ENVIRONMENTAL URGENCY: APOCALYPTIC UNDERCURRENTS IN APPALACHIAN LITERATURE
including
ALL PLACES THOU: AN EXPERIMENTAL NOVELLA

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Abstract

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Apocalyptic imagery and rhetoric appears across a variety of Appalachian literature and literature with Appalachian settings; however, comparatively little scholarly attention has been dedicated to exploring this trend, despite its provocative ecological implications. Using an ecocritical lens, I will first examine the apocalyptic undercurrent in Appalachian literature by analyzing its thematic significance to Ann Pancake's *Strange as this Weather Has Been* (2007) and Louise McNeill's *Paradox Hill: From Appalachia to Lunar Shore* (1972). I will then apply original narrative, verse, and selected artwork to a creative examination of these same thematic and symbolic trends. Ultimately, both critical and creative methodologies will indicate that apocalypticism - particularly in its contextualization of crisis in past, present, and future - provides a way for Appalachian literature to negotiate the ecological destruction and exploitation so prevalent in many parts of the region.

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Table of Contents

Abstract……i

Acknowledgments.....v

Foreword……..vii

Chapter 1: Appalachian Apocalypticism……...…..1

Chapter 2: Apocalypse in *Strange as this Weather Has Been*…….....27

Chapter 3: Louise McNeill, Apocalyptic Poet……...59

Chapter 4: Eschatological Ecology……....99

Chapter 5: *All Places Thou: An Experimental Novella*……..104

Works Cited…….....268

Vita……...272

Foreword

Although the first four chapters of this project conform to the prescribed format, Chapter 5 deviates from this in order to expand the scope of exploration, specifically by responding in the form of creative synthesis. In this way, I apply original narrative and verse compositions, accompanied by selected original artwork, to a continued engagement with the critical and theoretical sources introduced in Chapter 1. Chapter 5's experimental novella employs chiefly literary, rather than critical, techniques, but it still examines questions of apocalypticism and ecology in Appalachian place, in conjunction with the ecocritical analysis of Chapters 1-4.

Chapter 1: Appalachian Apocalypticism

As scholars like Henry Shapiro and Allan Batteau have pointed out, Appalachia occupies a special role in the popular imagination. Colored by characterizations of otherness - of isolation, primitivity, or preserved heritage in an otherwise "progressive" society - the region has served a variety of illustrative functions by which the normative, "mainstream" American culture has reflected on, and reconciled challenges to, its preferred identity. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, considering this longstanding appropriation within urban, industrial concepts of progress and "civilization," Appalachia has also been the site of extensive resource extraction. Exploitative industries, including, but not limited to, timber and coal, have left environmental, economic, and social damage in their wakes, leading scholars and activists to suggest that Appalachia represents a "sacrifice zone," or even an internal colony.

The men and women living in these sometimes severely reconstituted spaces face a variety of domesticated threats, ranging from intimidation and a loss of the commons to pollution and the looming possibility of environmental catastrophe. Thus, literature addressing these realities must often come to terms with both human and environmental concerns. In her conclusion to *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature* (2003), in fact, Elizabeth Engelhardt points out that, "[e]ight years before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, a text often celebrated as one of the first to condemn the effects of environmental pollution, (Appalachian novelist) Wilma Dykeman... similarly criticize[d] industrial poisoning of human and non-human communities" (170) in her novel, *The French Broad* (1955).

Even in areas less directly affected by resource extraction, moreover, the relationship between human beings and their environment looms large in Appalachian-focused literature and scholarship. While Appalachia as a region spans a striking diversity of spaces and demographics, generalized images of Appalachia tend to essentialize along a value-laden scale of human engagement with the natural world: at one end are images of wildness, primitivity, and animal association; at the other, portraits of down-to-earth communities still in touch with an agrarian past and saturated with the importance of (typically rural) place. Mountaineers are characterized as ignorant, degenerate, and violent - or as traditional, nostalgic, and close to the land. Across the spectrum of such representations, then, nature and environment provide a consistent, if not all-pervasive, thread, informing not only the stories told *about* the region, but also those told from *within* it, as residents explore questions of identity, history, and self-assertion in response to, and often conflict with, essentializing, or stereotypically simplifying, portraits in mainstream American culture.

The environmental undercurrent within Appalachian literature wrestles with a variety of elements, from historical memory to outside perception to continuing environmental exploitation. However, having to make sense of local history, local futures, and personal identity-in-place - often in the light of ecological destruction - tends not only toward environmental themes generally, but also toward apocalyptic rhetoric. Examining Appalachian literature, in fact, uncovers a subtle but identifiable apocalyptic thread, particularly within works dealing with human-instigated environmental change and resource extraction.

Apocalypse and Ecocriticism

Over the past forty years, scholars and critics like David Ketterer, Greg Garrard, Eric C. Otto, and Gerry Canavan have explored apocalyptic and related environmental science fiction discourse as an ecocritically charged genre (or subgenre), assessing its merits and limitations as the body of relevant fiction continues to grow. Stephen O'Leary, in a related but not exclusively literary vein, has explored apocalyptic rhetoric as a persuasive mode, and more recently, Anthony Dyer Hoefer has examined representatives of southern literature through an apocalyptic lens. Ursula K. Heise briefly addresses related narratives within a chapter of her *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), while Jimmie Killingsworth, Frederick Buell, and Timothy Morton continue to explore the modern status and limitations of apocalyptic rhetoric and literature.

Perhaps most significant of all to the current exploration, Frank Kermode and Malcolm Bull offer treatments of apocalpytic thought, in literature and social and philosophic discourse respectively, that provide a strong theoretical basis for exploring Appalachian literature in light of apocalyptic images and ideas. Although not strictly in an Appalachian context, multiple scholars cite Kermode as they examine apocalyptic literature, while Hoefer addresses the more contemporary (and postmodern) Bull in ways that highlight his relevance to literary theory. Although none of these scholars direct their analysis at Appalachia or Appalachian-focused literature, the connections they establish between science fiction, its apocalyptic subgenre, and ecological consciousness remain deeply relevant to the current exploration.

In his 1970's text *New Worlds for Old*, David Ketterer identifies American literature with an "apocalyptic imagination" (15), arguing that science fiction, and particularly apocalypse, stands in special relationship with American literary elements. Maintaining that "apocalyptic allows for a dialectic, conflict, or tension of oppositions" (8) - including through its "negative and... positive charge" (7) and "prophetic" (7) and "historical context" (7) - Ketterer characterizes apocalyptic in terms of "related tensions" (13):

> (Firstly) [t]he destruction of an old world, generally of mind, is set against the writers' establishment of a new world, again generally of mind. Secondly, satire comes up against a prophetic mysticism to provide a form of 'judgment.' Thirdly, the creation of purpose and meaning... collides with the possibility of non-meaning and chaos... And fourthly… apocalyptic literature (at least implicitly) involves a certain magnitude or breadth of vision which militates against an interest in detailed characterization. (13)

According to Ketterer, such works "question the fundamental epistemological assumptions of the human situation" (13) through "a literature of ideas" (13), concerning itself "with the creation of other worlds which exist... in a credible relationship... with the 'real' world, thereby causing a metaphorical destruction of that 'real' world in the reader's head" (13). Having attributed to American literature a "metaphysical" (20) element, an interest in the "prophetic" (21) or "original" (21), and a preoccupation with

the "juxtaposition... of pragmatism and materialism with the transcendental and speculative" (21), Ketterer further connects biblical and romantic myths to the American literary imagination, using these varied themes to identify science fiction generally, and apocalyptic fiction particularly, with American literature. Comparing "the apocalyptic potential" (31) of extra-terrestrial frontiers with "the colonization of the New World on Earth" (31), the author situates science fiction itself in the broader arena of "change" (24) and "crisis" (24) and asserts that the "essential element" (25) joining science fiction with American literature is "the apocalyptic imagination" (25).

Although Ketterer's is a dated text, it indicates an early interest in the scholarly application of science fiction and literary apocalypse, relating broader trends in American literature, based on a national, historic character that has, arguably, persisted in modern American exceptionalism. The relevance of apocalyptic rhetoric, then, to a literature engaging with issues of regional American identity, maintains roots in Ketterer's work.

Despite a rhetorical, rather than specifically literary, focus, Stephen O'Leary also offers valuable insight into apocalyptic rhetoric's persuasive character in *Arguing the Apocalypse* (1994). Identifying its particular version of eschatology, O'Leary notes that "*Apocalypse*, a Greek word meaning revelation or unveiling, is... the discourse that reveals or makes manifest a vision of ultimate destiny, rendering immediate to human audiences the ultimate End of the cosmos in the Last Judgment" (6). As such, it "locates the problem of evil in time and looks forward to its imminent resolution" (6), representing "history... (as a) dramatic contest of good and evil" (6). While "time, evil, and authority" (16) become O'Leary's central apocalyptic themes, then, the "discourse," he argues, "is *about* time" (16), depending, as it does, on "situat[ing] its audience at the

end of a particular pattern of historical time" (13) and thereby changing a "perception of time" (13). Articulating history in relation to its ultimate end becomes a persuasive response to the problem of evil in present and recorded time, and inasmuch as apocalyptic literature seeks to warn or challenge its readership (a goal that other scholars frequently highlight), it entails analogous structures, strategies, and aims.

Dedicating a chapter of his text *Ecocriticism* to discussions of apocalypse, in fact, Greg Garrard notes the uses of related rhetorical and narrative techniques in "the green movement" (93), ultimately problematizing the ways that "eschatological narrative... tends to polarize responses, prodding skeptics towards scoffing dismissal and potentially inciting believers to confrontation and even violence" (114). Garrard notes the dualizing character of apocalyptic texts, given their "emphasis on the 'unveiling' of trans-historical truth and the corresponding role of believers as the ones to whom, and for whom, the veil of history is rent" (94); he also highlights the imaginative basis of apocalypse, however, as something "yet to come into being" (94), in addition to its tendency to both "respon[d] to and produc[e] 'crisis'" (94). Engaging Stephen O'Leary's treatment of tragic versus comic apocalypticism, Garrard identifies the former as the more problematic of the two, with its "predetermined and epochal" (95) nature, "always careering towards some final, catastrophic conclusion" (95), while "comic time" (95) remains "open-ended and episodic" (95), less inclined to dualism and more open to the possibility of correcting mistakes and beginning again. Garrard suggests, in fact, that only this type of apocalyptic rhetoric, in contrast with the common tragic mode, offers the potential for environmental engagement, inasmuch as "tak[ing] responsibility for [a future]" (116) necessitates a belief in such a thing. Ideally, then, "environmental apocalypticism... is

not about anticipating the end of the world, but about attempting to avert it by persuasive means" (107-8). Nevertheless, he continues, "this categorical distinction between prophecy and exhortation is one that neither the history of apcalypticism nor rhetorical theory will sustain" (108).

In *Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism* (2012), Eric C. Otto continues this exploration by examining the ways in which science fiction, through "estrangement" (7), "extrapolation" (7), and a "sense of wonder" (11), engage an environmental movement focused on "the inputs of... destruction" (1), or the societal contributors to ecological crisis. The essential element of novelty in science fiction texts effects estrangement in order to prompt a cognitive response comparing the world of the novel or story to the world of the reader's experience (8). Extrapolation, then, extends this comparative mode to the temporal realm, "connecting the present *now* to a possible *then*" (11). To these two science fiction elements Otto adds the presence of the wonderful or marvelous, acknowledging the problematic, even "contradictory coexistence of nonhuman and artifactual wonders in a work of science fiction" (14) and ultimately concluding that by contrasting these two types of objects,

> environmental science fiction... asks us to consider our experiences of both, and if those experiences are indistinguishable, to consider then the ethical dimensions of a modern world in which we deem the evidence of our human presence as marvelous as the wonders that make us contemplate this presence on a deeper, more ecologically conscious level. (14)

He highlights the subversively anti-dualistic vision of deep ecology[1] (19) and the potential for environmental science fiction to "refle[ct] more deeply on ideological structures that without accident require us to forget about nonhuman nature and our uncontestable embeddedness in it" (18), eventually "provid[ing] the tools for thinking and building a new way forward" (126) based on this non-anthropocentric context. Indeed, despite the fact that he focuses attention on science fiction (and non-Appalachian) texts, Otto's attention to "embeddedness" and the contrast between "nonhuman and artifactual wonders" offer an important context for the apocalyptic, ecological strain within Appalachian literature.

Gerry Canavan introduces *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (2014) by exploring the conceptual shift from modernity to post-modernity, articulating "the loss of political-historical agency in favor of a sense of doomed inevitability" (3-4). Identifying the role of capitalism in the kinds of crisis familiar to postmodern audiences (in which, significantly, Appalachian environmental and social realities participate), Canavan problematizes a "mode of production that insists (culturally) and depends (structurally) on limitless expansion and permanent growth throughout" (5), but he ends in the hope that the ecological component of science fiction - as an "archive of the possible" (16) - may "transfor[m] politics in the present" (17)." Despite the pessimism into which capitalist growth has led postmodern communities, Canavan suggests that "collaps[ing]" (16) apocalypse and utopia through a "dialectic of deflation and inflation" (16), or

[1] Deep ecology espouses the view that human beings should not afford themselves privileged status in the complex, ecological network of global life. The wellbeing of the planetary whole becomes the essential motivator, then, meaning that deep ecology is sometimes used to justify environmental measures threatening to human life - particularly as the human population exerts a disproportionate and often damaging influence on the world.

warning and hope, may "project the conditions of a possible future - whether good or bad, ecotopian or apocalyptic" (17) to effect political responses.

Shifting specifically to southern literature, Anthony Dyer Hoefer explores the contradictory uses of apocalypticism in *Apocalypse South: Judgment, Cataclysm, and Resistance in the Regional Imaginary* (2012). Acknowledging the fact that "the rhetoric of God's judgment is (a) powerful tool of marginalization when it is invoked to condemn those who might violate the prevailing social order" (3), he contrasts such objectives, and their problematic social implications, with another prominent use of a "southern apocalyptic imaginary" (4), namely, as "a reservoir of hope" (4), through which "deliverance from injustices and worldly suffering remains possible within the daily experience of place, despite overwhelming evidence otherwise" (4). Engaging Malcolm Bull's treatment of apocalyptic (discussed later in this chapter) - and even relating it to Scott Romine's eschatological characterization of southern literature ("brought to life out of fear of its own, inevitable disappearance" (5)) - Hoefer identifies the application of "Apocalypse... to conceal and to reveal" (11) within southern history and society. And although focused on the specifically racial implications of southern "production[s] of region" (14) that "map" (13) eschatology onto place and invests "cultural practice" (13) with "historical vision" (13), Hoefer's application of apocalypticism remains deeply relevant to Appalachian literature as well. His interest, not only in "the apocalyptic imaginary's capacity to conceal the past and to regulate knowledge that would threaten (community) stability" (14-15), but also in its potential as "an alternative narrative space in which silenced or neglected experiences might be imbued with historical meaning"

(15), suggests rich possibilities for the literature of ecologically threatened Appalachian communities, especially in the context of sacrifice zones.

Although not the primary focus of *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, Ursula K. Heise also challenges dualistic conceptions when she compares narratives of environmental apocalypse to risk perceptions. Noting that, "to the extent that [apocalyptic] narrative... articulates quite clear-cut distinctions between good and evil, desirable and undesirable futures, it... relies on a different mode of projecting the future than theories of risk" (141), Heise identifies the "ideal socioecological countermodel - often a pastoral one" (141) either explicitly or implicitly present in such fictional treatments of crisis. Whereas risk perceptions engage "crises already underway" (142), "in the apocalyptic perspective, utter destruction lies ahead but can be averted and replaced by an alternative future society" (142). Heise nevertheless maintains that the two perceptions are not mutually exclusive, as "apocalyptic scenarios are... a particular narrativization of risk perceptions" (142), the greatest distinction between them being the fact that "environmental apocalypses [tend] to hold up, implicitly or explicitly, ideals of naturally self-regenerating ecosystems and holistic communities in harmony with their surroundings as countermodel to the visions of exploitation and devastation they describe" (142), while risk analyses acknowledge no potential future "completely exempt from risk" (142) in the wide range of possibilities for an "indetermina[te]" (142) and "uncert[ain]" (142) future.

In keeping with the repeated recognition of problematic dualisms, Jimmie Killingsworth approaches apocalypticism, particularly in its contributions to environmental rhetoric, with cautious distrust. Working primarily within the popular

conception of apocalypse, from which most of us, admittedly, approach the genre, Killingsworth, too, warns of the rhetoric's dangerous polarity. Although, rather than "a flat-out prediction of the future" (160), it offers "a representation of a desire to do something in the present" (160), this apocalypticism also speaks in "divisive and destructive" (161) terms, instead of "healing wounds and getting on with solving environmental problems" (161). Killingsworth argues, "life is scary and getting worse" (174), and "the question for nature writers and other artists of environmental politics is how to get people to face it" (174); meanwhile, apocalypticism, at least as it functions in popular rhetoric and narrative, is "not about facing it; instead [it] feed[s] the old three Ds of distraction, defensiveness, and denial" (177). Contrasting fantasy and science fiction, Killingsworth advocates a reflective Romantic, rather than sentimental, attitude toward the world; he suggests that science fiction, as opposed to fantasy, uses a "scientific sublime[2]" (204) to "unfold the mysteries of nature and the discoveries of science" (204). Moreover, within this form of revelation, "the unveiling is not an end in itself" (204) but a way to "engage [the imagination]" (204) in the act of "premise-testing" (204), relating narrative reality to the world experienced in everyday life. Killingsworth asserts the need for epiphany in union with a particular kind of consciousness: which "opens our eyes to the postapocalyptic landscapes of our world" (207) without denial, sentimentality, or "the division of the political world into good and evil that hero worship demands" (207). Epiphany, unlike apocalypse, "inspires an affirmation of values" (210), and although "the

[2] The "sublime" relates to Romantic conceptions of nature, specifically to nature's capacity to inspire fear and awe through a terrible encounter with beauty. Human beings experience certain environments (especially mountains or other vast landscapes) with a conviction of their own, comparative vulnerability and insignificance, consequently attaching almost divine connotations to the encounter. A "scientific sublime," then, applies this particular, aestheticized fear and awe to the technological strangeness of a postulated future.

two may work together... apocalyptic longing leading to epiphanic affirmation, or the epiphany affirming values that stand as alternatives to those questioned by end-of-the-world thinking" (210), epiphany remains central as "the promise of a life worth living, a world renewed" (210). This promise, finally, is "meant to be shared" (218), in direct contrast to the divisive character Killingsworth imputes to apocalypticism.

Not unlike this inclination toward epiphany and experiential appreciation, Frederick Buell adopts an ideal of "environmental mourning" (109) in response to (and as a culmination of) the varying uses of apocalyptic rhetoric in environmental fiction over time. Outlining an historic progression of crisis literature, Buell discusses a "domesticated" (198) form of crisis that belies future-oriented fears of a coming apocalypse, asserting a view similar to Timothy Morton's (admittedly more drastic) claim in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), namely, that the world, at least in terms of human conceptions of *world*, has already ended.[3] According to Buell, the current evolution of apocalyptic literature acknowledges contemporary apocalypse by situating it in the realm of daily experience. Unlike the impending doom of earlier narratives, this literature addresses the already-present reality of ecological danger, instead of urging change through visions of future calamity. In a

[3] Morton postulates "hyperobjects" as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (1): things (such as "the biosphere" (1), a "black hole" (1), or even, on a smaller scale, "the Florida Everglades" (1)) that are not mere human constructs but that exist in and of themselves and at some distance from the human capacity to conceptualize them in their totality. Individuals become "footprints" (5) of these "nonlocal" (1) hyperobjects, affected by them and existentially "situate[d]" (5) within them. Morton argues, in this context, that the idea of a "world" no longer makes sense: that the world, in fact, has already ended as hyperobjects have "encroach[ed]" (7) on the comprehensible "world" - specifically due to "the logarithmic increase in the actions of humans as a geophysical force" (7). Hyperobjects necessitate that we "reflect on our very place on Earth and in the cosmos" (15), while their inaccessibility to our phenomenologically-oriented reason problematizes our ability to do so in any familiar context. Human ideas about an accessible, anthropocentric world are, ultimately, exploded in the face of this new scale of object-relations.

sense, then, it extends the science fiction conversation to more familiar environmental realities, thereby also extending the scope and implications of the issues involved and blurring the line between ecological science fiction and ecological fiction generally.

In engaging with apocalypticism, both Malcolm Bull and Frank Kermode concern themselves with the creation of human structures in an undifferentiated, chaotic, or contradictory world; however, these scholars attribute divergent significances to the discourse as a whole. In their varied emphases, Bull and Kermode will provide a literary and theoretical framework within which to explore the intersection between apocalyptic thought and Appalachian literature.

In his philosophic and critical work, *Seeing Things Hidden: Apocalypse, Vision and Totality* (1999), Malcolm Bull argues that apocalypse involves the "coming into hiding of unknowable true contradiction" (31-2), whereby the paradoxical and undifferentiated state of reality challenges humanly-established binaries by a reinclusion of tabooed or scapegoated entities, potentially in "a new order" (79). Relating this "revelation of undifferentiation" (78) to the recognition of different identities in other and self, but also to the recognition of other in self and self in other, he further asserts that the layers of this inclusive vision entail "a gradual progress towards contradiction brought about by the subtle but irreversible dawning of new aspects on the aspect-blind" (294). Seemingly exclusive binaries give way to the chaos of both-and, even as the "dawning" of one aspect necessarily conceals its converse, which nevertheless remains real and active. For Bull, apocalypse witnesses the "ambivalence and undecidability of social meanings" (292) in this "necessary hiddenness of true contradiction" (293), insisting on an epistemologically transformative "return of undifferentiation" (92), an

undifferentiation once rejected as the enemy of an ordered understanding of the world. In the new world of apocalypse, then, "undifferentiation is not excluded but central" (92).

For Frank Kermode, fiction takes on (essentially apocalyptic) significance in the very way that it translates chronological, "successive" (160) time and "contingent" (160) experience into a meaningful relation between past, present, and future. Human beings, he argues, "need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems" (7). These concords, however, must be difficult, acknowledging the same chaotic, undifferentiated reality Bull discusses, in order to console within the necessary ordering form. Even beyond its characteristic features, notable among them the ideas of "crisis" (14), "transition" (114), and "decadence-and-renovation" (114), apocalypse remains both "type and source" (6) of this human need for epistemic order, for the genre articulates a meaningful present in significant relation to an origin and an end, situating the human experience within an essentially narrative context of meaning. Moreover, tragedy becomes a "successor of" (82), and commentary on, apocalyptic, for "the End becomes a predicament of the individual" (27), and "to live is to live in crisis" (26). Kermode discusses Shakespearean tragedy specifically as "apocalypse... translated out of time into the *aevum*" (82), or a kind of existence "between time and eternity" (80). Kermode identifies this qualified immortality with the canonical influence of a great novel or the political legacy of a king. Narratives are dynamic but also exist as completed works. The present of a novel relates to its beginning and end always, and any number of readers can engage with the same significant series of present moments. A king, as a man, dies, but his identity or legacy extends beyond himself through a kind of "duality" (83). Species, too, notes Kermode, preserve a kind of immortality through

change itself, from generation to generation (79). In tragedy, then, "the world may... exhibit all the symptoms of decay and change, all the terrors of an approaching end, but when the end comes it is not an end, and both suffering and the need for patience are perpetual. We discover a new aspect of our quasi-immortality" (82). Ultimately, "the apocalyptic times - empire, decadence and renovation, progress and catastrophe - are fed by history and underlie our ways of making sense of the world from where we stand, in the middest" (29), or the present moment, which is always meaningfully situated between past and future.

Although both scholars confront the discrepancies between a human need for conceptual order and a meaningful arrangement of reality, Bull focuses on the redemptive, "de-alienat[ing]"(294) implications of reconciled undifferentiation, whereas Kermode elaborates on the necessary balance, in literature, between formal structures - which invest the present with meaning by relating it to a beginning and an end - and the chaos of actual experience. These ideas, then, relate strongly to the kinds of alienation, estrangement, and wonder that scholars like Eric C. Otto ascribe to environmental science fiction, responding, moreover, to the dualistic and polarizing tendencies these same scholars identify within apocalypticism. Both Bull and Kermode, then, offer a rich context within which to examine the complex environmental and apocalyptic trends within Appalachian literature.

Appalachia and Science Fiction

Richard Miles Britton's Master's thesis, entitled "Appalachia in Science Fiction: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*" provides the most current - and, in fact, almost the exclusive - scholarly engagement with this

specifically regional view of science fiction. In it, the author provides an insightful synthesis of scholarly explorations at the intersection of science fiction and images of Appalachia, focusing on the thematic areas surrounding conceptions of "'space', 'otherness' or the mountain sublime,[4] and the impact of technology and modernization on the environment" (16), which he, in turn, borrows from Alessandro Portelli's article "Appalachia as Science Fiction." These significant topics, Britton argues, provide fruitful ways to articulate the underappreciated relevance of science fiction, "a genre typically devoted to technology and an imaginary future" (iv), to Appalachia and Appalachian fiction, despite the seeming contradiction of its "often (being) celebrated for its roots in tradition and history" (iv). Whereas Portelli stops short of identifying any Appalachian-set works of science fiction, limiting himself to tracing the "similarities between Appalachian local color fiction and science fiction" (Britton 1), Britton applies his thematic emphases to McCarthy's and Collins's novels (and, to a lesser degree, to Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012)). Based on these works, Britton convincingly maintains a "startling and often uneasy convergence of tradition and innovation, of past and future - of what was, is, and may be" (iv) within ideas about Appalachia, characteristics that lend themselves all too well to treatment within a science fiction genre. This "convergence" (iv), then, provides a richly complex space for critical engagement.

Engaging McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Britton underscores "the themes of place, the mountain sublime, 'otherness,' and the ecological impact of human technology" (18), selected as particularly relevant to an Appalachian, science fiction narrative. Britton

[4] See footnote 2.

suggests the ecologically-inflected tension between the novel's post-apocalypse and the reader's pre-apocalypse, a tension that ultimately engages human responsibility for the future (38). The presence of the sublime within the text invites readers into a less anthropocentric reality, Britton suggests, even while *The Road* presents, to its pre-apocalyptic readers, a remembered (but no longer existent) Appalachia as treacherous fantasy.

Shifting his attention to Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), Britton teases out its ecological consciousness, grounded in "the science fiction tropes of advanced technology and estrangement" (58) and specifically contextualized by "current environmental concerns in Appalachia and the world today" (58). The novel, in fact, presents a protagonist whose knowledge of nature equips her, in some ways, to effectively resist a politically oppressive establishment (56). This establishment, meanwhile, "use[s] nature as a tool for oppressing its citizens, while at the same time manipulating its citizens to oppress nature" (56). Focusing awareness on the post-apocalyptic intersection between environment and politics - and the role of nature in resistance - Collins's novel offers both a warning and a call to environmentally-grounded action (58).

In the last chapter of his thesis, Britton reiterates the fruitful intersection between science fiction's attention to "technology and tomorrow" (60) and Appalachia's association with "deep-felt heritage and strong link[s] to yesterday" (60), identifying profound "emotional power" (60) with Appalachian science fiction, particularly through "the startling and often uneasy relationship between past and future - of what was, is, and may be - and all that can be lost along the way" (60). Acknowledging that *The Road* and

The Hunger Games, respectively, suggest hopeless and redeemable futures, Britton emphasizes the ecocritical possibilities of Appalachian-set science fiction, ultimately suggesting that even a novel like Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* fits "at this fascinating intersection between science fiction and Appalachia,… explor[ing] environmental concerns through the themes of space or place, otherness, and the impact of human modernization and technology" (64). In novels like Kingsolver's, Britton points out, the narrative does not take place in an apocalyptic or technologically-infused future; rather, it is the contemporary world that situates science fiction themes and concerns, including the "sublime" (67), and the "other" (68). Calling such works "mid-apocalyptic science fiction" (66), Britton connects *Flight Behavior*'s modern ecological crisis to "the post-apocalyptic landscapes depicted in McCarthy's and Collins's novels" (66), suggesting that Kingsolver's present might well indicate such dangerous futures. And, in fact, all three novels use "science fiction tropes and Appalachian culture... to explore the uneasy relationship between past and future and to depict proleptic visions of worlds in which ecological systems have been destroyed by human technology and modernization" (70).

Building on this scholarship, which so thoroughly examines those "post-apocalyptic Appalachian landscapes that emphasize humanity's integral role in the ecological balance of nature" (2), I hope, particularly, to respond to the "mid-apocalyptic" (66) literature Britton identifies in the final pages of his thesis. Distinct from the post-apocalyptic fiction that occupies most of his text, this type of fiction, which includes Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and, I would argue, Ann Pancake's *Strange as this Weather Has Been* (2007), anticipates the social and environmental futures embodied in

apocalyptic science fiction, thus connecting an explicit apocalypse with the language of domesticated crisis Buell adopts (and others imply). In this context, moreover, I will continue to explore the specific relevance of apocalyptic rhetoric to Appalachian literature, both in fiction and poetry, even outside a science fiction categorization: identifying ways in which projected futures and inherited pasts intersect, whether through attempts at reconciling the environmental damage of a sacrifice zone, as in Ann Pancake's novel *Strange as this Weather Has Been*, or through attention to global threats within a local space, as in Louise McNeill's poetry - or, more widely, through the continual necessity of defining Appalachian identity: past, present, and future, against essentialization and stereotype.

Indeed, the religious and eschatological implications of apocalypticism, within which traditions of physical destruction and crisis are only a part, seem to participate in the very ideas and identities inevitably linked to the connotations of "sacrifice" within a "sacrifice zone." It is fitting, therefore, to explore the sometimes subtle presence of apocalypse and apocalyptic thought in the environmental consciousness of Appalachian literature beyond science fiction.

Appalachian Literature

Although certainly not all of Appalachian literature engages apocalyptic themes or images, the subtle persistence of such elements within a variety of works suggests a certain kind of environmental consciousness, one particularly present to the idea of endings in and of a natural order and the consequent uncertainty of future in place. Among the authors whose works touch on apocalyptic are Ron Rash, Robert Gipe, John Ehle, Gurney Norman, and Cormac McCarthy, in addition to the (admittedly more

problematic) James Dickey, who, nevertheless, articulates apocalyptic scenarios within an Appalachian context.

Ron Rash, in his novels *Above the Waterfall* (2015) and *One Foot in Eden* (2002), employs extinction and apocalyptic language, respectively, as a way of coming to terms with different forms of environmental destruction. *Above the Waterfall* evokes a mourning for lost species and an ambiguous revelation, in one character's dreams, that return is possible. The novel ends, moreover, with the following: "in the silence of fast-filling sand the first words and last words are printed. *I was here*" (*Waterfall* 253). Narrative origins and ends meet in an emphatic validation of the experiential present, even as the metonymic hourglass nears an implied end, all of which concludes a passage about the lost mountain lion journeying home. *One Foot in Eden*, meanwhile, looks down into a world, and a past, both ended and preserved when a hydroelectric dam floods Jocassee Valley. Heaven and hell, fire and water, loss and belonging blur in a way that defies dichotomy in a novel haunted by the somehow eschatological fear that "nothing is solid and permanent" (*Eden* 56), and that the experiential past can only confirm this uncertain future. At one point, a character even explicitly recalls "Preacher Robertson reading from Revelation how on Judgment Day the dead would raise from earth and sea and fly to heaven and what a glorious sight that would be," adding, as he raises the body of a murdered man by pulley into a tree, "But... I reckoned a man might witness no more terrible sight than the dead resurrected" (*Eden* 136). The presence of end-times language, connected with secrets hidden and revealed, only emphasizes this eschatological uncertainty.

Robert Gipe's recent illustrated novel *Trampoline* (2015) also engages, albeit less explicitly, with apocalyptic images and ideas. Origins and ends inform a present in which ecological destruction entails personal and community crisis, in which, in fact, this crisis has been domesticated. The destruction of place looses Dawn, the protagonist, in a way that manifests itself in a constant, back-and-forth fleeing from space to space. At one point, she conjures Cherokee or Shawnee perspectives on changes in the land (121); at another she evokes a herd of buffalo, returning with apocalyptic vengeance to crush her human body into the mud (271). And Dawn's Mamaw describes men as "a bunch of rabbits who woke up one morning with sharp teeth and thought that made them lions. But... they can tear up the whole world with them sharp teeth, and they still won't be nothing but rabbits" (173). This quotation, indeed, suggests the subtle apocalypticism of Gipe's novel, for it identifies, not a purely local threat, but a potentially global one, in which men, in an impossible attempt to prove themselves more powerful than they are, may "tear up the whole world." The fruitlessness and waste inherent to the image, moreover, connects all too easily to Dawn's imagined buffalo, "vengeance in their humongous hearts for waste and nearsightedness and the sheer mean stupidity of me and everyone else who ever claimed to be human" (271). The possibility that the past rises up in condemnation to effect an end implies apocalypse while questioning the meaning of humanness in the present. Rabbits who conceive themselves as lions, people who "clai[m] to be human" (271): these suggest that a loss of identity as a species in a larger ecosystem and a loss of place within that world (as well as local place), evoking apocalpytic dangers.

Relevant texts, however, are not limited to those set in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, nor to those addressing contemporary environmental concerns. Interestingly enough, John Ehle's *The Land Breakers* (1964), which engages with human-environment relationships and the consequent power struggle within a late eighteenth-century, North Carolina frontier context, uses apocalyptic language in describing the disastrous storm which ruins the agricultural community's immediate prospects. One character watches, "staring before her as if she were witnessing the end of the world" (385), while later in the chapter, another contextualizes the chaos and loss in terms of divine judgement: "All of it, as he saw it, was like the final judgment and was more awesome than judgment in a courtroom; it was judgment in a high place, and it must be God as the judge sitting behind the cloud up there, for who else would dare to give out so many sentences so swiftly" (389). He then considers the possibility of other, human judges, including himself, as a way of making sense of human causes, but in any case, he remains "standing alone on the trail... witness[ing] the end of it... here in the highest part of the wilderness" (389). Ehle employs apocalyptic language at the chaotic imposition of natural, over human, power. The overwhelming loss of livestock, by wolves and the river and, over all, the disordering storm, is a world-ending event seemingly fraught with eschatological implications. The civilizing arm of human beings in this "wilderness" space, a space both elevated and rendered perilous by its reiterated "[height]," seems to have transgressed divinely-imposed limits and met with a supremely place-centered response engaging a confusion and indeterminacy exactly at odds with the order and affluence sought. Indeed, the terrible power and beauty of this environment evokes the mountain sublimity with which Britton characterizes Appalachian apocalyptic literature

(Britton 16), for the emphasis on this "highest part of the wilderness" (Ehle 389), and "judgment in a high place" suggests that this landscape characteristic places it in a fitting position to host apocalyptic judgment.

