jumping Branch
And Hetty Hatfield from Cabin Creek
Each had her child full-time
And dead..."

"They say pintos and molly-grub
Don't set well
On pregnant bowels.
The baby's feeble breath
Whispered out
On the third hour..."

"Too bad the Kennedy child
Had to be bothered by questions."

Ballad for Hattie Carroll

On February 9, 1963, Mrs. Hattie Carroll, a housewife and mother employed at the Emerson Hotel, Baltimore, was beaten to death by 'socialite gentleman farmer' William Deveraux Zantzinger, with a fancy cane. Some 200 others at the 'socialite ball' looked on, making no effort to interfere.

Come all you poor and honest people
You who would like to understand
And listen to a sad, sad story
Of happenings in this troubled land.

The story of a brutal murder
Done by a rich and powerful man
Who beat to death a maid of color
With stylish cane held in his hand.

Hattie Carroll, an honest worker,
Left her home that fateful day
But little did she stop to ponder
That she might never draw her pay.

She went to work that cold gray evening
As she had often done before
Serving food and drink to rich men
At the big hotel in Baltimore.

The big man pounded on the table,
She hardly heard what he did say
And when she went to get his order
He took his cane and flailed away.

The poor girl bent and then she staggered
Her eyes could barely see the lights
But no one turned a hand to help her—
It was a ball for socialites.

They took her to a place called Mercy,
The doctor looked and shook his head.
There's nothing now I can do for her,
Alas she was already dead!

The church was crowded at the funeral
Good people mourn, her children weep.
She left a family full of sorrow
And to us all a pledge to keep.

A pledge that we shall end such sadness
Brought on by men of powerful name,
That we shall not forget this mother
Whose murder brings to us such shame!

Bombs over Birmingham

In September, 1963, white racists bombed a Negro church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four small children in Sunday School. At the same time, Birmingham police shot and killed another Negro child, and white hoodlums killed another, totalling six young victims in less than a week. Some fifty other bombings of Negroes in Birmingham took place in the same period with no convictions. Requests for federal soldiers to protect human life there went unheeded. But, at the time, a million and a half dollars a day went to support an acknowledged dictatorship in South Vietnam, plus thousands of U.S. soldiers.

Four little girls in Birmingham
America, hang your head
Four small bodies in Birmingham
Now lying cold and dead.

Four little Black girls went to church
On a Sabbath morn
Four little children bombed to death
Mourn, America, mourn.

Six little dead ones in Birmingham
What does our leader do?
Noble words in a U.N. speech
And soldiers sent to Nhu.

Six dead children in Birmingham
Toll of less than a week
With his eyes hard set on South Vietnam
What does the President seek?

Six mothers there in Birmingham
O Jesus, mourn their dead.
Millions cry for federal law,
The President turns his head.

Six little children laugh no more,
Bleed, America, bleed.
Six dead children accuse us of
Greed, America, greed.

Six murdered children's voices cry:
Blood is over this land
Blood on the streets of Birmingham
Blood on the President's hand!

Automated Miner

An automated miner
From Cabin Creek,
'Said automated miner
From Cabin Creek
Ain't got no job
That's what I seek.

Now I used to dig coal where
The mine was damp
'Said I used to dig coal where
The mine was damp
Load sixteen tons
By carbide lamp.

But since automation came
The times got tight
'Said since automation came
And times got tight
They put me on
A special diet.

O molly-grub and gravy on
The welfare roll
Said molly-grub and gravy
On the welfare roll
Can't get no job
To save my soul.

Walked all the way to Charleston
My feet got sore
I walked the road to Charleston
My feet got sore
And then I went
To Baltimore.

But twenty years a miner
It's all I know
'Said twenty years a miner
That's all I know
No job, no home,
No place to go...

Confession

for Carl Braden

I saw him walk through
 The prison gate
 And heard the iron bars clang
 Against his freedom.
 Accused, character assassinated,
 Condemned and forsaken
 By those unfit his shoes to tie,
 He went to serve time in prison,
 And there, but for my cowardice,
 Walked I
 Walked I...!

“Only in America”

*Ex-convict, convicted for defrauding the Government
 by mail, writes best-seller, restored to respectability.*

Now can't you see
 He played the game.
 His only fault
 Was he got caught.

The mortal sin
 As you may know
 Is questioning
 The status quo.

Two Georgia Refugees

Today I am a Negro—
 Refugee
 Wandering Georgia's Okefenoke.
 Racists want my blood

I run frightened
 Hearing the hounds bay
 On the downey dark
 Firefly sparkled
 Of a Southern night.

I shiver.

I don't see the fireflies
 Nor feel the soft warmth
 Of Southern night
 I only feel fear
 An urge to flee
 Into the dark
 Dangers of the swamp.

And I'm not a Negro
 No Black blood
 But the racists hate me
 I am afraid
 Wanting to run away
 To a place where
 Men are human
 Knowing the beauty of color.



Kentucky Miners

Folk songs rise from the people's feeling of the true and the good, or the false and the bad. Whenever a great tragedy comes, either to one or a lot of folk, it usually has its ballad or folk song. The song tells a story—maybe of hurt or of hope, or it may be of joy or sorrow or anger. The source of this song is the plight of the ex-Appalachian miners.

Way down in Kentucky
Where the mountains are steep
There is want and starvation
To cause you to weep
Little children go hungry
All the days through
Their fathers are jobless
With nothing to do.

Miners of Kentucky
Who used to dig coal
Went under the mountains
Until they were old
Made riches for owners
In some far-off place
Now see families hungry
With sad, pinched face.

Come all you good people
Wherever you be
Can this be the home of
The brave and the free
Where children go hungry
Each night to their bed
With mothers heart-broken
Wishing they were dead?

In this land of great riches
Now called U.S.A.
Where Negroes are murdered
American way
You who love freedom
Get on the right track
Join hands now my brothers
Poor white and poor Black!

Stereotypes

Redneck, Cracker
Goober picker
Eat poke sallet
Drink pot lickier.

Wool hat, hooger
You're my brothers
All of us had
Poor white mothers.

Linthead, white trash
Red dirt eaters
Lonesome water
Makes repeaters.

And hillbilly,
Do you think we should
Class ourselves with
The Peckerwood?

Or "Mountain whites,"
That sound better?
Then write it down
In scarlet letter.

We are the ones,
The big folks claim
Who lynch the Blacks
And bring them shame.

If We Must Celebrate

*Be hanged if you must,
But tell no tales out of school.
—John Brown*

IF
in our hunger for identification
we must celebrate violence
and those who shed blood,
let it be the Nat Turners
and John Browns
who turned the keys
that opened the door
to human dignity
and our national self-respect.

Ballad for Bill Moore

*On April 17, 1963, Rev. Billy Graham wired Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to
"put the brakes on a little bit."*

On April 26 an Alabama judge gave Rev. King a fine and jail sentences.

*Meanwhile, U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy paid a "courtesy
call" on the Alabama governor.... Then flying back to the Capitol, he, with
other Washington officials, went hiking along the Chesapeake & Ohio
Canal on April 27.*

*During this period another hiker, William Moore, walked Southern
roads carrying a message with an appeal for decency to Southern govern-
ors. A big, friendly, smiling, peaceable family man with three children,
Bill Moore carried a sign: "End Segregation in America—Eat at Joe's both
Black and White" and on the other side: "Equal Rights for All." But he was
never to deliver his message to the governors. On the night of April 23 he
was shot to death on a lonely stretch of U.S. Highway 11 near Attala,
Alabama.*

*Bill Moore is a symbol. His name will go into the legends of folk lore of
the common people who eternally yearn for friendly human relations. His
own words, "Is it not normal to want...good will toward men?" lie heavy
upon the conscience of the nation in these times demanding decision.*

O Bill Moore walked that lonesome highway,
He dared to walk there by himself;
None of us here were walking with him,
He walked that highway by himself.

Yes, he walked to Alabama
He walked that road for you and me,
In his life there was the purpose
That Black and white might both be free.

He walked for peace, he walked for freedom,
He walked for truth, he walked for right
End segregation in this country
Eat at Joe's both Black and white.

The lynchers' bullets know no color
As they come whining through the night,
They've brought death to many a Negro
And William Moore whose skin was white.

They shot him down in cold-blood murder
Two bullet holes were in his head,
His body lay upon the roadway
Where lynchers left him cold and dead.

Each man must walk his lonesome highway
Each must decide for himself,
No one else can do it for you—
You've got to walk there by yourself!

Some day we'll all walk there together
And we'll knock on Freedom's door
And if they ask who was it sent you
We'll say a man named William Moore.

He walked for peace, he walked for freedom
He walked for truth, he walked for right
End segregation in this country
Eat at Joe's both Black and white.

Hazard, Kentucky

Winter, 1963

In the breaks and narrows
Around Hazard town
The miners got so hungry
They shut the mines down.

A thousand angry workers
From the Hazard mines
On slush and snow and slate dumps
Tramped the picket lines.

And many miner mothers
You may now hear speak
"Life is no bed of roses
On Troublesome Creek!"

O days of hurt and hunger
O nights so black
O winds that chill the sleepers
In a miner's shack!

Been digging in a dog-hole
Four dollars a day
But can't feed a family
On that kind of pay.

In this land of great riches,
The land they call free,
Is there no hope nor future
For miners like me?

Christmas, U.S.A.

Toy shops this season
Are loaded
With cute little jet bombers
And toy polaris missiles.
Santa Claus' reindeer grow weary
Dragging toy death-bombs
To stuff the children's stockings
That they may play
At nuclear war...

Kids play at what
Men make serious business
And men play
With the control buttons
Of the ultimate...!



For These Sad Ashes

In Georgia, Ku Klux Klan elements burned three houses at our farm home on the river just outside Atlanta. One was our library with a life-long collection of books, papers, manuscripts and such. Another housed a craft shop with tools, antiques, etc. The fire was set on a Sabbath day in February, 1958.

My first reaction was stunned disbelief. Just now in the following lines I have begun to put down a more articulate, if unfinished, reaction.

They burned my houses
 And all my books,
 Workshop and old tools
 Valued for their memories—
 A life-time collection of rare things
 Personalized by long acquaintance—
 A whiteoak maul whittled by my Dad
 Handled smooth by his own weary hands,
 The frow old Kim Mulkey used
 To rive boards for my first school,
 Books re-read and cherished
 For the comfort they sustain.

Coming home at dusk-time
 Weary from the plow-handles
 Sweat salt stinging the eyes
 To settle down to caress the shelves
 With looks
 Too tired to read, but comforted
 By the presence of books
 The awareness that they were there
 As old friends
 Waiting to be visited
 Talked with, loved,
 In the east corner Shakespeare
 Quietly challenged
 And Milton crowded against
 Keats and Shelley
 The brooding spirit of Tom Wolfe
 Stirred uneasily
 In a multi-volumed set by the west wall
 And Bobby Burns, barnyard philosopher
 Of the little folk
 On the middle shelf
 Understood the way a man

Followed the plow all day
 And returned to his bed
 For a well-earned night.

And there were also the later ones,
 The Olive Dargon books
 She of the rare and lovely spirit
 Bursting through the bindings
 "A Stone Come Rolling," she wrote
 From her "Highest Hill,"
 A great big roundly rough stone
 With notches and scars on it,
 Came rolling across the land
 Sparking a fire that kindled
 The hearts of men and women,
 Came rolling across the South
 In the nineteen thirties—
 To Gastonia, to Happy Valley
 At Elizabethtown in Tennessee
 To Harlan County in Kentucky
 Where coal-blackened skins
 Failed to hide man's dignity,
 Where company commissaries and gun thugs
 (documented by the La Follette Committee)
 Failed to wipe out man's self-respect and human hunger
 Which craves more than bread
 For satisfaction, but needs bread also.

Across the great Appalachians
 The stone came rolling
 Gathering men up and binding them
 Together in bundles of unity,
 Calling to dignity
 Feeding the blaze that makes men human
 Stirring the ex-hill farmer
 To "Call Home the Heart"
 At the humble hearthstone
 Of a mountain cabin
 A miner's shack staked to a hillside
 On uncertain stilts
 Or the gray monotony
 Of dull rows of workers' homes
 On a cotton mill hill,
 To call home the heart
 To where beauty lives with human dignity.

Olive Dargan at Asheville in North Carolina
 Where Tom Wolfe's troubled spirit broods
 Over the tops of blue-fogged mountains
 Still crying to come home.

Olive the rare and beautiful one.
 In her will she left me her library,
 Books she had cherished and loved
 And lived with
 Books sprouted from her own heart's weeping
 And laughing.

It took three truck loads to move them
 And I stacked them with great love
 And expectation of future perusing.

But they burned them
 And their ashes are part
 Of Georgia's red dirt
 Where wind-bent weed roots now feed.

And I walk here by these sad ashes
 Reflecting on each dull gray speck.
 Has that dancing whirlwind
 Caught up the complete works of Shakespeare,
 Planting his seed out across my fields
 To where tall pines
 Turn the plowed furrows?
 Is that whisp of smoke
 Scattering Milton through the tree-tops
 Leaving poems on the pines
 To drip down and root in this read earth
 Next Spring?
 And are those grass blades
 Sun-dancing across the lespedeza pasture
 With Lanier to where the river's ripples
 Murmur softly
 "The Song of the Chattahoochee"

Henrietts Buckmaster wrote of this river
 This "Deep River."
 It rolls by my farm
 Gnawing in sullen anger at the fields.
 This Chattahoochee rising
 In the hills of Habersham
 From springs in the valleys
 Whose branch waters nourished

Gentle spirits of a mountain people
 Opposed to slavery.
 Her books were there on my shelves
 With ten thousand others
 And half-finished poems and stories
 Of my own musing, laid aside
 For future touching.

Weep now by these sad ashes
 Where the big elm tree
 Lop-sided from the fire's fierce blazing
 Stands lonely by these chimney stones.
 Weep deeply,
 But not alone for the burning.
 Mourn more for what has happened
 To Sandburg's "People,"
 "The People, Yes," the people,
 For what happens to men who set fires,
 Who threw the home-made bomb
 At the window of Lee Peery's house
 Past midnight with three small ones sleeping
 Breathing sweet air
 Needle-scented from Georgia pines.