Even among works explicitly engaging apocalyptic elements, however, the idea of apocalypse is not universally espoused. In Gurney Norman's *Divine Right's Trip* (1972), in fact, the possibility of apocalypse as an explanatory or narrative context is directly critiqued in favor of the slow, practical healing involved in living everyday life on a damaged but gradually redeemable homeplace. The focus on recovery challenges dramatic and irreversible connotations of apocalypse, negating it as a way to critique prophets of doom and despair, or anyone who ascribes to dramatic, sudden, or epiphanic conclusions to life's episodic progressions. As D.R. returns home to his uncle's farm, called to care for Emmitt in his old age and ill health, the young man loses himself in the dark and the woods, guided only by the light from a drive-in movie, *The Bold Frontiersman* (1948) (in which a man and his evil doppelganger struggle in the wilderness in an image of divided humanness pitted, not only against nature, but also against itself). Eventually, however, D.R. stumbles into Virgil, the aptly-named, out-of-work miner who leads him back out of the wood and into town in a playfully Dante-esque narrative moment. Given the symbolic weight, then, of a guide named Virgil, the reader appreciates a special significance when he sums up the destructive effects of mining in the area, especially since his words provide a chapter conclusion: "It's that way everywhere around here. Some folks call it the end of time but me, I just call it a bunch of goddam criminals out tearing up the world" (193). By evoking apocalyptic, end-of-times rhetoric only to reject it, the former miner strips dramatic, world-shaking

significance from environmental destructors, but he also implies a smallness and a human limitation to the effects, thus belying finality. In a sense, he refuses to justify giving up on the world, without ignoring the real damage being done. Nevertheless, Norman's decision to address apocalyptic conceptions and rhetoric further underscores its persistence within Appalachian literature.

Perhaps the most prominent example of apocalypse within Appalachian and Appalachian-set literature is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). In the text, father and son begin their eschatological and literal journey within an Appalachian landscape. Moreover, the father's memories remain anchored there even after they traverse the lowlands on their way to the coast, while the sharp contrast between a colorful, ecologically vibrant past and a spiritually and environmentally desolate present (and future) remains essentially grounded in the experience of lost Appalachian place. McCarthy even ends his novel with the image of a brook trout, a native Appalachian species now threatened in its natural habitat: "Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand" (286). He goes on to describe the "vermiculate patterns" (287) on their backs like "maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back" (287), and he ends by evoking their specific homes: "In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (287). Having provided a dead, gray, and irredeemable world throughout the course of his novel, McCarthy concludes by evoking an Appalachian past that is, also, his reader's present. Extending this past even further, however, to nonhuman knowledge of "the world in its becoming"

and those things which are "all... older than man," invests the lost, Appalachian space with a rich past before human beings, connected, by its very presence at the end of the post-apocalyptic novel, with a bleak future after human beings. In a way, then, McCarthy situates past and future in the present moment of the novel's reflective end. Concrete Appalachian space has been transformed around the fulcrum of humankind, connected by the crisis of their presence to past and future, both vast.

Even in James Dickey's Appalachian-set *Deliverance* (1970), the protagonist, Ed, and Lewis, his companion, discuss the latter's post-apocalyptic fantasies on route to their wilderness canoe trip. These fantasies, however, do not merely occupy Appalachian space as an incidental setting; rather, they depend, in some sense, on Appalachian place, albeit an Appalachia replete with assumptions of rugged self-sufficiency and a life close to the land. "There may be something important in the hills" (40), Lewis says, and later, "I think the machines are going to fail, the political systems are going to fail, and a few men are going to take to the hills and start over" (42). For Lewis, it is a matter of bodily proof, of physical survival as a test of personhood against the demands of wilderness place and the primitive, independent people already proven within it. The fact that the space through which Ed, Lewis, and their friends will travel is already appropriated for the site of a civilizing dam only complicates the association of wild, disappearing lands with apocalyptic refuge, for it allocates the world-ending element of this metaphor to fantasy, as something distinct from the concrete realities of human environmental manipulation.

In these and other texts, the sometimes subtle current of apocalyptic, ecological discourse insinuates itself through many important works of Appalachian literature. In

order to more fully explore the possibilities of apocalypticism as an Appalachian ecocritical mode, however, we should first examine an exemplary work of regional fiction in which it functions explicitly and prominently.

Chapter 2: Apocalypse in *Strange as this Weather Has Been*

Ann Pancake's debut novel, *Strange as this Weather Has Been* (2007), narrates the local, lived reality of a family just down the mountain from a mountaintop removal mine. Throughout the course of the text, this family and their neighbors face not only ecological and interpersonal dissolution, however, but also the apocalyptic intersections of past and future with a destabilized present. Based on a series of interviews the author helped to conduct for her sister's documentary film on mountaintop removal mining, *Black Diamonds: Mountaintop Removal and the Fight for Coalfield Justice* (2006), the events and characters of the novel articulate their West Virginia mountain place in a variety of ways, but apocalyptic language, images, and structures remain prevalent throughout most of these narrative voices.

Although there is, as yet, comparatively little published scholarship on Ann Pancake's *Strange as this Weather Has Been*, Heather Houser and Carmen Rueda-Ramos address important, ecologically charged themes within the text in their respective essays "Knowledge Work and the Commons in Barbara Kingsolver's and Ann Pancake's Appalachia" and "Polluted Land, Polluted Bodies: Mountaintop Removal in Ann Pancake's *Strange as this Weather Has Been*"; meanwhile, Lisa Hinrichsen's forthcoming contribution to *Ecocriticism and the Future of Southern Studies* examines the critical intersection between local and global environment in a way that extends Pancake's themes and significance beyond the individual community, stressing a vaster ecological network.

David von Schlicten has also published an essay on Pancake's novel in the *Journal of Moral Theology*, but its usefulness to the current exploration remains more

limited. He does point out that *Strange as this Weather Has Been* "associates MTR with apocalyptic language and the death of Christ" (165), further noting the consonance between "moments of lamentation" within the text and "several biblical books, such as Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, and some of the prophetic literature" (165). Von Schlicten also points out that certain elements are "reminiscent of the (Old Testament) tradition of lamentation" (165), thereby aligning the novel with "a kind of jeremiadic lament, with Christian evocations" (165). Despite the rich implications of these insights, however, von Schlicten makes several factual errors regarding character and plot elsewhere in the essay, while his primary objective focuses on the novel's pedagogical uses. For both of these reasons, his article will not feature in this project, despite its ecological focus.

In her personal essay, "Creative Responses to Worlds Unraveling: The Artist in the 21st Century," Ann Pancake reflects on the process of writing (and deciding to write) *Strange as this Weather Has Been*, ultimately drawing broader conclusions about the role of art, and especially fiction, in responding to real injustices. Asserting the imaginative and empathetic qualities of literature, Pancake presents her reader with a portrait of fiction as an integrating space, uniting conscious and unconscious, profane and sacred, self and other. She identifies, as "literature's most pressing political task," "envisioning alternative future realities," and she expresses regret at having failed, she believes to "provide vision beyond the contemporary situation in central Appalachia" in her novel. As Pancake speaks to literary purposes, characteristics, and potential, however, her language also suggests the deep relevance of apocalyptic themes to politically responsive literature in general and to her novel in particular.

Having briefly discussed the actual people, events, and context on which *Strange as this Weather Has Been* is based, Pancake's essay continues:

> Periods of disintegration most often contain within them profound possibilities for creation, so an era like this one, precisely because of the scale and scope of its dissolution, offers tremendous opportunities for sweeping systemic change.... I believe we artists must open ourselves wider to how art performs politically *beyond* bearing witness, because I've concluded that the only solution to our current mess is a radical transformation of how people think and perceive and value... a revolutionizing of people's interiors.

Characterizing the current "era" - especially as typified by the social and environmental sacrifice of places like (but not limited to) West Virginia mountaintop removal sites - in terms of "disintegration" and "dissolution" speaks strongly to the chaos and indeterminacy of Bull's apocalyptic focus. Moreover, the idea of "radical transformation" and "revolu[tion]" arising within people, which have been constrained by dualisms of "conscious and unconscious," "profane and... sacred," suggests a dramatic reassertion of ambiguous and undifferentiated complexity in a new world, strongly linked to Bull's articulation of apocalyptic characteristics and purposes. Artists, according to Pancake, serve as the "translators between the visible and invisible worlds, intermediaries" between such assumed dualities, in a sense becoming active prophets of a new ecoapocalyptic rhetoric "*beyond* bearing witness," by evoking epiphanic change within divided or alienated human beings.

Although Pancake believes herself to have fallen short of expressing future possibilities, Lisa Hinrichsen, in her forthcoming chapter "Stuck in Place: Affect, Atmosphere, and the Appalachian World of Ann Pancake," argues that the novelist does, in fact, offer such a theoretical forecast, or rather, prescription. According to Hinrichsen, Pancake not only presents "a vision of ecology as relational, made up of material and virtual geographies crisscrossed by flows of nostalgia, desire, and hope," but also "complicates the mainstream and celebratory forms of Appalachian self-conceptualization, positioning them as potentially unsustainable... in the face of the 'strange weather' of massive ecological destruction" (11). The type of revolutionary community the novel advocates, then, is, in Hinrichsen's view, not "exclusionary" (11) but connected with other "bioregionally similar spaces" (15). Pancake "seeks to move us beyond a narcissistic fixation on individual, atomistic identity, destabilizing the boundaries between object and subject to introduce new ways of feeling about place and space" (15).

Regardless of its admittedly significant global implications (the urgent universality of which lend themselves to apocalyptic rhetoric), Pancake does situate her novel in a particular environment with concrete and historic problems, values, and circumstances. In fact, Carmen Rueda-Ramos underscores this history when she writes, "Ann Pancake demonstrates that some Appalachians, as members of a disadvantaged socioeconomic group, have long and disproportionally suffered from environmental hazards and injustice at the hands of greedy coal companies and corrupt politicians" (221). Although Rueda-Ramos's treatment of mountain people verges, at times, on essentializing, as when she generalizes about "mountaineers' strong sense of place" (225),

she validly identifies the problematic "invisib[ility]" (221) of "Appalachians and their environmental catastrophes" (221) in a broader society dependent on overwhelming energy consumption. Pancake's novel, then, simultaneously evokes interrelated local and global crises.

Apocalypse and Time

In keeping with apocalyptic rhetoric, time occupies a significant place in Pancake's novel. Frank Kermode situates the notion of apocalyptic narratives in the meaningful relation of events to their origins and ends, while Stephen O'Leary contends that "apocalyptic discourse is *about* time" (16), or the "mythical and rhetorical solution to the problem of evil... through discursive construction of temporality" (14). Even the urgency and catastrophic imminence of popular apocalyptic narratives suggests a preoccupation with endings. When Pancake engages ideas of seasonal time, therefore, especially in the context of backwardness or upside-downness, this indicates a significant thematic element within the text. The encompassing, experiential evidence of strangeness in a natural cycle of time places weather imagery and disrupted seasonal patterns at the center of apocalyptic concerns. Backwardness and upside-downness, moreover, operate well beyond the evidence of "strange" weather and unseasonal progressions of time, and this expanding presence of inversion not only evokes the kind of paradox and contradiction Bull articulates in his treatment of apocalypticism, but also problematizes the very possibility of a traditional, linear chronology from origin to end in the face of apocalyptic destruction.

The fact that the novel's presaged catastrophe actually reiterates past disasters only underscores the importance of narrative and the slow, ever-present reality of

apocalypse, tying past to future in a way that suspends the present between the two in a cyclic, rather than linear, relationship. When "Mrs. Taylor tells the horrors of Buffalo Creek, February 26, 1972... she doesn't tell them as history or legend. She tells them as prophecy, as threat" (48), and Dane, "the listener" (48), is filled with these stories, which churn in his stomach and become "scrawled all over his insides" (48). The "flood inside" (48) is an internalization that obscures the difference between past and future, blending them with a physical experience of anxiety in the present. Origins and ends blur as Dane's dread of what is coming remains irrevocably bound to what has already transpired, the present in precarious balance between effected and potential reality. In fact, the inherent uncertainty of this state, and the revelatory role of stories grounded in environmental and human history, give renewed significance to a reader's reception of the novel itself. Dane's physicalization of narrative urgency situates threat within his daily experience, increasing the urgency with which the reader is supposed to appropriate the text as a real environmental warning.

"After that flood," Mrs. Taylor tells her friend, "I can't begin to tell you. There never was a time like it. The world just went inside-out" (205). Time is set apart, but oral narrative breaks down, and space, or place, is "inside-out." Later, when Bant goes to see the mine site with R.L., she "look[s] around, trying to figure out in what direction Cherryboy might be, but nothing has no direction. Upside-down peel of moon, *skin you alive*, she'd tell us in second grade, and I'd see that inside-out kid, bloody snagged in a barbed wire fence" (327). "Upside-down," "inside-out," the place connects nightmarishly to flayed bodies, in which things that should be hidden are exposed, while experientially-oriented surfaces become plowed-under memories.

In Avery's chapter, in fact, the perception of apocalypse and apocalyptic time - and their influence on personal identity - become explicit in the inevitable relation of past and future. After Buffalo Creek, there is no more Bucky. He becomes Avery, as though in an attempt to dissociate himself from a still-threatening, traumatic history, yet despite the loss of his childhood nickname, Avery still "sees right off the worst in everything, doomsday in his head. He lives in nonstop knowledge something bad's about to happen" (238). And as he looks at the present, local destruction caused by mountaintop removal, Avery reflects that

> [t]his is a disaster less spectacular, more invisible, than Buffalo Creek. This disaster is cumulative, is governed by a different scale of time.... Because Avery has come to understand (not learn, but understand, confirming) that the end times his mother obsesses about won't arrive with a trumpet and Jesus come back all of a sudden and everybody jump out of their graves. No. It is a glacial-pace apocalypse. The end of the world in slow motion. A de-evolution, like the making of creation in reverse. The End Times are in progress right now, Avery is walking on them... (239-240)

Walking "on," rather than "in" the "End Times" (240), he blurs the difference between physical-spatial and temporal realities. The land *is* an incarnated apocalypse, living an unglamorous, painful end as a "place... overlaid with doom" (239). Buell's domesticated crisis and Britton's assertion of a literature of "mid-apocalyp[se]" (66) arise here, then, in

intensified form, as Appalachian place takes on the physical and narrative identity of ongoing catastrophe in the midst of daily life. The unmaking inversion of "de-evolution," moreover, evokes an undifferentiating return to chaos reminiscent of Bull's apocalypticism.

"It wasn't just people who were sacrificed" (238), Avery notes elsewhere in his chapter; "this sacrifice of land, what he stands in now, is nothing new, it has been regularly slaughtered for well over a hundred years... the whole region had been killed at least once" (238). Recalling many trips home, Avery conjures up the strange, "fragile reincarnation" (239) of recovering growth, "vegetation, an obscenity or grace, vining over ruined industry and failed farms" (239), as "adulterated" (239) (essentially cross-bred) species of deer return to West Virginia. The lack of distinction between sacred and profane - even the strange, blended species, also cultivates Bull's undifferentiation within apocalypse; however, here these environmental elements will be defeated "for good" (239), according to Avery: "this... will finally beat the land for good" (239). Instead of the coming into hiddenness that implies a new world born of revelation, the wedded opposition of "plants lush against... the dead rusted metal" (239) seems to be a temporary state, one ultimately susceptible to a recurring (and one day final) "sacrifice" (238). From Avery's point of view, there is no living place once the "glacial-pace apocalypse" (240) reaches its inevitable conclusion, and since time and place are blurred, there is also no time. Sacrifice, instead of being replaced in a new order of undifferentiated but complex unity (as Bull envisions), becomes a state of completion in which neither time nor place have any meaning or any narrative potential.

Although this slow state of apocalypse echoes Frederick Buell's discussion of "domesticat[ion]" (198), then, Avery does not espouse the "full process of mourning," which "remembers and imaginatively reexperiences what it has lost" as a means of opposing "the process of habituation and anesthesia" (Buell 291). Avery does, in fact, relive his trauma, but his memory-associations with place extend little beyond the catastrophic experience of Buffalo Creek, suggesting that this event has come to dominate, not only past, but present and future as well. The environmental mourning Buell advocates, in contrast, links to an immediate, sensory engagement inaccessible to Avery, though not, perhaps, to other characters within the novel, who, through it, can choose to stay and resist community destruction.

When Bant sees the torn-up mountain clearly for the first time, it reminds her of Calvary: "I'd seen at church a picture of Calvary. Thorn trees set in a bleached earth and sky" (103). And although she does not draw a direct simile or metaphor between Yellowroot and the site of Christ's crucifixion, the recalled image immediately evokes complicated connotations of sacrificed innocence, redemption, and pain - despite the fact that redemption seems decidedly out of place in Bant's present experience. Indeed, Calvary's concealment of salvation within death perhaps keeps her from drawing a direct comparison, although her need to assign some familiar, meaningful context to the destruction invokes the image. However, while Bant, like Avery, identifies the land in terms of sacrifice, her presence in this place at the end of the novel leaves the reader some possibility, at least, of hope.

Perception and Apocalypse

The different characters' reception of (or failure to receive) apocalyptic warning, in fact, ultimately informs the reader's understanding of an experiential engagement with eco-apocalypticism. By incorporating the word "see" into both Lace *See* and Bant Ricker *See*'s names, Pancake establishes distinct thematic roles for these characters in direct contrast with that of Jimmy *Make*. Jimmy Make and his admiring son, Corey, take on the utilitarian, machine-oriented view that values everything in terms of use, or its ability to answer physical human need. Lace and Bant, however, demonstrate a sensory engagement of self-in-place that stands in opposition to such simplistic and dichotomous valuations. Significantly, while Corey and Dane's sections use third-person omniscient narration (as does Avery's chapter), Lace and Bant maintain their own, first-person prose, as does Mogey in his single segment The active storytellers, in effect, communicate with a vocal agency that is ultimately lacking, albeit for different reasons, in both Corey and Dane, thereby empowering the women's direct, personal retrospections and consequent evocations of future and past.

In the novel's first chapter, Lace introduces herself by narrating her young adult life and understandings, looking back on them from an as-yet indeterminate present. From her retrospective language - "I still do say..." (3) or "By then I'd decided..." (3) - the reader gathers that this story begins in a past directly relevant to the novel's present. Origins and history evoke significance from the first pages, then, in a way that suggests their narrative presence throughout the text. So when Lace states that she had "decided [she] was newer than all this here" (3), and that "only outside of here would [she], Lace See, live real life" (3), the importance of such claims, already implicitly distant from her

older, narrating self, transcends foreshadowed character development, for the word "newer" clashes with the structural emphasis on a meaningful past. To assert a freshness that disclaims history and negates responsibilities to place or home indicates the futile or short-sighted character of Lace's remembered self-perception. It identifies her past self as vulnerable and ignorant, and it highlights the underlying purpose of the subtle syntactic dissonance in "only outside of here would I, Lace See, live real life" (3).

Because it provides the first revelation of the narrator's name, the sentence flow hesitates with "See," for the reader likely associates this word, until now, primarily with an act of sight. The previously automatic interpretation intrudes on the word's significance as a surname, for the clause itself seems to prepare the reader for the accepted verb: "only outside of here would I, Lace(,) [s]ee..." (3), and the mild dissonance between expectation and reality encourages a brief hesitation over the missing comma, a double-take that identifies "See" as a name instead of an action, before continuing with the rest of the poetically dense sentence: "live real life" (3). The fact that the final six, monosyllabic words in this difficult clause all receive noticeable stress in natural speech, compounds the problematic flow already disrupted by expectation and recovery.

When taken in the context of her asserted "new[ness]" (3), moreover, Lace's name indicates a deeper thematic significance. Juxtaposing the supposedly fresh self, with all its connotations of sufficiency and potential, with the past-saturated "here" (3) of her family, Lace looks back on a self-conception that generates the same discontinuity as the first encounter with her name. For "[s]ee[ing]" (3), as a sensory engagement with reality, one with strong connotations of knowledge and understanding, requires presence in a

concrete "here" (3), rather than the vague "outside" (3) essentially defined by what, or where, one is not. The retrospective Lace can comment on how easy it is to "believe what's on TV is realer than what you feel under your feet" (3), the tangible, actual world. And by contrasting the abstract color of a daydreamed future - what the child "saw" (3) - with a name that merges identity with present-tense sight, the author suggests that place, and "real life" (3) lived in it, can be a source of authentic and identity-forging, if painful, revelation.

As she continues to narrate her past, in fact, Lace demonstrates this dawning sight in explicitly sensory, and particularly visual, ways. When Mogey coaxes her to go wildcrafting with him after her three months of depression and isolation, Lace remembers, "it was like light in your eyes after a long darkness, only it was not just my eyes, but my self felt that way. A squint with my whole body, and I pulled my jacket closer" (91). She has been closed off from the world and from others throughout her pregnancy thus far, and the result of coming into contact with that world again evokes a distinctly visual simile. Her whole self is overwhelmed with the visual vitality of experience, to the point that she tenses into a "body-long squint" (92) that strains after an overwhelming sensory engagement. Grammatically connected, in fact, to this image of sensory overload, even the act of drawing her jacket closer indicates a protective gesture against contact, not only with the cold, but also with the immediate world. It is not until she kneels on the ground, her "knees... pushing deeper into the black loam under [the dead damp leaves]" (92) and her trowel forgotten as she digs with her bare hands, that Lace first comes into authentic, active contact with the "here" of her mountain place. The "body-long squint" (92) relaxes into a new kind of sensory sight, physically connected to

the earth, and in the subsequent months, as she goes back into the woods with her mother again and again, Lace is able to "[relearn]" (139), essentially, how to "[pay] other kinds of attention" (139).

If Bant, then, is Lace's "side, [her] echo" (333), her "death and then [her] borning" (333) (a characterization significantly tied to both origins and ends), it seems fitting that she, too, should share the name "See" (33). "I made up Bant's name not just for the pretty in it," Lace says, "but because it made her more singular mine. And I called her Ricker See because it made her more of this place" (137). Bant herself, in fact, connects her full name to her grandma, "a Ricker" (33), and her pap, "a See" (33), maintaining that "Ricker mean[s] the most because Rickers [have] been on this piece of ground... for more than two hundred years" (34). Her name connects her to "[her] places" (35) by drawing her identity in a line of continuity with her family's situated past. Bant's name draws, then, not only on the same connotations of sensory attentiveness belonging to Lace, but also on the heritage of ancestral place. In a sense, the full significance of "Ricker See" (33) is the implied capacity to witness an inherited belonging. It is the continuity of past in present in a way that connotes an active form of comprehension, a conscious vision that opens up questions of the future and its own relationship to past and present. Kermode's emphasis on a present informed by origin and end, then, becomes embodied, to a certain extent, in Bant.

"I liked the longer name a secret kept" (33), Bant maintains, meaning more than the strange "Bantella" (33). "The other part of the secret" (34) is that "now [she is] the only one in the family who carrie[s] either name" (33-4), Ricker or See. Continuity is, in this sense, then, strained or threatened, but it persists in the "secret" part of Bant's

identity, "held inside" (34). The hiddenness of complex truth, of multi-faceted identity, evokes Bull's discussion of apocalypse and the importance of revelation as the dawning of one aspect, even as it veils another. The way that truth contains a non-binary chaos of contradiction, onto which human beings seek to impose order, thus, introduces even greater significance to Bant's witnessing role in its complex connection to past, present, and, ultimately, future. She must seek things that are literally hidden (namely, the truth about the Yellowroot mine); meanwhile her own, hidden name reminds the reader that identity, or reality, itself is not singular, and not to be taken at face value. Bant is not only Bant but contains the history of her family and her place in her "secret kept" (33) name.

Lace speaks of Bant as "fused to [her] ribs" (333) - of being able to "feel her there" (333) - in a bodily metaphor of shared space and sensory unity. So when she tells her daughter that she "Want[s her] to see" (15) what Jimmy Make can show her of the mine on Yellowroot, this becomes a deeply significant communication. As Lace and Bant share the name "See" and the witnessing role that this implies, however, Bant feels the profound need to "look" (58) and to "listen" (78) even without her mother's urging, and even against her own will to self-preservation. As the novel progresses, Bant "start[s] having to listen" (78) to her mother's news regarding the mountain's destruction. She "ha[s] to listen" (83), "ha[s] to hear" (83), even though the messages make her pull away, put a "wide river" (83) between her mother, still speaking, and herself.

Indeed, Bant wrestles with an inner divide that only emphasizing the complex hiddenness with which Bull characterizes identity and relationship. Although arising in Bant's simultaneous desire and revulsion for R.L., perhaps the most revealing

manifestation of this inner conflict occurs when Bant sees printed images of mountaintop removal mines on the counter at the Dairy Queen. "I wanted to look longer, and I didn't want to look longer, and I for sure didn't want Lace to see me looking, although I also knew that didn't make sense" (58), Bant relates, and the visual language, even in this single sentence, saturates her narrative. The simultaneous desire to "look longer" (58) and not to "look longer" (58) not only highlights inner tension and an impossibly true contradiction (reminiscent of Bull), but it also indicates the images' undeniable draw, for the choice is not between looking and not looking. Bant has already glimpsed the reality. Rather, the choice is between looking "longer" or not. This may seem an artificial distinction, but the fact remains that Bant's rhetoric stresses her perpetuated act of vision. She might have expressed herself differently, as in "looking" versus "looking away," but in her language as it stands, there is no such deceptive implication that avoidance is even possible. She must see, and her deliberate, even lengthy, antithesis maintains as much.

Significantly enough, the centrality of sight and looking to this passage is not confined to Bant's own actions, for she emphatically wishes to remain unobserved herself. "I for sure didn't want Lace to see me looking" (58), she insists, as though a desire for hiddenness might protect her from having to communicate what she sees. Someone hidden may witness the truth, but no one can impose the responsibility for speech on such a person. There is also, moreover, an implication of the taboo in Bant's perception of the photos, for she describes them "like dirty pictures" (58), reiterating this later in the paragraph: "like looking at pictures of naked people. Like looking at pictures of dead bodies" (58). The deliberate repetition occurs again here, although not, this time, antithetically. It stresses the desire to "go back... look harder, get it clear in [her] for

sure" (58), but it also pounds home the forbiddenness of the images themselves. Nakedness and death evoke exposure, victimization, and essential, even eschatological, human fear, and the simultaneous lack of and increase in hiddenness (by equating a too-revealing nakedness with that mysterious impassivity, death) generates the contradictions, concealment, and taboos bound up in Bull's treatment of apocalyptic thought. Moreover, as Bant struggles to preserve her personal closeness to the mountain woods, the significance of internal contradiction and the paradox of necessary hiddenness become all the more apparent.

Both Lace and Bant serve a witnessing role contained in their shared name "See." This focus on sensory attentiveness, however, is not limited to mere recognition, for in both cases, at least by the end of the novel, the witnessing role becomes oriented toward speaking out. While Jimmy Make, Dane, and Tommy drive away, Bant turns and goes deeper into the truth of her home place. She goes to see the full mining reality once and for all, then pushes into the woods with a renewed sense of belonging. This is the context for her last words in the novel, which also conclude the narrative as a whole: "I headed toward home to tell Lace what I'd found" (357). In the end, sight is not enough. It also requires communication, as Killingsworth advocates in *Facing It*. Bant occupies almost the role of prophet, for she comes down from the mountain with a message of destruction and, by the resistance entailed in the telling, hope.

Reception and Perception

This, in fact, is the great difference between Bant and Dane. Dane receives stories. He is "good at listening" (43), even explicitly "the listener" (48), and he is acutely conscious of the presence of "stories in him" (336), even if he has no outlet for

these narratives. Indeed, although he shares his sister's sensory attentiveness, Dane is unable to speak his fears or relay the prophetic significance he perceives in the juncture of past, present, and future. Lace herself notes that he "pulls into him everything, then closes like a mussel" (333), that he "feels too much" (333), informed by the loss and grief that his mother experienced while he was inside her (152). Dane reacts physically, paralyzed or nauseated, to events and stories in the world around him, able to understand "only in a way before word, before memory" (167). He cannot tell stories himself, unlike Bant or Lace.

Dane sees himself as different, even physically different, from others. He is "out of proportion" (110), "strangely shaped" (110), "peculiar" (111), even "strangely woman-shaped" (111), yet it is this perceived mismatch of forms that "makes a scary kind of sense" (49) to Dane, when he considers that he "must take and carry the stories" (49). And it is not coincidental that Dane, who occupies this ambivalent, apparently mismatched body both receives stories "as prophecy, as threat" (48) and receives the scapegoating rejection of his peers. In fact, Dane evokes apocalypticism with a personal immediacy of which no other character but Mogey is capable. This immediacy, however, lodges inside him without outlet. His body becomes the site of othering and alienation, and instead of speaking his premonitions of danger and dread, he absorbs them like a poison. The past and future crowd out the present, in a sense precluding communication by crowding out the temporal space necessary for engagement with others. Dane craves order, but he cannot make use of memory or stories to control the chaos, aptly embodied by the fish he imagines roiling in his stomach.

Dane sees the dreaded pamphlet as a "way to organize the End of the World" (73). Indeed, his interest in order and process is perhaps related to his self-perception, considering its relationship to blurred categories and improperly combined forMs. He mentally orders the space in which he hides his "pieces of God" (115) and ritualizes, moreover, the process of uncovering them. "There was an order to it," according to Dane, centering on threes: "(three's a charm. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, three crosses on a hill, on the third day he rose. Rosebox)" (115). The lunchbox sits within the tv box, which sits within the rosebox outline of the old trailer, and those narrowing layers articulate a space defined by absence, that is, by Grandma's barely-remembered presence, or the symbolic shadow of her hiddenness. From the smallest of these nested "boxes," then, Dane removes each piece in its proper order: an acorn from an oak by the church, a broken leg from a toy horse, and lastly, a page from a magazine: "Face of God in clouds over T-, Oklahoma" (116), "by far the most powerful" (115) of the three. Before looking, in fact, which must be an intentional looking and not "[accidental]" (115), he must pray "good, a proper beginning, middle, and end" (116) with a specified form. And when he does remove the page, revealing the tear "in its middle... through the face of God" (117), the order itself becomes useless, as though the tear exemplifies an alienated present, in which "God wasn't working around here anymore. God had been leaving ahead of time to get safe from this mess. Save Himself" (117). The inversion of the usual direction of God's saving reach creates a sense of salvation as a circuit beginning and ending at the same point, a circuit which bypasses human beings in a dark interpretation of fallenness.

In light of Bull's apocalyptic conception, this need for an extra, humanly-imposed level of order - and this internalized (scapegoating) shame over his physically

undifferentiated body - situates Dane in a pre-apocalyptic space. Arguably, his entrapment within compulsively ordered conceptions and processes creates a barrier between himself and the revelatory, revolutionary change entailed by apocalypse. Unlike Lace and Bant, he cannot remain in this place, which is perpetually oriented by past and future destruction; he does not have the resources to stay and oppose it because his means of coping tend, not toward memory or experience, but instead toward repeatable, abstracted processes imposed on chaotic physical and temporal realities.

In contrast to Bant, Lace, and Dane, Jimmy Make and Corey recognize a use-oriented world. "Of course Corey didn't understand," Bant reflects, "and Dane understood only in a way before word, before memory, and what did Jimmy Make understand" (167)? Bant's thoughts draw clear lines between these characters, even as she acknowledges the need "to see it (the mining site) before" she can make a decision about her own future in this place. "Corey did not understand," she says simply, "Jimmy Make copycat did not understand" (154). In Corey and his father's world, as Rueda-Ramos indicates, "natural space [is transformed] into a constructed one due to the intrusion of the machine in the Appalachian garden" (228). Corey, in fact, the "main victim of [this] transformation" (Rueda-Ramos 228), "[dreams] of the body as machine, of melting into it" (Rueda-Ramos 228) and extending his self beyond physical limits in a way that directly counters Mogey's transcendental experience with the buck.

Corey's assessment of the place in which he lives centers exclusively on its utilitarian, material value. According to Corey, "there are only two good things about Yellowroot Hollow... The stuff in the creek... (and) the way the hardtop road breaks down before their house, leaving a big asphalt lip... you can use to do bike tricks" (26).

His very criteria for value remains limited to what he can use himself, or, by extension, what indicates, characterizes, or enables the extended power of human beings through the machine. Essentially, the capacity to use, to drive, or to shape governs Corey's understanding of what is good. The junk in the creek is good because he hopes to use it to build a four-wheeler of his own. The asphalt lip is good because he can use it to make himself (or at least to seem) faster, more skilled, or more powerful. His "talent with machines" Dane conceives as "man-talent. Metal-made" (341), and the very association of masculinity with "[making]" connects him with his father, Jimmy Make. The parts Corey drags from the flood-glutted creek are valuable for their very "unmade, unbuilt" (25) quality of usefulness to a "man" (341) who can "[make]" (341) something with them.

When Bant takes Corey to see the destruction at the mountaintop removal mine, he does, in fact, see. However, Corey's sight is distinct from Bant's, and the ways in which it echoes her own only serve to highlight the profound contrast between them. "As soon as he sees," the narrator states, "he can't see enough" (162). The difference between seeing something on television or in magazines and seeing it in front of him shocks Corey, evoking desire akin to a physical hunger, for "he wants to stretch his eyes wide like you can do your lips, for a big ole hamburger, for three-layer cake" (162). The dragline, "Big John" (163) is "a great grand giant thing, here in this place of puny things" (162); he "can tell how big by the D-9 dozers and haul trucks antcrawling under" (163) it. Half-personified, Big John has a "neck (that) looks like one of those huge power transmitters that straddle the mountains" (163), a "neck... planted in a pivoting base the size and even the shape of sixty army tanks welded together" (163), a "neck... (with a) shovel... roomy enough to hold twenty or so of those monster rock trucks... themselves

so big Dad's truck... would only come halfway up one tire" (163). The personifying name and the repetitive metaphor "neck" are themselves constantly contextualized by trucks, tanks, and machinery. The dragline's very size is quantifiable only because of other, smaller machines moving in its vicinity, a fact that directly highlights Corey's utilitarian, machine-oriented valuations and assessments. Big John's scope is not something to be measured in human dimensions. Even "Dad's" brief appearance in the paragraph remains tangential. Jimmy Make is important as truck-owner rather than father, machine-operator rather than man.

Similarly, Corey can only give himself dimension and importance in relation to the machine. "He wouldn't just look at the machinery. He'd go on and climb right in" (164), imagining what it might feel like to "scale... that vast mountain-handling piece of gorgeous machinery" (164). Corey daydreams its "good grease... on his clothes" (164), in the next sentence imagining "cut[ting] himself a little... bleed[ing] a little" (164) as he climbs, as though the mixture of blood and grease were a kind of union between man and machine, a union fully realized in the last two sentences of the chapter: "That giant, his body in that gigantic body, his body running that body, and the size, the power of that machine: inside Big John, Corey can change the shape of the world. Corey can" (164). The merging of bodies to which Rueda-Ramos refers (228) evokes the kind of closeness to which Corey aspires. He is not interested in Bant's or Mogey's intimacy with nature-centered places. Instead, he wants a unity that magnifies himself and his own, "mountain-handling" (164) power. Looking, and the receptivity or mutuality ideally implicit in the act, is not enough. Use-value, instrumentality, and the power to "change the shape of the world" (164) motivate Corey in ways nothing else does.

Having provided Corey's reaction to the dragline and the mountaintop removal site, Pancake then offers Bant's first person account. She, too, strains to see, but whereas her brother hungers to take it all in, she must "[push her] eyes harder… let come in the hurt" (165) before the physical reality of destroyed place can come into "focu[s]" (165). The loss, in a paradoxical sense, precedes authentic sight in a manner that foreshadows the tragic hope of the novel's end, the contradictory revelation. Whereas Corey's vision is filled with the dragline itself, which he personifies in qualified, mechanistic ways, Bant takes in the whole of the scene, blending the personified, even empathetically experienced, pain of an "amputated" (165) mountain, "stumps... limping" (165): "Monster shovel clawed the dirt and you felt it in your arm, your leg, your belly" (165). And Rueda-Ramos, who has already pointed out Bant's own "embodiment of the mountain" (223), notes that "the author's use of words like amputation, guts, and limbs... to refer to the Earth clearly seeks to reinforce the interrelation between the human body and the Earth's body" (224).

Corey's gaze relates itself to "shap[ing] the world" (164) by his own, machine-enhanced power. It leads to ability and force beyond mere looking. Bant's gaze, however, far from asserting or seeking a world-shaping order, identifies nothing so much as confusion, chaos, and the lack of meaning. Rather than borrow even the bleak "*moonscape*" (165) metaphor, she evokes "airiness emptying [her]" (165), "nothing" (166), and sheer absence. "Because a moonscape was still something made by God and this was not, this was the moon upside down" (165), she maintains. Both Bant and Corey acknowledge the human impact at work in this mountaintop removal site, but they arrive at opposite conceptions of this impact. World-shaping potential juxtaposes itself with the

inversion inherent to destruction, particularly of something living. Staring at the "killed ground" (166), Bant "[can't] tell anything about size or distance... because... this was nothing. And you cannot measure nothing" (166). While Corey estimates size and power with reference to trucks, tanks, and machinery, Bant has lost all sense of scale and relation, including her relation to the land itself. "The distance between me and the land had set in, complete" (167), she states. "Just like you couldn't measure the site because it was nothing, you couldn't feel for it either, because there was nothing to feel for. Nothing stirs nothing" (167). Bant can only relate to the still-living land, to Cherryboy behind her, which has not yet been destroyed. Yellowroot can no longer combat the emptiness and meaninglessness of destruction in memory: "*Everything in these woods was put here for a reason*" (166), Bant recalls her grandmother's words. The memory of "what Yellowroot had been" (166) is the only meaningful space left within the mine site, where the complex, concrete and associational life of an ended place persists.

The "upside down" (165), "emptying" (165) site, then, in Bant's words, is "the ass-end of the world" (165). And although there is a kind of bitter humor in the vulgarized relationship between this despairingly, emphatically colloquial phrase and the personification in the rest of the paragraph, this serves only to highlight the indignity of tragedy, and even apocalypse, in a sacrifice zone. "The ass-end of the world" (165) refuses to associate nobility or necessity to the world-ending destruction Bant witnesses. Indeed, such language effectively divorces the revelatory context of apocalypse, its literal meaning, with the devastation so often conceived of as replacing it. The end of the world as a physical end may be in the power of Big John and his masters; however, the unveiling of hiddenness and the possibility of a new world have their origins elsewhere.

Thus, when Bant maintains that she can "still feel [Cherryboy] behind [her] the way you can feel an animal hiding close by in the woods" (167), the essentially relational and sensory-yet-hidden nature of this statement suggests the apocalyptic heart of the novel. In fact, it precedes, almost immediately, Mogey's chapter, which, more than any other, evokes authentic revelation.

Mogey's Ecological Vision

Significantly, Mogey's chapter occupies the exact center of Pancake's novel. The literal and thematic heart of the book, this section takes on apocalyptic significance through the dream-revelation of natural unity and the fusion of strange or paradoxical elements, each of which engage with the apocalyptic tradition and problematize simplistic dichotomies. According to Rueda-Ramos, "Mogey represents the spiritual aspect of the land and the communion with all the living creatures in the woods" (227). Not only does he "embod[y] the sick mountain" (227), but he also "[offers] a holistic view of both religion and the landscape" (227), "sens[ing] the interdependent relationship with the land and the blending of his body with [it]" (227), essentially as "a part of God's body" (227). It is, therefore, significant that his chapter begins with one Christianized form of use-value against which both Mogey and Pancake ultimately protest.

Quoting a conversation he once had with a respected pastor, Mogey remembers the man's words: '"God gave man the earth and its natural resources for our own use. We are its caretakers, and we have dominion over it...' And he went on like that, saying stuff I'd heard since I was little" (168). Articulating his original deference to authority, Mogey goes on to maintain a different kind of knowledge, one that could coexist with the dichotomous, rational separations by which, as Bull and others note, human beings seek

to make sense of the world: "Part of me knew, even back then, that's not what it is. I knew we wasn't separate from it like that" (168). And with this simple statement - the subject, "it" (168), so encompassingly vague - Mogey challenges the very idea of compartmentalization, of us/them and I/It and the related use-values that obscure an ecological (and apocalyptically-implicated) whole.

The essential strangeness of Mogey's childhood encounter with the buck destabilizes the reader and thus facilitates openness. By defying expectation in so many small and large ways, the episode takes on a sense of revelation, of the coming into hiding of that which is not simple but, rather, a multifaceted reality. In listening to Mogey's mystical experience, the reader is not only given a message, but is also equipped, by the message's very communication, to receive revelation in its undifferentiated, manifold character.

Mogey's encounter occurs, significantly, in "a place they called the Ribs" (169). By evoking the protective bones encasing the heart, the name suggests that this place conceals an ecologically central organ, some essential, metaphorical force circulating life through an ecosystemic body. Moreover, the skeletal image also alludes to Christian narratives of original creation, wherein Eve is formed from Adam's rib. This place thus takes on a subtly originary (and feminine) character, as though the experience occurring here might participate, somehow, in an as yet unrevealed creation myth and thereby indicate a meaningful relation between present and past or source, origin and experience, in a way that evokes Kermode's engagement with narrative time.

"That buck come out after the last drive," Mogey recalls, "I don't mean he was driven to us. He was not, he come out on his own" (169). Even as he begins to recount

his experience, Mogey attributes an agency to nature that is essentially lacking in a use-value, or I-it, perception. The buck "come out on his own" (169), while the pronoun "he" (169) further rejects an object-subject relationship that might privilege a human observer. Moreover, the way that Mogey "[feels]" (169) the creature's presence "without seeing" (169) or hearing, implies a real but extra-sensory connection, an identity with the other that establishes affinity in more interior ways than the usual environmental perceptions: blurring the lines between self and external space by closing the distance implied by typical means of sensory accessibility.

This sense of dissolving boundaries only increases as the passage and the encounter continue: "When I felt the buck and turned and saw, I thought at first he was a doe, his antlers blurred in the branches like they were" (169). Not only does this create a strange, ambiguous gender space, but it does so specifically through the buck's relationship with his background, his environment. In a sense, this image of the creature evokes a kind of permeability that ebbs and flows with his movement in place as "the antlers focused, come clear" (169). Continuing to defy perceived rules of logic, of nature, the buck "held himself still, like he should not have done" (169). Even after being shot, "he didn't just crash and come to rest on the next outcrop like he was supposed to. No. He went to rolling. It was the third strange thing he done that day, after showing himself to boys with a gun and then standing still, practically posing for the shot" (170). His very strangeness becomes an image of cyclic movement, "hooping down that mountain end over end" (170), suggestive, in fact, of the cycles of age Mogey evokes when he remarks that it's "as though [deer] age by seasons instead of years" (169). The nonlinear movement through time creates different, more immediate relations between

past, present and future, and the nonlinear movement downhill, into the "Ribs" (169) of the mountain, brings about a physical disappearance and a consequent "coming into hiding" (Bull 31) of temporal and relational significance.

Seeking the buck, Mogey discovers "a little sunk-down place like a room" (172), and he "knew that beyond it, the buck would be there. Somehow [he] knew" (173). Stepping inside,

> something layered down over [his] self. At first it seemed to wrap [him]. But then it was somehow in the center of [him], starting there, and then it washed on out through all of [his] parts.... And the thing was, once it had currented all the way through [him] and reached [his] very ends, it kept on going (172).

The boundaries between self and other, human and nature-other not only blur but dissolve until both halves of the apparent dichotomy fill external space:

> It melted my edges. It blended me, I don't know how else to say it, right on out in to the woods. It took me beyond myself and kept going, so I wasn't no longer holed up in my body, hidden, I saw then how before I'd been hidden, how I'd believed myself smaller than I really was. It made me feel bigger in myself, and it made me feel more here even though you might have expected such a thing to make me feel gone. (172-3)

Mogey's experience deeply engages the ideas of hiddenness, of indeterminacy, identity, and relationship so significant to Bull's exploration of apocalypticism. Through his encounter with this non-corporeal presence, Mogey communicates a revelation that extends and challenges his very experience of self in real and particular place.

Like Dane, Mogey receives destructive realities into his body, albeit through a mining accident and its endless aftermath. Unlike Dane, however, Mogey can express apocalyptic vision and thereby expand himself, without loss of identity, into the world around him. His receptivity does not preclude communication or communion. Conversely, Dane reaches out for comfort in prayer, careful to follow the proper formulas, but he cannot escape his fear or the conviction of absence: eventually both God's and Grandma's. In the end, Dane leaves with his father and surviving brother, physically removing himself from a space which, for him, has lost all sacredness but not all "threat" (48).

Also in contrast to Mogey, whose narrative evokes identity in unity through a blending of opposites and the consequent possibility of hope, Avery's story demonstrates the loss of place and the alienated identity that look back on apocalyptic disaster without being anchored, by memory, in a past defined by communion with nature in particular space. Avery does not have the resources to hope in the way that Mogey does; he cannot access the knowledge contained in loss because, in order to do so, there had to have been a deep, sensory engagement with the lost thing, prior to its loss. This is why Lace, Bant, and Mogey all retain the capacity to hope, despite the tangled, painful experience of loss in the present. They can personally relate to a past union with particular place, and, through it, with all of the natural world. Avery is forced to rely on books, on the history

he never learned until after the fact. And although these things are crucial (they do save him, in the sense that they allow him to continue his life outside the lost place), they do not equip him to remain in his childhood home once his experience of it is informed exclusively by catastrophe.

Hope and Identity

Indeed, Heather Houser, although she never explicitly connects the name "See" to identity-informing action, does stress the visual roles of both Lace and Bant in her article "Knowledge Work and the Commons in Barbara Kingsolver's and Ann Pancake's Appalachia," arguing that "the novel conceives of activism as a process of making visible" (108), implicitly treading on apocalyptic turf with this language of unveiling. Ultimately, Houser suggests that the "knowledge work" in which these women participate effects a potentially "remade commons," based on "regional experiential and global expert epistemologies" (113). "To counter the precariousness of Appalachia's environmental and economic futures..., *Strange*... revive[s] the commons as (a) sit[e] for intellectual and political formation predicated on losses that encircle home, region, and a world becoming strange" (113), but "work" itself relies on the ways that Lace and Bant "mak[e] visible the ecological and social fragmentation" (108). Identifying the visual impressions and actions of mother and daughter within the text, Houser emphasizes their roles in terms of "inhabiting, witnessing, and living-through" (109). Bant "becomes a vehicle for sight" (109) by the end of the novel, enabling, if not a "utopian" (109) eventuality, at least the potential for "activism and knowledge production opening onto hope" (109).

Only after coming face to face with the full reality of the threat can Bant return to a space of hope, "moving the way [she] used to in the woods.... feel[ing] what [is] nearby" (355). Inserting Mogey's remembered words between Bant's discovery and reburial of Dane's box forces the reader to view the tragedy, on which Rueda-Ramos focuses, as a frame, or a box itself, containing the necessity of "hold[ing] both the loss and the hope" (357). The experience of closeness returns to Bant after she witnesses the full scope of destruction, acknowledging loss and opening herself up to a sensory present on the mountain, in the woods, despite the inherent vulnerability of such a position. "[L]oss and... hope" (357) are both situated in place and time, contradictory aspects of the same experiential reality, the same whole, although one directs attention to the past while the other points to the future. Bull would say that each comes into hiding as the other is revealed, together comprising the "necessary hiddenness of true contradiction" (293) revealed by apocalypticism.

In the end, when Bant goes to the mountaintop removal site, "completely exposed" (351) now herself, she climbs the "tree slaughter" (352) inside the valley fill. In a landscape already described in terms of the upside-down and inside-out, the exposed hiddenness and the disrupted, even chaotic disorder of anthropocenic seasons, Bant climbs down and back up among trees no longer rooted in anything like place. She climbs "limb, trunk, roots" (353) down into the fill, where she is unable to gauge the depths of water in the impoundment; climbing back up the other side, then, reversing her descent through the disconnected limbs and roots, evokes a bitter sense of baptism, of coming back up from the water, through death to a life informed by new identity and new belonging.

According to Carmen Rueda-Ramos in her essay "Polluted Land, Polluted Bodies: Mountaintop Removal in Ann Pancake's *Strange As This Weather Has Been*," "Pancake presents Bant as the embodiment of the mountain" (223), as "one with the land" (223). By Bant's own admission, Rueda-Ramos notes, as a child she "never saw [her]self, never felt [her]self, as separate from it" (100), from "this land" (100) and this place. (Although Rueda-Ramos does not address the visual language of self-recognition, the fact that Bant reiterates sensory, particularly visual, ways of coming-to-know further highlights her role as active witness and the effect of this role on her understanding of the connection between self and world, between what is felt or observed and the "I" at the site of sensory engagement and comprehension.) Bant's closeness to, or rather inseparability from, the land, of course, grows complicated and challenged, given the destruction threatening her home as she grows older, and Rueda-Ramos clearly identifies the "distance" (Pancake 101) Bant begins to feel as a result of "the devastation caused by mountaintop removal" (Rueda-Ramos 223), even drawing parallels "between the exploitation of the land and that of Bant's body" (224). However, Rueda-Ramos does not address the paradoxical rejuvenation of closeness that occurs at the end of the novel, for she discusses the end in terms of "Bant reflect[ing] on the loss (of mountain land and culture) as she tries to retain hope to continue fighting" (229). Although Pancake's ending is certainly bleak, Rueda-Ramos neglects the vital paradox presiding over this conclusion.

Appalachian, mountain place thus takes on the significance of an apocalyptic text within Pancake's novel. Destruction, even of this particular, physical space, expands implicitly beyond itself, in fact, as it borrows the universal connotations of apocalypticism. Moreover, as the author interrogates the purpose and revelatory urgency

of narrative itself, especially past-oriented narrative, Pancake insists on the reader's responsibility to his or her own place, time, and world. She uses apocalyptic rhetoric as a way of mourning and challenging the loss, not only of place, but also of time, which is entailed by a loss of place. Destroying the memory-saturated mountain threatens, also, its narrative past, while mine-related health problems and looming catastrophe destabilize the present and the future. Heather Houser points out the loss of commons, indeed, in terms, not only of "what was once shared space (being converted) into enclosed, private property" (100), but also of the "bodily damage that makes trekking into the woods and spending long hours bent with a trowel impossible" (100), even before the "plants, animals, and earth" (101) are themselves destroyed. A kind of spatial and temporal displacement lends itself to apocaplypticism as a way of making sense of loss, even perhaps legitimizing suffering by investing it with the dramatic, eschatological connotations that bind the present moment in meaningful relationship with an otherwise destabilized past and future.

Chapter 3: Louise McNeill, Apocalyptic Poet

Shifting from Pancake's novel, with its exploration of ecological apocalypse in West Virginia's mountaintop removal mining, we should also examine poetry as a medium for apocalyptic expressions within Appalachian literature. To this end, we will explore Louise McNeill's collection *Paradox Hill: From Appalachia to Lunar Shore* (1972), through which the reader engages with historic past and apocalyptic future within Appalachian verse.

Louise McNeill and Poetry as History

As the poet laureate of West Virginia from 1979 until her death in 1993 (Harshman), Louise McNeill was specifically selected to be a cultural representative of her state, an artist whose work was officially identified as contributing to its historical and cultural tradition. McNeill's poetry, much of which makes use of formal structures and rhyme schemes suggestive of the ballad or, more generally, of an oral tradition, are deceptively accessible in that they deal with human experience and the natural world in often simple images and language, even sometimes with informal elements of dialect (Stringer 2). In *Gauley Mountain: A History in Verse* (1939), for example, the poet recreates individual Appalachian voices and perspectives in ways that invoke a humble local reality, as opposed to the epic sweep of international events. Family names such as O'Kane, MacElmain, and Verner recur, drawing lines of ancestral continuity with the present in order to stress both the complex relevance of the past and, within it, the interplay between individual and collective influence. Here, then, as in most of her poetry, McNeill privileges the personal and the experiential, especially in conjunction with an authentic (by which the poet means *non-industrialized*) natural world. In fact,

despite the objective, wide-ranging connotations of history proper, the poet's insistence on identifying *Gauley Mountain* as "A History" proffers a kind of thesis regarding not only the relationship between poetry and history but also the reality of what history is and does. Implicit in the poetry of Louise McNeill is the understanding that all history arises from the organic experiences of individual men and women on a local level. The act of connecting the present to the past, then, becomes a practice in empathy and imagination, facilitated by the sensory and evocative quality of poetry. Inasmuch as poetry invites a personal and sensory experience through language, it aids the modern reader in accessing the equally personal and sensory past consisting in other, remembered, experience.

Most of Louise McNeill's poems use formal verse structures, retaining a recognizable poetic character while engaging simple, even colloquial speech. By demanding this aesthetic consideration in a prominent way, namely in the apparent simplicity of language, meter, and rhyme scheme, McNeill is actually demanding recognition of a West Virginia Appalachian history built on the experiences of those who might otherwise be overlooked or stereotyped into essentialized insignificance or practical invisibility. She communicates local and personal histories as no less authentic than the stories of lawmakers, generals and presidents handed down by accepted authorities. When she begins to address apocalyptic futures, then, she does so from this local perspective on history and the past, one which accords Kermode's conceptions of narrative significance to a present informed by domestic, colloquial origins as well as threatening ends. In order to appreciate McNeill's future vision, therefore, we should first examine her own Appalachian past and (then) present.

Past and Present

Throughout her memoir, Louise McNeill reflects on her personal experience of growing up in Appalachian West Virginia. Within its beautifully-composed and nostalgic encounters with family and nature, however, *The Milkweed Ladies* (1988) articulates the reality and legitimacy of personal experience as a means of coming to terms with history, both as something past and as something always-becoming. In this legitimization, moreover, McNeill resists essentialization and stereotype. The particularity of personal experience, combined with the author's consciousness of her own nostalgia, belies an Appalachia which is either isolated from outside reality and experience or reducible to a single understanding. Instead, the Appalachia portrayed in *The Milkweed Ladies* speaks with poignancy and relevance in the context of past, present, and future, linked, ultimately, by continuity in nature. Coming to terms with environmental destruction, therefore, both in its local manifestations and its global (nuclear) threat, involves, for McNeill, an apocalyptic consciousness closely (and personally) tied to temporal and material Appalachian realities.

Writing of her childhood, McNeill describes the "green meadows and hilly pastures, [the] storied old men, the great rolling seasons of moon and sunlight, [the] limestone cliffs and trickling springs" (5). She invites the reader to smell the boiling sap at "sugar-makin" (41) and to hear her grandmother's "thin monotone" (86) singing "All the Pretty Horses." She writes in detail of "Decoration Day" (53) when her whole family would gather to work over graves of their kin, and she recounts the different kinds of snakes, apples, flowers, and superstitions that factored in her understanding of the world. Indeed, McNeill's childhood seems to revolve around the "thorn broom handle" (24) of

her Granny Fanny, that "old, pioneer woman, thin and wrinkled as a dried apple, and with her secret in her that she always kept from everyone" (24). The broom handle serves as an anchor, keeping her family back, it would seem, from the stream of modernizing life. "We could sense," she writes:

> just beyond our broken-down line fences, the great reach of the American continent flowing outward. Because we stood so long in one place, our rocky old farm and the abundant earth of the continent were linked together in the long tides of the past. Because the land kept us, never budging from its rock-hold, we held to our pioneer ways the longest, the strongest; and we saw the passing of time from a place called solid, from our own slow, archean, and peculiar stance. (8)

As McNeill grows up and departs for college, the newly paved roads bring new cars and new buildings to Swago, her home, even shifting the physical layout of the community: "It was almost as though Granny Fanny had jerked her thorn broom handle out of the world's axis and the whole contraption began to rattle and whirl" (105). The chestnut trees have sickened and died, and the lumber industry has poisoned the fish and stripped the land over the mountain. Industrialization and modernization have come to McNeill's corner of West Virginia, and the farms are largely abandoned. In spite of all this, however, *The Milkweed Ladies* is not, or not entirely, a narrative of an isolated rural way of life being forced into the modern world.

Throughout her narrative, McNeill relates not an isolated, backward Appalachia but an Appalachia both distinct from and connected to the rest of the country and the rest of the world. She describes her grandfather selling timber to a lumber company long before the loggers move into the area in earnest. Her father has traveled the country giving prepared orations and even traversed the world with Theodore Roosevelt's Navy, and her mother sometimes wears the kimono her father brought back in these travels. Even within her community, furthermore, McNeill's experiences belie the perception of Appalachia as either isolated or stuck in the past, despite the image of the broom handle anchoring them in time. She and her siblings visit their cousins in Chautauqua, eat ice cream, and play hopscotch, and Granny Fanny even bobs her hair with "the Flappers" (30). Although rural, McNeill's family is anything but isolated from the rest of the world, and her memoirs are thus able to situate Appalachia in more immediate contexts: not divorced from but contributing to history as a whole. In fact, even as a child, McNeill is made acutely conscious of the way her home and her family are viewed by the outside world when a young woman, who comes to teach Vacation Bible School in Swago, later publishes a magazine article about the "ignorant and crude" (78) mountain people.

As she relates the events and images of her childhood and young adult life, Louise McNeill resists a strictly consistent chronological organization, just as she resists the geographical division of Appalachia from the rest of the world. Dividing *The Milkweed Ladies* instead by theme and image, she sometimes recounts memories partially out of order. Standing over her father's grave gives way to visiting with him in life, and a full introduction to Aunt Malindy comes after events and memories of which she would already have been a part. The result of this gently unchronological narration is to blur the

strict separation of past and present by blurring the linear structure of that past. In reminiscence, all of the past is equally present to McNeill through the interconnections of personal experience. A personal history, then, is oriented more by perspective than by timeline, and this perspective remains active in the present, thus illuminating memory with wonderful immediacy and casting its significance also into the future. There, however, this locally-informed (but not isolated) past must engage with the realities of a global threat.

It is thus with particular poignancy that McNeil ends her memoir. Having wistfully narrated the details of her Appalachian childhood and the pain of watching a beloved landscape being ravaged by the timber industry, the author directs attention to the future by relating one more set of images from the past. The Northern Lights gleam weirdly over a West Virginia porch three months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Then planes stream incessantly over a faculty cottage in South Carolina. And finally, two words stand out in a New York headline: "A-T-O-M-I-C B-O-M-B" (121). "That was the night the world changed," concludes McNeill:

> It wasn't joy that died, or faith, or resolution; for all these come back. It was something else, something deep and earth-given that died that night in the Commodore (Hotel). Never again would I be able to say with such infinite certainty that the earth would always green in the springtime, and the purple hepaticas come to bloom on my woodland rock. For these, the earth and its seasons, had always been my certainty - going beyond death, beyond the

> death of all my people, even beyond the death of the farm;
> the sun in the morning, the darkness at night, the certain
> roll of the seasons, the 'old blue misties' sweeping out of
> the north. (122)

Nature, for McNeill, is at the heart of the continuity between past and present. It links the two even as personal, sensory experience and individual history play out within and across it. In fact, it is the means by which this very experience can contextualize past and present, present and future since all human life is a part of the natural world. The importance of literature, then, moves beyond the ability to give access to history and the past. Literature in general, and poetry in particular, should bring the past close in order to shed light on the future, giving warning as well as hope and grounding an entire view of history in the unifying needs and revelations of personal experience, ultimately linking past and future (as Kermode suggests) in their meaningful relationship with the present.

Throughout her poetry, and not merely in her narratively rich *Gauley Mountain*, McNeill asserts the essentially fruitful conversation between poetry and history. Using the sensory experience of poetic language, she provides access to the past within a framework of critical, experiential engagement on the part of the reader and thereby demonstrates the possibilities inherent in poetry as a means of exploring Appalachian history, and indeed, history in general. In *Paradox Hill: From Appalachia to Lunar Shore*, however, "the major collection of McNeill's mature career" (Stringer 1), moreover, the poet brings past and future into conversation with each other in a way that explores the full paradox of apocalypticism. Examining a poem from the first section of *Paradox Hill* will allow us to compare past- and future-oriented conceptions within the

collection, specifically in light of McNeill's interest in an Appalachian historical place and its relationship to the possible (nuclear) end of history.

"Arrow Grasses By Greenbrier River:" A Critical Expression of Continuity

In her ode entitled "Arrow Grasses By Greenbrier River," Louise McNeill demonstrates poetry's potential to engage with history in fruitful and critical ways, using strategic ambiguities in order to open up a limited historical perspective to critical attention. However, McNeill also creates a sense of continuity between past and present through which she invites the reader to consider the future, thus evoking, even in work more straightforwardly associated with an historical Appalachian past, the significant relationship of past, present, and future that Kermode identifies. In developing this continuity, then, not only does the poet offer a profound access to history through experience in the here and now (including that of reading the poem itself), but she also inherently contradicts the Western notion of history as linear progress. In this way, she ultimately invites both a critical and a personal engagement with the past.

> Arrow grasses by the river,
> Phalanx, spear by spear arrayed,
> Teach us that we may remember
> Others here have walked afraid.
>
> Teach us - all our generation -
> We are not the first to know
> Death and war and red transgression
> Where these quiet waters flow.
>
> Long ago our father's father
> Here in springtime dropped his corn,

Died and fell, an arrow winging
In his heart that April morn -

Dead as you or I will ever
Lie beneath the atom's burst -
Arrow grasses by the river,
Teach us we are not the first,

Nor the last to live in danger,
Live in wonder and in woe,
Here on earth beside the river,
Where the quiet waters flow. (*Paradox* 34)

In the first two stanzas of her poem, Louise McNeill cultivates an ambiguity by which something apparently straightforward creates a critical tension within itself. Although ostensibly the poet is speaking of the (white) settlers who were her ancestors (an assumption borne out by the fact that Cherokee women, not men, traditionally engaged in agricultural pursuits such as planting corn, and, therefore, the farmer in the poem is most likely of European descent), subtler connotative aspects of the poem invite a more nuanced reading.

When McNeill writes "Teach us that we may remember / Others here have walked afraid," her choice of "others" is deliberately vague. The word itself gives no explicit indication of reference to ancestors or to any other specified group or groups. In fact, if anything, the word evokes connotations of those cast as outsiders in opposition to one's own culture and ethnicity. The effect of this ambiguity is twofold. Inasmuch as "others" refers to the "father's father" depicted in the third stanza, it suggests the distance we tend to place between ourselves and those in our past, even our own ancestors;

inasmuch as “others” broadens to invoke ideas of groups distinct from those with which we identify, however, it implies an essential unity of human experience. In both cases, the effect of the ambiguity is to establish a type of continuity, whether between past and present or self and other (a blurring of distinctions which allies her later apocalypticism with that of Bull).

By way of increasing this ambiguity, moreover, the poet reiterates that “We are not the first to know / Death and war and red transgression,” a clause emphasized by the first strong instance of enjambment within the poem. In these lines, beyond the refusal, again, to specify whom is meant by “the first,” it is the use of the descriptor “red” that most builds on the subtle ambiguity of the first stanza. Although the word certainly evokes ideas of blood and violence, it also makes a connotative connection, particularly in the context of this poem, to derogatory labels and descriptions of Native Americans. In this way, the poet uses the suggestive potential of “red” to subtly invoke a tradition of subjection and injustice directed against a specific “other.” In this light, the meaning of “red transgression” takes on an added ambiguity. This ambiguity ultimately serves to open a critical space for reflection; however, it also implies a blurred boundary between self and other, whether “otherness” is predicated on social or temporal boundaries. McNeill's gentle reminder that “we are not the first” obscures the distinction between our own experiences and the past experiences of others, an effect strengthened by the fact that reading a poem is itself a sensory experience and thus not divorced from the experiential way in which we explore and discover the world. This essential continuity emerges throughout the poem, especially through rhyme, metric structure, diction, and repetition.

"Arrow Grasses" is written in quatrains of trochaic tetrameter, with every second and fourth line of the stanza missing its final, unstressed syllable. This creates a sense of closure for the reader at the end of each stanza, a completeness that effects distinctness in time: one stanza, moment, or generation from another. However, these verse units are also connected to each other through repeated elements, rhyme scheme, and an overarching narrative, and this creates a structural framework through which the poet formally suggests, as well as thematically indicates, the continuity of people and generations in time. This interplay of unity and variety thus evokes the specificity of the individual as something distinct from *and* united to a continuous historical narrative.

The poet also suggests, through diction and rhyme, that nature performs a unifying role in our experience of continuity with the past. Asking the arrow grasses to "teach us so we may remember" not only engages the significance of memory itself but also invests nature with authority as an observer in whom everything is preserved, albeit in ways that require the investigation inherent in "asking." McNeill's use of rhyme further echoes this reality. Although the rhyme scheme might be described as ABCB, with only the second and fourth lines of any given stanza providing a full rhyme, it is the first and third lines that are of interest. The pairs of these end words are as follows: "river" and "remember," "generation" and "transgression," "father" and "winging," "ever" and "river," and finally "danger" and "river." Each of these pairs, with the exception of the third, uses the hint of a feminine rhyme to emphasize the unity and variety inherent in the tension between the individual moment and history as a whole. The lack of harmony, moreover, between "father" and "winging" marks the death of the ancestor in a specific context most likely alien to the modern reader. The difficulty of relating to a concrete

past temporarily dissolves the continuity until, at the beginning of the next stanza, the poet continues to contextualize the event with "Dead as you and I will ever / Lie beneath the atom's burst." Indeed, the enjambment here insists on an essential continuity of experience, death with death, even as the specific fear of a modern age is juxtaposed with the farmer shot in his field by an invisible enemy. It is also significant that "river" reappears in the last two of the above pairs. Coupled with the repetition that echoes in lines like "Arrow grasses by the river, / Teach us we are not the first," and "Where the quiet waters flow," this use of the river links the sense of continuity to nature. A river, furthermore, itself connotes the subtle tension between continuity and change, movement and stillness. The Heraclitean idea that all is in flux - and that one can never step into the same river twice - contrasts with the connotation of peace, continuity, and steadiness. The river, then, becomes the ideal background in an appeal of this kind to nature.

It is perhaps the last stanza, however, and its flowing connection to the penultimate one, that takes the sense of continuity already established and extends it to the future. "Teach us we are not the first," ends stanza four with the least indication of a pause before stanza five's, "Nor the last to live in danger, / Live in wonder and in woe." The poet's decision to split "the first" from "the last" by stanza (which, as we have seen, subtly imply distinct moments in time), while also deliberately minimizing this separation, effectively recreates the unity and variety of time and generation. Furthermore, it implies that our assumed separation from the past relies on an artificial distinction which does not even exist between past and future. Indeed, linking the idea of those who came before us to those coming after, and linking them, moreover, through the continuity of human experience, ultimately even refuses to privilege us with regards to

them. We become the link between equalized moments of past and future, flowing in river-like continuity. History, then, acquires an evenness that makes all time equally relevant and equally connected.

In light of this continuity, the division between "Appalachia" and "To Lunar Shore" (implicitly characterized as "paradox" by the poet's choice of title) embodies the problematic crisis of a present that must stand in relation to both past and future. Although she implicitly aims "Arrow Grasses" toward a future by refusing to dissociate it from the past, the beginning and ending sections of *Paradox Hill* more explicitly position the reader, within his or her present, in relation to a past and future respectively. This structural linearity becomes blurred by the ways that "Appalachia" also invokes both present and future and "To Lunar Shore" additionally references present and past; however, the real but problematized division between origin and end continues to highlight a paradox ultimately evocative of Bull's contradictory truths coming into hiding.

To Lunar Shore

The third and final section of *Paradox Hill*, "To Lunar Shore," engages paradox and explores ideas of time - of origins and ends - in ways that evoke apocalypticism, especially the apocalyptic thought which Bull articulates in his philosophic and critical text. In her "Foreword to the First Edition," moreover, Louise McNeill herself notes that she has, while still "[writing] the lore and language of [her] people, the Appalachian mountaineers" (vii), moved also "through the atomic age" (vii). Articulating the shift from her explorations of local history to her struggles with a modernity both connected to

and distinct from its past, McNeill states that she "[has] written again of 'Gauley' (as in *Gauley Mountain*), but not of 'Gauley' alone" (vii). She adds:

> Where the subconscious mind runs deep - all of our experiences are blended and whirled: the Indian signal smoke, the atomic mushroom; the spinning wheel and the cyclotron; the winding wood path and the orbit flame. So Appalachia is not a consistent land... For Appalachia is life, and life is not - cannot be, surely should not be - consistent. Yet the life thread is strong. And here in our mountains it runs from the green savannahs to atom fire. (vii-viii)

In her conception of history, then, in 1972 when *Paradox Hill* was first published, McNeill identifies the profound existence of paradox, of undifferentiation and the apocalyptic revelation and anxiety simultaneously implicit in such a portrait of past, present, and future.

In the untitled, italicized poem which serves almost as an epigraph, and certainly as an introduction, for "To Lunar Shore," the poet speaks directly to her reader:

> *If somewhere in the cooling rocks*
> *Of cosmic seas, of cosmic dunes,*
> *You find this thing of paradox*
> *And can decipher out the runes*
> *Upon these pages edged with scorch,*
> *Forgive their tinges of the fire;*
> *I flung them like a riven torch*

Above the rupture of the pyre;
They billowed in a greenish blast;
And, with them, belling far away,
I heard the hound dogs of the past
Upon the burning mountains bay. (*Paradox* 77)

Beginning this section in such a way not only highlights the essential character of paradox within her work, but it also confronts the reader with the immediate, sensory presence of a past with which McNeill has been specifically concerned throughout her poetic career. Identifying, if with intentional ambiguity, the meaningful relation between past, present, and future, the poet brings her most prevalent themes to bear in these apparently simple verses.