Lee and Ann Peery
 Of the Jesus spirit
 Enriching the dirt of my gardens
 Because they loved.
 Lee Peery, the man is to me
 As a brother,
 Mourn not for him
 But for the hurt spirits of men
 Who sneak in the night-time
 To bomb his dwelling.

Weeping, walk here
 By this red river
 Reflecting on Albany, Atlanta, Oxford,
 Birmingham, Greenwood, Atalla,
 Route 40 in Maryland,
 And Bill Moore, murdered.
 Go grieve for Hiroshima and Nagasaki,
 That our country's conscience
 Is not burning,
 Fearing her conscience is dulled
 Beyond shared feeling

By the bias of bombs
For human extinction...

Be made sad by an arrogance
Assuming "manifest destiny" of affluence
At the cost of death
To peasant peons
Of Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, Santo Domingo,
And other lands where our country
Supports decaying dictators
Grieving that only dictators
Now look to America
With hope in their eyes...

Though weeping, also rejoice—
For the love in man
For Bill Moore, the gentle
And peaceful one, who lay down his life
On an Alabama road
That man's humanity might live,
For the strength of men
To endure Star and Gas Chamber
The stake and burning cross.
For this, rejoice, and far more—
For the humility of great men
Who submerge themselves
In the fountain of the people for renewal
Feeling there the pulse-beat
Of the people's yearnings
To be human...

For the gentle heart of the Negro people
And for the brave hope
They have brought to our land—
Frederick Douglas and his people,
Under the whip-lashes
Of haughty masters
Kept hope alive
That now stirs the heart of our nation.
For this, rejoice.

And
For Roger Williams whose dream
Has not yet arrived
Thomas Paine with the world
For his country

And a religion to do good.
For Jefferson and Lincoln
Who bent and doubted
But came back to the people—
Pegs to hang our hopes on
From history...

And rejoice even today for
The white men and women of the South
Of humility and truth
Close to the oppressed—
Aubrey Williams
Giant among pygmies who yap at his heels
Aubrey who never learned to double-talk
And who walks on a rocky road
With the great of history.

For Carl and Ann Braden,
Tuned to the under-tow depths,
Who listen and look and see
And dare the prison walls.

For Claude Williams and Joyce
Who preach the Jesus Gospel
And live it,
Who walk with violence and fear
Close by
And never thought to turn back.

For Floyd Buckner and Jean
Who question, and in dark hours
Of discouragement
Keep close to the bothered spirit
Of the common folk
As they search with love and hope.

Walking here by the white-barked birch
Lost in the river's rolling
Weep and rejoice
As fog hides the tear-drops dripping.
Mourn these days
While men must mourn
Confused, in alienation.
Mourn, but not alone,
Lifting high the Pilgrim hope
In a Manifesto of Man
Rejoined to himself...!

Freedom on the Mountains

In the Old South some four million Negroes, in bondage, were bought and sold as cattle. Amid this dismal existence there was one bright ray of hope: freedom. Human beings always hunger for it. Out of that hunger and hope came the Underground Railroad. Organized by antislavery Southern whites and Negroes, the main line out of the deep South ran through the great Appalachian Mountain range from North Georgia to the North and Canada. In the mountains the refugee found friendly helpers, and the "pat-rollers" from the tidewater lowlands were not welcome there. The mountaineer with his long-barreled rifle gun was feared by these man-hunters. The mountains, then, became a symbol. Many a weary Black man found shelter there, with bread and guidance, on his way to Freedom.

O freedom on the mountains
 O freedom on the mountains
 Go tell my brother
 Freedom everywhere.

O freedom, it's a-walking
 O freedom, it's a-walking
 Go tell my sister
 Freedom everywhere.

O freedom we're a-coming
 O freedom we're a-coming
 Go tell my father
 Freedom over this land.

Freedom, we're going to meet you
 Freedom, we're going to greet you
 Go tell my mother
 Hold to freedom's hand.

O freedom for the Black man
 O freedom for the Red man
 Go tell the white man
 Freedom everywhere.

Go sing it on the mountains
 Go tell it on the valley
 Go shout it on the sidewalks
 Freedom's way is clear.

Hospital Waiting

For Connie

Five hours now you've been unconscious
 Under the surgeon's knife
 And I wait here, lacking patience
 A nerve bundle, raw-edged
 Remembering, remembering—
 Now that nothing else matters
 And other things are dropped
 I wait, remembering—
 The sound of your foot-fall
 On door-step, floor, stairway
 Remembering years of hard going
 And the good...

Spring-time in Kentucky
 Rhododendron blossoms on Cumberland
 And the teasing blue eyes
 Of a laughing girl
 Daring me in a climb
 Up the big mountainside
 To where the Pinnacle looks out
 Over the Holston.

We were the foolish ones
 Where was the cliff to daunt us?

There, on the mountain peak
 Above Cumberland Gap
 Overlooking Boone's Trace
 And Tennessee Valley
 With five states in view
 We made a pledge...

You were the foolish one—
 Joining yourself to sorrow and hurt
 And hard times ahead
 But you were smelted
 From strong ores, tempered
 For bearing bruises
 On the troubled way
 With a man dissatisfied
 With his world...

Remembering Kentucky
 At the forks of Troublesome Creek

And Tennessee...

And then the children
And pinched bellies.
Remembering Atlanta
With mattress on the floor
Of a basement room
And five dollars a week!

And the children—
Ann, the gentle, the sweet one
Skipping onto our way
Like a puckish elf
Singing the sweet songs of the young
Ann, who grew so much like you
She could never hurt another being
She, the unselfish—
Ann, the first benediction to our love!



Then Hedy
With the stubborn chin, yours—
And mine.
Hedy of the singing lips
And compulsive drive—
Gathering snakes and lizards—
And to whom all mountains
Were invitations to climb
A bundle of questions
Asking for answers
Hedy, the hungry one
Strong with the strength to take life
By the hand
And walk with it in light places
And in the dark.

Remembering, remembering—
The hurt places we found.
Your feeling heart knew
Cotton-mill poverty—
Children, pinch-faced, resigned
To hunger
Women, hiding their hurt
Under stolid faces
A Negro boy sent to a Georgia chain-gang
Because he asked bread for the needy.
Pain and hurt and love walking
On a Carolina mill-hill
Up the valleys of Harlan
In Kentucky
On Cabin Creek in West Virginia.

Your quiet patience
Bore my own raw impatience
With the courage of love.

So much I remember here, waiting
Waiting for the surgeon's verdict
And then the long, lonely nights
Of uncertainty, waiting

The pain there
In a hospital bed
And telephone calls—
Mama from Georgia,
She who taught us to sing

When hurt,
 Sis in New York
 Buddy in West Virginia
 Belle in Colorado
 So far away, so long, I don't
 Recognize voices
 Reaching out across space
 With tender touch...

And the children—
 Hedy in California, she with music
 In her restless fingers
 And your own image on her face.
 Hedy the strong and tender-hearted
 Whose troubled thought course deeply
 Beneath a smooth surface.
 Ann, in Ohio, Ann the warm-hearted,
 Who taught Hedy to sing
 The old songs
 Ann, who has in herself the quiet strength
 To walk the dark valley
 With hurt and sorrow
 And who is so much like you she moves
 With your own sweet unoffensive step,
 A blessing to all who know her,
 Ann, the first benediction to our love!

And a helpless void inside
 All of us.
 For none can bear another's suffering,
 Each must taste the gall
 In his own...

I reach out and touch your face
 But I cannot take the pain away
 Other times I've seen you suffer
 Body broken near death
 And have walked alone in the night
 Cursing
 That the pain could not pass to me,
 That I could not take it into myself—
 You of the generous heart
 You the gentle human
 You with courage to face and life
 The hard life with a restless one
 You about whom I am passionately personal

You the woman I love.
 My tears now cannot reach
 Or heal you...

In a Song

I put my friend in a song
 As true as a song can be
 To keep in a secret place
 But the song got away from me.

I put my friend in a song
 In a cry of deepest needs
 I tore it out of my heart
 And that is why it bleeds.

I put my friend in a song
 With a hope my friend might see
 That torn fresh out of a heart
 The song was a part of me.

I put my friend in a song
 But the song got away from me.

American Folklore

I cannot glorify the myths
 Of brutal, brawling pioneers—
 The Mike Finks
 Or the muscle-bound fake,
 Paul Bunyon...
 Any half-grown gorilla
 Might, after all, repeat
 A full catalog
 of their feats.

But let me look
 Toward the gentle deeds,
 I prefer the
 Johnny Appleseeds...

Kim Mulkey

Young Kim Mulkey
On Cartecay
Proud of spirit
And loved fair play

Hard of body
Tall and straight
Built his house
With an open gate.

Was dreamy eyed
But strong of will
Build his house
On a Georgia hill

Built his house by
A granite rock
And on the door
He put no lock.

Married a girl
From Uniontown
Brought her home
Bedded her down

Sired thirteen kids
And plowed his fields
Then in the fall
Cribbed up the yields.

Hillbilly kids
All forty-nine
Called him Grand-paw
Sprigs off his vine.

Forty-nine kids
And I was one
Were proud to be
Called his grand-son.

Blacksmith, farmer,
Neighbor and Man,
He lived his life
As it began

Honest, simple,
True and strong

And n'er a man
Had he done wrong.

Forty-nine kids
In the Georgia South
Learned of life from
His gentle mouth.

You live but once,
Old Kim would say,
And life is what
You do today.

And man was meant
To share his love
Right here and now,
Not up above.

So watch the man
Who takes in more
Than he can use
Or locks his door

Against the need
Of those less strong
And in such deeds
Can see no wrong.

The crafty men
Trust not their kind
Among such ones
The thieves you'll find.

They, for mankind,
Have only knocks
So on their barns
They fasten locks.

Old Kim a man
Of simple ways
Lived not to see
These sad, sad days

When dignity
Is mucked through strife
And man is made
Stranger to life.

This Land I Love

North Georgia's Mountains

Out of this dirt
We dug our bread
It knows our tears
And holds our dead.

My father plowed
These hillsides fields
And cast his seed
For hopeful yields.

Then in the time
When winter lies
Upon the hills
He hewed crossties.

He peeled tanbark
On Cartecay
And hauled it down
To Ellijay

To trade for meat,
A poke of flour—
And love was sweet
Mixed with the sour.

For simple folk
Are often wise
Their feeling ways
Make lasting ties.

This land I love
Each rock and hill
Forsake its ways
I never will.

John Henry's Heir

For James Meredith, first Negro to enter Alabama University

In West Virginia's Talcot town
The people have a tale to tell
Of one who beat the steel drill down
And there beside his hammer fell.

Big Bend Tunnel on C and O—
Nine pound hammer swinging high,
Smashing the rocky mountain low
And arching rainbows in the sky.

John Henry's hammer sucking air—
Heavy hammer pounding steel,
Sparked the rainbow sharp and fair
And caused the cliffs to shake and reel.

The rainbow streaked across the land
Multi-colored on the sky
Reminder of a mighty hand
And he whose spirit wouldn't die.

O, rainbow, symbol of a day
When courage, faith and hope do send
Man groping on his winding way
To find the treasure at the end.

Now at the rainbow's end we see
Digging deep with bated breath
To find the treasure, dignity,
Is man alive, James Meredith.

Dig deep, there, man, John Henry's heir,
With honor, strength, and courage bold
Then on the morrow you shall bear
A treasure finer far than gold.

Old Homeplace

For Hedy

We stood silent there
Watching wimpling shadows
Of Big Burnt Mountain
Creep across Turkey Creek
By a crumbled rock chimney,
Homeplace grave marker
Whose hearthstones had tales to tell
Of lowly doings
Of days when a scant cupboard
Was never too bare to share
With a tired stranger,
Of the pack-peddler
And pull of lowland cotton mills,
Of a strong man with hope
And a singing blue-eyed girl
Who lived and loved,
Made a crop with two bull yearlings
And bore nine children
To feed and dress
As the mountain earth sucked up
Their flesh, burying
In salty sweat drippings
Covered by bulltongue and mattock

And the blackberry briar had tales
And the sarvis bush
Crowding the unfurrowed fields:
That the woman and man were still there,
Her eyes in the blue of the violets
Lips in the sarvis berries
Face in the sweet-scented trailing arbutus
And songs of the bending willow,
That the man, loving his fields
And babies, plowed himself into the live sap
Of their own gray roots
Sucking deeply there on the mountain

You said it was strange
To see a man's fields grown
To bush and weeds,
A strong man.

And the wind came over the mountain
 Laughing with a wimple of oak leaves
 Talking secrets in soft whispers
 As low bending willows
 Plucked the sparkling creek waters
 For music
 To sing the silent songs
 Of the sleepers.

If Peace Is What I Covet

When I was a laughing child
 My mother said to me:
 Born on a troubled night
 A restless man you'll be.

From nothingness came searching
 This man that was to be
 With itchy-footed hunger
 And tears that few could see.

Birtherd to feel the throbbing
 Of hearts depressed and torn,
 Empty-eyed and hopeless—
 And that's how I was born.

My mother was a wise one
 Who hid her nagging fears
 Tied to restless hunger
 That followed all her years.

She birtherd a stubborn rambler
 In a high and lonely place
 Lamenting for the land's sad hurt
 With a strange and troubled face.

If peace is what I covet
 How odd the trails I go
 Where haunting hurt and sadness
 Make men so worn and low.

Testimony

For Kim Mulkey

Let me speak plainly now
 for I have nothing to hide
 in subtle talking.
 I speak to the common man
 as I always have
 and identify with him completely.
 To the lowly, my brothers,
 of all races and lands
 I reach out to clasp twisted fingers
 glad in the freedom of choice
 of men to be brothers...

I am a Southern mountain man
 I walk troubled trails but I am
 assured by my hope and faith
 in creative power of the people,
 and by the words and life of Jesus,
 Joe Hill, Jefferson and Thomas Paine
 and multitudes unknown, unsung,
 including old Kim Mulkey,
 my mountain grandfather who mixed
 his dreams, wisdom and hope with sweat
 dripping at anvil and the bellows...

I hold the view that man is
 a decent, conscious creature
 capable of change and
 remolding of his character,
 believing man is the source
 of his own salvation...

I speak particularly to my own kind
 nor am I deterred that you
 may not accept all I accept,
 believe all I must believe.
 It is sufficient for me that you are men
 and we share humanity,
 linking the lowly of the ages,
 all lands their races and colors...

I accept this manhood of men
 as you shall accept it.
 I identify with the poor of all places.

I cry to be the universal man
 with patriotism to humanity
 which can only be so while
 a feeling of love is deep-rooted
 in my own land for my own people.
 Georgia I rightly love with compassion
 and these United States—

For our heritage and people—
 for Brown and Kagi at Harpers Ferry
 and for the teeming lesser-known
 who lit stars in the galaxy of freedom
 cementing their lives into a highway of
 hope in deeds,
 upholding man's humanity...

No distance, no tyrant,
 no skilled word-prostitutes
 can divide us forever:
 Peasant and laborer of India,
 Mexico, Chile and poets in all
 places remote

I reach a hand to all the hungering.
 I say lift up your heads, my brothers.
 Your bowed shoulders bear heavy burdens
 You bear the weight of brighter futures.
 You keep life alive, beauty aglow
 in the ugliness of poverty,
 in the beauty of man's search
 and concern for humanity.
 Know art and poetry belong
 to you
 and by your heart and sweat
 our world must be dragged from the depths
 to a high level with the stars
 onto the foothills of Utopia!...

Kim Mulkey, Mountain Man

There rose up in him an elfin vision
 of man's place upon the earth.
 It seemed to him—he wanted to believe—
 that all men were part
 of an undying stream
 roaring in terrific grandeur
 toward an illimitable destiny.
 In that destiny all men shared,
 all races partook
 and the tragic brevity of one life
 was compensated in the immortality
 of all life.
 For only life itself was eternal
 everlasting;
 and though intermittent darkness
 might shroud the earth,
 it was a temporary moment
 melted in the red dawn
 of an ever-returning morning.
 Though the pulsing of his own heart-beat
 might be stilled, he had immortality
 in the big lusty soul of creative man
 of all men
 flowing into the engulfing sea of struggle.
 Yes struggle, struggle itself was the germ, the seed and fruit...
 He knew that life alone was the reality
 the one flame that could not be extinguished.

By such a faith he lived and worked and fought—
 a hooper and a lover, holding life so dear
 he was willing to die to preserve it.

Memory is of such a one—
 Kim Mulkey, old man Kim, mountaineer
 blacksmith
 radical hero of my youth
 hope-giving inspirer of my manhood.

Deserted Mountain Farm

These Georgia hills with cold and barren trees
 Stand stark against October's starless sky
 While here I tread upon damp withered leaves
 And listen to the night owl's lonesome cry.
 Time was when crops of beans and milling corn
 Grew rank across this worn-out stubble field;
 The old house stands where stalwart sons were born
 Who plowed the land and gathered in its yield.

The root sags low, the hinges on the door
 Twist downward like a weary, aching arm.
 Ghosts dancing lightly on the puncheon floor
 Call back the time of once a thriving farm.

Outside a plow lies rusting in the rain
 Those sons are gone, they won't need it again.

Appalachian Old House

Here on this rocky mountain top
 winds come tuning their strings
 through mud-chinked walls
 of aged logs
 sagged downward toward door-sill
 and foot-path long untrod.
 The raven-winged night hovers
 over roof tree and shattered windows
 while ghost memories play gently
 around fireplace hearthstone
 and ghosts of flicker blazes
 lick upward against suttled arch stone...

Here Clem Cantrel
 his wife, Calley, and ten young ones
 once lived and toiled
 close up to where the sky
 folds its hem around tree tops.
 Old furrow ridges
 and a rusty plow beam
 hold memories, too...

Rotted logs and broken window panes
 with grass growing by door steps
 mock wind tunes
 fiddled through wall cracks.
 Weeded fields shake sourwood sprouts
 above the long valley
 whispering old tales
 of a vanished people
 a gone people—
 away from the mountains...

A Man Named George

His snow tracks melted
 on the mountain road this spring
 and mud moulds of his old shoes
 erode with the rains...
 And I trudge across the hill-tops
 by the rutted trail
 my own shoes mud-clogged
 by the hut George lived in
 and his bed of broken hopes...
 His crippled plow leans by the shed
 and weeds crowd the discs
 of a rusted harrow.
 In the caves of the great mountain
 George did not hunt the coon
 this fall,
 nor the genseng.
 The solemn bay of his tired old hound
 drifts over the knobs
 ghostly on the dark
 unanswered
 and the guitar is silent.
 For George lies now
 in Rocky Knob Grave Yard
 close by where sheep graze
 and Clifton mows hay
 for the long winter...
 I walk quietly here
 remembering
 George was my friend...!

Mountain Heritage

Listen

You mountain kid
Old woman or man,
I would call you back
To your own heritage...!

Must we, too, be lost
As America is lost
In a thicket of violent greed?
Are we too lost to recognize
Our own broken image?

I would point you back
To an uncertain time in history
When the values Appalachia gave to the South
And America
Were rooted deep
In independence and freedom!

At an uncertain time in history
When civil war clouds darkened the land
Appalachia held a blazing torch
On the freedom road...!

Appalachian Blues

Down here in Appalachia,
Government-designated "poverty area,"
blue thoughts stagger
up the valley
whisper on mountain fogs—

First:

To you who come to study us
to see what is wrong with us
that we are poor,
who look for the cause in us
(for in this opportunity wonderland
isn't it agreed

any man can be president?
and if he hasn't a job
and can't feed his kids
he's just no-count!)—

My word,
and we do have faults
a-plenty of them:
Poor schools
Bad government
Poor roads
Politicians
Poor people
Corporations
Corporation native flunkies
Etc., etc....

And dirt, trash, beer cans and whiskey bottles
rustied automobile bodies
decorating road sides
piled in back yards
and men on welfare in beer joints!

But don't look closer,
don't look too close.
It might be dangerous
You might see our colonial status—
outside corporate control:
Consolidation
Continental Oil
Island Creek
U.S. Steel
Dupont and Ford
Union Carbide and Mellon
Rockefeller
and the bought and paid for
native lackeys
Etc., etc....

Yesterday's People didn't look that close
so it was safe.

It was given to VISTAS, Appalachian Volunteers
and other varied assortments
of "Poverty Warriors"
as a Bible
that they might understand us hillbillies.

The fault of a poor man is all in himself,
verily.

And the dove is killed
because she flew in front
of the shotgun pellets.
The doe fell because
she ran into the rifle bullet.
And the rabbit,
of course,
the trifling silly rabbit!
Verily, verily I say
look to the victim
for causes
of why the victim
is victim—
You who come to study us!

Second:

You do-gooders,
missionaries of numerous persuasions
soul-savers who paint outside privies
poverty warriors who play at being poor
and gather us together
to tell us what our troubles are,
long-haired hustlers
expert at proposal writing
lengthy verbiage
for Federal grants:
Descend upon Appalachia
as the great black raven
from superior heights
hovering wings clouding the sun.
Find an articulate hillbilly
for front man,
prime him
trim him
use him
to do your thing
to us...!

Third:

Folksy ballad hunters
discoverers of mountain music
and mountain musicians—
Columbuses discovering Appalachia—

Culture diluters
Culture polluters
Culture exploiters
Circuit-riding freaks
Builders of spurious communes
pulling on your weed
running away from your own drug culture
but bringing it to Appalachia,
Buyers of mountain land
builders of summer homes:
Your Appalachia is not Appalachia
but a life-style travesty
a foreign thing!
Yours was a revolt in patterns
counter culture
counter revolutionary
counter poor people!



New and Uncollected Poems

When I Read the Report

When I read the report of the Committee
uncertainty engulfed me.
I knew fear, and acknowledge it,
with no apology intended.
I who loved America
who cherished the dream deferred
was accused by the Committee.

Plowing fields
on the banks of the Chattahoochee
the federal marshall found me.
His unaccustomed toe
tangled in turf,
sprawled him belly down
on the upturned sod...

Blushing, he opened his bag
to hand me the subpoena.
I must report to Memphis
on the order of Senator James O. Eastland
of the Senate Internal Security Committee.
My beliefs and doings
were in question.
My name was among the accused.

Alone in a remote farm field
I pondered sadly—
not alone for myself
but for my family
and my country...

Born to the poorest of the poor—
red-neck, cracker, hillbilly—
proud of ancestors
who never bought or sold a human body
but lived by sweat of their own skin,
that some among us
can clasp the hand of a Black person
and say, "Sister, Brother!"

In the 1930's
I had started Highlander Folkschool
and helped to free

a Black lad in Atlanta
from a 20-year chain-gang sentence.
He had led hungry people
to ask for food.
Two years in Fulton Tower—
protests, midnight handbills, legal action—
Angelo Herndon was free!

Now I was guilty.
Senators Eastland, McCarthy, McCarran
and other upholders of Nazi ideology
said so.
Atlanta authorities
took a bench warrant with word out to
"Get him dead or alive"!

Little security could my friends offer,
Black or white.
There was no hiding place.
A Black preacher's wife
pushed me by trap door into her basement
a poor white mother shoved me
out the back door
under a bramble thicket
when the cops came looking.

Leaving Atlanta and the state I love
under crocker sacks,
driven by a Black man,
dropped by the Great Stone Mountain
to thumb a ride northward.
I who have an intense dislike
for Chase Manhattan
and Wall Street imperialism
found haven with yankee workers.

—1955

Girl of Matoaka

Come, Pamela, girl of Matoaka,
 come to me
 to where I am
 on these Appalachian heights
 where our people's roots sank deeply
 in mountain-top granite
 eagles once rested
 and ravens built nests...

Eagles are gone now
 and the raven,
 nests fallen like crumbling clay
 of old chimneys
 parted from log walls
 of homes long desolate...

Come, Pamela,
 hurt child of the hollow,
 let us learn together
 of a people
 now dispossessed
 who lived and loved
 dug life from these rocky hills
 and coal from under,
 wove and spun to keep bodies warm
 hid refugees on the Underground
 groping a way toward freedom,
 took up guns against human bondage
 shed tears and sweat and blood,
 faced company gunmen
 and refused to be human clods...!

Come, Pamela,
 tend your roots
 spread your wings
 rise
 look
 see
 and possess your heritage!

—1976



Visit to Lolita Lebrun's Home

In the home land of warm hearts
 on the streets of Lares,
 birthplace of patriot revolution,
 along coffee-bush shaded trails
 worn deep on the mountain
 by human feet,
 I walked across fields
 where old peasants tell tales
 of patriot love,
 a laughing child playing there
 free in his child-heart reverie
 free in girl-time beauty
 free in her woman love,
 feet helping wear deeper trails
 by trees reaching limbs up
 to taste sweet rain waters
 whispering the wind's song
 that Lolita in prison
 is forever free!

—1977

Mary and Belinda

Mary, living woman,
 tramping our ridges
 backpack crammed
 with innate beauty
 born of her own gentle fingers.

Mary came looking
 and here found Belinda,
 child of hurt and hunger
 a quivering spring-time crocus
 venturing from a frigid earth
 toward life-warming sun.

Belinda, trembling girl child,
 a trickle
 wending a way through sapless sand.

Memphis

For Martin Luther King

Where Mississippi waters
washed garbage from the street
death came looking for a man
and there the twain did meet.

A sullen Southern dampness
subdued the bullet whine
it found the man in Memphis.
He walked the picket line.

Poor Little Rich Kids

At the universities in the 1960's
I read poetry to audiences
dressed in bib-coveralls
with multi-color patches.

Playing at poverty
poking fun at the poor
by shaggy assumption
of dirt and unwashed dress
they "did their thing"—
and the poor kept
getting poorer
and the rich richer...

Funeral Notes 2

We gather in Hickory Grave Church Yard
to bury part of her
beside our old Dad
laid here long ago...

Dust to dust benediction
mingles with red clay dull thudding
from shovel to coffin.

We're only burying a memory
a memory already out of the grave
up in the tops of tall maple trees
singing to banjo string music
on limber limbed willows.

Her teasing laughter sparkles
down Cartecay cataracs
by Ellijay to Coosawatee's shoals
and sluggish Chattahoochee.

Her rugged womanhood
stirs the sap of tan-bark chestnut-oaks
on Turkey Creek
Sourwood sprouts rustle
to the rhythm of her goose-necked hoe
grubbing crabgrass
from the Long Hollow new-ground patch.

Strong Mother
who taught us to sing when saddened
with always a song on her own lips.
Mountain Mother
sharing the sorrow of those who wipe silent tears
while wry jokes eased the hurt.

She cannot leave these hills
while a spark of her
is in Ann's gentle touch
in Hedy's restless fingers
tuned to banjo picking
and Talitha's puckish protest.

Lolita Lebrun

Lolita Lebrun, Puerto Rican patriot, spent 25 years in the Alderson, West Virginia Federal Prison for Women. She was guilty of the same crime committed by George Washington and the Boston Tea Party participants.

Lolita, gentle being
 freedom fighter
 epitome of eternal woman-kind
 reservoir of human dignity,
 we greet you and would welcome you
 to our mountains with no prison handcuffs
 you are one with us...

Twenty-five years
 you look across Alderson's prison walls
 Iron gate and barbed wire
 where 700 women count the minutes
 of the hours of the days...

Like the wounded raven
 born on crippled wing
 toward the balsam mountain top
 you make hope a living thing.
 Across daisy-speckled meadow
 limber willow limbs
 bend to kiss lilting lips
 of the Greenbriar
 Freight trains laden with a hundred
 coal cars are a monotonous growl
 Trains drag a part of us
 by Alderson Prison toward Wall Street
 where handcuffs for freedom
 are forged and fastened.

Freight cars clatter
 a morose monologue
 with tales of human flesh
 and sweat and blood on coal.
 Cry of the cripple-winged raven
 resounds, indomitable,
 over the prison walls.
 Lolita inside listens
 speaks with her God
 and sends us the warning:
 "Bury the bomb!"

Her God says "A-men!
 Let it be!"

—1980

Great Day A-Coming

We'll call beauty on that day
 and she'll come home
 Scars are healed
 work is everywhere—
 for Esther and Mildred of Harlan
 for Donald and Gary of Mantoaka
 and for women and men everywhere.
 All who breathe
 find useful doings.