Indeed, in their very simplicity, or seeming simplicity, these lines actually challenge the possibility of any message being either straightforward or comprehensible. For by making contingent, not only the discovery, but also the "decipher[ing]" (77) of "these pages" (77), specifically their "runes" (77), with their connotations of occult and ancient impenetrability, the speaker belies the kind of consistency implied by standard meters or rhyme schemes. By choosing to continue in formal, even deceptively simple, verse while asserting expectations of interpretive difficulty, the poet creates a subtly contradictory space, in which no statement can be glossed over or taken for granted, and, by extension, no reflective experience of the present.

Even within a metric consistency, then, evocative of symmetry and tradition, images of severing destruction confront those of continuity. Difference confronts indistinctness; recovery confronts loss. "Cosmic seas" (77) are syntactically equivalent to

"cosmic dunes" (77), water to aridity; the character of interest in either is chaos and indeterminacy, together with the subtle implication of eroding forces, given the temporally vast "cosmic" (77) and the relation of these wild, unpredictable spaces with "cooling rocks" (77). Finding "these pages" (77), which have been "flung" (77) over a funeral fire, places the very act of reading these poems in an improbable context and an uncertain connection with past intention; moreover, the poet's act of casting words into (also chaotic and consuming) fire appropriates a language of severing loss through "riven" (77) and "rupture" (77). Even the auditory presence of "the hound dogs of the past" (77) becomes ambiguous, since it arises with the "[flinging]" (77) over a "pyre" (77) and the uncertainty of anyone "find[ing]" (77) and "decipher[ing]" (77) the truth. The "bay[ing]" (77) is real; it even evokes a sense of the hunt, of movement and progression toward some unseen goal, perhaps something that requires a conscious use of the past in order to catch it. The intangible sensory presence of sound, however, particularly distant sound, preserves the interplay between accessibility or continuity and loss, connection or unity and isolation. McNeill simultaneously problematizes and necessitates the meaningful relationship of past with present, thereby generating the future's chaotic, even violent uncertainty. The fact, if not the content, of the past's significance is clear, as is the reality of imminent crisis, and the reader takes this, not only into the subsequent pages of poetry, but also into the present within which he or she encounters them.

Throughout these poems, then, paradox and problematized dichotomy repeatedly arise: images of cyclic versus linear time, of unity versus isolation, and of sensory or experiential comprehension versus the statistical analyses that draw lines and boundaries

across indeterminate reality. Of the collected poems in "To Lunar Shore," however, perhaps the most significant evidence of such apocalyptic reflections occurs in "Chain Reaction" (97), "Quadrille of the Naked Contours" (99), and "Fireseed" (79-82).

In "Chain Reaction," McNeill articulates origin as a continuing, dynamic process. Indeed, the title itself suggests causation in a way that highlights individual reactions within a linked continuity extending in both directions, past and future, evocative of Kermode's discussion of contingent versus narrative time. The title's connotations of explicit causality might seem well suited to McNeill's predilection for formal verse and strong patterns of rhyme; after all, a "chain reaction" (97) implies verifiable, scientific connections in an ordered, possibly inevitable, progression of time. The poet's decision to forgo her typical reliance on rhyme, then, if not on meter, provides a more nuanced structure, combining the underlying, ordering principle of often enjambed blank verse with the unpredictable continuity of internal rhyme, repetition, and alliteration. By presenting "chain reaction[s]" in this ambiguous way, indeed, McNeill subtly engages with another connotational element particularly present to her contemporary (1970's) readers: the nuclear threat.

The poem runs:

> Primordial space - before there first was light -
> And in the dark one utter density
> Lost as a seed but concentrated down
> To heaviness and potency, its weight
> Hung in the iron night; and outward burst -
> And burst again - and farther bursting still.

A chain reaction flaming forth the worlds
That spin and flash and thunder and expand
Forever outward in exploding blooms. (*Paradox* 97)

Beginning with an image of total, even ineffable indeterminacy, the poet generates the "before" of space, a "primordial" dark that nevertheless contains "one utter density," defined in terms of "concentrated" potential without situated place, "lost as a seed" and thus evocative of an origin before identity-revealing growth. By establishing a beginning "before... light," moreover, McNeill alludes to the biblical origins of an "earth... without form, and void" (KJV 1:2), where "darkness was upon the face of the deep" (KJV 1:2). Suggesting such a connection, indeed, subtly elides "the Spirit of God" (KJV 1:2), as the original "mov[ement]" (KJV 1:2), preceding even speech, with the dynamic "burst[ing]" of the poem's chain reaction. The blurred division between the scientific and the divine, then, infuses theoretically observable actuality with connotations of mystical, even eschatological import, specifically connected to a distant, and therefore somehow occult, past.

Having rejected a consistent rhyme scheme, McNeill uses repetition, internal rhyme, and alliteration in order to draw, in a sense, on the dynamic hiddenness of harmony. As the final words of the first and second lines, "light" and "density" should, by the usual rules of Louise McNeill's poems, find answering rhymes in the next two lines; however, the poet's third line meets no such expectation, and the reader must wait until the fourth for even the partial concession of "potency" to "density." And although "light" and line five's "weight" echo each other in playful paradox, the poet offers a full rhyme only with "night" in the middle of line six, before launching the forceful repetition

of "burst... burst... bursting still," which ends the stanza. By stretching and muffling an ABBA progression of rhyme, McNeill problematizes the very traceability of the chain reaction she describes, engaging the possibility that human impositions of order neglect more subtle and dynamic symmetries within the fabric of reality. Furthermore, the pairing of "light" and "night," "density" and "potency," respectively engage with paradox and with the manner in which past and present somehow contain, even physically, the future's rich, compact dynamism. McNeill draws a line of hidden but inevitable continuity from past to present to future, thus establishing a sense of meaningful (Kermodean) connection along a full range of distinct events within "forever," but she also attributes to these events, these present moments, a condensed, even dangerous, power with real implications for the entire span of time, a power suggestive of nuclear reactions. Although her characterization of time, then, does evoke Kermode's interest in the present as event or crisis - and in a narrative present related to past (origin) and future (end) - McNeill's use of paradox and ambiguity implies, also, the seriousness and caution these very ideas require.

The paradox of origins and futures, moreover, only widens when one considers the fact that an inward, secret "seed," containing all potentiality, is also the source of the "forever outward" "expan[sion]" of myriad worlds. The unexplained cause of such a transition, or "burst," only emphasizes paradox by preserving the essential hiddenness of mystery (subtly anticipating Bull's theory), while reiterating its inherent dangers. The repetition of the word "burst," in fact, by its refusal to offer any additional mode of description, whereby the process might be better understood, signifies a linguistic barrier and a perpetuated hiddenness even within the implicit distinction between points in

continuing time, which "burst" to "bursting still" effects. And the loss of even internal rhymes in favor of more subtle, alliterative harmonies carries this mysterious connectedness into the last three lines of the poem. "Flaming forth" and "flash," "expand" and "exploding," however, also create a faint chiasmus that problematizes the temporal distinctions inherent to "burst... burst... bursting still," for the gerund form here associates itself with a sense of time that blurs the difference between past and present, present and future. The present tense of "flash" and "expand," meanwhile, with its connotations of completeness, remain framed within these expansive, "-ing" actions, seeming to situate even our observations of present events within a wider, more ambiguous continuity, itself characterized by powers of explosive potential. The (essentially sublime) implications of such power, such ambiguous temporal causality, and such mystery, then, problematize the very possibility of human control.

Having offered paradox and ambiguity as subtle checks to human power, McNeill returns her reader to formal rhyme and images of artistic order in her poem, "Quadrille of the Naked Contours:"

> At the end of night, and at the end of day,
> When the substance burns till it burns away,
> And nothing stands by our burned-out seas
> But some birches stripped to the soul of trees;
> And nothing hangs in the upper zones
> Of the crystal clear but the neutron bones
> Of the white dwarf stars, like a ring of stones -
> Then the Absolutes in their lucent cords
> Will rise and dance on the burned-out swards.

Then the Theorems come, with their lines made clear
And the Formulae from the dark appear -
Then the Postulates and Hypotheses -
And the Zero drift from behind the trees
With its minus sign - and the Circle roll
And close itself, in itself made whole....

Then the constant "h" with its frigid thews -
And the Quanta flow with their retinues -
Transparent forms - in that utter still
Will move and dance in their cold quadrille -
Abstractions' host - and the neutron bones
Of the white dwarf stars, like a ring of stones -

And then, and then, from the neutron rocks
Will rise the skein of the Paradox. (*Paradox* 99)

"Quadrille of the Naked Contours" begins with the twice repeated word "end," thus connecting the complementary halves of experienced time. Balancing the first line with these equal halves of night and day, dark and light, and essentially negating the relevance of such distinctions by placing each at its "end," the poet continues to engage with blurred dualities, this time in a projected, eschatological context. In a sense, by situating daily, experiential time at an end, McNeill evokes an indeterminacy only emphasized by a "burn[ed] away (substance)" that leaves almost "nothing" behind it. Using anaphora to reiterate this near-complete void ("and nothing stands... but," "and nothing hangs... but"), the poet turns a definite, almost singsong meter - with its simple pairs (and one trio) of straightforward end rhymes - to something ominous in its very apocalyptic

simplicity. The plain, repetitive mode of communication, almost like a child's nursery rhyme, essentially describes a dance at the end of the world, in which importantly capitalized figures and concepts, intended to order human reality, move through an empty, "burned-out" space in engagement with only each other.

Even as she evokes a bleak future in simple, musical verse, the poet shifts into present tense: "Then the Absolutes... / will..." becoming "Then the Theorems come... / and the Formulae... appear." The anaphoric use of "then" delineates this strange consonance between future and present, the blurred distinction between which allows McNeill to describe the abstract dance as though it were already in process. In the next (third) stanza, moreover, the speaker engages both present and future, for although "Quanta flow" in present tense, an unclear, plural subject, tangled in hyphenated sentence divisions, also "will move and dance," despite being, or seeming to be, in the same temporal space.

In the poem's final pair of lines, therefore, the repeated "And then, and then" necessarily arises within a blurred chronology. In light of this context, in fact, this final event has to demand emphatic placement on an otherwise confused timeline, asserting its very finality by repetition. However, the necessity of such rhetorically simple insistence ultimately suggests a childlike plea for credulity which, in connotation, if not denotation, belies the authority of a meaningful end. The poet, then, leaves her reader with a sense of dissatisfaction, even as she reduces all human concepts and abstract knowledge into the indistinct "skein of the Paradox," as though we cannot approach even this logic-defying concept with any surety.

While the poems examined thus far situate apocalypticism within Appalachia primarily through the poet's professed belonging, and in conversation with her more traditional poems (a conversation clearly intended by collecting them within *Paradox Hill: From Appalachia to Lunar Shore*), other poems in "To Lunar Shore" make this indwelling, Appalachian apocalypticism somewhat more explicit. For example, "Potherbs: *(Of the edible wild plants my granny taught me.)*" (*Paradox* 85) offers a situated, literally rooted kind of "hunting": "I will hunt for pokeweed upon that burnt hill," the poet writes, specifically calling on an inherited, wildcrafting ethic, by no means guaranteed but at least answering "hunger" in a time of encircling "fire." Likewise, "Life-Force" (*Paradox* 84) paints a post-apocalyptic vision of one "alone on the rubble of earth - all alone" and turning to "woundwort," "bindweed," "thorn," and "sheath of the man-root"[5] for survival. Although subtler in this regard, "Fireseed" (*Paradox* 79-82), too, ties McNeill's portrait of Appalachia to more universal spaces and themes, particularly to the meaningful connection between past and future, realized in every present moment. Providing perhaps the most complex, eschatological vision, "Fireseed" invokes the paradox of multiplicity in unity so relevant to Bull's conception of hiddenness and undifferentiation while engaging Kermode's sense of narrative/apocalyptic time, wherein crisis and continuity meet in literary space.

[5] Significantly enough, "man-root" alludes to ginseng, whose name means "Man Root" or "Root of Person" in Chinese (Sivula 33). The fusion effected by this compound, in fact, suggests the undifferentiation of Bull's apocalyptic in telling ways.

Fireseed

The longest poem in *Paradox Hill*, "Fireseed" begins:

> Primordial space, Primordial dark -
> One atom spinning in its arc,
> The worldseed lonely as a spark -
>
> Spinning and growing till it grew
> Great in the silence; then it blew;
> Out of the oneness, there were two -
>
> Two in the vastness burned and whirled;
> Four in the void forth were hurled:
> Eight in the thunder - so a world -
>
> Thousands to millions; billions flame -
> Out of the oneness, trillions came;
> Out of the sameness, none the same.
>
> Trillions to trillions split and glowed;
> All in accordance, out they rode;
> Circle in circle burned and flowed... (*Paradox* 79)

Significantly, the first stanza offers a different metric structure than the four that follow it, all of which remain essentially, rhythmically consistent. In fact, this establishment of predictable patterns conveys, as the "worldseed" divides in exponential multiplicity, an underlying unity: of process and source. From the origin of "primordial space" and undifferentiatable "dark" comes "one atom," and "one" cannot make a pattern. Order and

patterns require multiplicity, but also connote a connectedness, or continuity over time. The metric pattern, then, imitates the increase from one atom to two, four, eight, and eventually to "thousands," "millions," and "billions." Moreover, all but the first line of these four connected stanzas (following the first) eschew enjambment in favor of an even more pronounced, rhythmic repetition. Indeed, the presence of enjambment in this first line: "growing till it grew / Great in the silence," is, in a sense, the exception that proves the rule. It precedes the expanding pattern as the singular, "lonely" seed, the "one atom," swells with potentiality. The reader is drawn irresistibly into the next line in a way that builds anticipation, even as the language itself suggests pregnancy and the rounding development implicit in it. (Moreover, "then it blew" evokes not only the force of an explosion (suggestively nuclear) but also the bursting fecundity of blossoms.)

Thus, moving from a "lonely," atomic "worldseed," which conveys absolute unity as something inherently lacking, the poet initiates a chain reaction evocative of nuclear explosions and equally irreversible. "Out of the oneness, there were two-" just as, a few lines later, "Out of the oneness, trillions came." This anaphora, in fact, by offering such starkly divergent multiplicities as arising from the same statement of unity, creates a paradoxical similarity rooted in process and form, a paradox almost immediately intensified in the next line, when "Out of the sameness, none the same" both contradicts and validates the unity and complexity that continues to expand. Not only does the line itself shift from "oneness" to "sameness," a word less limited to indivisible wholeness, but it also plays with echoes of the "oneness" dropped from the line since "none" differs from "one" by a single letter.

As "time beg[ins]" (*Paradox* 79), then, the poem's meter changes, becoming slightly less consistent, as though in response to the random, disordered extension of time that Kermode identifies in daily, human experience:

> Earth in its orbit cooled and spun
> One first circle with time begun,
> So forever to ring the Sun.
>
> Fire winds passing spilt down a cell;
> Ancient of oceans rose and fell
> Washing branches of coral shell.
>
> There in the swamplands fern seed blew -
> Xylem and cortex slowly grew,
> Giant rushes and strange bamboo.
>
> Eons passing - the great trees died,
> Fell and rotted; the serpents plied
> Over that jungle undefied.
>
> Ancient of oceans ebbed, returned -
> Into the jungle sunlight burned,
> Black, in its measures, coal was turned.
>
> Ferned in its blackness, branched and veined
> Trapping the sunlight, so contained
> Fire forever with darkness skeined. (*Paradox* 79-80)

Using much more enjambment than the previous stanzas, this next section of the poem nevertheless maintains a kind of order. Significantly, this six-stanza segment continues to address the idea of paradox through change and continuity.

The earth "cooled and spun / One first circle with time begun, / So forever to ring the Sun" (79), and the poet evokes a sense of slowing, or hardening, into consistency, a settling into "orbit" (79) that will continue indefinitely in "ring[s]" and "circle[s]," which themselves connote infinity. The centrality of the Sun, of light and heat in contrast with a "cooled" Earth, then, decenters the blue planet itself and, by extension, humankind. Despite this, however, Earth remains at the imagistic center of the poem, as the poet documents its development; indeed, its agency extends even to "trapping the sunlight" (80), if not exerting power over the Sun itself, while the contradictory darkness of coal takes on a "branched and veined" (80) form in implicit contrast to the planetary, circle imagery. Furthermore, as "ancient of oceans" (79, 80) "rose and fell" (79), "ebbed, returned" (80) in images of cyclic continuity, the revolving "forever" (79) of Earth's orbit gives way to the "forever" (80) of "fire... with darkness skeined" (80). The intermixture of dark and light, given a specific origin in the "turn[ing]" (80) of coal, extends indefinitely, but considering the finite nature of this resource and the more general, metonymic use of "fire," this sense of infinite continuation implies an almost Edenic loss, a Fall. The fact that "serpents plied / Over that jungle undefied" (80) has already challenged a biblical narrative of creation, albeit subtly, so that the line, "fire forever with darkness skeined," becomes a statement about the inevitable admixture of light and dark, of opposites melded by an inherent paradox of reality. The moral dimension of conflicting forces becomes obscured in a way that complicates and problematizes our

dualizing conceptions of a paradox-rich reality. In the next section of the poem, however, McNeill ultimately problematizes this moral ambiguity with the first metonymic signs of human presence:

> *Gold, gold, and golden -*
> *Golden monstrous snakes*
> *Turning to oil, and winding through the earth,*
> *Amber and iridescent through the caves,*
> *Black, green, and tawny serpentines of oil*
> *Enfolding waves of sunlight in their coil -*
> *Gold, gold, and golden -*
> *Trapped to flame again,*
> *Wild on the steeps of derricks in the sky.* (*Paradox* 80)

Here, again, the meter changes, this time much more drastically. Lines vary in length and pattern of stress, while the only end rhymes are "oil" and "coil" in the stanza's center. In fact, the poet uses these differences to create a new kind of order, one less immediately apparent, for lines one, two, and three, although differing from each other, find metric echoes in the last three lines of the stanza, cued by the exact repetition of "*Gold, gold, and golden -*." Furthermore, in between these framing segments, the fourth line matches the third, while the fifth and sixth lines at least rhyme, even if their rhythms vary somewhat from the rest. Human beings' appearance in history, then, occurs in the least metrically consistent stanza thus far, while still maintaining some degree of internal order.

As the "golden monstrous snakes [turn] to oil," the poet calls to mind those "serpents (who) plied / over that jungle undefied" (80) three stanzas earlier. Evoking

snakes and "serpentines of oil" thus revives connotations of a biblical Fall, this time in connection with the human use of energy resources. Just as the coal "trapp[ed] the sunlight" (80), so "tawny serpentines of oil / enfold[ed] waves of sunlight in their coil... trapped to flame again," taking the central source of heat and light, around which earthly life revolves, and channeling it. Considering the subtle undercurrents of a Genesis narrative, then, this transformation of serpent-like oil to useable energy potentially problematizes the amoral portrait of creation, not because human beings "trapped" the fire themselves, but because, in forcing its manifestation "wild on the steeps of derricks in the sky," they purport to control an energy traceable, across stanzas, to universal origins. The "derricks," constructed to channel and control, produce, nevertheless, a "wild[ness]" and therefore an implicit contradiction between human intention and volatile reality. Moreover, inasmuch as they seek to harness a trapped form of the sun's energy, the implications inherent to a "skeined [darkness]" of coal, or to oil's "amber," "iridescent," "black, green and tawny" ambiguity, color the fact that human beings appropriate a morally indeterminate resource for their own needs. This fire is present in the "seed" (79) of the world and will continue to unfold in a life larger than any individual creature or species. The possibility of controlling such a resource, which informs recorded and unrecorded time in complex unity, seems problematic at best. Of course, the fact that sunlight has been captured in order to "flame again" also suggests continuity with the past, complicating the paradox and the implied warning and emphasizing the fact that humans, too, belong to the course of nature as a part, rather than a defining culmination, of it.

The focus on carbon-emitting sources of energy, moreover, and their use or misuse, accesses a special narrative for the West Virginia poet, whose home state witnessed (and continues to witness) the coal industry's environmental destruction. The fact that McNeill situates coal at the heart of a subtle Fall narrative, then, implies, not an inherent evil, but an inherent chaos, a mingling of opposites that can be read, in a sense, as a source of forbidden fruit, a symbol of the human potential for corruption, when forcing a wild, natural energy, a "fire forever with darkness skeined" (80), into destructive human use. Coal is the first resource identified in this way, but following it so closely with "serpentines of oil" extends the reader's gaze from a symbol associated with McNeill's homeplace to one that evokes related controversies in a variety of disparate and distant, global locations. Certainly coal - and the problems associated with its removal and uses - exists far outside Appalachia; however, within the context of this collection, *From Appalachia to Lunar Shore*, its local connotations remain prevalent. The poet's use of oil imagery, then, serves to forcibly expand thematic implications to a global community, in a subtly similar way to the intentions Lisa Hinrichsen reads in Ann Pancake's novel: "put[ting] bioregionally similar spaces and places into an integral conversation" (15).

Explicitly delineating a new "time" (80), the poet continues to address human history within the broader history of the universe; however, the new stanza's structure continues to play with paradox, with unity and difference, in a way that belies a truly separate era:

> Another time - the years and days
> In circles moving, and the rays

Of great wheels moving down the ways
Of sunlight; oxen in their yokes,
The great hubs turning and the spokes -
The oxen like a fire that stokes
The shining grasses of the plans;
The horse a fire that burns the grains
Of golden oat seed as he strains
To pull the plow. The Diesel turns
The oil of serpents as it churns,
So cycle into cycle burns. (*Paradox* 80-81)

Shifting from the italics of the previous stanza, "another time" (80) is offset from the rest of the line, indicating at least a claim to qualitative difference from the undifferentiated "begun" (79) time that came before. In fact, it is as though, with the metonymic entrance of human beings and their attempts to harness primal energies, something changes in the very progression of time. "Years and days" (80), for one thing, apply human conceptions of measurement to still cyclic, natural processes, or "circles moving" (80). The sympathy between human work and natural revolutions, then, initially remains. It appears in "the rays / of great wheels moving down the ways / of sunlight" (80), which connects the spokes of a wheel with light imagery, "moving," furthermore, "down the ways of sunlight," and thus in harmony with the sun's implicit orientation. Offering first the simile of "oxen like a fire" (80) and then the metaphor of "horse a fire" (80) generates further consonance between unifying, universal energies and human work, even establishing an essentially biological energy transfer from sunlight to "shining grasses" (80) and "golden [grains]" (81) to the horse and the human. This unity with natural processes and primal energies, however, is quickly challenged.

The form of this stanza articulates the tension, in fact, between participation within and appropriation of natural and even essential sources of energy. For the continuity with origins, which is implied by the re-adoption of the poem's initial (AAA, BBB, etc.) rhyme scheme, becomes compressed into a single stanza - and also heavily enjambed. Whereas the beginning of the poem builds, from stanza to stanza, these tercets are pushed together, with the end of every trio of end rhymes pressing on into the next line. It is not that order becomes obscured, but that movement and development are condensed, even rushed, in a sense, abandoning the clarity of rhythmic progression, exponential as it was, in order to squeeze energy from its natural sources. Even the horse's "strai[n] / to pull the plow" (81) problematizes human ambition somewhat, evoking the stress of effort transferred onto another, literally harnessed, creature. Finally, at the end of the stanza, the "Diesel (engine) turns / the oil of serpents as it churns, / so cycle into cycle burns" (81). The machine, which succeeds the oxen and the horse, uses energy to condense revolutions, "[burning] cycle into cycle" with the same insistence on power pressed into service at the expense of the unfolding of natural, unifying revolutions. Despite the stanza's apparent formal unity, indeed, a "strain" arises in it, like an overtaxed engine.

It is particularly significant, then, that in the next stanza, which repeats the "*Gold, gold, and golden*" (80, 81) of the stanza before last, the rhyme scheme dissolves entirely:

> *Gold, gold, and golden - golden cyclotrons*
> *Throb in the leadshields, while around the Earth*
> *The kilowatts and ergs and quanta move*
> *Intricate webs of fiber from the sun*
> *Pulsing the engines. From the wilds of space*

The satellite relays the colored forms
That burn and posture on our TV screens;
And down the dusty craters of the moon
Men stumble drunken, picking up the rocks. (*Paradox* 81)

This return to italics, combined with the "golden" repetition, highlights the continued harnessing of energies; now, however, this has accelerated tremendously with the use of language evoking nuclear processes and characterizing energy-extraction spaces in terms of non-earth imagery.

This return to space echoes the poem's beginning without offering that beginning's structure. The earth, which was "forever to ring the sun" (79), now sits at the center of "the kilowatts and ergs and quanta (that) move / intricate webs of fiber from sun" (81). The planet becomes conceptually central even as energy removal becomes less cyclic, more extractive. The images of "shining grasses" (80) and "oxen like a fire" (80), even "serpentines of oil" (80), give way to drawing power directly from the sun in the "wilds of space" (81). The only "burn[ing]" (81) in this entire stanza, moreover, describes the "colored forms / that burn and posture on our TV screens" (81), essentially trivializing the essential energies evoked throughout the poem. This technologically-projected shadow-show evokes Plato's cave, in fact, as images and façades, nonspecific "forms" from the "wilds of space," divert attention from the events now expanded beyond the realm of sensory observation. This removal of Earth-defined place, indeed, becomes all the more powerful in the final two lines of the stanza.

As the inclusive "our" of "our TV screens" envelopes the reader in a collectedly distracted humanity, an *other* appears, for "down the dusty craters of the moon / men stumble drunken, picking up the rocks" (81). Here McNeill returns subtly to her native

place by choosing a metaphor often attached to coal mining, especially strip mining, operations. Such used-up land is often described as a moonscape, and the poet deliberately engages this image to conclude the portrait of a nuclear and satellite age. Following such advanced and in some sense abstract energy-consumption, the moonscape metaphor both resituates and alienates the reader simultaneously. Lunar language fits all too well with the "wilds of space" and its planetary scale; however, the "stumbl[ing]" (81) presence of "men... picking up the rocks" (81) connects this desolation to a specifically Earthly context. The contrast of abstract space with physical labor, especially labor directly and tangibly involved with removing pieces of the Earth, problematizes any conception of distance between energy technologies and lived, experiential place. The same ambitions that move beyond a concrete, Earthly sphere at the beginning of the stanza, far from situating all change in the ether, actually transform observable reality on the planet's surface, making it resemble the desolate and inhospitable landscapes of space. Moreover, the "drunken [stumbling]" (81) indicates a glutted kind of ignorance, an incomprehension resulting from too much intoxicating use, in this case, of power. Similarly, "picking up the rocks" (81) connotes more careless aimlessness than intentional purpose.

In the few stanzas remaining, end rhyme reappears, but its patterns change from segment to segment. The rest of the poem, in fact, can be divided into two more sections, the first attempting stanzas of four and three lines, as though echoing the poem's beginning, and the second concluding with a single stanza of three combined quatrains. In the first of these sections, the poet writes:

Singing and seething from the core of wonder,
Consuming, unconsumed,
I pass undying through these globes of tinder
Candescent and illumed.

Gold, gold, gold, and gold -
Nothing is ever still and cold;
God is the fire made manifold -

Flames in the wind and flowers in the quasar -
The quasars outward roar
Expanding worlds, and from my falling gratefire
Primordial sunsets pour - (*Paradox* 81)

Here the poet uses "I" (81) for the first time, but rather than perpetuating a connection with the reader (as in "our TV screens" (81)), this voice actually seems to speak for the Earth as a whole. Indeed, this makes the previous use of first person (plural) read almost as an irony, for the poem's broader, planetary identification traces itself from "fireseed" origins.

Considering that this is the first explicit "I" within the poem, this Earth-voice offers consciousness as a kind of response to the anthropocenic era articulated by the two previous stanzas. "Singing and seething" (81) evokes a strange combination of joy and anger, but "consuming, unconsumed" (81) expresses a sense of totality beyond human power, even paradoxically "consuming," rather than being consumed by human efforts. To "pass undying" (81), furthermore, enhances this paradox by coupling a euphemistic word for death with ideas of immortality. The Earth is "candescent and illumed" (81),

lighting and being lit, in a contradictory blend of unifying difference that suggests the function of wonder in knowledge, even as the Earth speaks "from the core of wonder" (81) itself.

"Gold, gold, gold, and gold," then, takes similar language from the opening of both italicized stanzas and removes the explicitly adjectival "golden" (80, 81) in favor of a list of ambiguous noun/adjectives offered in sequence, as though each were also different from the others. Its connection to the fire and energy images throughout the poem, in fact, implies the unified difference of their manifestations, from "serpentines of oil" (80) to the coal that "fire forever with darkness skeined" (80). So when the poet continues this three line stanza - significantly enough, the last attempt at echoing structures from the poem's beginning - she fittingly (that is, paradoxically) brings void language, or definition by negation, into contact with ideas of bright, inclusive totality: "Nothing is ever still and cold" (81). "God," McNeill maintains, "is the fire made manifold" (81), moving from the second line's negative revelation into this explicitly epiphanic divinization of "the fire" (81), in its "manifold" (81) unity (evocative, incidentally, of Trinitarian theology). The similarity between the very word "God" and the repeated "Gold" of the first line highlights this unity-in-difference and even indicates the possibility of seeing this revelation for oneself, albeit indistinctly.

As the reader approaches the final stanza, "expanding worlds" (81) connects him or her to the beginning of the poem, conveying the continued action of origins, the echo of creation, yet "from my falling gratefire," the speaker states, "primordial sunsets pour" (81). Paradox links origins and ends without drawing a clear line between them. The persisting expansion coincides with a "falling" fire, while "primordial sunsets" evoke

both distant origins and immediate (if not final) ends. Indeed, the simultaneous connotations of conclusion and continuing cycle, with which "sunsets" are invested, places human destruction in a universal context, in which time and space "consum[e]" the anthropocene as a small, if dangerously ambitious, participation in its wider life, its continually expanding spiral.

> From one form to another I am passing -
> I change but do not go -
> Foxfire and firefly and pitchblende seethe within me -
> Volcanoes through me flow -
> The snakes of golden oil burn in my body,
> My flesh is veined and branching with the fire,
> From form to form I pass, forever burning
> Along this arc, and filamented wire
> Magnetic holds me to the sun's turning.
> From path to path I, too, can pull the sun -
> The seedfire is of life, and we are burning, burning
> Within the burning ONE. (*Paradox* 81-2)

In this final stanza, the speaker-as-Earth becomes still more explicit as McNeill layers change and consistency on each other in permeating paradox. Passing "from one form to another" (81), "chang[ing] but... not go[ing]" (82), the Earth contains organic and inorganic fire, "foxfire and firefly... volcanoes... (and) snakes of golden oil" (82), even as it, itself, is contained by "magnetic [hold]" (82) in its solar revolutions. Consistency of orbit gives form to the burning, changing, "veined and branching" (82) variety within Earth as it "[passes] from form to form" (82), "forever burning" (82) in an image of unconsumed consumption significantly more essential than the human use of energy

resources (although references to oil and coal do involve these uses as well). This eternal fire might, at first, seem to shrug at human activity on the grounds that the world changes continually but also continually survives; however, the last quatrain of the poem problematize this in a subtle but powerful way, ultimately leaving the reader with both warning and apocalyptic promise.

The Earth inevitability "rings the sun" (79) from its origins to the present. The ordered revolutions provide an image of unity, of predictable movement in time and even a rootedness to real space and heat and light, a source of energy and stability. In this last quatrain, however, the relationship between Earth and its anchor is characterized differently. The planet is "[held]... to the sun's turning" (82), but whereas before, movement is ascribed to the Earth, here it also pertains to the sun itself, which is also "turning." Even this simple shift implies a widening pattern of interrelations ranging far beyond the Earth and effectively de-centering it. More significant still, however, the orbiting planet, "too, can pull the sun [from path to path]" (82). What has been understood as an image of consistency, order, and power throughout the entire poem can suddenly, in a simple and unelaborated assertion of agency, be shifted to another path by the very planet it anchors and sustains. The uncertainty inherent in this brings an unlooked-for chaos into the poem's conclusion and immediately raises a host of unanswered questions about the impacts of interrelated elements on each other. The reader is left only with the speaker's enigmatic conviction, now fraught with future uncertainty, that "the seedfire is of life, and we are burning, burning / within the burning ONE" (82).

In the end, "we" obscures the division between planet and person, connecting both in an indeterminate whole that sheds new light on the metamorphosis imagery of the stanza as a whole. Changing forms, which remain connected to origins and moving toward and through individual ends in collective continuation, indicate the indeterminacy of Bull's apocalypse: its undifferentiated character and its revelation of a new world without the comfort of dualistic certainties. "We" are burning, and the resulting transformations are not without their effects, despite the intricately related whole with its capitalized, primary unity. "The seedfire is of life" (82), meaning that it, in its essential energy and its expanding force, will continue; however, the form that it may take remains as uncertain as the "path[s]" to which the Earth "can pull the sun." The survival of no single creature or species - or planetary form of life - can be anchored to the future, any more than the Earth can be anchored to a star on which it exerts, in turn, its own influence. The apocalyptic promise, then, of an end that initiates newness, always continuing in consonance with a "fireseed" (82) origin, provides a serious warning to the reader as well.

Louise McNeill: Poet, Prophet, Place

In her collection, *Paradox Hill: From Appalachia to Lunar Shore*, McNeill transitions from the recognizable rhythms and narratives of her West Virginia home (so often associated with the past) to seemingly less Appalachia-centric reflections on the course of science and history in their progression toward a future end. In placing between "Appalachia" and "Lunar Shore," however, a section entitled "Scattered Leaves," she appropriates for herself the suggestive identity of Sibyl-esque prophet. Past and future meet in relation to the reader's present because McNeill situates both in the

same flow of narrative, poetic time. And although her preoccupation with apocalypse articulates itself primarily in nuclear terms, the pervasiveness of energy and resource use within her "Lunar Shore" poems suggests a connection to the West Virginia spaces she and her family witnessed in transformation. Apocalypticism, then, is the mode through which she, too, makes sense of change and destructive threat in a place anchored in connotative and real tradition.

Chapter 4: Eschatological Ecology

In both Pancake's novel and McNeill's poems, apocalyptic images and motifs become a way of conceptualizing a future that threatens past-saturated place lived in the present. The relationship between origins and ends takes on eschatological significance with cultural, social, and ecological implications of environmental destruction, particularly through nonsustainable resource use. The exploitative appropriation of place for human gain involves connotations of divine and earthy significance by evoking apocalyptic ends; in fact, the distinction between a spiritual and a physical realm blur when situated, even metaphorically, within sight of an End Time. Eschatological drama raises the metaphysical stakes, and narratives that identify origins and ends as directly relevant to an occupied present invest that present with meanings fraught with the emotional power of memory, hope, and fear. But examining the apocalyptic undercurrents within Appalachian literature - whether in their contributions to a specifically science fiction genre or, more inclusively, in their manifestations as eschatologically-inflected rhetoric and imagery - ultimately raises questions as to why these trends continue to surface in such a body of regional literature.

Elizabeth Engelhardt identifies a related, environmental consciousness, specifically "the roots of ecological feminism" (8), in *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*, tracing ecological and gender themes through women's writing in and about Appalachia at the turn of the last century. "Although I am not claiming an original uniqueness for Appalachia," she writes in her Introduction, "its stark divisions between classes, highly charged and constructed discussions of race, and peopled wilderness *are* particularly illuminating" (8), and

"Appalachian women's literature... can reveal changing attitudes toward gender and environmental justice in the United States" (9). Her treatment of early ecological feminism relates to this apocalyptic investigation, then, in the connections it illuminates between a literature increasingly attuned to human and nonhuman community members and its historical, social, and environmental context. Because Appalachia, at the turn of the last century, was the focus of so much mainstream attention - including resource extraction and essentialized perceptions of mountain residents and natural spaces - its literature (in this case women's literature) gradually developed an ecologically-charged response that has carried through to more recent authors. In her Afterword, Engelhardt argues that "the roots of ecological feminism... continued to grow throughout the century in Appalachia" (171), and that the contemporary region, still "struggl[ing] with environmental and social justice issues" (171) and often "still... subjected to the voyeur's gaze" (171), may continue to provide fertile ground for an ecologically and socially responsive literature.

Ann Pancake, Louise McNeill, and others have demonstrated that this is, indeed, the case; however, their work also implies that the kinds of exploitative conditions, under which significant parts of Appalachia still struggle, now also lend themselves to a specifically apocalyptic perspective. Arguably because Appalachian history is too often inflected by essentialization and environmental damage, the intersection of past and present readily evokes a heritage of peripheralization with dark future implications. The effects of exploitative industry, for example, carry forward into the present and build toward a future in ways that Appalachian literature must address and negotiate. Carmen Rueda-Ramos points out that "some Appalachians... have long and disproportionally

suffered from environmental hazards and injustice at the hands of greedy coal companies and corrupt politicians" (221), while Ronald Eller, in his critical text *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945* (2008), attributes persistent Appalachian poverty to economic and political structural inequalities, which tend to privilege outside industry and preserve the status quo. When apocalyptic undercurrents appear, then, in a range of Appalachian literature, they provide a means of coming to terms, both with the experientially present evidence of past and present injustice and with the real implications these have for the future. For Pancake, this entails the role of vision, of presence and resistance in the face of an apocalypse already underway; for McNeill, this vision encompasses past and future to their remotest extensions, shrinking all of human experience, immediate and inherited, to that point of precarious balance: the paradox of simultaneous influence and insignificance. Both writers hint at an elusive (comic) apocalypse-as-transformation in the possibility of life after the "end," but both also problematize this by articulating the world-destroying processes already in motion. Engaging issues of technology, environment, and human ambition, both Pancake and McNeill identify apocalypse as a fearfully appropriate end to the trajectory of their Appalachian (West Virginia) place - in its relationship to a personal and historic past.

Whether or not such eschatological drama offers a constructive response to admittedly problematic social and environmental conditions is another question entirely. Scholars like Jimmie Killingsworth argue that the divisive rhetoric of mainstream (tragic) apocalypse polarizes a discourse that ought to focus, instead, on the positive value of personal engagements with (and thus responsibility for) the natural world. Indeed, Ron Rash's *Above the Waterfall* and Gurney Norman's *Divine Right's Trip* implicitly respond

to this very critique, as they offer strategies for ecological recovery that center on active, engaged appreciation and regenerated human-nonhuman cooperation, respectively. Other works, however, including Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and, indeed, Pancake's *Strange as this Weather Has Been*, use explicit eschatological drama as a primary narrative context. They characterize ecological and social dangers as in some sense apocalyptic, and without denigrating nature appreciation, they suggest that the crises facing our contemporary world now demand a more drastic reorientation of priorities. Ultimately, the rhetorical strength of apocalypse narratives lies in their insistence that imminent endings, even globally-implicated endings, cannot be contained in religious texts, metaphors, and studies any longer. Moreover, the possibilities inherent to *comic* apocalypse, especially the undifferentiating coming-into-hiding of Bull's explication, actually offer powerful tools for writers, scholars, and activists interested in the future of human-environment relationships in the crisis-rich Anthropocene. Indeed, Anthony Dyer Hoefer suggests a similar potential with regards to racial justice. And regardless of apocalypticism's comic or tragic manifestation, the urgency and scope of warning involved in apocalyptic narratives might well justify the risk of discourse polarization, considering that less dramatically articulated concerns risk a potentially greater evil: complacency.

Although this study has surveyed important critical and literary texts, it cannot address the full range of Appalachian literature. Moreover, I have not addressed possible connections between apocalypticism in Appalachian religion and literature, as Anthony Dyer Hoefer has done for southern literature. Nor have I made a comparative study of Appalachian-set and Appalachian literature or traced the development of apocalyptic

rhetoric chronologically through fiction and poetry. Ultimately, there is real need for additional scholarship in many of these areas. Future academic inquiries could press questions of rhetorical negotiation further still, identifying and elaborating on the ecological implications of apocalyptic language within Appalachia: a region too often sacrificed to exploitative industry and consequent environmental destruction.

Chapter 5: *All Places Thou: An Experimental Novella*

Preface

In composing *All Places Thou*, I hoped to engage, via synthesis, with the apocalyptic, thematic undercurrents present in Appalachian-centered literature. I chose a fragmented narrative form, interspersed with poetry and selected artwork, in order to explore the ways that we make sense of place, especially place that has been lost (in this case, to apocalyptic degeneration and eventual death). A stagnating, or dying, present entails not only an (at best) uncertain future, but it also brings the past into necessary conversation with these experienced (present) and projected (future) times. Time itself no longer makes sense in the same way, so this apocalyptic narrative relies on no certain closure (except, perhaps, a feared, tragic closure), while untethered time becomes less a linear movement than a scattered, spiral consideration of causes and effects, wherein past is never truly divided from present or future, nor they from it. Apocalyptic uncertainty precludes the fantasy of clean, linear time and gathers this narrative, instead, into clusters of what Frank Kermode calls *kairos*, crises informed by relationships of temporal significance.

Although implying a tragic apocalypse, I hope to engage Malcolm Bull's more hopeful, transformative model in the underlying, thematic appeal to readers. Specifically, I construct an apocalyptic event based on meiotic interruptions, which preclude sexual reproduction and, thereby, cut off genetic diversity. The consequent disappearance of species and flattening of heterogeneous potential is supposed to suggest the use-orientation that interprets a diverse, ecological world as little more, sometimes, than the sum of resources available for production or extraction (or, conversely, as obstacles to

such use). Although the specific cause of the ongoing apocalypse remains intentionally obscure, then, its mechanism is meant to problematize anthropocentric utilitarianism and advocate a consciousness of diverse human and non-human vantages on, and engagements with, the ecosystem. I would argue that the kind of exploitative social and environmental evils, within which context many Appalachian communities have historically struggled, entail a deep essentialization that ignores authentic variety (and alternative perspectives) in dangerous ways. Imposing, on any place, the character of an overriding instrumentality (as a source of some specific commodity, or as a validating, hierarchical mythos to an outside elite) enables exploitation, but it also establishes an unsustainable fiction. *All Places Thou* is meant to explore the possibility of this fiction becoming symbolic reality, while the only hope for the future lies in a responsively symbolic diversity of life and ecological purpose (in implicit extension of Bull's apocalyptic return of previously-rejected but now integrated elements).

Involving fiction, poetry, and visual art is intended to convey the necessity of varied means of coming-to-know - and varied levels of accessibility - in the experience of a fragmented world. Moreover, within each medium, I have tried to provide a range of formal and thematic approaches to highlight this same variety. The original acrylic paintings, for example, punctuate the novella's past, present, and future by identifying different levels of abstractness or accessibility within each. *Paradox Present* (see 106) conveys a broken ecology and a consequently fragmented perspective on what should be seamless and cyclical time. *Paradox Future* (see 109) indicates a blurred, skyward vantage to communicate an ambiguous perspective and orientation, while *Paradox Past* (see 164) portrays the clearest visual representation: mountains under a foreboding sky.

The novella's final image, *Paradox* (see 266), is a close-up of the sky in the past painting; depicting a single piece of cloud, this image is meant to explore the way that pieces participate in a whole. Narrative and poetic fragments, in conversation with these visual elements, are intended to communicate this theme of unity in variety and variety in unity - specifically within an apocalyptic time and place resistant to interpretation. All places now require a *thou*, an experientially validated other, within and through whom to negotiate a broken reality.[6]

[6] The title is an allusion to line 618 of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book 12:

Wearied I fell asleep: but now lead on;
In mee is no delay; with thee to goe,
Is to stay here; without thee here to stay,
Is to go hence unwilling; thou to mee
Art all things under Heav'n, all places thou,
Who for my wilful crime art banisht hence. (614-619)

Paradox Present

Part One

Shutting the book, she pushed it across the desk and leaned back, staring. This almost-silence like sitting on cold stone, the seizure of it, went deeper every second. And though she knew the generator was working - fluorescence still hummed faintly overhead - there was no filtration sound now, so her breathing would be filling up the space, the smothering quiet. Nothing would hold its shape for long.

She dragged open the drawer and glanced down, then leaned forward abruptly, snatching up the foil packet. Granddaddy must have been keeping it as a surprise. When she swallowed, the walls of her throat scraped together, struck matchspark images that flared and flickered out, but her eyes were wide open, and the cool, red-and-gold foil was warming to the heat of her palm.

last favorites fastened, ridiculous,

to numb insides, to friction-numbed

stomach distension or stuttered nerves

The coffee machine made a creaking gurgle as she poured the murky water and depressed the "on" switch. A little like animal protest. Close enough.

The smell set incoherent comfort loose in her joints as she watched the liquid fill; she could turn the blank idea of it over and over, but the scent was so overpowering that it refused association. Pouring coffee into his Atlanta Braves mug, she slurped and scalded her tongue. Thought of acidic soil runoff down the backyard. Her taste buds felt rough and thick under deadened layers, and someone started humming *blackbird has spoken*

like the first bird, way back in her brain. That sharp pain in her nose and throat, which usually meant tears, came and went. She wondered about the horrible blankness between sips.

Caffeine buzzing inside the walls of her body, scratching like wasps, every cell inside her jostled the others. But when she looked around at the bunker, it didn't seem to register that she was leaving; what was left of it was too caught up in the rich coffee smell, so much like old identity, to notice the way she'd been sharpened and shaken across its wide-eyed surface. But her insides knew. She could feel them trying to rearrange themselves, the gears and edges catching against each other while her brain braced itself against the inside of her skull. She wanted to feel the sound shell of it between caffeinated tremors, but she couldn't keep still enough in any sense that mattered, not to her mollusk brain.

We know all about the expiration dates attached to places. And now that the bunker was over too, there was no part of it that she could touch, except in passing. The quilt lay across him, over his face: a barricade. This was it, then.

~~Finis~~

Paradox Future

***

Quilt to keep warm

Just like the mountain, roots and all,

the story in the pattern in the skin sketched

over a bed, diamond fields meeting

at pressed edges.

It reaches down to a past like rock veins

and wormy chestnut and fire roaming

lost over the rise between green summers.

And the weight of it like the dead weight

of generations congealed

with forgetting the proximate past.

***

A can stood empty on the picnic table. Someone had held it too tight, and the shape of it teetered, slightly off but not so crushed it couldn't stand. The dull pattern of orange trees, anyway, acted like a mildly damaged matrix of support. If the ants hadn't discovered it yet, she thought, they would soon. 25% juice from concentrate, half of it orange, half blood-orange: so the sugars, at least, were real.

The gray, pocked table, square in the center of the campsite, threw everything off. Em could never figure out how, but it did, even with the empty juice can carefully off-center, which should have helped. The bench was cool through her thin blouse as she leaned back along the seat, and when she turned her head, she could see Lucas across the underside of the table, lying on the other bench. He'd dared her to cut his hair last night. And now it looked stiff, rust-brown and too close to the skull, with his eyebrows relaxed in ironic punctuation. He'd drawn his knees up so that the soles of his boots were flat against the surface; she imagined him standing without pushing up, feet anchored and the rest of him swinging up out of sight like some bad effect in a stop-animation film.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey, yourself."

“Ready to get going?”

“If you are.”

But she didn’t sit up. If it hadn’t been so overcast, there would have been dappled shade sliding across the two of them. A catbird fluttered out of its glide to land on the table, and she reached up instinctively to shield her face, sitting up so fast the matte light dissolved in dizzying planets, myriad retrograde. When they cleared, the bird was gone, but Lucas was standing beside the table, stretching.

“What was *that*?” he asked.

“What?”

“You spazzed.”

“Just startled.”

“Birds, the sneaky bastards.” He grinned, "I guess I'd be shell shocked too, teaching third graders all year."

She remembered another day, here in this same place. And for a slivered second, Emily’s glance shot between possibilities and overhead movements of light. Tempered spaces burned in bits and starts, time came up in conversation with color, and the bones ached in her wrists and hands. Reversed patterns on her retinas met the world exactly, and the remembered shapes and edges connected inside her kaleidoscope brain.

In jigsaw summer, light holds together,

edge to edge between leaves.

Between granulated fissures of bark,

the mutual displacement stands complete, complex,

fitted to the riddle of populous quiet

in interlocking unison, until

a single leaf extricates itself, impossibly,

and begins unravelling autumn.

That time wasn't this time.

"We should get going."

They drove all night, with the mountains constantly swerving away, circling back, and coming at them again from every angle, eerily. There was no predictable encounter with that rock ocean, teeming with leaf-scaled bodies and nocturnal eyes and haunted in shape like nothing else, or nothing living. Em and Lucas moved alone inside it; they were like bats zipping away from just-lit dark, deflecting an otherwise incontrovertible choice: whether to run off the edge of ahistorical space or smash to pieces on centuries of stone still in motion.

They had never come this far along the Parkway before. The rush of their parallel selves over the road met geographic surfaces and made something entirely new: they sensed it with the parts of their brains and fingertips not directly engaged in surviving

hairpin turns and pitched-aside spaces into blackness. Em wished they could climb out of their skins and dissolve themselves in the dark.

"How many times you think your parents've driven the Parkway?" He pulled the car left, the weight of his hand falling down the wheel like water.

"I don't know."

They passed a sign like a snapshot flashing, legible only in afterthought. *Peaks of Otter*. Strange names superimposed.

"Didn't they honeymoon up this way?"

"No," she lied. This wasn't like that. They weren't them.

When she looked at him in profile against the moving world, the broken bridge of his nose startled her, his sharp face slicing open the darkness at the headlights' edge.

***

Looking ahead, through the tiny, wire-grid window and the equally tiny kitchen, Em was already smiling. Meeting a smile made it easy. "Come in, come in," Lena gestured expansively as the door swung open, almost against her knees, then shut. Lena called their little room "the clown car." Teachers' lounge pseudo-space. Felt like the beginning of a bad joke, all those desperate adults crowding away from their students - but Lena taught kindergarten, so somewhere between scissor fits and alphabet meltdowns, she'd developed the requisite humor to survive what she called "the lesser tragedi-comedies," which, of course, included coffin-sized teachers' retreats.

"So." Lena always tipped her chair, and Em could see the spidery shadow of her hair like a halo, close against the wall. She'd done it up in a sock bun, with the flyaway wisps coming loose already, not even noon yet. "Tell me."

Emily twisted the excitement up like bits of wrapping paper, little pyramids of foil-sharp color, nerve-bright. "We're just going hiking," she said, smiling the lie into "just."

Lena clapped once, loud in the confined space, then laughed at the jump in her friend's shoulders. "Awesome. When?"

"Friday night."

"A night hike?" Lena's eyebrows were laughing now. Short jumps, mock-severe.

"Yeah, apparently there's some kind of meteor shower, so we're packing, like a picnic, kind of. With wine and some fruit. Not much." Emily swallowed, tried to swallow her smile, but it wouldn't go. And the thought of being out in the dark with him, and in a dark that might feel like home, almost might. She could swear her heart was beating xylophone music up and down her ribs. The impossible, ache-sharp homesickness filled out her anticipation, like inflating an origami shell of something - some crushable object - a snail. She could see the mountains. But this time without her parents' flat, little house, the things her father had said, the shove of it, words down her throat. She paused, opened the refrigerator - "sorry" - in Lena's face, and took out the tupperware with her name half rubbed-off. Chicken salad. Canned chicken, grapes, and walnuts, like Mama used. "Something smells weird in here," she said, wrinkling her face as the door swung shut. That suction sound.

"Vincent left shrimp over the weekend. So, but I wanna hear more about the 'perfect gentleman.'" The way she said it, Em couldn't help picturing a monocle and waxed moustaches.

"He's... nice." She shrugged, still smiling. Inched around the tiny table and sat across from Lena, who was rolling her eyes.

"Nice."

"Ok, so he's *really* nice. What do you want me to say?" she laughed.

"I want you to admit you were wrong."

"About Lucas?"

"No. Well, yes. But not just Lucas. You said you weren't interested in all that. *I so don't need a man*, right? The pact and all? You totally gave up." Lena kicked her accidentally, swinging her foot, then pretended she'd meant it. "Right?"

Emily rolled her eyes.

"*And...*?"

"And ok, I did find someone who's kind of nice *and* who is just taking me hiking, Lena. This isn't marriage. He might be a total jackass."

"I think you'd know that by now."

"What, three weeks?"

"Um, yeah."

"You're ridiculous."

"Thank you."

***

A memory fell apart somewhere overhead as the old man half-muttered, half-sang something low and indecipherable in his sleep. She looked at him, watched the tremendous rise and fall of the breath inside him slow and sink again into wheezing quiet. Then she turned to look at the unfinished canvas on the wall of the bunker. A faint runnel of rust had dripped past it, down the panel, maybe last night, certainly recently. Anything that defied the glacial sameness of this place flashed out like lightning, like *shining from shook foil*. She crossed to the sink, wet a rag, and wiped away the meager trail. Granddaddy shouldn't see it. It would mean weakness to him, and death: the world, or what was left, trickling, drop by drop, in a last, slow runoff.

In another lifetime, he had been the first one up in the morning, puttering around the kitchen with that ubiquitous sense of activity and the vague, dry whistling through cabinets. Breakfast had been his responsibility, always, and even standing up to rinse out a bowl might bring him swooping down. They'd called him Pancake Ben. There was even a song.

She filled a saucepan and slid it onto the stove, dropping the rag inside before setting it to boil. It released an uneasy smell of stagnant heat into the room, and the old man cleared his throat and grunted, pushing himself upright on the bed. He moved with geologic slowness like a mountain falling over.

"You sleep good?" he asked finally, patting down the wiry hair atop his head. *Hurricane hair*, Grandmomma'd call it. Ben and Bell. The names rang against each other.

"I did. You?"

"Can't complain." He didn't stand immediately but sat looking at nothing, leaning forward with his arms anchored in the threadbare quilt. He cleared his throat again. "I think we should open the blackberries today." Canned whole so they weighted the spoon like singular planets.

"I think maybe that'd be good." She'd expected him to say they should wait for Christmas, which was soon now.

"I hope that's not breakfast," he added, nodding at the stovetop and grinning momentarily, his sandpaper cheeks grating faintly.

"No, just a rag," she smiled.

He tottered slightly as he stood but regained his balance with a hitch of the elbows and hobbled out of the room. "You need to use the bathroom 'fore I go?" he called back.

"No, go ahead."

She could hear the curtain dragging on its rod and the cold sudden settling of porcelain.

An anticipated waver of steam from the stove collected her gaze like flypaper, and she followed it, dissipating upward, for a handful of seconds. It released her against the low ceiling, so she glanced back toward the unfinished canvas on the wall, then up where the trail of rust had come from, imagining the weight of the cabin and the mountaintop and over that the sky, also a heavy thing now, and inanimate. The difficulty lay in everything

belonging outside, overhead, still. There was memory, but it ran like the ladder up against the hatch, where you could either bash your brains out or turn back. Her own trajectory could only be downward, into the heart of the mountain: it ground out every second without a sign of recognition that she was there, huddled in the cavity of its side. Where the blood and water flowed out.

The old man murmured something from the other room.

"What?"

"Nothin."

She remembered Grandmomma painting, maybe humming her own, wandering version of *Lift Thine Eyes* over and over.

He shuffled back in, hitching up ashen sweatpants with the grease stain like a bruise on one knee. "You get the blackberries out?"

"Not yet. You hungry?"

"Little bit." He was already hobbling toward the other door, but she moved faster. "I'll get it," she said. He paused to watch her pass him, turned, and pulled out the folding chair at the table. But before he could sit, she was back with a jar of blackberries cradled in one hand.

He reached out, taking the jar. "How many left?" he asked.

"Just the one after this," she said, and he nodded.

"Christmas," he said, moving toward the stove.

"Yep."

"You done with that?" He stopped and looked back at her over his shoulder, gesturing at the now-boiling water.

"Oh, yeah," she said and dodged around him to slide the saucepan off the burner. "All yours." The nod bent downward as he gripped the jar lid and braced himself to open it, drawing his body up in a line from one shoulder, head hunched into the effort. She watched him stop and replant his feet, grunting. Saw him holding his breath, compressing it into something hard and forceful in his lungs like aerosol pressure, levered into the wrenching motion. His breath leaked out, and he set the jar in the sink, still sealed, to drag open the utensil drawer and pull out a table knife. She watched him bring the handle down hard around the edges of the lid, dents like little teeth-marks crimping it. Then the second twist. "Can I try?" she asked, but he was already banging on the lid again. The grunt was like crushed paper now, with a torn edge, and there was a dark spot under his thumbnail.

She could tell when the lid came loose because his shoulder swung back into almost-symmetry. The walls witnessed the circular, scraping sound of the jar opening, and he wiped his face with his palm before leaning back against the sink, breathing hard. "Those better be damn good," he laughed with difficulty.

***

"Yeah, well, that's what they said in '45, and we're still going to shit, far as I'm concerned." Russ tilted his chair back, crossing arms over his chest and running his

tongue over gray front teeth. He'd gone wrong buttoning his shirt, and the collar made a lopsided *V*.

"We'll be alright," said Ben, but not because he believed it. He could hear the tense whir of Bell's sewing machine through the door, and he imagined quilt squares coming together under her hands.

Russ shook his head. They both looked out the window, where moths made nervous constellations on the glass. Silent like dust and behind them the black, unavailable world. "I been working on something." He jerked his head, "at my place, up the hill."

"What's that?" The whir stopped, started again.

"Way I see it, things are even worse than they like to say," Russ said, squinting, like trying to read the future. "Or will be soon. You never get a straight answer out of scientists or politicians, and - God help us - they're the ones in charge. So I'm going to be ready, now. Building me a bunker underground, down from the spring. I got pipes running to it and a battery generator - or will have, when it's done."

"Don't you think that's a little much?" asked Ben. A luna moth beat the dark away from itself to rest, weird with suddenness and size, against the glass, and both men felt it, like the puff of air from those palm-sized wings had passed through to them, sitting at the table in their island of light. The wing-markings were like tiny, open mouths.

Russ watched it for a minute. “No,” he said.

Most people hadn’t known much of anything was wrong back then. But Russ had known. There’d been days when he’d been unable to talk about anything else. Russ, the Prophet of Doom, Bell had called him. Not that she hadn’t humored him, too, probably more than most people. She’d helped outfit the bunker, painted and picked out books. Stacked cans and quilts and toilet paper. Said if the world did come to an end, they’d need a library at least. A “little Shangri la.” And Russ had let her add whatever she liked. “When it comes down to it,” he’d said, “the three of us will just go to ground. Snug down for as long as it takes.”

***

Manroot money, inseparable art

from economic need.

The folk go gathering.

(How different, really, from sewing up quilt-sides

against the cold?)

There's a price for everything,

certainly, certainty wedded

to a kind of cost,

and living means eating, drinking,

breathing air,

remembering.

we buy the things that tell us how,

sell them like secrets.

***

The planet wasn't the problem. We'd tested bite-sized pieces of the moon to confirm it, and the earth had been around for 4.6 billion years. Enough to know itself the way shale and chloroplasts do. And bats, learning it as they go.

The crawl of it had built, on and on: bare and chitinous from blind horizons, and propelled God knows how, it the filled corners of staggering time. Atom by millennial atom. Molecule by paramecium by mollusk. Down to us.

As much as we had the right to say so about anything, earth had stood the test of time.

And, from before earth, our instruments suggested extension, mass: infinitely combustible matter sparking up in the vacuum of space.

So that eons before ourselves or our questions or our secret springs of things, we postulated a dizzying density, from one scaleless second to the next, hurtling outward in limitless ambition.

To us, we still imagined.

***

"Hey, what's wrong, honey?" Emily peeled a marker-saturated page off the bench and sat down next to Becky. The paper was still wet; it felt like a petal just starting to wilt. But Becky watched her to make sure she didn't lay it on the sidewalk. Emily draped it gingerly over her lap. "You had such a great morning. So what's up?"

A pair of third-grade eyes blinked, still murky with tears. "I don't want to tell you."

Uh oh. She reached an arm around Becky, keeping one part of her brain tuned to the kickball game going on across the field. "Hm? Ok, but if you don't tell me what's wrong, how can we make it better?"

Becky just watched the drooping edges of her marker drawing, like she'd already considered this. Her jumper was starch-stiff, except where she had been gripping the skirt. Emily could see the anxious, crumpled lines like wastepaper in palm-sized spots across the child's lap.

"I like your picture," she said finally.

"Thank you. It's my dog," Becky sniffed.

"Looks like a good buddy you got there."

"She's dead."

Em stopped paying attention to the kickball game, which seemed to be maintaining equilibrium so far, at least, and turned to face Becky. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry. Was it over Easter?"

Becky nodded. "Then we got a new puppy. His name is Fitz."

"I bet he's nice."

"Yes. But I miss Lizzy, too." Becky's eyes followed the kickball in a wide arc.

"Of course you do, honey. Is that why you were crying?"

She shook her head.

"Oh. Um, are you feeling ok? I should have asked that first, huh?" She felt the girl's forehead with the back of her hand. "You need to see the nurse?"

"No. I feel fine."

"Well, then," Em glanced at the field in time to make eye contact with Augy, all set to peg Max in the back of the head. She lowered her gaze, shaking her head slowly, and he danced backward, threw the ball straight up, and made a goofy cartwheel, as much as to say, *See? And YOU thought…* Em just gave him her angled, teacher smile and turned her eyes back to Becky.

"Mom said I can't go play on the playground today." The waterworks starting up.

"Did she say why?" asked Em carefully, as Becky crumpled another handful of skirt.

"She said if I wanted to wear my nice dress, I couldn't go run around and play at recess."

Em's face twitched. She glanced down at the colorful epitaph in her lap. "Well, you look real nice, Becky."

The child looked down. "But then Max called me the most boring girl in class. He said it was stupid to sit on the bench. And then he laughed."

"He did, huh?" She glanced back at the field. "That wasn't very nice. But, you know, he probably said it because he wishes you could go play too. And you know you're not stupid."

Becky nodded.

"I'll talk to him, Becks." Em patted her shoulder with as little levity as she could manage, then stood up and set the drawing back on the bench. "It's a great picture." She could hear someone calling from the field.

"It won't bring her back, though," Becky sighed, like she was repeating something she'd heard a grown-up say, and Emily paused.

"It'll be ok," she said again.

Part Two

Myotis

Echo-layers mount, mean resistance, mass:

a shriek-breaking barrier wall in animate dark, in the dark

I read in the folds of my face, my funnel ears, make

sense of shape by the bounce of bounded waves

as rock and shell and bark go teeming, too,

down furred sides and affectionate, fingerbone wings.

I sharpen to the chase and the singular shout, chitinous, the wing

crunched out of that surrounding space that sings mass

back at me. Ah the gulp and the sensitive, limb-tangled flash. Self, too,

in the moving, in air that fleshes and finds my moving in the dark,

spells it back to my sisters, who hear enough to wave

inside the pattern: swing and clutch down slopes of their own make.

We hear us, still melt behind shrill silhouettes, the shapes we make

sliding from themselves in shivers, shingles, plates wing-

stuttered in seraphic pairs; they play between voices and so slip the taught wave
of gazing, like a net. So I riddle myself, so many aimed angles of mass
cast back. And speed makes a guess of me inside indirect dark
to the other who speaks, falling, time-broken too.

It's the wholeness of rock, of me, that insists, tricks my brain, a game building two
of one and three of two and all shifted sly of the axis we make
in movement. So I play my sisters down the sky, down the mountain box dark
with sediment sides: his linings humming black vibrations, wing to wing.
And each dodge loose of rock remembers the huddled muteness massed
under, so softly, cave-settled selves completing the daylight dark in waves.

Because we keep it, sleeping, dip bodies well in waves
of it, stir like leaves. And the yielding totality, envelopment soaks down to
our bones, to the roots of each echoing synapse, while stone shrugs mass
back down to night, shoulders over us stars, and we scatter, remake
the universe in the dense space of seconds as unweaving wings
wake to separateness, shovel layered lines in the wet-sand, outside shore of dark.

As I run the game, the slight, fierce, furrowed smattering of self, of dark
me, swings under and under the song-deciphered shapes like backlit waves,
and I stir the particulate air. And the thrum, my stealthy breathing, my wings,
flows in articulate dark as we shout the discernible forms, speak to
them the tune of bodies in our knowing of foreknown shapes, make
sure to ring the truest outline of prey in the flare of nerve-bright mass.

How is it I create them from the dark: the image, mass,
matched in sound totality? While waves, to which we each respond, make
the shape of voice, wings, own eyes, lit sounds of the self, sing evidence too?

***

Jigsaw puzzles made her think of the "upstairs," the old world before the bunker, maybe in the rain: seams showing through where granite moved, geologic fissures blending into the striped shadows of trees, the earth held upright like hands knit in prayer, and mountains fitted under each other in dire complexity. The pieces made each other fit in the darkness of silent time, and you trusted it. All the seams in the dark spaces were things that you could trust because, though you couldn't see them, you saw the places they made, the gaps of hiddenness and sloped mystery like ridges in a hive. Everything fitted to the light or the absence of light.

The puzzle pieces came together slowly, more slowly than she'd expected, and the laborious jigsaw edges crammed deftly among memories so that she had difficulty distinguishing, for moments together, the pieces she fitted together now with the ones, the same ones, she'd made to fit last month or last year, when the changes overhead were different, though still unknown, from the changes going on today. Upstairs. Around the corner. What did that mean anymore? Something alive, surely, if only in the mingled brokenness inside a box.

She swirled the familiar, fragmented pieces in the lid. She wouldn't look at the picture. Hints would spoil it, since the gradual discovery of place was as close as she could come to arriving anywhere new. There was no puzzle image of the bunker, except the one she'd formed over and over in her mind, between the spines of Grandmomma's books and the corners of tables and chairs.

He was moving in the next room, and she listened, her fingers twitching shut over a piece of sky. Like an 'X' marking some inconsequential segment of space that might hold stars, or did, invisibly. He coughed, and she almost said, "God bless you," but stopped herself and scanned the gaps in the puzzle-place spread over the table. It felt like seven o'clock, she decided, and stood to make herself a cup of tea.

***

It had been a long drive, the rain spinning off the truckers' wheels in fractured clouds like an automatic car wash, and with comparable visibility. She could feel the tense buzz at the back of her eyes, the surreal thinness of focus that came from straining down obscure roadways, pounding with shrouded traffic, for too long. Just turning to

glance over her shoulder before changing lanes, it took her a second to catch and record the swung fragment of road. Temperature on the dash said 48: cold for October, she thought, dragging back to the grinding mess of spray.

She stopped for coffee in Staunton, then again in Christiansburg, thinking caffeine could at least prop open her brain. When she hurtled back onto 81 South, Emily realized she was halfway to the cabin if she just changed her mind and went there instead. No Gran now. First no Grandmomma, then no Gran - just generations retracting into time.

But for a minute she *was* there: and a smaller Emily could tuck her fingers in the crook of Gran's arm, burrow into the loose skin while head and shoulders wriggled up under the elbow. "Sing the favorite song," came the snaggle-tooth voice, hair going out like feelers with the static electricity. *Standing on the promises of God.* And the voice and the rough, white hair, the corded hands, would hold the same quavered conviction. Em had sung too, coming up under the words without understanding them. Just chirped them over and over, up and down the ladder to the attic, where she wasn't allowed inside.

Someone gunned past her, and Emily jumped, heart thud flushing her with a strange kind of embarrassment. She'd slowed down without meaning to. Swallowing, she pressed the accelerator and came up to speed, kept going. Not far now.

The storm, at least, was starting to wear out, though the used-up air still leaned against her windshield as she gripped the wheel and pulled off the interstate. Close now. And she shrugged against the seat, watching the street signs swing past, in slow, definite sequence.

Her parents' road had been widened and repaved recently, the lines bright on wet asphalt and a new, raw ditch tracing unsteady edges. The rust-dark dirt looked naked under scattered straw and spray-green grass seed, but the chicory and ragweed were gone. Day lilies, too. The mailbox at the end of the gravel drive, still hanging open, had been moved back and resettled slightly a kilter, but someone had stenciled a border of smog-gray lace down the sides of the post. When she pulled in past it, the rocks crunched under her tires, and yanking the parking break felt like dropping an anchor.

Mama knew that Emily wouldn't have come back for any other reason. But there she stood in the doorway now, barefoot in a black cotton dress, trying to hide the biggest smile Em had ever seen. It flickered on and off, her grief like intermittent static with some Gospel song playing along behind it. "You made it." She was reaching before Em could put down the overnight bag, and as soft arms snapped shut around her, the house smell sifted over them: mildew and disinfectant, beer and burnt caramel and pine flooring. When she pulled back, Mama's hands kneaded her arms, gripping and flexing distractedly. "You look older." Emily frowned and her mother blushed faintly, embarrassed by the vague, insinuated guilt between them. "So when did you cut your hair so short?"

"I don't know. Sometime last year."

"Oh. Well, it looks real nice."

"Thanks."

They stared at each other without speaking for a minute. Mama's waist-long ponytail had finally gone gray.

"Come on in and sit. Can I get you anything? Some water? It's such a long drive."

"No thanks, Mama."

"Funeral's tomorrow morning, and then the reception."

"Ok. Do you need help with anything?"

"Oh, I got everything under control. Already have about fifty chess squares in the fridge. Sylvia and the other ladies are taking care of the rest. You sure I can't get you a snack or something?"

Em followed her into the kitchen and stood on the curling linoleum, watching her straighten things that were already straight, take out and put back a tupperware full of unshelled peanuts, and minutely adjust the porcelain nativity scene on the counter. "This has been so hard on your daddy." She poured half the water from her glass into a potted plant; its soil was rimmed with a tentative fuzz. When she looked up, there was an impossible tremor under her left eye.

"I know."

"We just didn't expect it like this."