Leaves flutter in growing corn fields
 of verdant valleys
 Food abounds
 even for Floyd Fowler
 whose Daddy drowned
 in a six-inch mud hole
 No child nurses a hurt
 No person knows want
 of body or spirit
 Black-lung, holding the
 hand of greed, followed by ugliness
 slunk out of our hollows.

Great day a-coming...!

—1980

They Who Exploit

They who exploit the poor
have soft hands
voice modulated.
(The poor's hands
are hard
voice a growl
of inarticulate protest).

They who exploit the poor
make Foundations
with charity gifts
to dull the sharp edge
of rebellion
(The poor take hand-outs
with bitter taste).

They who exploit the poor
make wars in far-off places
and profits in the USA
(The poor fight, die in battle
and come back to welfare
and uncertainty).

They who exploit the poor
cause mountain-top plagues
to slide down the valleys
(The poor know
Buffalo Creek
and its bitter waters).

They who exploit the poor
make wholesale deals
in pot and LSD
that sons and daughters
of affluence
may "do their thing"
peddle their "revolution"
(The poor have their own revolution
needing no dope
for inspiration).

—1980

Insurance Policy

Greed, short-sighted insurance policy,
miscreant, gorged on gore,
fares sumptuously
as working men's guts
strewn on battlefields
yield profits
for war profiteers
and sprout seeds
of insecurity and destruction.

Premise

Sometimes I play with the premise
That a woman is the mysterious essence
of reality
haunting and pricking
and giving hope to being.
And a man lives
because the mystery is there
—1981

Man Alive

For Jim Barfoot who, because of his stand on civil rights and justice in 1948, lost his job as professor in a Georgia university. To make a living for his family he became a door-to-door book peddler

Forty years ago I knew him
Eagle with uncropped wing
Soaring above petty bias
And never unmindful of pain
Of those who suffer in silence
Plodding through mud and the rain.

I saw him come down from the hill top
 To valleys of struggle and hurt
 Bringing his wife and children
 To slosh in the mud and the dirt.

I knew then he was my brother
 With none of the wolfish way
 Of prowling over the pastures
 To pounce on a helpless prey.

Forty years, and today I saw him.
 He didn't boast of his scars.
 Weathered, bent but not broken
 His eyes are still on the stars.

—1981

All of Them

Red-neck, hillbilly
 dago, wop
 got the red from plowing a crop
 of Georgia cotton.

Cracker, ridge-runner
 Jimmy Higgins
 gully jumper
 and a lot more.

Massacred at Ludlow,
 I tore down the convict stockades
 at Coal Creek.
 My blood made Harlan bloody.
 My sweat wet the cement
 of Detroit and Atlanta.
 With pain and tears
 I made Greece and Rome.
 I was the gladiator in gory arenas
 and now the boxer
 bruising and slugging
 to amuse the sick people
 conditioned to cry for blood.

My Poem

I am a mountain man
 my history has life in it,
 a people who cared.
 My poem is collective
 like Harlan miners in secret meetings
 from gun thug terror
 or cotton mill workers
 at Gastonia and Marion
 in 1929.

And my poem is personal,
 as personal as Burl Collins
 wheezing black-lung breath
 after thirty-five years in the mines
 and Rosie's agony
 waiting at the mine mouth
 for Burl's broken body,
 as personal as the pinched belly
 of a hungry child
 looking upon hollows
 where trash speaks a dead language
 of despair
 a place where beauty shed tears
 and went away,
 a stranger to our hills...

My poem has hurt in it,
 the bent bodies of strong men
 legs gone, arms severed
 striving to stand straight
 and stooped women lending their bodies
 to the striving.
 My poem has hurt in it...!

I am brother to these—
 the poor, the hurt, the crippled—
 all of them...

And I am brother
 to the eternal glimmer
 sparking dark places,
 remembering green mountain spring-times
 and the resilient fibre
 of twisted chestnut oaks
 straining toward a ridge-crest plumb line...

My poem stays close
 where the poor of the earth share life
 and cherish beauty,
 brother to hope.

My poem lives
 to negate lunatic ravings
 of nuclear madness...

My poem has life...!

Something of America

A friend once said:
 "If you want to be a good patriot
 don't read your country's history
 too closely...."

But something of America I know
 love and cherish
 with warm pride
 and something I intensely dislike.

The Great Dream
 Like the rising of a fair morning
 with Thomas Paine
 had never been equalled.
 But the recording made it
 a dream deferred—
 left slavery unmentioned
 made a Bill of Rights for white men.
 Black and red men, women of all colors
 were omitted...

In the hearts of the lowly
 Thomas Paine never died.
 There no slavery lived
 no grabbing of red people's homeland.
 John Burnett walked the trail
 of tears and suffering with the Cherokee.
 Appalachian-rooted John Fairfield
 laid his own life down
 on the shadowy underground
 of thousands of Black folk
 toward freedom.

Numerous unknown headlines
 annals of unrecorded history
 speak still of justice and peace.
 Workers, the humble poor, plain people,
 producing life substance
 plan no battles, make no wars
 for blood to drip
 that profits may continue
 in undiminished flow...

Many I know who now harbor
 peace and justice and sharing:
 John Woody and Effie
 keep hope a-flicker
 in desolate Matoaka.
 John Woody, a man I know of 48 years
 waiting to die of black-lung,
 never knew the school room,
 went to the mine at nine.

Effie and the children
 robbed of his manhood
 grieve silent tears
 on the sad Matoaka hills.
 But John's courage stands tall,
 remembering Blair Mountain,
 Cabin and Paint Creeks,
 Ludlow and Coal Creek—
 years when miners held
 union meetings in secret places.

Once at strike time I found John's body
 unconscious, beaten
 on a rutted trace,
 Empty coffin, a warning,
 was left in his yard
 labeled "John Woody" in large letters.
 When told what the letters said
 he smiled.
 "That's the last thing I need," he said.

Cabin Creek, alive in heroic tales,
 unrecorded.
 There Clifton and Mary Bryant
 fuel the flame in their humble hut.

Blair Mountain, 1921
 Ten thousand miners in struggle
 bombs dropping from the air.

West Virginia knew Debs—
 in Moundsville Prison,
 and in 1912 elected fifty-five
 of his party to public office!
 West Virginia mountaineers
 seceding from slavery in 1863
 enslaved to corporate power later—
 Consolidated, Continental,
 Peabody, U.S. Steel,
 Rockefeller...

And Ludlow—
 bitter in memory Ludlow!
 Hungry miners
 evicted to tent colony
 fearing Rockefeller police bullets
 dug an under-tent pit
 for women and children's safety.
 Rockefeller guards drenched and set fire.
 Thirteen children and a pregnant woman
 burned to death.
 Five men and another woman shot.

O, celebrate the risen Christ
 Easter Sunday, 1914
 Celebrate the murder of 19 workers!

Ludlow...!
 Map makers leave it off now.
 A stone-carved miner
 with wife and slain child at foot
 mark the spot to:
 "...the men, women and children
 who died in freedom's cause
 April 20, 1914."

Ludlow, bitter in memory Ludlow!

And Coal Creek, Tennessee,
 blotted, too.
 Pleasure-seeking tourists at
 "Lake City" don't know
 the bitter—and glorious—

story of Coal Creek.
 Change the name
 blot the memory...!

Hope and hurt, blood and terror
 lie heavy in Coal Creek memory.
 Mountain men there lit the spark
 destined to destroy
 the convict labor lease system.
 In 1891 they were called "Communists!"

In 1934 in a Kentucky jail death cell
 with three men sentenced to die
 I learned the song:
 "Shut up in the Mines at Coal Creek"
 from one on his way to the Chair.
 Stanzas were found when 28 bodies
 were excavated
 on a scrap of paper blood smeared
 between lumps of coal.

Something of America I love
 and cherish with warm pride
 and something I intensely dislike:

Ludlow...!
 Coal Creek!
 Clifton and Mary Bryant!
 John Woody and Effie!
 Bill Blizzard!
 Florence Reece!
 Cabin Creek!
 Bloody Harlan—corporate profits!
 John D. Rockefeller the fourth:
 "Too rich to steal."

Ludlow...!

IV.

Prose of the recent period.

People's Cultural Heritage in Appalachia

Sometimes references to the cultural heritage in the Appalachian South mean merely the quaint mannerisms, Elizabethan word pronunciation, "old fellerism." Or our beautiful folk ballads, songs, music, tall tales, lore, quilt-making and other arts and crafts may be included. All of these certainly are part of our heritage and should justly be considered. The folk songs, ballads, music, tales and such grow out of the subsoil of folkliving—the hope and hurt, the sorrow and longing of our people. All of these are part of it, but not all.

We believe a true understanding of our history will help to explain not only our songs and music, but that understanding works both ways. Our songs and music help us to understand the heritage from which they sprang, our people, problems, why we developed differently from the rest of the South, and where we may be able to go in the future. Our purpose is toward a more meaningful appreciation that may help in solving current problems and enriching that culture.

Brief Background—Pre-Civil War

The history of Southern Appalachia has a peculiar content and quality which, in so many ways, set it apart from the South and the rest of the nation. Some causes for this, no doubt, are due to the cultural origins of the original settlers. They came largely from a background of old country rebellion against repressive economic, social, political and religious suppression. They were predominantly from Celtic origins.

Further influences grew from the nature of historical developments in relation to conditions and institutions in the New World. These conditioning influences in the Old World and developing events in the New created a Southern Mountains sub-culture, clearly distinguishing it from that prevailing in the old South of which it was a geographical part. These differences centered mainly around issues of political and religious independence, freedom and slavery.

I will not here go into any great detail, but may I say that years of research in Southern Appalachia's history and cultural heritage have enabled me to document everything contained here, and much more. The purpose here is a brief index to what is meant by Southern Appalachia's peculiar role in American history.

Independence, self-government, the freedom of man have always more or less had a place in American ideology. Because of certain specific influences, it was in the Appalachian South that these issues were first most strongly raised and acted upon. The old Regulators of North Carolina at the Battle of the Alamance fought unsuccessfully against the exploitative taxes and dictatorial rule of the royal governor Tyrone before the American

Revolution. Taking refuge across the Smoky Mountains into what was later to be east Tennessee, they participated in setting up the first self-governing community in the New World. There at Watauga was written and adopted the first constitution for self-government by American-born men. A little later, from these southern mountains, three "declarations of independence" were written and advocated for adoption before the eventual Jefferson document. It was here in this mountain South that the sharpest issues of slavery were joined, as the modern abolitionist movement was born and cradled in infancy, toward a growth leading to the Emancipation Proclamation and the freeing of four million Black chattels. Here the first newspaper in America wholly dedicated to abolishing slavery was published (*The Emancipator*, Jonesboro, Tennessee, 1820). William Lloyd Garrison of New England was only 10 years old when these southern Appalachians were organizing their manumission societies and launching the *Intelligencer* and *Emancipator*.

And it was here in the mountain South that the gentle Lundy came (after the death of *Emancipator* editor Embree) to labor and sweat and shed his tears as he struggled to print his *Genius of Universal Emancipation* on the mountain abolitionist press. It was also Lundy who after three years in Jonesboro moved his operation to Baltimore to be more in the mainstream, and on a speaking trip to Boston met and influenced Garrison to become an active abolitionist. Garrison was then editing a temperance sheet. At Lundy's subsequent invitation, Garrison came to Baltimore to assist him. After a year in Baltimore, Garrison was jailed for editorial attacks on a local slave trader. When Lundy and friends managed to obtain Garrison's freedom, he returned to New England to start his *Liberator*.

The relevant point here is that the movement to abolish slavery was not a New England-birthing thing with pesky "Yankees" meddling in the affairs of "Southerners" ("Southerners" meaning always, of course, the no more than three hundred thousand slaveholders, never the six million non-slaveholding whites nor the four million Black slaves).

It was in these mountains that the venerable Dr. Samuel Doak organized his freedom teaching academies—Washington and Tusculum—later to become Tusculum College, which is still in operation at Greeneville, Tennessee. Likewise, it was here that two native Kentuckians in 1865 organized and set on its way Berea as an integrated abolitionist institution to teach the principles of freedom to Black and white mountain youth. From here came the internationally known abolitionist leader, John Rankin. Educated by Dr. Doak at Tusculum, Rankin moved to Ripley, Ohio, where he kept an underground railroad station, wrote voluminously and led a movement against slavery, particularly in the Presbyterian Church. Rankin sent nine sons to the Union Army. Garrison called himself a disciple of Rankin, and Beecher called Rankin the "Martin

Luther" of the abolition cause. Many other noted men were educated by Sam Doak in east Tennessee, among them Charles Osborn, who moved on to Indiana to lead an anti-slavery movement for which he was "read out" of the Quaker religious order, but never silenced. Another was Sam Houston. His later decision not to sign the Texas ordinance of secession may well have been influenced by his Tennessee mountain education.

There are dozens and dozens of other mountain men who lived dangerously and worked ceaselessly and sometimes gave their lives in the struggle against chattel slavery. Two such from Appalachian Virginia were remarkable in their selfless devotion to human freedom. The first, John Fairfield, as a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, seemed to live a charmed life. He went into every slave state to lead refugees over the shadowy trail up across Appalachia to Canada West and freedom. The other, John Kagi, a Virginia schoolteacher, took two Black refugees with him when he went searching for John Brown at Lawrence, Kansas. Kagi became John Brown's close friend, right-hand man and most trusted lieutenant. He died at Harpers Ferry. The fate of John Fairfield, who would "give the shirt off his back to a needy refugee," is unknown.

Even the mountains of Georgia and Alabama have their dramatic events and anti-slavery heroes. (Winston County, Alabama and Dade County, Georgia seceded from their respective states when those states seceded from the Union.) Christopher Sheets, in the legislature from Winston County, led the fight in convention against William Yancey's secession drive. The preponderant slaveholder influence defeated Sheets' efforts, but he came back to north Alabama to organize mass meetings against secession and the evolving Confederacy. He was arrested and spent the Civil War years in a Montgomery prison. The Alabama mountains were hotbeds of anti-Confederate guerrilla activity. A similar condition prevailed in north Georgia.