"What happened?"

"Heart attack. After her Wednesday night game."

"She still played Progressive Gin," said Emily, unsure whether or not it was a question.

"Said it kept her sharp."

"What time is the service?"

"Ten. You bring a dress?"

"Yes. I haven't forgotten the rules."

Mama frowned. The light coming through the kitchen blinds made stripes across the floor. "Well, how's Lucas?" The question was so thin it could have fit into one of those stripes.

"I wouldn't know." A catbird startled in her brain.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It's ok. He was a jackass." And there was the silence that burned inside words like that, here in this house. Jackass. Bitch. Fuck it. "When's Dad getting back?" But she could already hear the cold, crunching roll of tires on gravel.

"That'll be him." The refrigerator rattled as Mama opened it, and a trail of condensation slid down the edge of the door. She snapped a beer off its plastic ring. "Here, you go visit. I'll start on dinner."

By the time Emily had reached the door, she could already hear him clearing his throat on the other side, boots scraping on the mat with the American flag on it. There was no sound of keys in the lock; her parents hadn't locked their door in the thirty-five years they'd been married, and it always came up at least twice:

"It's not like the city. We've never locked our house; never given us a minute's hesitation. Fact, one night Ed Shaner came in and used the phone to call in his wife's

stroke. Saved her life, and not a minute too soon. If he'd had to wake us up to get in, she'd have been cold in her grave, guaranteed."

"Ed should have had his own phone line. Then he wouldn't have had to waste all that time getting next door."

"He did have; they disconnected it. And you know, Emily Grace, that's what neighbors are for."

"To call in medical emergencies?"

"Don't be smart."

The door swung open, and she moved back to let him step in off the porch, but he stayed put for a minute. "You made it," he said, and for one uncomfortable second she thought he was tearing up, but instead he set down the casserole dish he'd been carrying and gathered her up in a swift, massive hug. Dad was a big man; his affection, when it came, was like brisk, emphatic punctuation. "We weren't sure. With the end of school, you know."

"I wouldn't miss this." She handed him the beer. "Mama's in the kitchen."

"I figured," he nodded, pulling the tab with the metallic, sucking sound that brought back too much. "That woman is tireless." Then, after a pause, "Service is ten tomorrow."

"I know."

He finally stepped inside, and they stood there for a minute with the sound of the stovetop ticking through the walls as the gas caught and flared up. Mama always held

her breath lighting the stove, like breathing would suck away the fumes before the flame could settle. One of the burners hadn't worked for years, and one had to be lit by hand, but the other two could still be coaxed to life.

"So how was the drive?"

"Not too bad," she said, nodding. She caught herself crossing her arms the same way he did and forced them down to her sides. He didn't ask about Lucas, and she didn't volunteer anything.

"Your Aunt Grace is coming in the morning."

"I'm glad."

"Not sure, though, how many cousins can make it."

"I'm sure they'll come."

"Yeah, I don't know about that." They were both moving toward the kitchen now, and Em could hear the outline of the pot sloshing across the stove. "You never know with these kids. They just don't feel the same about family anymore."

She pressed her lips tight over the answer, reminded herself that he'd lost his mother already. And now his grandmother, now Gran. But she couldn't say the things she knew he wanted.

***

I'm sure they forgot me. Everything so quiet. I was going home today, and now it's already night and I can't find my robe. They must have packed it and taken it with them, thinking I was there. It all comes from silence, from being too quiet too long in the

background while they're playing backgammon and progressive gin and the other game with the missing pieces in the cabinet. Not like bingo at all. Stuffed prizes in bags like suffocated kittens and things you have to claim, loudly. All gone now.

The hallway is too dark, like I thought. No one could see anything between the mountain walls if they tried. Canyon or cavern. Is it bats moving?

The flesh-edged, darting shape moved back and forth across the hall; the bones in her feet rocked on their narrow contact with tile, ground her heels unevenly into the floor in a tentative staccato like stilts of fear or furtiveness. She was naked, but she thought it might be better this way. Nothing to close her off from the dark hallway shooting off to the exit. She could ride the direction of it this way, unsteady herself.

Birds at the window remind me of the chickadees making an art of smallness up on the mountain. They used to flicker in and out of spaces only just larger than they were between the leaves, the light. They could see things that I couldn't, opening spaces between spaces, and knowing which would shift to let them through. Bats can see things, too, with their voices, and that draped abruptness: wings like bunting in caught, flickered waves - there's more purpose to it than people think. Things we can't see. And my feet on the floor make one of those things: some meaning.

"Mrs. Eller?"

Naked in their light, for a minute she turned her eyes toward the exit, downhill from the static capture of that flashlight beam. "They left without me," was the sound that startled her: words in her voice, but not steady like the thoughts they echoed. That's what came from voicing a moment that was gone. Seconds or hours, the past fell equally

out of reach, and speaking it could only waver, disconnected. "Ben. My son left without me."

"Alright, let's get you back to your room, now."

The bat shapes would wait until the hall was empty again and the lights had left.

When the woman in soft grays came back out into the hall, closing the door behind her, she didn't speak. Mason was still holding the flashlight, but he had switched it off, and with it their weird, swallowing shadows. Instead he'd engaged the low overheads, and they were standing now in the dim, purple underside of fluorescence, a dull ache. "We're going to have to start locking her in," he said.

"You know we can't do that."

"Yeah."

He walked back toward the lobby, but she looked down the hall one more time before following. Laurel Hill was nice enough, but every time she caught that woman running around at night, it just sank the knowledge deeper: she'd never let them take her to a nursing home. Half-hotel, half-hospital. It sent your voice back to you, wrapped in gauze.

***

She sat down and opened to the first blank page, slid the cap off her pen, and stopped.

I've been thinking about Gran. Being here with Granddaddy, shut in the bunker, makes me think of her - of her being one step closer to a time before

terminal velocity. She comes up behind our conversations every time. Has to. Gemma Lane Eller is more than a name.

The last time I went to visit her at Laurel Hill, I think she was watching for me. Soon as I'd cleared the slow swing of automatic doors and stepped into the lobby, her eyes that were always moving grabbed hold, and she raised her hand like she was hailing a cab. Told Granddaddy to go wait outside.

"I have to tell you something," she'd said. Her hand was soft and cold over mine, but the edge of one, hard nail bit into the side of my thumb. "You may not like it."

I waited, and a man with a fanny pack and long, drooping eyes stared at me through an ornamental fern.

"I'm getting married again. Marrying a Catholic."

I remember blinking, then trying not to smile. "Oh. Really?" Wondering if she was thinking about Mama, remembering and forgetting in exactly the right gradations to make it all new.

"It'll shame the family."

The man behind the fern scratched a yellowed patch of skin under his jaw and moved closer to the entrance. Sat down. The rug under his shoes was worn to almost nothing. I remember that. The comings-and-goings bald spot.

"Well, I can help you plan the wedding, if you want," I remember saying, but I was still watching the man watching me across the empty, travelled places on the rug.

She looked up quickly. "Would you?"

I did smile then. "Sure."

"I think we should consider that Catholic church down the mountain. Something of the Hills. You know?"

I couldn't remember the name, but she kept going anyway, about the bridesmaids and the cake and the best time to tell the rest of the family. She wasn't looking at me anymore, but every so often, she'd shake her head. "Shame the family." When I'd got back home that night, I'd thought about all the places she'd been in her life, and where she'd gone to now, with the words making things real that made sense only to her, and only while she was saying them.

I still dream about her sometimes. Walk her down the aisle, with bats hanging in the rafters and a mute, massive fern hiding the altar from sight.

She put down the pen, sat still for a minute. If she waited for the words to dry down into the paper, at least she could read it over again, convince herself it had happened as it had.

***

The last time I stepped into her eyes that were always moving,

her hand was soft and cold over mine.

The edge of one, ornamental smile, remembering and forgetting,

was worn to almost nothing. I remember that.

And I was still the empty place on the mountain.

Something *of the Hills*. You know?

The words still dream about her.

Walk her down the aisle.

***

We few, fewer, measure them most by absence now

by space, try, strain vibrations through the closing dark

and the falling folds of our bodies. Few, fewest, last,

with the dark darker for the gone drum of wings, the drone of prey.

Hunger and skeletal motions chase us down the sky -

hungry, fall-from-the-stone hungry - we are heavy with it,

with remembering what it felt to make more from us,

from the bound-inside stir, mine. No more myriad.

No mate not gone before me, last, last,

the dark sunk deeper than my words.

Part Three

Dry strands of grass, like ortolan bones, articulated the graveyard space, building rough, crunched footprints under her as Rebecca pushed through the heat. Sun glare like the final word. Like life gets sucked down underneath when you start putting bodies in the ground, parceling out their possessions - somehow you end up at the chthonic fringe of place, with the ground tamped down between you and an unknown past. Suddenly occurred to her how names get leveled when you become *Mama, Honey, Love*. Maybe the past goes too, with *Rebecca*. When you take a man's name, give it to your daughter: supplant yourself with *Emily, Honey, Love.*

She had worn the wrong shoes, too thin, so the leftover shards of grass snagged her steps. But there was a strange satisfaction, too, in the dry, underfoot sound, the decisive crush that at least meant no one else had stepped here yet, not for a long time. The sound reminded her of autumn leaves - that same fragile, underfoot reproach - while her feet flexed the thin, rubber soles of her shoes, felt every blade burnt and crumbling. And even though she knew someone from the church behind her had seeded this grass and mown it and reseeded over each grave, Rebecca imagined Cherokee words, that were sound and substance before Sequoya, going out in search of balance with every fractured spire underfoot. The bones in her feet warmed to the solid, ruined ground, and there was a kind of mercy in it, in the pressed close heat and the solidity.

This church had been built over and over in vicarious memory, in the stories her Papa had told about his: the ambidextrous pitcher, conscientious Quaker, nicknamed "Possum" who knew why. Stole himself a Catholic bride from Iowa, and Papa born five

months after the wedding. Not a story you told your kids, at least not if you could help it, but Em never asked those questions anyway.

They'd helped build the church behind her, Papa and his father, though it wasn't theirs. Jacked the old, frame building up and slid stubborn logs underneath to roll it away like the Ancient Egyptians might have done, making space for the brick rows of substance going up in its place: Grace United Methodist. Said someone bought the original church when the congregation decided to rebuild, but no one seemed to know where it was now. Rebecca imagined living in it, or the shell of it, with pews and altar gone. Maybe they'd kept the old windows. There'd be a couch and a kitchen table, cabinets along the back and a refrigerator humming prayerfully. The smell of it would always be like a church no matter what you did. Something about the breathing and the sweat and the spilled waters at the intersection of vertical and horizontal words, worlds.

It reminded Rebecca of standing under the St. Francis window in her own parish - the baptizing green light going through her, with the friar-brown and halo-gold; she'd be standing there this Sunday, too, on the other side of the mountain from Jim, speaking her conviction in "all things visible and invisible." It turned over the earth in furrows, radiating out from the present on which she stood.

Corn still grew in the neighboring field, crowding the cemetery fence, but its stalks rattled, parched to their black silk tufts and dusted a vivid, ferrous orange at the base. There should have been a story to match the image.

Turning and walking slowly back to her car, she calculated the minutes necessary to drive home. She should make it in time to put dinner in the oven. Drawing the keys

out of her purse, she thought about the dust already settled over the windshield in a fine, tender film. The pads of her fingers felt dry and silky opening the door.

Pausing for one last look at the cemetery, over the top of the car, Rebecca remembered her father's face across the table, while he watched her unwrap a birthday gift that last summer in the world; his eyes had been sharp and inquisitive, like he'd forgotten what it was he'd bought her. Rebecca couldn't remember now either. But she did recall the late afternoon funeral.

She'd wanted to see it again, this place Grandpapa, then Papa, had wanted to be buried, though it wasn't his church or even his religion. Granny Rae was laid next to her parents in Iowa; maybe that was why.

The thought of him laying the brick, rolling away the old frame space made her think of tombs opening. Stones rolling, though it wasn't the same. She imagined this church going too, and tried to see what walls came next. She should go. Jim would be waiting. She hadn't told him she was driving out this way today, and if she wasn't back by the time he got home, he'd worry.

***

The old kitchen, the ubiquitous tupperware. The burnt-sugar smell that was maybe something else since it never did quite go away. There were other things about it Em could remember, but the best of it was always sitting on the counter, helping stir pancake batter, "cakers," or cut out biscuits or lick whipped cream off the beaters, on a special occasion, when Cool Whip wouldn't cut it. Sometimes Mama would tickle Em's knees and make her kick, thud heels into the aluminum face of the dishwasher - bang - like

backstage thunder effects. The matching salt and pepper shakers, painted to look like red and white hens, sat on the table mostly, but if company came, you brought out the glass-cut ones that had been a wedding present. There was a serving pitcher once, too, but someone had knocked it off the counter and broke it. So there was no putting it back together.

And Emily remembered, too, watching her father talk with Uncle Danny, holding their beers with one hand, the other hand stuck in a back pocket in exact mirror images of each other, without knowing. Which was funny when you thought about the differences between them.

Uncle Danny had met Aunt Grace in college, taken her to upstate New York to meet his family the Christmas of their junior year. He'd wanted to move up there, closer to his parents, later on, but he somehow never got them closer than Maryland. Went to law school straight after Virginia Tech and got a job with the Social Security Administration. Em remembered visiting their house in the suburbs for the first time when she was five or six, and thinking the neighborhood, the streets, the shape of the rooms and the clean, bricked-in faces of those pretty houses were like something out of a book. Uncle Danny would chase her and her cousins around, play with them, throw them over his shoulder and growl and march around with his chest puffed out, still with his tie and coat on; sometimes he switched and chased Aunt Grace. But outside of his alter ego, the tickle bear, Uncle Danny was the kind of man who kept a schedule, combed his hair, and kept his toothpaste tube rolled up at the bottom. He wasn't a storyteller, like Em's father, but he always listened to the cousins' homework troubles and baseball stats and who was charging what at the farmers' market.

Jim Eller had asked Rebecca to marry him after three months courting. He'd gotten a job managing a factory floor outside Pulaski, and there was a logic to the asking: they could set up house and start fresh, both of them, "not too awful far" from either family. Aunt Grace went much farther north, marrying Uncle Danny those several years later. Emily heard her tell Grandmomma once, it felt like a different planet. She hadn't understood that before she visited.

***

But nothing in translation is the same,

though the same sounds beat and buckle,

seeking balance in familiar words.

When you try, you only press them into lines,

thick like holes dug with your hands but filling up

from saturated earth.

A bat's spoken sight, world-making,

requires negation, or the space through which to move,

revolve, rebound to a stretched-membrane self.

It requires negation to ride the curved earth

and not crash.

Sacredness needs space to flavor sound,

and send it back: true to broken logics

that let in the infinite.

And when we forget our stories,

we forget our thoughts,

which are words,

which are sounds,

for nothing in translation is the same.

***

You could smell it from outside the house, drawing you right in, even before Mama yelled to finish up and wash hands for supper. Chicken and dumplins and shuck beans cooked down with a ham bone and plenty of pepper. And tonight, mashed potatoes. He'd do like Daddy and make a well in the middle, pour hot spoonfuls of the spicy bean juice in so it soaked the mound, made it steam all over again. Ben's mouth watered. The pecan tree laced up that sinking sky while he walked quick under it, shuffling a little to warn the ducks since he'd kicked the one last week, accidentally, in the shade and the dark. He'd yelled at the warm, soft bulk of it, caught and decentered and sprawling like a clumsy football with legs and a healthy sense of personal grievance.

Made his skin crawl, there being something live and solid in the dark where you couldn't see it.

As he crossed the rough, shady dark under the tree, back from the cowshed and into the kitchen, Gretchen snuffed her wet nose under his palm, loving the cow smell there, and Ben laughed. All that chicken-and-dumplins smell, and she still said hello in the crater of his hand.

Later on, she'd follow him out to the corn crib, stretch under the rib-held ears and watch him and his brother, swinging at bats with their tobacco sticks. And tomorrow, Saturday, late in the afternoon in the field - while they'd use the driest, biggest old cow pies for bases, dead-puffs of dust coating their feet - she'd watch their baseball game, knowing to chase only the fouls. Good dog, from a litter of five, down Barter's Branch.

"Wash up, get your brother," Mama rubbed a vigorous arm under her chin, caught the drop of sweat there on the sharp edge of it, wrist cocked like it was still coated with flour. "Go on, now."

Ben liked to think about the future, getting ready for a supper like this. It didn't need any seasoning to imagine the land coming back to him, some land close by, at least. You felt like it just had to. Just like there might not be chicken and dumplins every night, but there would always be chicken and dumplins. The unarguable, familiar food let you draw lines backward and forward in time, never getting so far off the ground you couldn't tell where they headed. And if there wasn't any girl, particular, he could think of being a wife, he knew there'd be one. And she'd go along beside that line, like he would. And they'd talk over the table like Mama and Daddy did, with the chickens gone quiet outside,

and the cow. Maybe some pigs, like Daddy talked about getting. You didn't need much convincing to see it.

***

The lights shut out everything past that low, chain link fence on the opposite side of the diamond. And the green, it was vividly absurd down there, and flat, the way you imagine Ireland looks as the airplane slides down a rainbow to land on the yellow-brick tarmac. The lights had come on at some point, but it must have been before things dimmed away because she hadn't noticed a switch from dark to bright. Just realized, suddenly, that the constant, clean view of the bases and the cropped grass and the elaborately postured players had seemed to soak up all the color from outside, drawn it in and left a curtain dark between them and the rest of the world. It was a cozy feeling, actually. Made the experience of minor-league baseball into something colorfully concentrated. Like everyone there in the stands had focused hard enough that their attention made a spotlight reality in this specific instance. The intense power of will.

Emily leaned her elbows on her knees and looked down their row to her father, who was gesturing at home plate, gripping a nonchalant beer in a way that changed, somehow, the solid tilt of his shoulders. Mama just nodded, watching, pretending not to notice while Granddaddy snuck chips from her half-finished nachos. Emily grinned, but it slipped sideways, and she let it. Staying with Granddaddy meant the occasional visit home now, driving him, but this string of them, all there together, spelled something that wasn't quite true.

It was still warm, even after the sun had gone down, and she settled her instep closer against the condensation-wet cup between her feet. Glad she'd worn flip-flops for once.

The baseball skimmed from player to player, occupying its own orbit, with a center fixed somewhere deep down. Molten core of the earth, maybe. That was the real reason why you wanted to hit the ball - crack - out of the little, fenced-in space. It disrupted the trajectory, defied the laws and the constancy and snapped you out in decisive motion, past the civilized, greened-in space.

"We used to try to hit the bats with a tobacco stick, like swinging a bat." Granddaddy offered.

Emily glanced up toward the lights, checking for flying shapes. "You see a bat?"

"No. Bet we do, though, some time tonight."

"You ever actually hit one?"

"Nope, they'd always swerve away at the last second. They'd come for the weevils, at the corn cribs. They had slatted sides, so we had to be careful about weevils. And the bats would show up, too."

"So didn't you want them to eat the bugs?" She looked at Granddaddy, then back down at the diamond, following his relaxed gaze. The man coming up to bat was shorter than the others. He made the same shapes they all did, squaring themselves into focus, cocked and ready.

"Oh, we didn't bother 'em none."

"I feel like somebody trying to beat me to death would bother me," twisting a skeptical glance at him, half-smiling.

"Never did hit one."

She watched the batter swing and miss, and the strike flicked up on the board with changeable precision. "Still," she said.

"Your grandmomma hated that story."

Emily didn't say anything.

***

Lena had taken a personal day to drive her to Grandmomma's funeral. "You really don't have to," Emily had said, feeling how thin her own voice went, saying it. "I'm ok."

But Lena had just hugged her, tilted a look that said *I know how ok you are*, and steered them both out of the teachers' lounge.

It was a long drive, but Emily didn't remember most of it. When she thought back, it was like skimming something off the top, moving over a surface that was all about the things being churned up from underneath. But Lena had been talking, she knew. Telling funny stories about things the kids had said. Questions they'd asked. She'd keep glancing over at Emily, quick, quiet looks, and go right on talking.

The way she looked over reminded Em of Grandmomma, then. Which only brought back the whole unreality, shoved it down underneath them, so the car became a

knife, scraping impossible death down the road behind them, spreading it out. The suddenness of everything - not knowing there was even a problem until it was too late to change - brought it all back, with memory connecting at uneven synapses, sending messages the wrong way down and dredging up, stretching out an out-of-joint past.

Grandmomma looked sideways at her for a split second, then smiled back into what she was doing, like looking in a mirror. "Oh, you'll see. Things usually turn out better than you expect." Emily watched her dip a long, narrow brush in the water and swirl it around. Billows like dust came off the soft tip, trailing it down to the bottom of the jar, then the soft bristles flatted against the side, the round base, and clouds diffused through the whole jar: a blue like distance.

"Have you decided what you're going to paint?" Emily changed the subject, drawing her knees up under her chin like she was still a child. The old, cane chair was too low, but she didn't get up. Just crossed her arms over her knees and craned her neck to see the whole, mostly-blank canvas.

"Mm-hm," Grandmomma nodded.

"What's it going to be?"

"It's always mountains." She laughed at herself. "Even when it's not." Then glanced at Emily again. "But it'll be ok. The job. Teaching is a wonderful thing, you know. At any level. Nothing like it to show you what you know and what you don't." She squeezed a perfect globe of yellow ochre onto the palette and dipped the not-quite-clean brush into it, spreading a ragged shadow in the still-wet blue.

"Do you ever sketch it out beforehand?" asked Emily, watching.

"Sometimes."

She always started off slow, but the longer she painted, the more impatiently her brush moved, pushing and pulling the colors, smearing them together or laying them out, thick, on top of one another. And the colors would start to fight, in a way that made sense only to themselves, and Grandmomma would stop glancing sideways, stop speaking. Em would hear the bristles rasping against the plastered-over weave of the canvas. Dunked in the murky water, the brush looked frayed, harried, and Grandmomma herself pushed her lips tight shut and stared like she was possessed, sometimes humming the same, compressed snatch of tune over and over.

She'd start slowing down once the mixed forms filled up her canvas space. Slow down, quieting. Looking hard at the way it had all happened, she'd step back and pause, then go back and add a murmur of color here, there. Protest of green down the edge of a cloud-smothered ridge. Question mark cloud, goldenrod, cupped sideways, precise, in the tangle of sky.

"There." She put down the brush. Looked at it. Looked at Emily again, and smiled. But there was always another half-dozen times she would stop, passing it while it dried, and touch a finger to the surface, to blend some ungentle division or clip the wing-slope of a hill.

They set three or four of her paintings on easels at the wake. "Did she do those?" Lena asked, and Emily nodded, wishing she could remember all the things Grandmomma

had ever told her, when they'd sat on the porch swing, or in the kitchen - or when she gave the "always mountains" their impossible colors. But the wrong bits kept coming together, building and sliding, and when she tried to push them away, they just snarled and became something else. Became mountains.

She could hear her father's voice, the same insoluble pain there. She knew he was shaking his head, and she felt Lena look at her when he said it, when he knew she could hear. Like his hands gripping her arms, shaking once, twice, sharp, to snap a lesson home at the top of her brain. "No, I don't know. Sometimes you just wonder about people." The catch there, like a fingernail snagged in pantyhose, something you don't try to fix, just throw away. "Cold fish, I guess." His incomprehensible daughter. And then he was crying, and Mama was comforting him. And Emily was staring at the painting, not crying, not doing anything.

***

The first time the lights went out, she was reading aloud while Granddaddy worked his puzzle. He hadn't wanted any help this time, though he never said so. She'd read slowly, propping up each word like a domino and seeing how far she could go before the spell broke and the whole row flattened itself back into place on the page. The next words were already waiting in her brain, filing forward, tiptoe, on tenterhooks: *There he goes now; to him nothing's happened; but to me, the skewer seems loosening out of the middle of the world. Haul in, haul in* - when it happened. And the dark.

The suddenness was an implosion; it sucked the words down with everything else in a shocked vividness of black. Or maybe it was the opposite: the walls shooting outward

and the nothing outside rushing in until everything was the same sensory vacuum, edges shut down by infinity and no way to know where your own body ended and darkness took over. Implosion. Explosion. Felt exactly the same.

"Emily?" his voice in that dark took up too much space, and the hair on her arms stood up. She could hear him now, making his way toward her, feeling for the narrow couch that used to exist, that she used to be sitting on, reading a novel, before everything got snapped off and dissolved. When he found her shoulder, the stab of adrenaline in her hands and chest forced her breath out in a punctured gasp, but at the same time, she was aware of the book in her hands, the mitigated roughness of stiff pages and the worn-out spot at the base of the spine where the binding gave to pressure. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she breathed, shifting on the couch. Contact with the fabric proved the contours of her body: her self still there in the dark. "What happened?"

"Not sure," he said, but the words drifted over her head, no mooring. She could feel them unraveling in undefined space. "Stay here." His hand was gone from her shoulder, and the sound of him fumbling away took the fleeting shell of place with him. There was a sense of fascination in the slipping away, too, and the narrowing tunnel of the real. It built itself out of sound like a sandcastle corridor melting behind him. He was going to the utility room to check the generator. There would be a flashlight on the shelf by the door, and he would find it, switch it on, and play that stark, singular beam over real walls and solid objects. Her brain crawling horribly, Emily imagined him reaching for the door only to find more space. Space that would fill up, somehow, with their own breathing if the generator stayed off.

Minutes built without meaning, collecting by imperceptible degrees.

The sudden snap of light and the groaning whir of circulation shocked the bunker back into reality. Flickered. Then held. The resuscitated angles of furniture - their simultaneous flatness and sharpness defined a space that crowded matter-of-factly out of the dark. But that act of creation - of recreation - edged itself with the fraught refusal to acknowledge that the dark had happened at all. The table's innocence destabilized it, and the chairs stiffened self-consciously like alien things masquerading a false, unarguable familiarity.

"Battery," he said, moving like someone getting used to his body again. He shifted over the grinding intersection of bones and tendons.

"You change it?"

"Yup."

"Those are supposed to last longer. Isn't that what he was always saying, that he had everything figured out - all the latest innovations?"

The old man shrugged. "Seemed like."

Emily looked at him; he was breathing too hard, and the cough was rattling up again, going along the bones of his spine and hitting every one like a stick down a picket fence. He shoved it out and cleared his throat of the left-behind echoes. She waited until it was gone. "How many batteries we have left?"

"Enough."

***

There are disasters of fruit

piling up, a plunder

of choice that never goes bad

or fades off the specials flyer, week to week.

Newsprint produce just swarms the section

without comment,

and there's something to be said

for the tight shine of apples in February

or bananas anytime.

We, the consumer, choose time

(I declare it!)

outside space and irrespective

of season or touched seeds, felt skins.

Seedless April watermelons,

in fact, make homesick fare

fit for the pilgrim,

hawked hulking from cardboard pens.

(If I thump their tropic sides, the sound

sticks in the pulp,

generating inevitability:

I mean, it comes from gods in lab coats

- Pan twirling clear pipettes -

who try to perfect the floating gene.)

Someone may pay, I think,

but not us

in our well-lit aisle.

***

"This is for you as much as me." It had been an aimed, righteous kind of fury he shoved across the space between them. Flashing eyes, controlled mouth. In his element, then.

"What a load of bullshit." Livid as she was, Em enjoyed the perverse, blasphemous feeling of hissing it back in his face, keeping the edge between her teeth. Hoped it might chip away at the marble pedestal under his damn clay feet.

"You know your dad pulled me aside last Christmas. To warn me - said you'd never put down roots, didn't know where you came from when it came down to it. Thought you were scared of staying put, raising a family." He shook his head, threw out a hand like pushing a curtain open. "Wanted to know what I thought about it all."

She stared at Lucas, at the cracks she imagined slithering dusty down his cheeks and neck. She wanted to hit him, explode the son of a bitch with one good punch. Even though she knew, somehow, that it would only push him higher up Mount Olympus.

"And I stuck up for you." Of course he had. Dutifully. Same sword (going snickersnack) as now. Making the same sense. "But he wasn't wrong, Emily. You latch on to other people and coast around until it's just - it's dead weight on both of us. You don't know who the hell you are. Where you belong - and you're not even looking. You're not ready for a relationship."

So what were the last three years? she wanted to ask, but didn't. Just kept staring.

"I'm taking that offer. The Park Service job."

"Fine. But don't pretend like this was a hard decision. We both knew you'd go the minute you got the call."

"You think that if you need to, but it doesn't change anything."

"Yeah, ok. You just hate the idea of being tied to someone a thousand miles away when you're in your element. Posturing. No wilderness guide with his bullshit Paul Bunyan beard can be wild enough with a girlfriend back East. Especially one who's not

down-to-hearth enough for you. It'd be inauthentic, keeping the light on for a suburban sellout. Right?"

"Fuck you."

The thrill of hitting home jabbed adrenaline into her hands and chest, and she took a step closer. "So go. Be Edward Abbey for a year or two and brain rabbits and blaze trails so you can live your white-man-conquers-the-wilderness wet dream. Pretend you're saving humanity. Whatever. I'm done."

His ridiculous chin jutted, fists tight at his sides, and the thought sizzled out, on the griddle surface of Emily's brain, that the heat and anger creaking in his knuckles would make a hard, dark lump of coal like a pit at the center of him. Rage core of stored energy, and you couldn't release it again without the poison too.

"Goodbye, Emily."

When she thought about it now, the whole conversation seemed small. Like it wasn't even sure how it might fit into the whole, though she was sure it did. Though leaning against him, watching old movies, getting up to check the pound cake in the oven - had implied something that wasn't real after all, a continuity that didn't exist.

***

“This is real good of you.”

“It’s alright, Mama.”

“No, I mean, he needs this; he's been struggling. You’re a good granddaughter.”

Em looked at her. "Yeah, well. It's hard to be alone."

Mama looked away, out the window into the grease gray yard. "The Shaners said they had trouble with their fruit trees this year." Daddy rubbed his jawline the way he did when he lost at cards.

"Your mother's right. It's good what you're doing. It was hard enough when we lost your Grandmomma. Now all he has is us." For a minute it was like Granddaddy was standing there in the kitchen with them, only it wasn't him exactly, since their images of him, still with somewhere to rest in the live world, overlapped only roughly. Three vaguely approximate Ben Ellers, all clearing their throats in embarrassment, waiting for the conversation to end.

"Anyway, it's just for now. He won't want me moving in permanently," Em said.

"Not sure he's ever felt permanent there himself. Not like the old place."

Gran had had just enough left to buy the cabin when she'd sold the Yadkin County farm. Granddaddy had been fully grown by then, and married, but Mom said it had been hard on him, harder, maybe, than losing his father. "You know he went back there by himself a couple times before the auction. Would have attended that too, but your Grandmomma talked him out of it."

Emily ran her fingernail down a seam in the tabletop. The rain was starting up again, sputtering like popcorn on the roof, and somewhere in the suggestive tangle of neural pathways, images rose with the imagined flood line, rain sounds filling her brain. Grandmomma's swollen fingers fanning her cards, the knowing look that belied shaking hands and a voice like a wasps' nest, hollow and papery, and inside a sharpness made of multidirectional enthusiasMs. Then, behind it were the Noah's Ark crib hangings Mama

had given away when Em and Lucas finally broke up. Deeper down still, worms' sluggish alarm over the sidewalk after rain. And the egret standing like an omen the day she died, anchored - tenacious as desperation anything - in the middle of a football field, the storm of the decade breaking effortless fury across it while it just burned sheer and terrifyingly white.

"She was quite a lady."

Looking at her father, Emily wondered what the rain was dredging up under the fused bones of his skull. Grandmomma had been gone for three plus years, Gran following more recently. And now winter scrolling out across them both equally.

***

The signs, gone into hiding:
that's what sameness means,
broken-down myotic layers
crushed together into coal
(and no one to burn us).

If there could be new without
difference, you'd share that,
right?
tell me,

winding crooked

around a carcassed bargain?

As symbiotes stop,

signs stop,

and we stop, too, telling stories.

Once the last of the final minutes

freeze in cloned re-repetitions.

Paradox Past

Part Four

This is to frighten a storm

Listen! She's gone up the mountain before you,

feet sparing Selu in leaping us, ready-wombed

sky for the life of the people of the earth.

Her steps took in the mountain, ascended

where you should follow now, if you desire her.

Go make love undisturbed on the mountain,

shake open your terrible sides when you find her.

My breath will show you where. Listen!

***

"Queenless, then. Didn't you say you were seeing more and more of that online?"

"That's just it, though, Aster. I saw the queen." Ed let out a short, patient breath and noticed a hole in his sleeve, scrubbed a fingernail over it.

"Oh." She frowned, brushed the corner of her eye with a fine-veined hand. "But you said-"

"Yeah, I said the workers were laying," he grunted.

Emily sat still, rolling the bottom of her glass against her knee. The cold grind of it, shifting cartilage. She stopped. It was always like this, visiting the Shaners. You

walked next door, they offered a glass of iced tea, and before you were half done with it, you were out of things to say and they'd filled the awkwardness by talking their lives on over you. A comfort, really.

"The workers don't lay if there's a queen," said Aster.

The sound of the hives, faint down the yard, came between them for a minute, and Ed rocked back against the porch rail, pressing the new, stiff blue of his jeans into it. "Yeah." He'd watched them, seen enough to suspect the queen had died before he saw her himself, there at the unholy center of milling workers. More drones now than there should have been. And more honey; the farmers' market was flush this year.

"Some of the peach trees aren't producing," she added. The dry gray in her hair sparked, and the shade ran under her eyes.

"Saw that."

The afternoon was quiet around the bees' hum, the boxes. Wasp numbers were down this year, too. And mosquitos. Aster scuffed a boot, then propped its heel on the other foot, studying the toe.

Boomers had been swarming the birdfeeders. Ed had seen a video online with two squirrels fighting, then a blue jay swooping in so they popped apart like an explosion. Whoever'd caught it had slowed the whole scene down and plugged the toreador song in behind. Looked just like a slapstick routine, Ed thought, but he'd felt strange laughing at it. There was something off about the number of confrontations this year, all those weak incursions by chickadees and chipmunks. And then Aster'd had one almost eating out of her hand the other day: "Look!" He'd shooed it off, thinking rabies,

but she'd rolled her eyes at him. The animals were getting chancy. And the bees. People said bees were a sign.

"You think something's up?"

"Just one of those things, probably. I'll have someone down to look at the orchard, maybe."

"What about the bees?"

"Just keep an eye peeled."

"For what?"

"Who the hell knows."

"I should probably head back," Emily said suddenly. The condensation looked like scales on the outside of her glass as she handed it to Mrs. Shaner.

"You come on back any time," Ed said, angling the words under an earnest frown.

Aster nodded, "You know you're always welcome, honey. So sorry about your Gran."

The afternoon was stretched thin, even hot as it was, and the short walk through the maples seemed to go flat, pressed into some paper-thin plane with time spongy underneath, soaking you up in the flatness, stuck. Some part of her just knew she'd never get back the hundred yards to her parents' house. Drops of oil in suspension, without purchase.

Reduced to that single dimension, time, she could hear a thinness in their voices, too. The Shaners had been living here a long while.

She'd heard somewhere that bees were a sign, but who really knew?

***

At first, after they'd shut themselves in, all she could think about were the thin walls of her old apartment. How she used to hear the muted comfort-voices next door, their sitcoms and the sound their Playstation made firing up. Like a commercial for some other life. It had annoyed her back then, made her think about the loss of difference between strangers - without a corresponding increase in familiarity. She'd pictured the whole complex, walls gone transparent, hosting one big, nonsensical dollhouse open house. There she'd be, sitting on her futon pretending to grade handwriting exercises while the neighbors fought a few feet away. Fake separations.

But underground felt different. Things had different depths, like looking at an irregular graveyard, nothing patterned, not even the deaths or the disposable, flag-punctured ground, or the unpruned laurel. In those first days, everything had been terrifyingly flat, draped over by cobweb voices she knew she'd never hear again. But then the varied give of things happened, gradually. Pictures and words took on shade, and she realized that she could go deep into them. Photographs of faces. Granddaddy's hands. The tip of her pencil. The place where it went in the sharpener. Sometimes it was things you'd expect to have space inside them. Sometimes it wasn't. But the depth was always a kind of accusation. That she hadn't noticed it, any of it, before.

Sometimes, still, her skin felt the panic that tingles itself tighter without, somehow, cutting off circulation. Just the edges of you know that something's wrong, but it's enough to question your outline, feel that it's not quite where it was before without any idea of how it got that way.

She knew it was about the unarguable finitude of this place.

But steam escapes upward,

dancing from wrists wrapped in ephemera.

Things that still move show you how wrong you are,

and you keep forgiving their lies.

The way she'd forgive a book for ending the same way every time.

***

(Still the same ending)

Go again?

***

The man, bald as the apples in his orchard, squared himself at the screen, looking out at all the people who would have no idea how serious this was. "None of them," he answered. "They none of them fruited this year."

The reporter frowned carefully, the familiar, conscientious line going across his forehead, telegraphing his concern. He was a very concerned, very handsome, very informed citizen. With a microphone. "None of them?"

The man with the orchard shook his head, frowned in a different way than the reporter.

"And can you tell us what that means?"

He'd been told to keep his answers short and impactful. The attention span wasn't what it used to be, and if you wanted to send a message, there were increasingly limited ways to do that. One was to make a clip and post it online. News clips that made it were the kind you could translate into YouTube segments. He wished he had a goat or a dog in the picture. "Well, Mike," he said. *Call me Mike, he'd said.* "All the blossoms fell off, and no fruit, like they didn't get fertilized. No fruit at all. And I've been keeping these trees safe: old varieties of apples, you know - can't find anywhere else, most places. Most of em wouldn't be good for much else but cider."

"So what happens now?"

The man twisted his face, like his nose itched. He looked down, shook his head. "Well, Mike, we've got to figure out what's going on here."

Mike nodded.

"We might be in real trouble, as I hear from some of the others."

"No more apples?"

"Now, I hope not."

Mike nodded. "Who knows what the future holds for fruit growers like Mr. Tom Bilton. We're getting reports of so many shortages this season, could we be facing some kind of global crisis? Find out more tomorrow night when we bring you answers from

our country's leading scientists. I'm Mike Randall, and you're watching *Up Close and Present*. Thank you." He held the smile, then turned to shake Tom's hand. "Sorry about the apples," he said. "Hope things turn around."

Tom suddenly realized how much he hated people leaving themselves out of sentences, dropping the "I" like everyone understood you anyway, didn't need a word. "Yeah," he said.

***

Ben turned off the television and sat for a minute, listening. There was a siren, an unusual sound in this area; wasn't like it was downtown. He opened the door and went out on the porch as the thread of alarm faded back into quiet. It was awfully quiet these days.

He crossed to the edge and unhooked the birdfeeder so it wouldn't tempt any bears. Every night he watched the news. Went out to take down the feeder. Brought it inside. The birds had gotten used to the routine, even. They flickered all the movement left in the wood, seemed like, gathering seeds while the news played inside. Some evenings, now, it was hard to watch, with all that urgent commotion going on out the window.

He was glad Em was coming to stay for a while.

Ben went back inside and set the birdfeeder in an old, plastic bucket, dirty-white, sitting by the door. The bag of apple chips on the counter looked different after that last piece on the news. About the empty orchard.

He closed his eyes and stretched, feeling the difference in his body, something like a pull that went all the way back to the way it was, young on the farm. And then meeting her, marrying, coming up here together to help Mama, staying on when she went to Laurel Hill. Staying himself when Bell died. When Mama did. Its being home, too, by then. His body remembered things in ways his brain couldn't always do, but it wasn't an easy feeling.

The stiffness came from the grit of too many places going into muscles and bones and the purely-for-connection fibers between them. Tendons, ligaments. Connections got difficult the longer they held.

And something about it made him think of those old movie sets, with the hordes of dancers, all moving in elaborate, choreographed, black and white ways. They could have happened anywhere, so you didn't think about the performance itself, the original one, being made in a real place. Though it was. It helped when it was only two people, though, as long as they were just dancing for the camera, not for an audience in the story. The sense of a real space came around them because they made the space themselves, in ways you could follow. Astaire and Rogers. Bell had loved those movies.

Picking up the phone, Ben dialed and waited while the ringing went through its rehearsed sequence. Artificial bells were just one more thing he could do without.

***

"Emily?" She almost didn't recognize the voice, it was so different, so many more edges, more give, like crumpled foil.

"Daddy?"

"You with your grandfather?"

"Yes." She could see him watching her. He wasn't holding anything, just standing still; unsteady breathing.

"Ok, listen. You know things are bad."

She listened. There was no more moisture on her tongue. When she pressed it to the roof of her mouth, it stuck here, kept pressing, like she could push herself up and out of her skin that way. Maybe.

"Your Mama and I are going to stick it out here, but we want you to stay with him. Last time he was up here he was talking about that bunker place, the one Russ built. You think they'd let you stay there?"

The space behind his voice was fuzzy with emptiness. Then something that could have been another voice. Then the mucky give of rotted-out silence, the gone. He was waiting for her to talk. "Yes," she said, looking down through the ground under her feet to an imagined rock core and a compressed bunker space somehow inside that. "We've been talking about it."

"And you can go with him?"

"I can go with him."

Her father might have exhaled, but it just became part of the bigger dissolution of sound stretched between them. "Good."

"I love you."

"Love you, too, Em."

There hadn't been another conversation. Not after that one. Granddaddy had waited for her to tell him, but she hadn't. And they'd taken that unanswer down into the bunker.

***

She looked over her shoulder at the same people who had been at Grandmomma's funeral, mostly. Three years ago now. And a part of her entertained the possibility that there was no one in the coffin now either, just empty space defined by another, specifically body-shaped emptiness inside the larger one.

Grandmomma had wanted her ashes buried on the mountain. But they'd still had a funeral with a casket. Her favorite book open inside it. Milton.

But this time there was a body. Gran's. And Emily tried to feel that this made a difference in the quality of absence inside the coffin. Possibly it did.

She watched a hand in a worn cuff come over the back of the pew behind her grandfather to rest moistly on his shoulder. He turned just his head, said something to the man shaking his head behind him, but Emily couldn't hear what it was.

"…When the dead will rise," the pastor was saying, "and the earth return to its fullness…"

Someone had scratched their initials into the back of the pew, against the grain, so that it was difficult to see anything else when you unfocused your eyes. The rest of the wood was smooth, even with the varnish chipping in places. It went in an unbroken

plane down this side of the church: made a wing or a page of some well-leaved whole, coming out from the center aisle spine. So, of course, someone had tried to carve themselves into it. Though initials, she thought, were more obscure than the blank pew back would have been. You only knew what they meant if you'd put them there.

The stoop of his shoulders up ahead caught the watery glow from a stained-glass window, splashed him quietly blue before the sun went back behind a cloud and the color absorbed itself back into silence. The still, small voice was light, she thought. One hair curved off the top of his head like an antenna, shifting with currents of air she couldn't see. Emily tried to clear the discomfort from her throat without calling attention to herself.

Gran had been struggling for a long while. They had had to move her to another wing in the last few weeks. She'd thought the dogwood outside her window was the same one on the bank, down from the cabin. Told you when spring was good and started.

The pastor would be finished at some point. Emily could already see forward into the reception, if only because it extended from the things he was saying and the way he was saying them. All the abbreviated food and the used tablecloths that took on the facts of the matter without making them stories. She'd never heard a family story about a funeral.

It was hard to tell when one thing ended and the other began.

They all milled, crunching raw vegetables drowned in ranch dressing and weighting down plates with the soggy-skinned chicken and tumbled corn. Treading lightly like balancing the paper plates, which could collapse if you tried to take on too

much comfort food kept warm too long. That's what grief was really like. The long-suffering, textureless food that tiptoed around your feelings, in case you couldn't handle chewing anything today.

"Now, Rebecca, you tried the corn pudding?" Emily heard a woman with a tasseled scarf ask Mama, putting a hand on her arm; you could see the soft give of her fingers, like they couldn't exert any pressure themselves.

"Not yet, is that the one you were telling me about?"

"It sure is. I made it for her a few weeks ago, and she made me promise, bring it when the time came. Said you had to try it."

"Well, then, I have to try it. Where'd you put it?" They walked out of earshot, or got swallowed up in the public hum.

Em was never sure what was real, community feeling and what was ginned up for the sake of expectation. Corn pudding seemed to fall somewhere between the two, but she wasn't sure why.

***

"The problem is that they didn't catch it before some of it just disappeared." The guy shook his head like he actually knew shit, folding his arms over the too-soft sweater vest he was wearing. The wife, or girlfriend, maybe, didn't even look up from her phone.

"Yeah, I've heard that." Mike nodded gravely and leaned back, sending a surreptitious look down the sidewalk, as far as he could see through the plate glass

window. Seemed like, these days, you heard the same things on or off the camera. Everybody's a damn expert. At a dance class, for Christ's sake.

Elena was looking at her watch, practicing a step for the mirror, stopping and glancing at Mike. Abby was late. Again. She'd probably be late for the wedding, too. Screw it. He cleared his throat and sent Elena an apologetic smile which she returned automatically. "She's coming," he said. This class had been her idea in the first place.

"You did a spot on the new cloning methods a couple weeks ago, didn't you?" Sweater vest again.

"Yeah, Dr. Masten." Mike nodded, "He really knows his stuff." Like hell.

"You think it'll be enough?"

How the fuck do I know? "Oh, we're in good hands." The party line held for the moment. Mike's cell rang, and he turned around, walling up sweater vest behind him. "Where are you?"

"Mike?" It wasn't Abby's voice.

Holding the screen back, he saw the name and cursed silently. "Sorry, I'm waiting for Abby. Did something happen?"

"Yeah, supermarket shooting downtown. I need you go get over and cover it."

"You can't get hold of Vance?"

"He's in Beaufort on the desalination piece."

"Right."

"I'll text you the details."

Mike hung up and reached for his jacket. "Sorry. Work."

Driving downtown, he called Abby on the bluetooth. When she picked up, he heard the breathy exasperation in it. Could just see her rolling her gaze over her shoulder, changing lanes with the cell tucked against her shoulder, under her chin. Periodically he'd hear depressed dialing, one tone at a time, and sometimes she'd cut out because she had to use both hands to drive. Freckled wrists leaning on the wheel, hands draped. Only turning did she actually grip it.

"I'm coming, Mike. Got held up with Margie. Are you guys waiting, or did Elena start?"

"I actually had to leave," Mike said to the leather interior, coffee-colored surfaces smooth on the empty space.

"What? Why?"

"Work call."

"I thought it was Vance on call?" She might have forgotten, picked up the phone with one hand because he could hear her straightening up with the question, hear it in her voice.

"He's out on assignment."

"Well, screw that."

"Basically." The exit scrolled toward him and he sheared the slick side of the car over into it. "Listen, I'm getting off now. Gotta go. I'll meet you at home."

"Ok, fine. Pick up some stuff while you're out, though. Davies' just got a shipment in this morning, so I'll text you a list."

"I thought Davies' was going under?"

"Some big shot bought the chain. Must have access to a lab farm."

"Ok, fine. See you tonight."

***

The angle was one he hadn't ever taken before, but there it still was: sky storm blue under the clouds, brought low the way the sliding door tinted it. You just waited for the thunder to start, just breathed. As he lay there on the floor, his back against the gritty, supermarket tile and there, under the bin an old, shriveled-in piece of corn husk, Russ thought about the bunker. Glad he'd brought Ben and his granddaughter down there, showed them the ropes.

His back against the floor should have been cold, but the way his brain was floating, just barely, it felt like there was more of him extending upward than he knew there was. Like he'd thinned out, expanded up from the line where he knew his body met the floor, and because of the diffusion, the thinning-up, the floor didn't feel so hard. It was a matter of pressure, probably. Less-condensed body, brain arching the substance up like filling a balloon with air. Maybe not helium, but a slow lung-blast of good old carbon dioxide. You couldn't breathe it, but it filled up all the cells till you floated, without leaving the floor.

There was room to thin out because the blood was making room for it. What a stupid way to die, he thought suddenly. Shot in the picked-over produce aisle.

***

Patron Saint of Apocalypse

When the bomb fell on Nagasaki,
on her children and cathedrals,
it tore the heads off the Urakami saints.

We saw them once: startled martyrs
ready to fall at any minute,
statues frozen up with gaping space
where stone eyes and mouths
should have been to comfort, warn.
Just standing around.

There's one that might have been Saint Joseph,
but his hands are gone too, acephalous
lily staff fused fast to rough stone folds.

So you have to wonder

what vaporized rubble tunic

the dead wore that day.

It may not be Joseph, either.

Could just be Jude,

gone mute with meteoric hope.

He'll be pent inside only as long

as it takes for the dead

to rise around him.

Then that patient, eyeless waiting

will be done.

***

When Mike finally got home, the camera was still running in his head. He waited for the long, peal of thunder to finish before jamming his key in the lock and opening the door. Sounded like somebody falling down a flight of stairs, building with the drop. It had taken its time after that boltless flash of lightning.

"Hey, baby." Abby's dark hair like a cloud clipped back out of the way.

He threw his keys in the ladybug dish they'd kept as a joke. "Hey," he said.

She stopped. "Did you go by Davies'?"

"No, I forgot. Sorry."

She screwed her mouth shut for a minute. "Ok." Frowning, "what was the call about? You look wiped out."

"Yeah, well, it was a shooting. At a fucking grocery store."

She just looked at him.

"They hadn't even got the bodies out by the time I got there. Dealing with some other shit, apparently. More important than dead people in the produce aisle."

"That's awful. How many were there?"

"Two. And one girl in the hospital now." Mike peeled off his jacket and threw it on the arm of the sectional. It slid off the leather, but he left it. Abby looked at it on the floor. Didn't move to pick it up, just watched him. "Come to find out, they're not even letting us air it. Too heavy. They're running that piece on the circulating library instead, the one we've had canned for weeks."

"Shit," she said softly, walking over and sliding her arms around him. The cloud of her hair crawled up his face like it was growing there.

"Shit."

Part Five

Astaire and Rogers

There they were:

real as black and white

and holding ground

like that hard line of negative space,

the tailcoat seams.

They floated.

No, they didn't. More like running figures:

like precise litanies of relation,

mathematical surfaces that make space beautiful

again

in just the repeatable once.

In the end, do their names conjure it, too,

the letters like stage personas themselves,

stories with careful histories

still selling tickets?

May every friendly photon find its place

in the angles of identity

on offer?

***

He had, of course, described the place to her, and she'd even been down inside it once, when Russ was finishing something, some issue with the springwater pipes or the vents for the filtration system. He'd said what it was, but she couldn't remember now. He'd been working on it for years by then, seven or eight, maybe. Grandmomma had picked out books and music for it, even, before she died. Then, after Gran, when Em had gone to stay with Granddaddy, they'd seen a bit of Russ, there at the beginning; he'd said it was almost ready and for them to walk up and take a look. So they did. And then Russ was gone, too, and Granddaddy had waited, watched the news, watched the shortages creep up the social ladder, one slender rung at a time.

Seeing the bunker that first time had made her uneasy, like all the small, off-kilter things about the world, that bug the scientists were so concerned about, the slipping-away species, might be something more than the usual fear-mongering news. She'd imagined holing up here, and the idea had crawled under her skin, until her flesh felt taught and claustrophobic, shrunk down and itching with tension. She hadn't stayed long, hadn't wanted to listen to Russ talking about batteries and generators and rudimentary plumbing.

She'd dreamed that night that the bats were returning, after their genetic vanishing act, that they were crawling up out of that bunker, only now they had feathered breasts and faces like newborn babies. They'd gone wailing up, and the sun had caught on something going down, wedged to a stop halfway down the horizon, like something stuck in a chute. In the dream, Emily had looked around her, felt wing bursts of air up and down her body. Ran away East with the mountain closing behind her.

She remembered that dream the day Granddaddy said it was time to go down in the bunker. "Bring the quilt," he said. She'd looked around at her room, out the window at the cigar-leaved rhododendron, with the sleet rattling through it and the hard, cold mountain poured and set like steel between its roots. She'd pulled the quilt off the bed, then jumbled it down in a pile on the floor, grabbed a bag and reached for who knew what - later she'd take things out one by one: a field guide to edible wild plants, *Emma*, a collection of fairy tales, *River of Earth* and Percy's *Lancelot*. Gran's little jewelry box with the blue dove cutouts. Her baby book and the blue dress she'd worn under her gown at graduation, forever ago. She'd slung the bag over her shoulder, gathered up the quilt again, and followed him out. Down.

They'd listened for sounds of something overhead that night, with the twelve-inch, portable dvd player reparteeing Fred and Ginger through their unheeded figures. But, of course, there was nothing to hear.

***

"So who's this?" Granddaddy picked up the tiny figure, and it disappeared for a second, before peeking up over his fingers.

"That's the Princess," said Emily, reaching up and putting her back on top of the mountain, where the helicopter was supposed to land, if it hadn't been broken.

"Princess what?"

"Princess," she thought for a minute, pretending not to, "Emily."

"But that's your name," he said.

"Her Mama got the same idea," she shrugged small shoulders and turned around, looking for the empty train car.

"You know your Gran has a cabin up on a mountain. Grandmomma and I are going to see her in a couple weeks."

Emily looked up. "I know. We went there."

"That's right."

"I swung in the climbing tree."

"You have a good memory."

"Mama wouldn't let me climb, though. You have to be five."

"You're five now."

"So I can climb next time."

"I guess so." He glanced around at the scattered figures and cars and derailed trains. "You gonna finish building that track?"

"Ok, but not yet."

"Why not?"

"I have to find the train first."

"Your Daddy used to have a real, electric train that went around on a track."

"Where did it go?"

"Oh, we've got it at home someplace. Maybe sometime when you visit we'll get it out and see if it runs."

"Maybe. If there's time."

He grinned. "How 'bout you find your train and I'll build you a mountain track? And we'll load up the cars and send them through the mountain."

She considered. "Ok." Scratching an almost-healed scab on her knee. Her hair was sticking up in back, and every so often she tried to squish it down. "Sometimes they get stuck in there," she said, looking up from where she was squatting, leaning almost double over her knees. She looked like an awkward, impossibly balanced bird, perched on her toes like that.

"What, in the tunnel?"

"Yeah."

"Well, if they get stuck, we'll pull em out and try again, ok?"

"Ok, that's a good plan."

"I'm full of those."

Emily laughed in a way that made him think she didn't really understand. He laughed too. "Think that's funny?"

"You're funny."

"Ok, well, let's see what the princess thinks about all this construction going on."

"Yeah, let's ask her."

***

I left her in the orchard, *old as sin* shade

flattening out across her body

like floodwater,

like filling up caves

and hiding them down

where nocturnal creatures

swim their sounds,

their frequencies too low to hear.

I garbled something over her grave,

shallower than shade,

knowing there could be

no accusation

in her blank pine bones.

***

She'd loved Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers because they weren't just a man and woman. They were the whole package: the fairy tale you didn't quite have to make sense of, even when it did *come right down to it*. Because dance made the space into stories, some calculated flight from point A to point B, and both points are the same. There's just the loop of concentrated narrative going on, and for a second you can see the way a place takes up space across time.

Ben had been tired of the films, truth be told, and she'd known it, but there it was. Or here it was since there was here, too. *Top Hat* Tuesdays had been the compromise so Ben could watch his football and Discovery Channel and pawn shop reality shows. And Bell would sit with the quilt over her lap, usually unfinished but in process, at least, and it was all part of the dance.

One Tuesday Em was over - couldn't remember why - and she'd sat watching, fidgeting some but keeping quiet, too, until it was over. She was probably ten or eleven. And she'd looked at Bell for a wise minute and just bounced back out of the room to play. Didn't say a thing. Ben had set up the train for her again, and you could hear it clattering from the next room, going around and around the space like stitching it back together. Bell had laughed at Ben when he'd said, "I told you so," and just gone right on sewing Emily's quilt.

***

I share the possible

with the rest of me

out there,

past telling.

***

"You're up early this morning," he said.

"Early bird catches the worm."

"Only if the worm gets up, too."

"What was that thing you used to say about 'pretty morning in the morning,' or something? I was trying to remember last night." She sat down at the table and imagined morning. She hadn't really forgotten.

"It's a pretty mornin' this mornin'. If every mornin' was as pretty a mornin' as this mornin', it'd be a pretty mornin' in the mornin'."

"Can't argue with that."

He grinned back at her while the cough climbed up his ladder ribs, almost visible.

"Can I make us some tea?" she asked.

"I'm ok, but you make some if you want."

"I'm ok."

"Thought I'd reread that book today, with the lilies. How bout you?"

"I hadn't thought about it. Maybe do some writing." There was a fine crack running halfway down the corner where the walls met behind the stove.

He tried to clear his throat, lost hold for a minute and coughed. "Why don't you write me something new to read?" Cleared his throat again, like he wanted to spit. She saw him glance at the sink, then stay put.

"Yeah, maybe. It's hard to think of new stuff anymore, though."

"Yep, well." He looked at the bookcase, across the room. "Write something old."

Emily got up and brought him the book he wanted, but he just set it on the table. "You know we thought about moving up there at one point?" Granddaddy scratched the gritty stubble on his chin, the loose, papery flex of his skin giving under his fingers.

"Northern Virginia? Why?" Emily looked at him.

He shrugged. "We'd have been close to you. And the hospitals are good up there. We were looking at different facilities."

"There are closer ones."

"Yeah, that's what we decided. The best of them were up toward Winchester and on, though. For your Grandmomma. We thought about it. Prayed about it."

Emily nodded and looked back at the crack in the wall, superimposing a needle and thread, sewing it up in her brain. "I think I'll finish my crossword today, if I can," she said; she'd been working, off and on, for three days. Some things you just don't know.

"Would have been nice to be closer to you," he said.

"I would have liked that." She could hear the multiplied places grinding up inside him: futile breathfuls of gravel.

"We could have come and talked to your students," he added finally, "taught em something useful."

"Useful. Thanks," Em smiled. "Think I would've been too worried about what you might tell them."

"Oh, I got lots of wisdom," he said, raising craggy eyebrows.

"I bet."

"Could have talked about castrating cattle. Or dehorning. You know we had to do that in high school. Part of the ag program."

"Doesn't sound like much fun."

"There'd be this spurt of blood out the horn, right in the middle."

"Ugh." She laughed because he wanted her to. And the moment, as she looked at him grinning, dropped out of the undoing, bunker-bound finitude. If she'd pushed, she might have fallen right through. Deep. "That's so gross."

"Well, that's the way it worked."

Then there were all the dead cows; they had to be dead by now. She'd heard about a group of Christians up, somewhere in the Midwest, who'd been trying to breed back the cattle you needed for sacrifice in Jerusalem. Somewhere in the Bible, she guessed. You

needed a special sacrifice before the second coming. They hadn't managed, but it didn't seem to matter too much.

"How many cows you think they've been able to clone? If they're still doing that?"

He frowned, and the grinding pieces rattled up, while he brushed at the top of his head. Smoothed the hair down, calming tangled insides, maybe. It was time to give him another haircut. "Seems like they weren't having too good success there."

"They could be doing better now."

"Could be." There was no significance in the words.

Mold still grew, anyway. They reused tea bags as long as they could, but there wasn't any way to keep them going past that. Not if she wanted to keep from getting sick down here, sicker.

But every time she tore a fresh, gauze pouch out of its paper - the stale, comforting leaf smell dry as paper too - it unlocked one last shred of normalcy, and she'd stare at it until the feeling went away again, thinking it was like a birthday ritual, almost. You didn't understand the need for continuity, for *punctuated* continuity, until you did. In the old life, you just looked forward to high points like they were part of the natural fabric of time: you never got lost, so you hardly knew you were going anywhere, just rode along. Truth was, you cut up years and months and days, pieced them together and wrapped them up; half decorative order, half necessary warmth. Anniversaries and holidays didn't go by without reminding you that a season was different and the same. Human.

Somehow she thought of Great-Granny Rae, Mama's grandmother, the one time Em had met her. She'd been the smallest woman in the world then, with a rosary looped around her tiny wrist, too many times. Mama said she always wore one, though she'd never seen her praying it. Maybe in private. Granny Rae would rather have had grandsons and great grandsons than granddaughters, Mama said, but Emily hadn't known that then. She just remembered a very old, serious face across the rim of a teacup, those dark rosary beads wound round and round her wrist with the crucifix hanging straight down, the pewter face blurred and indecipherable. The chicory tea, its particular smell, was like blue smoke in the memory.

Once time stopped, it was hard to reinterpret history. You were stuck, then, with the same, hard facts and no way to get between them to see from another angle. Only able to do that so long as it was moving and you were moving, both in the same way and always with the thread of present reality. Once time stopped, there was nowhere to follow that thread back to. Because there was no more possibility of change. You lost the future, sure, but you lost the past too.

Maybe it was just in her mind, though. Emily knew, of course, that there was still a world out there. The sun still rose and fell, or seemed to, if anyone was watching. The Earth still turned. When they'd gone down, there had been the bacteria still going, at least. Even if they'd seemed to be the last lives unaffected by - whatever it was. Still mutating, moving, having histories play out. Who knew, really? Just pieces left.

***

The poplars turned gold so late this year, the maple leaves too long bright, then gone. All the high poplar boughs cut that certain light straight down to the porch, the lower limbs lost way back, and all the other trees just about bare, maybe a few, curled-up stubborns left, and the rhododendron, of course. But they came up even with the porch rail, no higher, since they'd been pruned back a couple years ago.

There were still chipmunks, and plenty. Came out of their little bankside holes among the roots and wound themselves up between rhododendron limbs, or azaleas - that branched the way fire did, like an x-ray of hearthfire, maybe, in a book.

The fence had three rails replaced just recently, and whoever'd done it had crushed the morels that always grew there in the dead leaves. So the ants were going at it now, filling up the lace hole catacombs and flowing down, dripping the tourist-thick crawl of them at every angle of space.

A nuthatch navigated its way down the maple trunk, headfirst foraging. Then his neck craned up to catch those invisible seed-glints of light like code. He could read them without the anxiety people feel, printing not-quite true words, trying to make retroactive sense of them. The seeds always spelled clearly. Gave out what wasn't secret, held what was, and kept the husk steady in between.

The woman sitting on her porch thought about these things and kept swinging, slowly back and forth.

Part Six

She rooted in the leaf meal, pushing her strong snout deeper where the heat held just that last bit longer, looking for food. She was hungry, was what she knew, and that was something strong now, even more than the becoming she had found out meant running from humans, with or without guns. Hungry might win out over that other thing soon. If she ran at one of them, she might knock him down and answer need that way instead.

The sun came through branches over her head when she looked up, pieces of dirt and leaf stuck to her face so she blinked, sniffed. The dirt covered up the other smells for a minute and then the woods came back, more hollow-tasting than ever, and quiet. But she remembered things in her bristled hide. There was a place from being shot at, across her back.

Shifting her weight, she picked her way down the bank and dipped her tongue in the icy creek, front hooves knuckle-deep and a shiver twitching down one side like talking back to a fly. Her hide flinched back the memory of a horse fly, then, when it bit her under the shoulder.

She walked slowly downstream.

***

Down into the waters,

like Beowulf to Grendel's grave,

goes the beetle,

diving and rising again and again

through the churned sea

with tiny mouthfuls of mud.

He’s building the slow island

where we will live,

moving unscathed through boiling waters

to deposit land, land, Heorot home,

open to the stone arch of sky.

There is balance; he does not puncture it

to make this place,

though Earth floats between

that vault and the teeming sea,

suspended at north, south, east, and west

down lines like the ribs of a basket.

***

Rebecca swirled her hands in the warm, soapy water to look for the last fork. As her fingers found it, she ran the rough side of the sponge once down the prongs. "She'll call, Jim," she said. She knew, without looking at him, that he had heard her and was considering how to answer. Her throat ached, but she turned on the faucet and rinsed the

utensil, dropped it into the dishwasher with the rest of the already-clean dishes, shut the door.

"You would think," he said finally. She heard him take a swallow of beer. Liquid punctuation. She unstopped the drain and wiped the inside of the sink once the water ran out, before she turned around, the dishtowel wrinkling in her wet, gripping hands.

"Times like these, family comes together."

"That's right, Becca. You don't have to tell me."

"I know she'll call."

"Yeah, but when?"

She felt like the table might tilt, like this was some kind of balancing act they were doing, there in the kitchen, and it might swing either way on the edge like this. It was worse this time, pulling between the past and the future like before, but now this loss, Jim's grandmother, had to interrupt time in a way that touched the other loss, the three-years-ago loss of his mother. Like you suddenly had to realize they were the same, incomplete act of losing, and it wasn't finished yet. She looked at him. "I'm making us some biscuits," she said.

"We just had dinner."

"This is dessert. We still have some of last year's honey, from the Shaners, and I know I have molasses. We'll hunker down and watch a show and eat dessert on the couch like when Em was little."

"Becca, I'm just gonna finish my beer, ok? And we'll figure things out tomorrow. You just run the dishes and go on, now. Finish that book you've been reading."

"Alright. Then I can make biscuits for breakfast, if you like."

"That sounds fine."

She slung out the dishtowel and draped it over the oven door handle. Pushed the button on the dishwasher and listened while it gurgled and cleared its throat. "Alright, then. I *have* been wanting to finish that book."

"There you go," he said.

The phone rang.

***

b u t *pl a n t ed* d o es n t

n e c es s ar i ly m ea n

a l i v e

a n d *p l a n t*

m a y b e

s o m e

th i n g

e l s e

t o o

***

Before Grandmomma and Granddaddy moved into the cabin, when they lived in the house with the three acres and the silver maples pushing roots up through shade-dry grass, there were whole afternoons of running and lying around and swinging outside, always barefoot. You limped over the blue gravel drive, stiff-kneed, and then found the cool grass again, with its own spools of spidering roots invisibly thick underfoot. Bare feet could curl over the rough shapes tree roots made like lines on a map.

Mama was on the phone inside, and it was summer. Grandmomma sitting, sewing together two matched quilt squares, in the squeaky chair under the old, gone-wild arbor; Granddaddy checking on the cucumbers, snap beans, and tomatoes in the garden down the hill. Daddy had gone hunting with Mr. Shaner and wouldn't be back until tomorrow. Meantime, the sun was up and hot, and - looking into the big, overfull blue of the sky - Emily imagined she could pull some of that color down into her eyes, make them bluer like Cinderella's.

She could hear Mama's voice, bits of it going through the arbor leaves, past Grandmomma's moving fingers, quiet hands. "...just for the weekend... home..." The loud summer sounds made the grass seem full of insects. Emily wouldn't stand against the tree anymore; the ants and spiders might crawl down into her clothes, and what you couldn't see, you could still feel. A cloud of gnats hung itself in front of her face, and she swung her hand through them, walked a few steps to shake off the haze of them slurring her vision the way they did. "...no, well, I don't know... I could ask, though... of course, I remember..." Mama laughed, and Em smiled, burst in a gallop around the tree and took off toward Granddaddy and the garden.

He was stooped over, pinching a bean between his fingers as she pulled up between the rows. "Almost ready, Em. You gonna help me pick em when it's time?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes."

"Oh, yes?" He grinned up at her. "You look like a long, skinny bean yourself."

"I'm pretty much eight," she said, shrugging and picking up her bare feet in the hot dirt. "Is there anything ready right now?" She squinted up at him, and he pulled off his cap, stuck it down over her head, where the too-curled brim caught him and the garden and all in an upside-down bowl.

"Well, now, let's see," he said, running a hand over his sweat-matted hair so it stuck up a little - Emily giggled - "Seems like there might be something for us."

"Ben?" It was Mama's voice, but direct now, not pointed over the phone. Granddaddy looked up and shaded his eyes with one hand. "You still have that electric train set? Grace said she was wondering."

"Oh, yeah, I think so. Probably out in the shed. It's where we keep most of the old things."

"Ok, thanks. Mind if I take a look?"

"Not a bit. Em, you ever seen a 'lectric train?"

She shook her head, grinning already - took off after Mama.

The inside of the shed always filled Em with awe. There was the way the dusty light never really hit all the surfaces. The sawdust smell left over from when Granddaddy used to make things out here, with saws and hammers and a sinister clamp still fixed to

the table. There were all the baskets up on high shelves, some of them with green foam bits stuck to the insides, some of their ribs sticking out or wiry slats misplacing themselves in the weave. Everything dirty, and either broken or boxed away. There were certainly a lot of boxes, one of which apparently held a train.

She watched as Mama started sifting through the different kinds of dark, the different boxed-in, secret things that Emily hadn't known about until now. Well, still didn't know about. Most of them got closed back up, the tired tape pressed back again without time to disclose all the contents.

A relieved "Ah" meant discovery, though, and Em moved her feet carefully in the rough dust floor to stand behind Mama and peek inside. "Your daddy and Aunt Grace used to play with this." Emily nodded but wondered if there were maybe spiders inside the box too. You couldn't really tell, which was concerning. But Mama just hoisted the box up and marched back out of the shed. "Latch the door, Em," and her feet went solidly down the steps.

The train wasn't solid, but it still worked. The clatter held together enough to punch through space the way it was supposed to do, so once the tracks snapped into place - stitching up the room - there it went, around and around.

"You know that's just like the train Sukey and Pollywog rode one time," Granddaddy said, his shadow standing behind him on the wall. "I shouldn't ever have listened to those two, but they thought it'd be fun, I guess, and they wanted so bad to get over the mountain, see the circus going on over there."

"What circus?" asked Em, still squatting on her knees beside the train, while it clipped around and came back again.

"Oh, it was a big one. What do you think they had in that circus?"

"Lions?"

"You bet they had lions. And tigers and elephants. What else?"