In Alabama, Robert Tharin had been a law partner with William Yancey. But he shared Christopher Sheets' anti-slavery sentiment and activity. In 1857, he proposed to publish a newspaper, the *Non Slaveholder*. He also defended in court poor whites accused of associating with Blacks. Given a slaveholder kangaroo court trial, Tharin was sentenced to 39 lashes on the bare back and to exile. Going north via an underground railroad station kept at Cincinnati by Levi Coffin (a Carolina mountain man sometimes called the father and president of the Underground Railroad), Tharin eventually joined the Union Army and in 1863 published a book which he dedicated to the "poor white trash of the South." It was a powerful appeal to the poor whites against slavery.

Tharin's book was quite similar in spirit and content to that of the North Carolina mountaineer Helper, whose book, *The Impending Crisis*,

became one of the most controversial anti-slavery books ever written. It was banned and burned in the South. Men were jailed for possessing or circulating it. At least two men were lynched, and Helper was forced to flee for his life to the North. But in 1860 it was reprinted and used as campaign literature to help elect Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency. These stories are not in the history books our mountain children study. They are just a few examples of southern mountaineers who, although unknown, ought to be schoolbook heroes for our mountain youth, to help inspire and restore dignity, self-respect, pride, and confidence. They sprang from our people and from a cultural heritage differing sharply from that of the old slaveholding South. History has been so twisted that often a distorted self-image is developed. And it is our belief that a people's self-image is most important; it determines what an individual or people try to do, and it greatly affects growth and development.

The Civil War

Then came the Civil War. And from a southern mountain point of view, it was a civil war, not a "war between the states." In that struggle, the Appalachian South continued to play a distinctive and strategic role. The area stretched down across nine states to Georgia and Alabama, seven hundred miles long and up to three hundred miles wide. Although geographically a part of the Confederacy, the Appalachian South sent some two hundred fifty thousand volunteers to the Union Army, more than would have been the draft quota had it been above the Mason and Dixon Line. They joined without inducements of bounty promises and with the almost certain knowledge that their homes would be devastated if the Confederacy had the opportunity. This certainly happened at least in areas of Tennessee around Knoxville.

After the Civil War

During the war, the mountain South was considered a dangerous threat to the Confederacy. The mountaineers were considered "traitors." At one point, a Confederate official complained that the mountain South represented a greater threat to the Confederacy than either army of the Union. And undoubtedly he was right. Had the two hundred fifty thousand southern volunteers been thrown on the other side, the history of America might well have been written differently.

After the war, there was a long period of stagnation in the mountain South. Roads and other internal improvements were neglected. Schools and education were worse. Men whose ancestors had been fairly well educated grew up illiterate, signed their names with an X. Many of the long-form deeds to "mineral rights" on mountain lands were thus signed. Then came new developments which were to change, destroy and play

havoc with much of our mountain heritage and culture: representatives of northern-based corporations buying up "mineral rights" at 25 cents to 50 cents an acre.

The long-term deed to "mineral rights" had a clause granting the owner the right to use whatever methods he felt were necessary to remove those minerals. This clause has been used in modern times to legalize the atrocity of stripmining.

With coal rights owned by outside corporations, mines were opened and the mountain man suddenly found himself in strangely new circumstances. He was no longer a free man. He lived in a company town where houses, store, church, school, streets, and roads were owned by the company. He was compelled to trade in the company store, live in a company house, send his kids to company schools, and go to a company church. Whether he wished to or not, he paid the preacher. Frequently the preacher's salary was checked out of the miner's wage before he received his check.

A mining village usually lay along a creek between two mountains. It had a single road that only led in and out. Often the company had an entrance gate across this road and an armed guard stationed there day and night. Strangers without a pass were not admitted. Add dangerous working conditions, low wages, and a constant fear of being fired and we have a virtual serf- or slave-like situation. It went hard against the grain for a once-proud and independent people.

The spirit might writhe under such conditions, but fear muted voices of protest. If they were heard, it meant loss of a job. Eventually, though, a notion was born and began to grow—mutual aid, organization, union. These ideas were at first whispered, secret. A quiet word, a nod or an undercover handbill—a secret meeting, of necessity—in basements, out in the woods, even in a cave. For the company imported professional gunmen to terrorize, to brutalise, to kill; they did them all. Sometimes the most secret gathering would be discovered and men were murdered.

But the mountain spirit had been a free thing. "Mountaineers are always free" is not a meaningless motto for West Virginia. Great, dramatic, militant and heroic struggle ensued—Coal Creek and Tracy City in Tennessee, Harlan and Bell Counties in Kentucky, Cabin and Paint Creeks in West Virginia with five thousand armed miners camped at Marmet, marching toward Logan to aid brother-miners brutalized by a reign of gun-thug terror, the battle of Blair Mountain with planes dropping crude bombs on the marching miners—memories of desperation.

Long years of determined struggle against gun-thug terror finally won. The old freedom-loving independent spirit asserted itself. The longings for self-respect, human dignity—and food for their children—survived even the worst brutalization. The miners organized. They won a contract

with better working conditions, more safety, better wages. The locked gates with armed guards at mine village entrances were removed. The miners were no longer forced to trade in the company store.

Then the union was militant, democratic, with rank-and-file participation in the decision-making process. All seemed well, with future promise. Victory was good, and it seemed to be a lasting thing. Miners trusted their leaders, and this was their mistake. They forgot that the cost of liberty and human welfare is always eternal vigilance. They forgot that power corrupts and that great power corrupts greatly.

In the beginning, conditions were so bleak, violence and murder so commonplace, that John L. Lewis himself was compelled to lead militantly, to conduct a democratic organization. But Lewis lost sight of a union's function and purpose. He developed no rank-and-file education program. He did not see such understanding of the membership as essential. Lewis made the decisions. Lewis got drunk on power. He eventually consolidated that power into what became a virtual union dictatorship. (It was passed on to Tony Boyle, who is currently and finally under federal indictment for his power misuse. *Ed. note: After this essay was written, Boyle was finally convicted for the murder of the Yablonski family.*) Lewis ruled by the strong-arm method. Those who questioned that rule wound up its victims. The fate of the Yablonski family is the natural fruit of this violent heritage in coal. In the United Mine Workers Union, local districts were not permitted to elect their own officers. John L. Lewis appointed them, and after him Tony Boyle. The miners lost all voice in decision-making. When automation came, Lewis made no fight to protect the members. Tens of thousands of miners were replaced by machinery. Other tens of thousands are scattered through Appalachia, disabled, disillusioned, on welfare.

But again the mountaineer fights back. He is resilient—he may be bent, twisted, warped, but given the opportunity he comes up again. He stands straight like the man he was and is. Last year in West Virginia, the mines were solidly closed down and forty thousand miners marched on the state capitol demanding mine safety legislation. They kept the mines closed—against the national union leadership's orders, against the corporations, against the politicians in the state government—until a bill was passed.

Jesus, the Quiet Revolutionary

Personally, I like the plain Jesus, the carpenter-working-man Jesus, concerned for and close to the poor and common people. That Jesus was hard as nails used in the building of houses, but gentle as a child in a feeling for human needs. Pompous efforts to fasten him up in stained glass windows of costly cathedrals or confine him to solemn assemblies with

ceremonial ritual have never impressed me.

Empty, pious phrase-mongering unrelated to human need leaves me cold. Likewise I have scant concern for priestly religious garb...robes, frills, back-turned collars and such. Much of my work can be done in a pair of blue-bibbed overalls. I do not condemn those who feel a need for status symbols, phrases, special clothing or ceremony. It just happens that I feel no need for such.

For I see Jesus as a simple (not simple-minded), down-to-earth revolutionary who sought to change an evil system based on competitive violence and greed for material wealth to a structure centered around human values and need. He was a plain, quiet revolutionary who sought no outer display of beads, religious robes, ceremony or credentials. Nor did he resort to long-winded rigamorole of pious phrases to vindicate the truth. He was not given to the use of wordy theological cant so dear to the hearts of some religious officials then and now. I think he must have been as impatient with such as was the old prophet Amos. His own language was extremely simple and earthy: "Go feed my sheep" were the people's own words.

This quiet, plain-spoken Jesus had most of his trouble with the leaders of organized religion, who were then, as so often since, lackeys of the political *status quo*, who upheld a system of aggrandizement and violent greed. Jesus gave priority to love and human concern. This was a radical departure from the existing socio-religious form...then and now. It was simple, though, and easily understood by the poor and the common people. First priority he gave to love... "love one another." When human life is cheap, this is indeed a revolutionary priority.

The hungry masses of all ages have aspired, hoped and worked for a time when their bellies can be filled, their backs clothed and decent shelter shield them from the raw elements. They have longed for the time when men can live and love and laugh in security and at peace with their fellows. They dream, love and hope. Jesus knew...and He was no "opiate of the people!" This is attested to by the way he was received in gladness by the poor, but with anger and violence by the rich and powerful.

He recognized...and condemned...the evil of riches possessed by the few while the many go hungry. It was no piously phrased cant when he said: "hardly shall they that have riches enter the Kingdom," and "It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom." Nor was he repeating pious phrases when he labeled the Pharisees "hypocrites" who observed a lot of religious ceremony with great show but "omitted the weightier matters" of justice. They were "blind guides that strain at a gnat and swallow a camel."

How simple, how plain, how real and earthy—in the people's own language. Jesus was always like that—so much like the people. He was different only when being different made a difference. In modern

terminology he was so “square” that they couldn’t tell him from the people. He moved among the people like fish swim in the open waters. To me, this is the test of a true revolutionary, and not that he wears beads and braids or sports an outlandishly different hair-do or face. This kind of outer appearance “rebellion” is for adolescents, and so often practiced by affluent youths of our time in a sort of papa-mama protest. The real revolutionary affects no style or manner, dress or language that may set him apart from the people or erect barriers to communication. He may at times find it convenient to lose himself among the people. Jesus did on a number of occasions.

It happened once after he made a revolutionary speech in the Nazareth Synagogue. (He said His purpose was “to preach the gospel to the poor...heal the broken-hearted...deliver the captives...set at liberty those who are bruised.” These objectives were shockingly un-*status quo*.) There he faced an angry, lynch-spirited gang of religious fanatics who sought to cast him headlong over a bluff to his destruction. But Jesus, obviously so indistinguishable from the people, managed to lose himself in their midst. The Bible says: “passing through the midst of them,” He went His way.

At another time, following a temple speech in the area of the Mount of Olives, Jesus had exposed the hypocrisy of scribes and Pharisees regarding the stoning of a poor woman taken “in the very act” of adultery. Again, He was in a hot spot. His enemies were taking up stones to cast at him: “but Jesus hid himself” (among the people again) and went out of the temple, going “through the midst” of the people. Only the man who looks like the people can lose himself among them.

This, incidentally, is a lesson some youths who associate with what they call “the movement” might well learn today. Often they seem to be talking to themselves, vying with each other in proving their “revolutionary radicalism” by mouthing many four-letter words and affecting strange manners of speech, dress and hair styles that can only erect barriers of communication and set them apart from the people. It sows confusion, misunderstanding, and hinders essential unity of the people. Maybe this is a reason why the power structure hucksters take up and market the wares of these “revolutionaries.” But this may be an infantile sickness that maturity will eventually cure—if it isn’t too late.

But there is always the “stooge,” the “fink”—even in small working class groups. We had them back when we were building the miner’s union in Appalachia. They infested the civil rights and Black people’s movement. Paul Crouch, Harvey Matusow and many lesser known creatures did yeoman service by lying about honest men and labor organizations. (Crouch, incidentally, died of cancer of the tongue.) But the “fink,” the paid “witness,” the “informer” were not created by Senator Joseph McCarthy or Eastland of Mississippi, though Crouch, Matusow,

and others served such men. Every people’s movement from the beginning of time has had them. Spartacus contended with traitors. So did Jesus. Even his little select group of twelve men had its Judas! Judas, the false witness, the paid informer.

We will note here two things about the incident of paid witness Judas’ betrayal. First, those who accompanied Judas with swords and other weapons were from chief priests and elders—organized religion, which played lackey to the political power. Second, the incident witnesses again to Jesus’ oneness with the people. Else why should informer Judas need to come along to point him out to the enemy? Judas had the agreement that “...whomsoever I shall kiss, the same is he; hold him fast.”

Jesus, the quiet son of Man, exemplifying the revolutionary quality of love in action, was so much like the people that, as the song goes about Lincoln, “They couldn’t quite tell where the people left off and Abe Lincoln began.”

The enemy always needs Judas when the true revolutionary is involved.

Orion Magazine, 1967

Romantic Appalachia

or

Poverty Pays if You Ain’t Poor

Almost every day we get letters from those wanting to come to Appalachia to “fight poverty.” They’ve read about the Southern Mountaineers. They’ve seen movies, comic strips or TV (Lil’ Abner, Beverly Hillbillies...).

It’s not that there’s no poverty in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago and other parts. There is. But Southern Appalachia has that “romantic” appeal.

Just a few years ago it was the southern Negro, and dedicated (or adventure seeking) young “yankees” came tramping to the South on freedom rides, marches and such. Not that racism, segregation and even riots didn’t exist in the North. They did. But since the Black militants kicked the whites out, suggesting they go organize their own kind, the next most romantic thing seems to be the Appalachian South.

So we are “discovered” again. It’s happened every generation, sometimes more often, since the Civil War. After a few people in the North, following Lincoln’s awareness, realized how the mountain South played a strategic role in defeating the Confederacy, there was a twinge of stricken conscience. First came the religious “Missionaries” from New England

and other parts North to lift us up and save our "hillbilly" souls. They brought along their "superior" religion to do it—and were closely followed by corporation emissaries buying up mineral rights for 25 cents to 50 cents an acre.

The Union General Howard, marching through the Cumberland Gap, had been so deeply impressed by the friendly spirit, aid and support given his soldiers by the mountain people that he communicated it to President Lincoln. Lincoln himself vowed that after the war something should be done for "the loyal mountaineers of the South." One eventual result was Lincoln Memorial University at Cumberland Gap. (We have degrees from that school.)

Subsequently a whole passel of mountain missionary schools sprang up. The loyalty of the southern mountaineer, his anti-slavery sentiment and action, and the plight of the poor little mountain boys and girls in isolated Appalachia were told in lurid details in the North. Many missionaries were New England women who, some of the romantic fables held, were disappointed in love. They came to the mountains to lose themselves. Nonetheless, they had "uplift" in their eyes. A few even married hill men. We reckoned maybe that was part of the "uplift" too.

I attended one of these mountain missionary high schools. I remember so well how the New England "Pilgrims" used to come down each year. A special train brought them on a siding to the campus. All of us little "hillbillies" were lined up with candles lighted on each side of the dirt road for half a mile with carefully coached greeting smiles. It was a "great day." We were supposed to be cheered when the "Pilgrims" told us how we were "the last remnants of the pure old Anglo-Saxons" who, of course, were the most superior of all peoples. This, maybe, ought to have made us feel good and "superior" in spite of our poverty. And we did have poverty then. It's nothing new in the mountains.

Our biggest show was reserved for the Henry Ford visits. The old oxen were yoked to a wagon loaded with wood to amble all the campus roads, managing to meet the Ford procession on numerous occasions. (Henry might give us a flivver, you see.) Oh, but we really got to do our stuff then, including the old mountain dances with Mrs. Ford and Henry. That, we learned, was Henry's favorite dancing, and he gave the school more than a flivver, too. Ford put millions into that school. He also gave jobs to graduates in his non-union Detroit Plant which, he vowed, would never sign a union contract. Though we walked out of Appalachian poverty through the slums of Detroit, Henry would protect us from all the union evils.

Ford, we learned, was a tight-lipped guy. He never bored us with speeches as others did. He was the "silent but strong" type. He also doted on our supposedly "pure old Anglo-Saxon" heritage. And we learned he

had no use for the "money-grubbing Jew."

(Ford later financed the organization of the "Anglo-Saxon Federation" and a virulent "Hate-the-Jew" campaign that taught Hitler lessons. His newspaper, the Dearborn Independent, printed the "Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion," and he financed their printing in the hundreds of thousands of copies as a pamphlet. Purporting to be a sinister Jewish plot to rule the world, the "Protocols" were proven to be false and were so labeled by leading scholars. Only after a public boycott—by Christians, Jews and others—of the Ford cars which brought near-bankruptcy to the Ford Motor Company did Ford apologize to the Jews and publicly repudiate the "Protocols." Henry Ford was a man greatly gifted mechanically, with a flair for finance, but ignorant about nearly everything else.)

When later at a mountain college (Lincoln Memorial) Henry and Mrs. Ford showed up, we sort of felt like old friends. Dancing the mountain folk dance with Mrs. Ford again, we could talk about back when Henry didn't confine his southern mountain interests to high school. He beckoned to "the best" in our colleges, too. We were inspired to "make a success," "get ahead," "be somebody," just like Henry had. The dollar mark was the standard, always.

Each time we are "discovered" a passel of new missionaries invades the mountains. Old clothes, surplus food and such are made available and some temporary reforms may result—crumbs thrown to the poor who need whole loaves and some meat, too. Some stirring is stimulated. Hope flutters painfully to escape the lint-covered mill hills or dust-blackened shacks behind slate dumps only to fall broken-winged in polluted air or rivers outside. The missionary effect is to dull the razor-edge thrust of the people toward human betterment. Appalachia's colonial status—the ownership, production and distribution structure—is left intact, hardly shaken or questioned.

As the nation's awareness of the new "discovery" wanes and, despairing of saving our "hillbilly souls" anyhow, the "missionaries" begin to pull out again. In such manner went many Presbyterians, Congregationalists and other religious cults years ago. More recently it was the Appalachian Volunteers, SCEF, VISTAS, some CAPS and other assorted conglomerates of poverty warriors. Shortly we may be forgotten again, until another generation "discovers" poverty in Appalachia.

Yes, the southern mountains have been missionarized, researched, studied, surveyed, romanticized, dramatized, hillbillyized, Dogpatchized and povertyized again. And some of us who are natives and have known this hard living all our lives and our grandpa's life before, marvel that our "missionary" friends discover us so often.

(Southern Appalachia is a colonial possession of Eastern-based industry. Like all exploited colonial areas, the "mother country" may make generous gestures now and then, send missionaries with uplift programs,

“superior” religion, build churches and sometimes schools. They’ll do about everything—except get off the backs of the people, end the exploitive domination. That the people themselves must eventually see to. The latest “missionary” move is the “War on Poverty.” It was never intended to end poverty. That would require a total reconstruction of the system of ownership, production and distribution of wealth.)

This is not the first time in our lifetime that big city folk have come down to save and lift us up. I remember the 1929-1930’s. Southern Appalachia was discovered then, too. Young “missionaries” were sowing their “radical wild oats” from the Black Belt of Alabama and Arkansas to Harlan County, Kentucky and Paint and Cabin Creeks in West Virginia. They were mostly transients, as “missionaries” frequently are. I don’t know a single one who remained. I do know quite a few who returned North and are now rich men, some multi-millionaires. It was a thrilling experience to be in romantic Appalachia or other parts South for a spell, but it was nice to have a rich papa up North to fall back on.

Not long ago, visiting in an affluent apartment house on Riverside Drive in New York, our hostess asked if I knew who owned that building. I didn’t, of course. “Well,” she said, “it is your old friend, Alex ———, and this is just one of several he owns.”

I remembered Alex very well. Once I drove his car from New York to Birmingham. He was a super activist, and articulate, as big city folk frequently are. He was sure he had the answers, too, about solving the problems of the poor. If you disagreed you were just no doggoned good, maybe an enemy of the poor. But I went to see him there in New York recently. He is not interested in the plight of the poor anymore. His time is given to looking after his multimillion dollar real estate business. He sowed his “radical wild oats” down South years ago.

There is a qualitatively different situation for those who come to fight poverty in Appalachia now and back in the 1930’s. Then they came (Theodore Dreiser, the great American novelist, brought a passel to Pineville and Harlan, Kentucky) on their own. There was no OEO, no VISTA, no Appalachian Volunteers. Nobody was paid a good salary to fight poverty. They made their own way, shifted as best they could. It was depression times, too. Some did good work—helped to smoothe the way for a future union and such. Some were murdered by thugs. Others were beaten, crippled. Issues were sharp and violence too common. There was more to it than writing songs, though songs were written. “Which Side Are You On?” came from Harlan, Kentucky, “Solidarity Forever” came from the Cabin Creek struggles. There were underground papers, too, that didn’t have an address or an editor’s name. They were really underground, no romantic play-like. They who worked at organizing the poor had to keep a wary eye. The murder of the Yablonski family is a throw-back, a

reminder that the billionaire coal operator families always play rough, and for keeps, against effective opposition.

I remember a night on a mountain road above Harlan town in the 1930’s. Six operator gun thugs with deputy badges and a young native organizer. Beaten to unconsciousness, thrown in the brush for dead, he came to hours later, crawling from the nightmare, stumbling down the mountainside to where a friendly old couple tended him in their humble cabin. A few nights later, in a fourth rate Hazard hotel, beyond sitting up, unable to pay for food or lodging, dirty, hungry, listening to every footstep in the hall outside with fearful uncertainty. Organizing the poor in the 1930’s was risky and extremely uncertain. I speak from experience here.

But things are considerably different now. The young “missionary” in Appalachia has it comparatively easy. First, he is paid. He has food to eat regularly, a place to sleep. He goes to bed with scant fear of being murdered in his sleep. He holds meetings without slipping around secretly in the bushes or basements. His meetings are not liable to be broken up or machine-gunned by operator thugs with deputy badges. And in an area where tens of thousands of families live on less than \$2,000 a year, poverty fighters may get much more. Some salaries are large—\$10 thousand, \$15 thousand, \$20 or 25 thousand or more.

We know one poverty “consultant” who received \$500.00 a day for his consulting. He was later hired by a poverty-fighting agency to work 4 days a month at \$10 thousand a year salary. Others received similarly outrageous stipends. And some of the bright young “missionaries” who came down in one of the poverty-fighting brigades, perhaps despairing of saving our “hillbilly souls,” certainly failing to organize the poor, now find money in poverty by setting up post office box corporations that receive lucrative OEO grants or contracts to train others to “fight poverty.” If they failed to organize the poor themselves, they nonetheless can train others to go out and do likewise. They became “experts” in the process, and now get well paid for their “expertise.”

Recently a new agency, a-burning to “change the image” poverty creates in our area, to be financed by OEO “seed money,” proposed to pay its director \$25 thousand a year with \$16 a day per diem, the assistant to receive \$20 thousand and so on. The claim is that such salaries are essential to get “qualified” personnel. Some of us who have seen the “missionaries” come and go over the years may think that such salary demands are indicative of precisely the kind of quality not needed.

From their affluent middle-class backgrounds, so many do-gooders who come into the mountains seldom grasp the fact that the poor are poor because of the nature of the system of ownership, production and distribution. When the poor fail to accept their middle-class notions they may end up frustrated failures. Some put their frustrations into a book (like *Yesterday’s People*). Others set up the post office box corporations to get in

on the “benefits” of the system. Both have been done.

Their basic concern was not how they related to the mountains but how the mountains related to them and their notions. With their “superior” approach, they failed to understand or appreciate the historic struggles of broad sections of the mountain people against the workings of the system dating back beyond the 1930’s: early Paint and Cabin Creek battles; the armed march with 5 to 7 thousand miners camped at Marmet in the Kanawha Valley, marching toward Logan to help fellow miners against gun thug terrorism; the Battle of Blair Mountain, where the enemy dropped bombs from the air; the battles of Evarts, Harlan and Bell in Kentucky; Gastonia, Marion, High Point in North Carolina; Elizabethton, Wilder, Coal Creek in Tennessee, and later Blue Ridge in Georgia and the Black Lung West Virginia Strike in 1969. And before that the mountain man’s struggle against a slave system that oppressed both the poor white and Black slaves.

These modern “missionaries” (some, already “ex-missionaries”), despairing of us, may return home. Ten years from now—if the world still stands—they may look back from their affluence with nostalgia for the time when they sowed their “radical wild oats” in Appalachia.

The “missionaries”—religious or secular—had and have one thing in common: they didn’t trust us hill folk to speak, plan and act for ourselves. Bright, articulate, ambitious, well-intentioned, they became our spokesmen, our planners, our actors. And so they’ll go again, leaving us and our poverty behind.

But is there a lesson to be learned from all these outside efforts that have failed to save us? I think so. If we native mountaineers can now determine to organize and save ourselves, save our mountains from the spoilers who tear them down, pollute our streams and leave grotesque areas of ugliness, there is hope. The billionaire families behind the great corporations are also outsiders who sometimes claim they want to “save” us. It is time that we hill folk should understand and appreciate our heritage, stand up like those who were our ancestors, develop our own self-identity. It is time to realize that nobody from the outside is ever going to save us from bad conditions unless we make our own stand. We must learn to organize again, speak, plan and act for ourselves. There are many potential allies with common problems—the poor of the great cities, the Indians, the Blacks who are also exploited. They need us. We need them. Solidarity is still crucial. If we learn this lesson from the outside “missionary” failures, then we are on our way.

—from WEST VIRGINIA HILLBILLY (1969)

Appalachian History

Introduction

I think history is terribly important. It ought to be the most popular school course. But it’s not. Why? Maybe the way it’s taught sometimes causes students to be bored. Anyhow, too many students, too many people, don’t see to like history.

In these articles I may speak of some things you haven’t heard much about. I’ll try to make it plain and simple and down to earth, because I believe writing ought to have those qualities. I shall not bother you with footnote references, either. On this particular subject I think there is much misunderstanding, sometimes distortion in the history writing.

Why Is History Important?

Why is the study and understanding of history important? Why, particularly, is the understanding of our own history important for Southern Mountain folk today?

Well, I think the way a people see themselves in history helps to determine their own self-image. Did you know that what you think of yourself, the image you have of yourself, is very important for you? Did you know that it pretty well decides what you may even try to do? The same is true for a country, or for a community, an area, a people. If we know where we’ve come from, why and how, maybe we’ll have a clearer view of where we may be able to go, and how.

We’ve Been Hillbillyized

There have been many unpleasant things written about the Southern Mountaineer. Some very ugly things. We’ve been “hillbillyized” and “Tobacco Roded” so long that sometimes some of us may begin to half believe some of those stereotypes about ourselves. Lil’ Abner, Beverly Hillbillies and such are hardly calculated to add to our feeling of dignity and self-respect.

A “hillbilly racist” stereotype has emerged, too. I’ve heard learned scholars of both colors refer to the “hillbilly psychology” when referring to the tap-root of southern racism. But it ain’t necessarily so, as the man said. In fact, it is downright false. These articles will show why.

So you see, the twisting of a people’s history and cultural heritage may lead to wrong evaluation by others, and even worse, to a false self-image.

Sort of Johnny-Come-Lately

What kind of people are we anyhow? Who is this hillbilly we’ve heard so much about?

The Federal Government now classes all the Mountain South as "depressed." That means we're poor, have a hard time making a living because of job scarcity and such. Many national magazines, writers, missionaries and other do-gooders have also discovered us in feature stories detailing our poverty and miseries. None of this is news to many of us, of course. The majority of mountain folk have always worked hard for scanty returns. Some of us wonder why the Government and all these other people were so late discovering what we've known all our lives. It strikes us as being a sort of Johnny-Come-Lately deal. Not that we don't welcome any aid from anywhere. But some of us have the notion that no problem solution ever really comes from the outside. It comes from within ourselves.

We have many sorts of "welfare" jobs now. Some say we're just plain down no 'count, that we're just too lazy to work. Some "welfare" workers seem to try to make us feel like trash or scum. They act like they think we'll break the Federal Government by the few measly dollars we draw!

Yesterday's or Tomorrow's People?

Others see us as "Yesterday's People." All we need to solve our problems is to listen to them, get rid of our quare notions and quaint ways, accept middle-class values like the rest of America.

Some of us doubt this. We hold a notion that maybe, after all, there may be good values in our own cultural heritage worth considering, saving and extending. Most of us are exposed to the cultural product of middle class America via TV and other mass media. We find few values to get excited about here. We know about political machines, poverty, race riots and rats, murder gangs and such in the great centers of America.

We've also had political representatives of the great American family dynasties come to us. We have a Rockefeller now. And when John Kennedy ran in the West Virginia primary, spending a quarter of a million dollars on his way to the White House, there was more free liquor around the polls than we'd seen in a mighty long time. But it didn't wipe out our poverty, and it hasn't. We are also aware that the Al Capone type patriot, Cosa Nostra and underworld political deals are as much a part of the "American Way" as racial injustice.

So some of us seriously doubt the value of becoming just like the rest of America. We even prefer our square, quaint ways, if nothing else.

But is there anything in our own mountain cultural history worth understanding, appreciating, preserving, expanding?

I happen to think there is. I remember back in the 1930's teaching on Troublesome Creek in east Kentucky when the first "welfare" program got under way. One day up the left hand fork of Troublesome, visiting with Dan and Mary Pratt, I was told how the social worker came by offering surplus commodities. Now Troublesome's people were poor, all right, and

needy. But they said: "We're not paupers. We don't take handouts."

That sentiment stemmed from our mountain heritage—self-respect, independence, human dignity.

But a lot of water has gone down Troublesome—and Cabin Creek—since then. Men can only stand to look into the eyes of their hungry children for so long. Troublesome's people, like others in the mountains, were eventually forced to accept handouts. Life had changed. Great corporations had reached into the mountains. The squeeze was on. A man could no longer take axe and bull-tongue plow to scratch a living from hillside patches. That self-respect and pride, once virtually a part of every mountain man, have undergone a massive mauling. Conditions created sharp-toothed destroyers that gnawed away inside men until human dignity itself was almost swallowed. Our people became victims of circumstances they did not create and over which they had no control. From such conditions, outside corporations drained millions in great fortunes.

But the mountain people never gave in easily. They fought back every step of the way. The heroic tales of trade union beginnings in Harlan, Gastonia, Marion, Elizabethton, Cabin Creek, Wilder of the 1930's record that spirit. The current struggles against stripmining devastation at Pikeville, Clear Creek and Troublesome Creek, and the other struggles of mountain groups—all witness the fact that the mountain man is not defeated. He still has the courage to dissent. He is never an establishment creature.

Perhaps it remains for the mountain people to come again to the rescue of the nation as in these articles we propose to show they did in the Civil War.

Perhaps instead of labeling us "Yesterday's People," a more fitting one might be "Tomorrow's People."

With Courage to Dissent

Settlers in the mountains came from a different cultural background than the tidewater cavaliers or lowland slaveholders. Mountain men came from a dissenting, freedom-loving tradition. True, they were of the common folk, mostly Scots (sometimes called Scots-Irish). They had opposed both religious and political oppression in the old country, fled for a time to Northern Ireland, then to the New World. There were also sprinklings of German, French Huguenots, Welsh, Swiss and English. But in the main they were hard-headed independents with courage to dissent even when unpopular and dangerous. Their values were in men more than in things.

Early mountain religion was strongly Presbyterian, because of the Scots. Mountain men were intensely devoted to religious freedom. Western Virginia's people strongly resented being taxed to support the Anglican established church of Virginia. This was an early point of dissension

between mountains and tidewater. Add unfair tidewater representation (three-fifths of the slaves were counted), slavery and secession, and the new mountain state of West Virginia came to be.

No Witches Were Burned

Despite strong Calvinistic influences, and unlike Puritan New England, the mountaineers never tried to force their beliefs on others. No one was persecuted for holding different beliefs, nor for disbelief. No “witches” were burned. One might be a church member or one might not. One might even be an outspoken unbeliever. That was a free man’s right.

As time went on and the mountains continued to be isolated and slighted on internal improvements by their several state governments, education waned. Schools and road were virtually nonexistent. The Mountain South became literally a great unknown wilderness area inhabited by “quare people,” sometimes referred to by tidewater aristocrats as “wild men.”

But Never Establishment Men

Perhaps this very “wildness” was part of the dissent. For these hardy hill people were never “establishment men.” They never had hit it off very well with royalty, nor with those who traded and bought other men’s bodies as slaves.

For these mountains were the home of freedom-loving men. This is an emphasis that can’t be over-stressed. It went back to the earliest settlement and beyond. Here was formed the first Commonwealth with a constitution for self-government written by American-born white men—the Watauga Association. Here the State of Franklin was created by men who had fought royal governor Tyrone of North Carolina in the Alamance Battle. Many of these same veterans with hog rifles tramped back across the Great Smokies to defeat British General Ferguson at King’s Mountain in a victory Thomas Jefferson declared crucial to the American Revolution.

The Cradle of Abolition

It was up the valleys through these mountains that the main line of the Underground Railroad ran with refugees bound for Canada and freedom. Many a humble mountain cabin gave food, shelter and direction on the way to weary Black men and women. From here came Helper’s great book, *The Impending Crisis*, in 1857, used as campaign literature to elect Lincoln in 1860.

It was also here in the Southern Mountains that the abolitionist movement to free four million Black slaves was born, nurtured and cradled through infancy to a maturity that eventually broke the chains of chattel bondage to make the Negro a man instead of a thing.

It was here that the first newspaper in America dedicated wholly to abolishing slavery was first published—*The Emancipator*. Elihu Embree was publishing his *Emancipator* when William Lloyd Garrison was only ten years old.

And to these mountains the gentle Lundy came to work and shed his sweat and tears getting out the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* after Embree’s death.

Mountain Life & Work, 1970

Mountaineers Fighting for Freedom

An Interview with Don West (1970: Excerpted)

Maybe for a minute we can talk about some of the things you have been involved in, in connection with union organizing.

In the 1930’s I was involved in trade union organizing. I mentioned before this interview the story of Barney Graham—the ballad of Barney Graham, written by his little daughter Della May. Barney was a good friend of mine, one of the first organizers and presidents of his union that I ever knew. I was working with him with the union there at Wilder, Tennessee, in 1933, when Barney was shot by a couple of gunmen. His was the first funeral that I ever officiated at as a young preacher because they couldn’t get a preacher and they couldn’t get a church.... That whole community was blacklisted—the whole village of Wilder—and when the Roosevelt administration came in, they just lifted that whole body of people and settled them over near Crossville on Cumberland Homesteads. The federal government bought up several thousand acres of land for that purpose.

I was head of the Workers’ Alliance in East Kentucky for about three years. We had lots of struggle there in 1936. We had 300 East Kentucky unemployed miners who went to Washington. We spent about a week there with some 10,000 other people.

Were you in Harlan County at all?

I was in Harlan and Bell Counties back in the 1930’s. In 1929 the first union that came into Harlan and began to organize and lead the first strikes was not the United Mine Workers Union: It was the National Miners Union. It was this union that developed such people as Jim Garland, Wally Jackson, and others—they were songwriters that I am thinking of particularly, and they produced songs like “Which Side Are You On?” and “I Don’t Want Your Millions, Mister,” etc. I was there, and it was really a rough area and a

tough experience to be there, because many people were beaten up or murdered. Harry Sims was murdered; Boyce Israel was beaten so badly that he never recovered. Numbers of others were beaten, shot, wounded, or killed. I had the experience a number of times of being put in jail, at Pineville, for example. I had the experience of being arrested again by six deputies with badges on, and saying they were taking me to jail, took me instead out on the mountain and beat me until I was unconscious, and left me by the roadside. This was quite common, because, as I said, violence was present all the time. And you were lucky if you lived through it sometimes it seems.

The struggles you and others were involved in aren't talked about in the history books. But there seems to be a lot of talk these days about the importance of Appalachian Studies—courses studying this history.

This is what I have been hammering on for so long. I am amused sometimes that now nearly every Tom, Dick and Harry in education is thinking about a course in Appalachian Studies. A lot of people are becoming conscious that Appalachia is a peculiar area, that it does have a peculiar history, and that it does have a colonial status, and that it does have a tradition of struggle. So many times our own people don't realize this about themselves, and I think it is so important that people do find out these things about their own history....

For some reason or other it seems that in the mountain south when the labor unions undertook to organize, particularly in the early period, the efforts to keep it from happening were the strongest, hardest, most vicious efforts on the part of the owners. Perhaps it was because these people, the owners, had come down from New England, and had invested in coal, and they felt this was the last bastion of cheap, unorganized labor, and they wanted to keep it that way.

In Gastonia in 1929, the National Textile Workers Union was trying to organize. People were making seven dollars for sixty hours of work. They were living in company houses and being treated like serfs. So these people who came down from the mountains to the cotton mills, they got enough of it, and they started to try to organize, and when they tried to organize in the cotton mills it was the same as in the coal mines—same kind of terror, same kinds of violence were meted out to the people.

At Marion, in the same year, they shot down at one mass gathering six people in cold blood. There is a song about that in Marion. The mountain people made folksongs out of these kinds of struggles. At Elizabethton, there was the same kind of thing. Cabin Creek and Paint Creek have, I guess, some of the most dramatic history in modern labor struggles. I believe the Appalachian Movement Press has printed a bunch of songs off of Paint Creek, songs like "Solidarity Forever" which became an internationally known song.... And the situation got awfully rough. It got

so terrible. In the first place, poor people don't strike unless the situation is terrible. It is the last resort; it is a desperate measure that they take. Some people have the idea that people just strike for the love of striking. This is a lot of baloney. When men strike, it is a desperate situation they are facing. And on two different occasions the people on Paint and Cabin Creek felt so strongly about the terror and the viciousness that was being carried out against the miners over in Logan County that they organized and armed themselves and they started to march over to Logan to help their fellow miners under this reign of terror.

There was a sheriff over there by the name of Don Chafin, who is reported to have had 300 deputies, which meant that he had 300 hired gunmen for the purpose of keeping the union out of Logan County. He receive ten cents a ton on every ton of coal mined there, on the guarantee that he would never let the union come in. Speaking of guerilla warfare, that was back in 1922, mountaineers—and they had their wagons with their nurses and their medical supplies, a doctor—they were organized militarily. They had some of the guys who had been in World War I in charge of their organization. One very prominent leader there was a Black man, a Black coal miner. When they started marching toward Logan County they were met by the enemy and they had to pitch battle. The enemy had these little airplanes dropping bomb contraptions from the air on these miners. Finally the federal government intervened, and the coal miners said they would not fire against federal troops, and they surrendered. It took a couple of freight cars to carry their guns and supplies back.

That was a desperate kind of situation. The miners weren't doing that because they loved to fight; they were doing it because they were in a desperate situation. They had been shot down themselves. They had had the experience of having their tent colonies peppered with bullets over on Cabin and Paint Creeks. There are some awfully dramatic stories over in that area about what went on.

There was a very vital old lady called Mother Jones who was pretty widely known. She was a very controversial figure. She was a great agitator. She was not an organizer, that was not her role. She tried to stir up the people with an understanding of the necessity of organization, and she did that. She was very good at it. One time there was a situation up on Cabin Creek when the people trying to break a strike were coming up on an army train, and there were no men in the community. Mother Jones and Mother Blizzard got the women together and got some picks and crowbars, and took up the rails from the railroad and threw them over in the creek, so the Bull Moose Special, the army train, when it got there, of course, had to stop. It couldn't go on up to where it was destined to break the strike. So the women sometimes got very active in the coal miners' strikes, too. This is an illustration of that.

When we remember some of this history I think it helps us to have a little

more hope and faith in the potential both now and in the future. The mountain people had a tough time then. They were beaten down. It looked hopeless, and they had to hide around to hold their meetings. They had to slip around and hide in the bushes, in basements, or in old houses in order to hold a meeting. They couldn't hold an open meeting, but they did it. They faced that kind of condition, and they finally effected an organization. In the beginning their organization was a militant, democratically controlled organization. It was only later that the machine was set up which controlled the United Mine Workers and controls it now, as I see it. That's one of the unfortunate things, one of the tragic things.

How did this happen?

Well, after a few things had been won, the union was consolidated, and the miners tended to sit back and let their representatives take care of things. A machine that had complete control over the decision-making process was set up. The men didn't elect their district representatives. They were all sent down by the bureaucracy from above which controlled it. There was no education program. I think the tragedy of all unions in America has been that there has never been, with very few exceptions, a really good education program that went along with the organization. What do the young fellows in the modern union know about the struggle back then? They know very little. They have no knowledge; nobody has taught them. They have not read about it. All they know is that they are working, they get a pretty good wage, and so on. They know nothing about the tradition, and so it is easy in that kind of situation for a machine to control it and run the thing. And it is awfully difficult to convince these people that it should not be done by the machine. Just like when Yablonski ran here last year against Boyle. Yablonski was quite strong here in West Virginia. He was representing a tremendous sentiment that was growing and coming up from a groundswell here. You know, we had a strike here against the union leadership, against the state, and the coal operators. It was one of the most significant strikes we have had a long time in West Virginia. And these people were striking about a real, felt grievance, this mine safety situation, black lung and all this kind of thing. Out of this struggle has grown a group that calls itself Miners for Democracy. And the Black Lung Association. They are agitating and working and trying to educate a broader section of the miners to the necessity to have rank-and-file, democratic control. Safety measures and such can be guaranteed only when the men themselves are conscious and aware of the need for it and are working for it.

The *Miners' Voice*, the paper which the Miners for Democracy put out, has some things which I disagree with. The last issue which I saw had a front page story about John L. Lewis saying that the greatest mistake he ever made in his life was when he selected Tony Boyle to replace him. But the real mistake was that John L. Lewis earlier than this had made the

situation in which he had the power to select somebody to follow him, you see. This is sort of tragic. Our workers have been conditioned for such a long time to accept this kind of thing that it is awfully difficult to get around...it.

In connection with union organizing, isn't it true that a lot of prejudice and racism goes straight back to the coal companies—a lot of it is actually an anti-scab feeling?

That's right. People don't realize that back in the time that we were trying to organize the unions, the mountain miners were sometimes out on strike, and coal corporations would go down into Alabama and Georgia and bring back a bunch of inexperienced, raw share-croppers to work in the mines. The Blacks were used as scabs to break strikes. And that's how many of them happen to be in the coal-mining areas. That's just a little ugly fact of history. This is particularly true of southern West Virginia where they are more prejudiced than in any other part of West Virginia, I suppose. But you can see if they bring in these Black people to break up a strike, what kind of race relationships would be created there.

Not only did the coal operators do that, but down through history it has been true that the ruling group has used the Black/white issue. They have traditionally caused the poor white man in the South to think that the Black man is the one who is causing his misery, and in turn they cause the Black man to think that it is the poor white trash who is causing his trouble. They use the term N----- to the whites and poor white trash to the Blacks. As long as they can keep the poor white man calling the Black man N-----, and the Black calling the white poor white trash, then they can keep them both down—keeping the whole standard of living down while they make the profit.

As you come in contact with a lot of people around here, does that give you any hope?

Well, people here are like people generally, I guess. We have people that are under the influence of the media. It is difficult for them at first to understand some things, and then at other times they see things rather clearly. Yes, I have not been discouraged with my experiences with people here. I have been encouraged really.

You are talking now about people who come to the center?

We have all kind of people coming here. We have a lot of people who come from other places outside the area. Some of them come in, and they are slummers, and I say this without intending to be too critical. We get letters from people saying "We want to see the people." To me that means we want to look at the natives. This hurts me a bit. But a lot of these people who come here are from affluent backgrounds, and they may be sympath-

tic, they may be interested and so on, but frequently they do not have a real or genuine understanding.

In spite of the fact that we have had some difficulties here, we haven't—with two exceptions—had any real vicious attacks or ugly experiences since we started the Appalachian Folklife Center. There was a paper over here at Princeton that attacked us for about a year. I guess there were at least a dozen front-page editorials hostile to us. They were written by a young fellow who didn't know what he was writing about. He has since, after I had the opportunity to talk to him, become our good friend. This has happened here in about five different instances, with five different people. There was a radio preacher, a CAP director, same kind of thing. They later came and apologized and said they were sorry. As far as the common, ordinary people, we have quite a few good friends here who have read and listened and have not believed the kind of tales which have been told about us. They have called us every kind of name from free-love advocates to hippies, hippy center, Reds, and all that kind of thing. Fairly typical. In spite of this we have managed to keep going. We have considerable friendship around here.

Had this been in Georgia, in lower Georgia, we would have been burned down, we wouldn't have survived here. I had three houses burn down there, my library, a life-long collection of books and manuscripts and records and things. They burned that just because, back in 1948, I defended a Black woman who with her two kids was condemned to the electric chair because a white man had come to her home and tried to rape her, and one of the kids got his gun and shot him. So they condemned the mother and her two kids, one of them just 13 years old, to the electric chair. The Black leaders in the community came out of the university where I was teaching and wondered if I would speak at a mass meeting. Said they would like to have a white man speak at this meeting and they couldn't find anyone. So I went out to speak at Macon, Georgia, at this mass meeting—and they lowered the boom. I was fired at the university. It was impossible for me to get a job in my home state in my profession.

It's very easy to think of people who would do that as having an "evil nature."

I don't believe that. It is conditioning. It is not human nature. It is the way our people have been conditioned. And, as I use the phrase sometimes, their spirits have been poisoned deliberately by people who know better. The powers that be, as I said before, they find it very useful to keep this kind of thing stirred up. It benefits their interests when they can stir up some of these poor devils to go out and do an ugly job. The Ku Klux Klan itself has had lots of poor people in it, but you will find the leaders are lawyers, doctors and higher echelon people, not the poor people. The thing has been promoted by selfish interests. I have had experiences in teaching—

lots of times my students have said such and such a thing is human nature. I remember one thing—competition, you know. I have had big arguments with my students who say, "Oh, competition is human nature." I say, "Now wait a minute. Is this human nature or is this itself conditioning which human beings are subjected to?" That's why I value anthropology. And that's why here in our year-round school, cultural anthropology will be the core of our curriculum. Look at other cultures which do not emphasize competition. In those cultures the person who individually tries to compete and beat the other person for his own interest is looked down upon. But in our culture the one that climbs up on everybody else's shoulders, he is the one who is honored. Doesn't make any difference how you get to be a rich man. As long as you get to be a rich man you have a position of honor. We start this in first grade. We start them competing with one another for the highest grades. Competition is not human nature; it is conditioning to which people are subjected. My wife and I have spent a lot of time among different tribes of Indians who believe in cooperation like the Hopi Indians who train communally or cooperatively. Their kids are trained to be cooperators, not competitors. They are proud to tell you that they never organize themselves to go out to take a human life, and that sort of thing. So much of what we do is conditioning, not our...nature. I think human nature potentially can be very beautiful and very lovable and very peaceful...I think it is. When it is warped and twisted...it becomes otherwise.

I guess basically I am a poet, and being a poet—that is what I always wanted to be—I think you could not believe any other way.

Mountain Life & Work
January, 1971

V.

Poems Added to Second Edition.

I Cannot Sing

I cannot sing within myself
Of trees and flowers a-bloom,
While sad-eyed children still look out
From many a barren room.

I cannot sing just for the few
Who live in wealth and ease,
While there are those whom hunger gnaws
And winter weathers freeze.

For I must sing my simple songs
Of men who till the soil,
Of those who sweat in mill and mine
Or other honest toil.

I know of loving and of loves
That are unsatisfied,
From empty hearts from circumstance
Where kindled hope has died.

These are the themes my songs embrace—
An earth with love and strife.
I sing of them because they are
The stuff of living life.

— 1933

Question Mark

Why...?
The question mark!
Dangerous!

Why...?
Why hunger?
Why poverty?
Why slavery?
Why so few rich people?
Why do those who work less get more?
Why do those who work most get less?
Why so many poor people?

Why...?
Why war when men love peace?
Why must a Georgia plow boy
go to shoot a brown boy
five thousand miles from
the furrow he plows?
Why do corporations make profits
from war, from the blood
shed on battlefields?

The question mark
shakes the world!
Sows seeds of rebellion
among slaves,
and freedom germs.
Sprouts doubt weeds in the field
of holy war!

Why...?
Why blind obedience?
Why not scrape away
scales of prejudice
and see—
see who fastens them there?

— 1938

Ballad Singer

He sang in quiet places
Along his mountain ways
Where wrinkled human faces
Showed tracks of weary days.

He sang his songs of living,
Of corn in rocky soil
And men and women giving
Their lives to honest toil.

He never heard the praises
Of fame and loud acclaim
Which oft the headline raises
Around a polished name.

But he saw furrowed faces
And gripped the calloused hand
Of men in quiet places
Where lonely cabins stand.

— 1940

Free Enterprise Poverty

Down in Kentucky
Way back in the hills
How can a poor man
Pay grocery bills?

This is our story
In a wealthy land
Where the poor go hungry
And the rich live grand.

A few rich people
And a lot of poor
The old wolf howling
At the poor man's door.

His kids are peaked
 For they're underfed
 Their cheeks are sallow
 And they toss in bed.

With bellies potted,
 Sadness in their eyes,
 But cheer up, Brother
 It's free enterprise!

I Dare Not Say I Love the Lord

I dare not speak of God today,
 A diety divine,
 As if I knew Him very well—
 A casual friend of mine!

I dare not speak of God like that,
 It is too much for me
 To see the hunger all around
 And those in misery.

I saw a Negro lynched one time
 By men who talk that way,
 And saw a union miner killed
 One sunny Sabbath day!

I dare not say I love the Lord
 While children starve and freeze,
 For Jesus said love first should be
 Unto the least of these!

Oh Jesus spoke in simple words,
 And simple truths are deep—
 They who say: "We love the Lord"
 Must first go feed his sheep!

— 1950

Question on a Child's Lips

*Except you become as a little child
 you shall not possess the Kingdom*

Mummy, why is there no food in our house?
 I'm hungry...!
 And why, Mummy, must Jimmie and Katie and me
 Go barefooted?
 It's cold...!
 Mummy, there's lots of food in the Piggly-Wiggly
 And shoes at McAns.
 Mummy, if there's lots of food and shoes
 Why must we
 Be hungry
 And cold...!

— 1950

I Walk Sometimes

The mystery of living...the ache and hurt,
 the joy and sorrow and happiness of people!

I walk sometimes into the deep recesses
 of darkness, alone, asking questions...
 I'm the great asker of questions, for I
 know so little...

Only a few things I've learned:
 I've learned that wherever people
 are in struggle
 even in the grime and dirt and
 misunderstanding,
 the glory of man's courage blazes
 like a hot flame—and it warms my heart!

And I've learned that truth—sometimes
so simple it confuses the learned—
is understood only by humble folk
and little children...

And a little about the mystery
of a man and a woman,
drawn to each other...how the face
of a woman is seen in a sea of faces
in struggle—in the struggle for life.
And that face is a symbol...the memory
of a touch, a look, of quiet words
or words unspoken, become goads
toward the realization of man's
full beauty
in a world cracked open
and rebuilt...!

If I Could Make You

For Linda

You would be
a hungry one
so dissatisfied
you'll never know peace of mind
so disturbed you'll never
accept old ways
and philosophies
hoary with rust...
You would be a questioner
a digger and searcher
and a traveler
on the way to becoming...

You would see
with the artist's eye
feel with the poet's heart.

Nor would I shield you from tears
or the bitter you must taste.
For from them the heart of the poet
will squeeze the true.

You would see raindrops in summer
as a young maiden's tears
from heart-break crying
falling to ease
the world's great hurt...

And the misty winds
as the restless breath
of lovers
breathing beauty
into its human form...

Vision

And I saw a new earth,
Alive with joy
And the vibrant voices of men,
The laughter of children
And the daughters of men...

Ashes of the desolations
Of many generations
Were scattered amidst the fields
Where seeds sprouted
And flowers deep-rooted,
Reflected the everlasting hope
In the eyes of the sons of men.

There was a road winding
Up toward the high hills
Of consecration.
It was no lonesome road
For it teemed with many feet.
No man walked alone
But together they moved—
And fear was nowhere about...

Men marveled at tales
 Of former generations
 Who moved with fear and violence
 At their side
 And whose broken bodies
 Cemented into the road-bed
 Made a way toward the high hills—
 Away from the darkness of bigotry.

A great light was there
 And it shone from the hearts
 Of the people on the road
 Who were of all nations and races,
 Walking toward the high hills
 In the new earth...

— 1955

Away Down South

Poor White, Poor White,
 You're down so low
 Not much further
 That you can go.
 Your children cry
 With hungry mouth,
 Poor White, Poor White,
 Away down South.

Poor Black, Poor Black,
 Been down so long
 Your children sing
 A hurting song
 And forced to drink
 A bitter brew,
 Poor Black, Poor Black
 Is down South, too.

If you must fight—
 And fight you must—
 Unite against
 The upper crust.
 What hurts the poor
 Hurts White and Black,
 Unite to throw
 Them off your back.

— 1963

Only We

What shall we say of ourselves,
 We who have used the atom bomb
 On human flesh...?

Only we have used the bomb
 On women, the sick and lame
 Old men
 And unsuspecting children—
 All of them
 All of them—
 Only we...

Once barbarians may have spared
 The children
 Or women with child.
 Only we kill indiscriminately,
 Only we have used the bomb
 On human flesh
 Only we
 Only we!

— 1964

These Poems

The stuff of these poems
Is sorrow and hurt
The man on the belt-line
Or working the dirt.

There's nought to be found here
And try as you will
To justify planning
The great overkill.

The bombs and the missiles
From practical men
Are portents of hatred
The deadliest sin.

And death, the foul player,
Sounds pleasant as June
He calls to the dancers
And fiddles the tune.

But poets are hunters
In rocky terrain
Where men in their living
Know sorrow and pain

But grieving and sorrow
And pain will not do,
The poet wants action
To carry it through.

There'll Be a Tomorrow

(For Clifton and Mary Bryant)

In all my wanderings
I've gone most to the poor
who are adept at hiding pain.
Sometimes the mountain man
does it stolid, ox-like,
revealing scant emotion.
But I know there is a cry inside
a flute song hungering for words
and maybe a curse...

On Cabin Creek I eat and sleep
in the makeshift home
of a disabled miner.
Hurt lies heavy on the house
but the deepest hurt is still unworded.

There is a today on Cabin Creek —
ghost-town mining camps
miners who sit idle
drawing DPA checks
while machines drag coal from under the mountains
and bulldozers tear the mountains down
mixing with cess-pool creek filth —
a today swallowed in poverty's greedy gullet.

There was a yesterday on Cabin Creek
Paint Creek, Matewan, Logan —
a yesterday with heroes, heroines and hope —
Mother Blizzard, Mother Jones
and women ripping up rails and crossties
that the Baldwin Felts armored train
might not pass,
a yesterday with Bill Blizzard
and a hundred others indicted for treason
by courts doing corporation bidding,
a yesterday with Steve Mangus shot dead
and the long march to Logan.
Seven thousand Kanawha Valley miners
with rifles, shotguns and pistols
on the long march to Logan...

There was a yesterday of hurt and hope
and solidarity
when a virgin Union's inspiration
stirred mountain men and women
to heroic feats.
Born on Cabin Creek,
"Solidarity Forever"
went on to stir lowly hearts
in all parts of the land.

And there may be a tomorrow
on Cabin Creek
a clean tomorrow,
child of hope and hurt and solidarity.

— 1969

Announce New Nicaragua Book: Features "A Nation of Poets"

West End Press announces "A Nation of Poets," a new collection of poems from Sandinista Nicaragua for Fall publication.

The poems have been gathered from the Talleres, or poetry workshops, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture under the direction of Ernesto Cardenal. Some of these poems were first gathered in the magazine *Poesia Libre*, published under the direction of the Ministry of Culture.

The West End edition consists of a translation of these poems by Kent Johnson, a poet from Milwaukee who spent several years gathering them in Nicaragua; an interview with Cardenal relating to their significance; and an introduction by Johnson. The work is produced from poems available in this country after the enforcement of the trade embargo.

West End Press is donating the usual royalties for this book to organizations in the United States struggling for peace and justice in the Americas.

A Nation of Poets, trans. by Kent Johnson, with an interview of Fr. Ernesto Cardenal, 160 pp., available in September, \$5.95.

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Don't miss this book. I picked it up as a poetry break from history reading. But it turned out to be not just the best book of poetry fresh in my memory but also, both in the lyrics and the essays it includes, the best book of history. Rooted in a particular place, the South and especially the Appalachian hills; in a long time, with poems dating from as early as 1932 and as late as 1981; and in the wide experience of a man who has been a farmer, lineman, preacher, organizer, deck hand, professor and journalist, *Land of Plenty* is about America over the last half a century. It is about miners, freedom, racism, sharecroppers, family, love, loss, the South, laughter, labor, hunger, and heroism. . . . Constance Adams West's spare illustrations make *Land of Plenty* still more beautiful.

Dave Roediger, Dept. of History, Northwestern U.



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