"Those ladies riding horses standing up?"

"That's just exactly what they had."

"And a ringleader with a hat and a cane."

"It's like you were there."

"Why couldn't they drive there?" Em frowned.

"Well, now, they couldn't drive because their daddy couldn't take 'em. He was busy that day, workin' on the farm. He and Farmer Brown had to get all the corn in before those deer got any more of it."

"Why didn't they shoot the deer?"

"They did, but the deer just got smarter and snuck down in the corn, and you just couldn't catch 'em."

"Ok."

"So they said, 'We gotta get over there to that circus somehow. How 'bout jumping on board the train when it stops to load up in town.'"

"What was the train carrying?"

"Well, what you think it was carrying?"

Em could see Mama moving around in the kitchen, glancing in, smiling. "I think it was a baloney train," she called in.

Granddaddy grinned and shook his head.

"Was it carrying potatoes?"

"Well, how did you guess that? That's exactly what it was carrying. And that potato train always met the farmers in town so they could load up their crop and get going back to the farm."

The train kept pushing across the floor, sounding the way hard work looked when you watched somebody else doing it. Mama was singing something in the kitchen, chopping up cucumbers, and you could tell the oven was on, with the clicking, expanding sound like it was coming from the wall. "Is Mama making a cake?" Emily interrupted the story.

"Brown sugar pound cake," Granddaddy said, then kept on, "so Sukey and Pollywog thought the best way to get to the circus would be catchin' a ride on that train. So they waited 'til no one was lookin' and they jumped right in a big pile of potatoes and covered themselves all up so no one would see."

"They hid in the potatoes?"

"They did. And when the train stopped, over in that town where the circus was, they peeked out to see if the coast was clear." He pushed his nose over one arm, darted his look over at Em.

"Was it?"

"Yep."

"Did they go to the circus then?"

"Well, just wait."

"I imagine they were hungry by then," Mama offered from the doorway.

"They were pretty hungry," he admitted. "Particularly for cake."

"Maybe after the circus," said Mama.

"So since there was no cake," Granddaddy continued, "they grabbed a couple of those potatoes, but they couldn't finish them, raw like that, so they went on to the circus. But when they sat down to watch the ladies on the horses, their stomachs were growling so loud it scared everybody. They thought the lions had gotten out or something."

Em giggled and tucked her knees up under her shirt.

"Don't stretch it out, now."

"What did they do?"

"They had to stop the whole show. And what do you think happened then?"

"What?"

"The lions really did get out. They thought all that growling was a lion, too, and they just got so excited they busted out and started lookin' around for their friend."

"Uh oh."

"Uh oh is right. Everybody was screamin' and hollerin' and jumpin' up on the tops of the cages and nobody knew what to do. But what do you think a lion's favorite thing in the world is?"

"I don't know!"

"Well, take a guess."

"Potatoes."

"Now, wasn't it lucky that Sukey and Pollywog still had those potatoes in their pockets?"

"Yes."

"That's right. They gave 'em to the lions, and while those big, toothy mouths were crunching down on the raw potatoes, the lion tamers could get up behind 'em and catch 'em, put 'em back in their cages again. Course, they had to give Sukey and Pollywog something to eat too, to keep those tummies quiet."

"What did they give 'em?"

"There's always popcorn at a circus. And cracker jacks."

"And cotton candy."

"And they had some fritters going at this one, too, hot, with honey."

"So the lions were ok?"

"Oh, the lions were fine. They even gave 'em some cotton candy."

"Good."

"And since Sukey and Pollywog had saved the day, they even let em ride on the fancy horses."

"Did they ride standing up?"

"No, they were too scared to stand up, but they rode all around and around sitting down. They said it was the best day they ever had."

"Then did they get cake?"

Granddaddy leaned back through the door, grinning into the kitchen. "I don't know, now. Did they?"

Mama laughed, and the train kept chugging along the floor.

"We should make a mountain for it," said Emily.

***

The mountain in the painting went wrong.

Sorry.

Tell me about it, you said.

We laughed,

then you stuck the played-out brush

that smelled like oranges,

like eco-friendly turpentine substitute,

back in the jar with the ones

you hadn't used.

I remember they looked at you

like they weren't making any promises,

but you might still find them,

stiff-necked and waiting,

when you came back tomorrow.

In which case it was just possible

that if you left it alone,

the mountain might

look better in the morning,

too.

***

And there was the old, electric train, its intentional clatter sharper than memory, almost like hearing it again. "Remember?"

He laughed, but it didn't shake him any more than he was already shaking. It just sifted out with the shivering, where you could see it in his eyes. "Oh yeah," he breathed in pieces.

Emily watched him. Bruised nets of capillaries wound down one side of his neck, and the white of his eyes wasn't white anymore, but yellowing. More things going wrong, the way the world turned itself over to the future, inching indoors.

"I think I'll lie down a little," he said finally and hoisted himself uncertainly upward, steadying hobbled footsteps over to the bed.

It was easier to remember things that happened back when Emily was a child.

"Whatever happened to that one, Lucas?"

"Who knows."

"I mean, you two were dating, right?"

"Some things don't turn out to be so important, Granddaddy."

"I don't know. I would've liked to see you settling."

She'd stared at him. "Are you serious? What would that have done except make this that much harder?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. We're in an underground bunker, no contact with anyone outside, so what on earth is the point of regretting one failed relationship?"

"I don't know."

Emily had pictured Lucas, what he might be doing now. What was anyone doing?

They'd met at one of those outdoor education workshops, back when she was thinking of changing things up - when classrooms felt so small and all the excited voices got caught between the walls and magnified. Third graders could have taught those rangers a thing or two about *wild*.

They'd been partnered at random, and she remembered thinking sidelong thoughts about the way he listened without seeming to give anything up. He always listened that way, like a judge, and his questions would shape the same courtroom possibilities, over and over: guilty or innocent. At the time it had looked like self-knowledge meeting the world head-on, which was just right for a naturalist or a ranger, which he was in equal halves.

The time they went skating and came out, and the parking lot was slick, too, with black ice. He'd caught her and laughed, and she'd built a castle on the spot, laughing too. Fucking idiot.

The real benefit of dating Lucas had been all the extra hiking they'd done, the driving down the parkway, watching for birds, the hammocks slung between perfectly spaced trees after semi-adventurous treks through semi-domesticated woods. They were more lived-in, at any rate, than his parents' suburban neighborhood, which he loved to hate. "It's just this fake-ass place, where you make up the kind of life you think everybody wants: perfect, cheap houses and those golf course lawns with the kids and the dogs just there to accessorize your existence." He'd unzipped a pocket on his cargo pants, pulled

out a cigar, and slid a lighter out of a mesh backpack compartment. There would be eloquent punctuation, now, to his diatribe. And he'd gone on about the false face of suburbia imposed on drained wetlands and stripped, second-growth forests (waving his hand around them at the wood). "Damn it, there's nothing to them." It took a while before she could tell him she'd moved to the suburbs.

Thinking about it, this might have been the only thing Lucas and her parents had in common, not that they had had the chance to find it out, meeting just the once. Granddaddy only knew about him at all from Mama. Anyway, it was irrelevant now.

It couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes before Granddaddy sat up again, slowly, and looked at her.

"Can't sleep?"

"Must be all the big thinking going on in here," Grandaddy said, huffing, not quite like a laugh, but almost.

The whole bunker leaned in, and Emily opened a cabinet, took out the small, plastic spice jar with a red lid and unscrewed the top. "Dessert first?" she handed it to him, still sitting on the bed, and he held it out, open, shaking the contents just enough, like they'd learned to. Cinnamon awake enough to whisper back whole days of Grandmomma, Mama, baking in a hot kitchen. Different kitchens unlocked and branching out from this one like roots so tangled you can't tell which way is up.

He handed it back and she shook the smallness of its contents just a little more, sifting it in the recycled, bunker air, which of course got into the container too. Plastic breathes.

Mama keeping peppermint tea in an old tupperware so even when you took it out, the container smelled cool and leaf-edged.

"If I'm making dinner, you have to talk to me," Mama had said, the day after the funeral, in a moment of uncharacteristic directness. "Keep me company." And Em had made small talk, still thinking about Gran being gone, not touching her with any topic more than she could help. Mama had drunk it all up like a dusty field.

"Can I ask you something, Granddaddy?" Emily felt her way across the question the same way he'd navigated the bunker when the lights went out.

"Course," he said. She could still smell the invisible, memory-weighted incense in the spice hanging between them. Maybe that's what made her ask it.

"What are we going to do?"

When he looked at her, the way he did it erased her "we." It was the first time she'd known it for sure, exactly what happened next. He didn't get up. "You'll be ok."

"It's not ok, though, is it?" she said, trying not to be mad, leaning herself back against the oven handle, which creaked behind her. The hand towel draped there made soft grooves against her palm, but it slid on the smooth plastic.

"It will be."

"No, it won't."

"Not everything is gone, Em."

She knew what he was thinking, saw the bearing-witness, folded leather case on the pages where Gran had written births and deaths, and not like in other family Bibles. By

particular verses, like they were part of the story, which Grandmomma had thought was wonderful. Fit with the beginnings and endings she saw growing out of each other when she talked about God. But what Emily knew and what Granddaddy knew, when they looked at each other, buried alive on the same mountain under the same empty space of emptying nature - which didn't need them, as it turned out - were opposite things.

***

Things that sit on the mantel

mean stories usually.

Or should.

Take me down from my shelf,

I might say,

if I were sitting there.

Tell me

with more snap than I remember there being

between me and the beginning,

me and the end.

Make me history

and gather it, too,

so there's nothing

in isolation.

***

I know what they're going to do. They used to joke about Laurel Hill, and now they don't. Not ever. Might give me another summer if I can keep quiet about the troubles, but there's no stopping them, their plans after I go to bed, when we're all gathered for Christmas or Thanksgiving. No hoping against winter weather now. Not when it hurts to bend over, tie a shoelace, pick something off the floor. Or reach behind me, fasten a zipper, much less a bra. And your breasts sag down your front like weird, irrelevant things attached to your body. Oh, I know how to hide the stiffness and the pains, what things to avoid. You pretend to prefer sweatsuits and slippers, and then you do. You put important things at waist-level, little higher, maybe, and you don't wait too long to use the bathroom. There are rules for an aging universe, and I know them all by now.

Still, there'll be that day when they put your suitcase in the car and spend fifteen minutes hoisting you in sympathetically, and they're just too cheerful, promising things.

Something stuttered in the closet, a fluttering thump that stops everything else, interrupts and then listens to itself before repeating. It tried a different rhythm next, but with the same abortive weight. The old woman stood up and turned just her head, listening sparingly to insulate herself from the possibility that this, too, was imagined. Again, now more desperate, with a thrummed skitter between soft, lively thuds. *Answer-size sounds.*

She shivered and stared at the butter-colored wood of the closet door. The something shivered back, now against the washer, making it hollow out echoes inside like phantom sleeves slapping the metal door. Pushing back to yesterday, her thoughts sticky, fibrous, and giving reluctant way, she tried to remember *had I closed the window after the laundry?* The sad, small sounds of panic in the closet felt like they were inside her chest now. *No, I always close it once the dryer's done. Did I?*

Standing, she shuffled carefully to the door without putting on her slippers. The cool, pine floor felt like another skin, and she knew her movements went under the door to the creature inside because it stopped, then redoubled the fluttering thuds, now exploring the walls, the door, the ceiling, all spaces constructing the shape of its fear, mad pain, sick down the sides.

She stopped, couldn't open the door. It would be a bird or a bat in there. A muffled squeaking reached her. For a bat to be hitting the walls, the washing machine, the dryer, not finding the window, if it was even open, there was something wrong. More than something. She was shaking like it was inside her, fluttering around, colliding with nerves and setting off chains of electric impulses in her hands and face. She turned back toward the bedside table and picked up the telephone, but it took her a minute to find the number in the book and dial, her fingers unsteady.

When animal control came, finally, knocking and waiting for her to reach the door, they said it was a bat. *Was the window open?* No, window was shut. *Then how did it get in there?* Not sure, ma'am. Seems like you might have a hole under the eaves,

though. Or the window was open and fell shut. *It's never done that before.* Old houses, ma'am. They get a bit touchy.

Sitting in her chair, she listened for the night noises outside and in.

***

It was dark once they closed the lid. Like closing a book if you were stuck inside, too dark to read the words. The coffin was only a relative ending or beginning, though. And words still made up all the invisible parts of her stopped brain, even though she couldn't say them anymore. They were still there.

There were too many folds in the satin lining, like gray matter, only it didn't soak things in but collected dust and strangeness on the outside only, keeping the walls of the box free to press up against the ground on all sides. All sides were under and over and through earth, but the hole they made, standing in each other's compass, was a real thing, too. An actual depression of space made to hold one body, and a particular one with particular words, unread but not illegible. A little like footsteps you hear but don't register when you think you know exactly who they are and it isn't important.

There were no worms trying to get to her, so the words would inevitably congeal into sentences and stories, maybe melt a little around the edges, crack with too-quick changes in temperature or slump down, but the core of them would stay, magnetizing the dark inside the box. Making every needle point down into the earth.

***

Bell looked up from her book to see him watching her across his puzzle. She smiled. "What're you up to?"

"You feel like a piece of pie?"

"Oh, always."

"High time for pie time," he said, hoisting up and jogging himself into the kitchen; he'd started picking up his elbows in a funny way, cocking them behind him like a baby bird, like a joke about old age.

She turned the page but didn't keep reading, just listened to him in the kitchen, getting out plates and slicing into the blackberry cobbler. She'd swear she could hear the purple weight of it going down inside the bowls, there on the counter.

"Ice cream?" he called back.

"Thank you."

And then there was the suction cold of the freezer door and the clink of spoons and he was back with a bowl in each hand, heaped high.

"Thank you, Ben," she said, laying the book face down on her lap and taking the bowl. She turned it around to pick up the spoon.

"You know, I think Mama's going to sell," he said as he sat back down at the puzzle. It was going to be an owl, huddled on a branch with the snow somehow wedging him against that rough bark, but at the moment there was only the frame, one claw, and a pair of weird-gold eyes fringed in puzzle edges: feather-brown tabs and pocks that would

fit in one specific way with the rest of the unsolved picture. The *not yet* of it ordered and particular.

"I thought she was leaning that way at Christmas," Bell nodded. "It's just too much for her anymore, there on her own. Even a small farm is a full time job, and she's getting older."

"I know." He picked up a piece, did nothing with it. "Just hard to see it go, a little."

"I know," she said. Then, more slowly, "Is that something you want us to think about?"

"What, taking it?"

"Well, yes."

He squinted down at the piece in his hand, shaking his head. "No, we can't do that."

"Why not?"

"It's just not that time anymore, for us," he said. "We're lookin at retirement, 'fore too long, makin do fine, but it's no time to buy a farm."

"Ok."

He smiled at her, though, and took a bite of cobbler. "Great place to grow up, though." The piece struck into place under one gold eye and the picture smoothed out that little bit farther, like rolling out dough.

"Only if your brother doesn't push you down the hill in a barrel."

He grinned her favorite, imp-twisted grin and rolled his shoulders in a playful shrug. "Well, now, little brothers have to watch out what they say they're goin' do. Have to teach them the ways of the world."

"I guess so."

***

Typing Exercise

wo (pla (cou (ci (pa (tr (?) ee) rk) ty) ntry) net) rld

***

It was still easy to remember the way Christmases had been. Not those last years, with the viscous light on red velveteen tree skirts and the stiff, fake branches that never broke or shed needles but seemed to burn out patches of lights every time you turned your back. Before then. When they'd gone to Grandmomma and Granddaddy's house on Christmas Eve and spent the night, never enough beds. Emma had slept on the floor, in the foyer space by the front door that never got used. The driveway didn't even reach that far, and Mama had said the only people ever rang that harsh, cellophane-thin bell were salesmen and Mormons. Em would have her own mattress there on the floor, knowing that Mama and Daddy were down the hall in the bed with the dress-up clothes under it. And her grandparents in their own room, in the bed with the thin columns at all the corners, and the knobs that came off the tops but fit back like spools. Cousins on the floor in the living room, too, and her aunt and uncle on the pull-out couch. They all went to bed, if

not to sleep, at the same time because of the mixed-up-together arrangements, but it was all part of the festivity. The late nights. The Christmas lights that went between the green and the dark. The little porcelain village with its own lights in the tiny windows. And the smells of spruce and cinnamon and the sandalwood nativity from China, with the carved trees and the little emperor who came behind the wise men, his hands folded calm in his sleeves and a long, lined beard going smooth down the front.

Once, Em had caught a glimpse of the ceramic houses, the village, reflected in the glass of a picture frame. It had seemed so real that for a minute she'd thought it was the picture, alive in a cold dark that was also alive. Quiet, with gold windows and fresh snow down and the dark that brought everything together to sharpen the singleness of it all. Like stars. Like seeing it from up on a hill, coming home.

It wasn't what Granddaddy remembered, when she asked him about Christmases. He'd gone back to childhood memories, too, and told her about the angel food cake and Gran's homemade noodles that, for all her miraculous cooking, Grandmomma'd never been able to replicate. He'd grinned for a minute over flour clouds, then told about pushing his little brother down the hill on the sled (before he was ready, just like the time with the bike, the time with the barrel) and coming in, crossing under the pecan tree they killed not long after, with the salt water from making ice cream. But that was summer. In the now of his story, it was Christmas, and there was still a pecan tree under the frost hardness, thriving somehow, just waiting. An early snow. And sweet pickles brought up from the shelves downstairs for the best ham sandwiches you ever had, thick slices tiding you over for the big dinner later.

As the memories blended into something strange and unwieldy, too many sides to be three-dimensional, Emily watched him, sitting across from her, the Bible next to him on the couch, where he'd set it, closed. Grandmomma had had it rebound and his name engraved in stiff, gilt letters the year before she died, but it was splitting now, along the spine, his parents' penciled wedding date faded almost past recovery. He was quiet now. Like listening.

"What do you think happened to them?" The question like a drop of soap in a greasy pan, with everything pulling away from it, thinning out as it lost surface tension. She hated herself for asking.

***

I used to think that words matched the world, like there was some deep affinity in the colors and shapes they made that meant poetry was possible and life, by circular reasoning, also true. Something like spearmint was, also, like "spearmint" - actually had that sharp, bright thinness you think of, the edges that won't hurt you because they're also cooperative, compound. But more than sharp: a smooth flat base, sliding under the door like paper. Could be something written on it, but if so, it should be cold and open, a mysterious something that expands without the hard shell of meaning. Any shell would burn away with "spear" anyway. Breathed-in instead. "Spearmint" slants up and gives glint to what would otherwise settle too tamely. It's a paper airplane word, but also color going flush-gold from cold green, like flaring, a blush, live tissue cool to the touch. It's aloof, seems cheaper than it is. The hurt in your throat from running after the bus on the last cold day of the year.

And you'd trace it through all the times you heard or read it: spearmint. Of course the gum with the ice blue wrappers, very neat in packs at the checkout counter - not to be confused with Wintergreen, which wore entirely different clothes and was also a place. Then, too, the times you chewed it in the car because you couldn't brush your teeth right away. Sugar-free. Powder on your fingers, peeling back the pliant wrapper - or you popped the shelled bits out of plastic trays and crunched through to the gum. The actual plant might be a distantly accessible fact somewhere, but there'd be no reason to include it in the life-inscribed space where language goes.

Never mind.

I've since learned that all of the above is a lie, anyway. And that now-theoretical spearmint grew sociably beside the road, almost anywhere wet enough in the continental United States. You could have stopped the car and gone, picked it out of the ditch. Same word. Same gone thing.

***

"You know something?" She watched him pour a can of green beans, with slivers of pepper shaved between them, into a pot and set it on the stove.

"Oh, you'd be surprised all the things I know."

Em frowned without realizing why, caught herself, switched it off before he looked up at her. "I think I know more about home now than I did before I left."

He stopped stirring.

"You know I've been looking at those books, the field guides and stuff."

He nodded and turned back to the stove, shaking the pot a little, scraping it on the burner to loosen, even the beans. "Always good to know where you're from," was all he said.

At one point it would have made a difference, being able to learn from the land itself. But now, living down here, up there, the difference got boiled down, distilled to a film of something. Sticky memory, residual on walls and tables and maybe the trunks of trees. You learned the same lessons inside a bunker at this point.

One summer, Emily and Lucas had driven through an old coal town, the houses rot-hollow faces startled out of grainy sleep. Ghost town like the ones abandoned out West, but more smudged with handprint oils, maybe, and the old tipple and the overgrown sinkholes and a rusted-shut gate across a road going up the hollow. Like the whole, human world just fell asleep and didn't get up again. Lucas had wanted to stop and take pictures. Just learned how to change the filter so you'd get sepia tones or black and white, if you wanted.

Secretly, that's how she imagined the way the world had gone over their heads. Used-up and put-away-empty, with furrows where people used to move around over the surface, not going very deep after all, or did they? Buried deep.

Driving away, Lucas had slowed down and pointed out the window at a middle-aged woman in boots, moving up through the woods with an old bucket, the kind Granddaddy used in the garden: dirty white, heavy plastic, the rim chipped. The woman stopped and watched them go by, raised a hand, and Emily waved back automatically. Felt like she

was waving at the mountain. "Maybe she's a ghost," Lucas said, raising his eyebrows. Em nodded.

***

The stone knows, swings,

holds its shape to the drawn-taut

string and speaks, as gravity

circumscribes rotation, sway.

Things lost. Lost things

the stone knows.

Part Seven

There are fixed ways

to sew up a seam,

patterns of proper order,

the over-under

pressed into service.

You learn these things

from other people

reaching back

further than you can:

receipt book remedies

conscripting time

as mitral valves, aortic spaces,

open and closed in

specific rhythms too -

and you wouldn't think

to learn them from

anyone else.

There is no simple forgetting.

***

Emily stretched, felt every tendon and bone and untested socket pull away and fan out, like they could take up all kinds of meaningful space, escaping the core. "You want to know something?" she asked him.

He pretended to think for a minute. The bunker made them patient. "Yes."

"Your cells are constantly changing. Dying and regenerating. So every several years, seven I think, you're looking at a different body. All the cells replaced."

"Something to think about," he said, raking through the puzzle pieces in the box lid, fishing one out and trying it, setting it aside.

"So if you're made of different pieces, are you the same person?"

He cleared his throat with a long "ungh," rough edges. "Your Grandmomma would have had an answer to that. What do you think?"

"I don't know. Just thought it was interesting. I can't even remember where I read it. Nothing in here."

He nodded and snapped the last piece into the puzzle frame, all the outside edges smooth, like a sigh of relief, and waiting to be filled.

"I guess you're the same person," she added, giving up the experiment she'd half expected to try out. "You remember all the same stuff."

"Soul and memory aren't the same thing."

She looked up. Finally, "I didn't say they were."

"The real difference is chicken." There was the little grin sheltering in the savored, punchline-lit space. Here we go.

"Chicken."

"Yep. Difference between somebody who eats chicken, not out of a can, but whole chicken. Fried. Boiled. Then use the carcass and make soup. They talk about stew for the soul for a reason. You get pretty thin-souled without chicken. Not sure you're the same person after a couple years. Forget seven."

"It's 'chicken soup for the soul.'"

"Principle's the same."

Emily shook her head, throwing a thin-souled smile up against the bunker wall to see if it stuck. Sure enough. "I'm thinking it's pound cake. With eggs and milk, all fresh. And you smell it baking."

"Well, may be."

"I mean, pound cake is important enough for Grandmomma to make rules about cutting it while it's hot."

"Having it with coffee."

"You can't even taste it right when it's hot." Which meant the true meaning of pound cake was beyond taste. Oh, so existential. "The existential slice," Emily said, grinning.

Granddaddy snorted. "Fried chicken is a whole religion. Try competing with that."

When he started coughing, she looked up again, but he waved away her gaze, so she tried to swerve it up, over the too-sharp angles seizing in his neck and back, elbow, wrist, waist. All the places you took variability for granted.

She looked at Daniel Boone, Aunt Grace's old, stuffed doll, just sitting on the shelf now. In the bunker. Grandmomma'd replaced his leg at some point, and it stuck out like a cast, whiter than the rest of him, his tired fabric hide. Daniel Boone was more properly Dan'l. Aunt Grace had named him. And Em was pretty sure he'd once been a girl, with those embroidered eyelashes and coy lips. Losing all his hair and any dress he might have worn, though, disguised the fact just enough, so a little girl more interested in explorers than princesses could name the now-bald, inherited toy whatever she wanted. Either way, he sat on the shelf, keeping all the secrets to himself. Hide, hide. The word stood up by itself.

Granddaddy breathed, halfway a cough, and the clatter subsided back down inside him. Never seemed to make its way out, just went through varying degrees of inwardness.

"I could make us some tea," Emily said, but she still didn't look at him.

"No, we should save that," he said.

***

~~Once upon a time~~

~~there was a tree~~

~~inside a park~~

~~inside a city~~

~~inside a country~~

~~inside a planet~~

~~that was also a world.~~

Wow.

***

Lucas wasn't ready to go yet, and to tell the truth, neither was Em. She watched him wade down the creek, jeans rolled halfway up his calves and the ankles showing up white under the line where his hiking boots covered the skin. The sun was slow overhead, and Em leaned back against the bank with her own feet planted on a smooth wedge of shore, half-sand, half-mud. The taut grain of it felt good after the uneven stones of the creekbed; she imagined carpeting her house in silt and leaving bare footprints everywhere she went, some coded, spatial narrative, giving away all the negative spaces where you never walked. Emily grinned and kneaded a root into the space under her shoulderblade, then picked her camera up off the rock where she'd set it and found Lucas again through the lens. He was picking his way slowly downstream, still close enough to hear the shutter behind him. "Don't you have enough pictures," he

laughed and glanced over his shoulder without stopping. Which was a mistake. A minute later he'd lost his balance on the loose stones and flailed dramatically down, the look on his face gone to shocked foolishness before the smile slid quite off.

Em was on her feet as he pushed himself up, sitting in the creek, his short hair stuck to his skull and the Kings Dominion t-shirt hanging like discouraged skin. Em raised the camera and snapped another photo, but she was laughing so hard she could barely aim it at him, looking up at her. The lady ferns across the creek curved over the bank, waving as a boomer stopped, halfway up the paper side of a yellow birch. She could see the breathing give of his red-brown body while his eyes clamped down on her, on Lucas, on the both of them laughing now. He flicked a scrawny tail and shivered up the trunk, using a narrow branch to drop himself down inside a rosebay, where the shade between wide, waxy leaves hid him from view.

"You about done?" Lucas grinned, standing uncertainly and wading back toward her with elaborate care, sopping.

"You stay away from me," she laughed, scrambling up the bank and almost falling straight into a witch hazel, catching herself on the scaly bark, gripping it like a staff before the bowing threw her back off balance and she had to stumble past and upright, turning to check on Lucas's progress behind her.

"Come back here."

The adrenaline came up like the long-gone witch hazel flowers, in twists and tufts, yellow, and like pinging seeds going off to come up at gleeful projectile distances. Like being chased by the tickle-bear who was really Uncle Danny, Aunt Grace laughing

and Em and the cousins running, squealing barefoot down garden rows while Granddaddy stopped picking tomatoes and just grinned, shaking his head. "You can't hide behind me, now. Not from the tickle-bear."

Em sprinted back to the car and half-tripped inside, the shiny panic giggling up as she depressed the lock and watched Lucas stumbling up the bank. He'd picked up her camera, where she'd dropped it under the witch hazel, and now he was pointing it at her, snapping a "coward shot," he said later. The camera was ok, then, the grown-up in her brain nodded and put an arm around the now-subsiding child. Good. She smiled at Lucas and he took another picture.

A pileated woodpecker caught her eye, deeper in, past the opposite bank, and Emily rolled down the window, pointing for him to catch it on film. "Look over there." And he stood, trying to see it, for several seconds before he gave up and squelched back toward the car, scooping up his hiking boots by the laces.

"You bring a towel?"

She reached behind her and handed it out the window, taking his boots and the camera. The woodpecker was gone. "How was the swim?"

He just grinned and jumped in the passenger seat, throwing the wet at her and leaning back in the seat. "I don't know why you moved out of these mountains, Em," he said, flipping the switch for the sunroof and watching it drone slowly back.

"Ok," she said, and put them in reverse.

That night, stopped at a farmhouse-turned-restaurant with painted ivy growing up the inside walls and laminated doily placemats on blue checked cloths, he tried again. His hair and dried more disheveled than normal, and he seemed to be addressing himself to the happy, pen and ink version of American Gothic printed on the menu. "You're so lucky to've grown up in a place like this."

She glanced around, then just looked at him.

"You know what I mean," he leaned in, exasperated, before turning back to the page. It wasn't a long menu. "It's different down here."

"I didn't grow up here, Lucas."

"But you grew up Appalachian, is the point. There's just something about this place you miss when you're raised in the suburbs. What do you think I should order?"

"Whatever you want."

"How come you never cook?"

"How come you don't?"

A waitress with a cleft lip scar and bright red heels clipped toward them. Her sweater was blue like the tablecloth, and when she grinned, her eyes came straight at them and didn't waver. She was maybe in her late twenties, and the apron snugged tight around her waist and hips. "What can I get for you two tonight?" she asked, and Em looked up at the rasp in her voice.

"I'll have the spaghetti," Emily said. "And just a water. Thanks."

Lucas stared at her like she was nuts, then laughed, just one burst and done. "What's your specialty?" he asked, adding "Minnie," reading it off the crooked nametag. She reached up and straightened it, patting it back in place, still smiling. Sometimes Em forgot how good-looking Lucas was.

"Oh, everything's good. If you like fried chicken, though," she finished the sentence with a shake of her head, eyes half-closed.

"You make your own biscuits here?" he asked. He was leaning on the table, smiling back.

"You better believe it, hon."

"Fine, well I'd do the fried chicken and biscuit, with a side of green beans."

"Sure thing," she said, collecting their menus and sliding them in a distressed wood rack on the way back to the kitchen.

"What's wrong with you?" Lucas laughed. "Spaghetti? In a place like this?"

"You know there are actually Italian Appalachian communities," Em said, leaning back and pretending the place was more interesting than Lucas.

"Ok, is this one of those?"

She shrugged, and he just laughed, refusing to be baited.

"Well, you can't have any of my chicken, Miss *Italian Appalachian communities*."

"Don't recall asking for any," she said, looking at him now. He just grinned.

***

When Rebecca closed her eyes, the shape the monstrance made was red against the dark, cave-shut softness of her eyelids, and it held steady for longer than it should have done. Outside on the mountain, she could hear the wind, shaped by moving branches, shaped and shaping, so that there was no single space: not like the inside of a woodwind, but a different kind of instrument, one made of perpetual motion like a voice with a thousand connected throats. What it was saying, singing, screaming, though, was outside, and Rebecca wondered what it meant when the Word was an unleavened disc melting on your tongue. She wondered if that same Word was wrapped in the gale, or if still, small voices only pitched tents in more sheltered spots.

Just a week after the funeral, now, and with Jim so lost and everything at home so quiet. She'd tried to tell Emily when she came, but there it still was and no closer to an end. Of course, she couldn't have stayed.

It was quiet in the church until a helicopter flew overhead. None of them shifted from the still directness of prayer, but Rebecca could see them listening. The incense billowed up across His face like dust while the clattered thrum passed over them, closing down the space. It had felt like being folded up in a box or slid between the pages of a book: the outside a different place entirely. Father Jack started *Tantum Ergo*, and the words went, perpendicular, into the thwarted, rotor-gapped sound. There was no rubble to match the clouds drifting up from the censor, but the roar told a different story.

Shifting, Rebecca leaned back against the pew, but a felt edge of Presence bled into the storm outside: no rain, just the wind, which frayed a listing autumn. She

watched Him, his unreadable, sacrament-face looking past her, through the plaster and the brick and out into the storm, where it found the tire tracks punched into the shoulder of the road along its narrowest curves. Like vertebrae. *Though the mountains leave their place and the hills be shaken, my love shall never leave you.*

She pulled her rosary out of its case and let it fall free for a minute, straightening out any twists, before she crossed herself. Always her lips moved when she prayed. She couldn't help it. She'd tried to slide the words straight from her brain, but her breathing shaped itself around those prayers in spite of herself. Rebecca could feel the pressure of each bead against the pads of her fingers, passing around the connected whole: she let it punctuate the words revolving in their smaller orbits, gradually receding to the back of her brain in a low, familiar stream of muted sound. The meaning fell out from behind them, melded into something wider and more opaque, and the whole of it became a curtain, other images playing out from somewhere else. Cave shadows. And Rebecca thought about sacraments, about signs hiding themselves behind meaning, and about impossible translations.

A bell rang, and she glanced at the rosary in her hand, watching her fingers swallow another bead, near the end. Emily had come home, though. She'd come back for Gran. And maybe would again.

***

Old dog, bones protruding

at the neck as sign, those white-parched

stones sunk down in fur dearth,

spoke:

“Build a raft to float your family safe

in the coming storm,

for the waters will rise

from mountain to mountain,

over the earth.”

True words flood the world.

And now, with the waters gone again,

we press feet to the earth,

startled only for a minute

by the singing that is coming

from her bones.

Part Eight

Running through it, she chipped bit by bit up out of the bunker-now, never leaving. How she should have said it. What could have, maybe, changed things, transected established connections so the new ones could have room to grow.

"Love you too, Em."

"Are you sure you and Mama'll be ok?" *Should have said.*

"The Shaners are here too," he said.

A pause. "You'll be ok?" *Should have said.*

"Course. They're bound to sort all this out. We haven't been around for thousands of years to just quit like that. They'll find a way."

"And if they don't?"

"Em, it's the government. They get the best scientists. I think they know a little more about it than you do." The words clanked like money, or keys, thrown down on a table.

"What are they saying now?"

"Don't you watch the news anymore?"

"Not for a couple days. Granddaddy does."

"They're hopeful. We just gotta stay put, you know. Keep calm. There's no point making things worse than they are."

"Not sure that's possible, Dad."

She could hear the hard edge his silence made, peeling back finally. Just "I have to go, Em."

"Ok."

"We'll talk again when this blows over. You'll see."

"Ok, yeah."

"Love you. You take care, now."

"You too." Then, "Dad?" Nothing. "Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Why don't you and Mama come down here instead. You got any gas in the car? Or the garage, maybe?" Her voice was quiet now; she wasn't sure if it could sustain itself down the line, over the rough land left. Might snag on something.

But he did answer finally, "They said to stay put. We're good here, Em. The Shaners have some stockpiled cans and stuff, and Ed and I have our hunting rifles. For emergencies. You know. We shouldn't need them."

"Ok."

"Bye, Em."

"Tell Mama I love her."

"I'll do that."

***

a n d

w h at t he h e ll is l e f t

t o d o

ex a ct l y

i f a th i n g

i s st i l l

all o w e d

t o

a s k

?

***

The trees were leafing again, though no seeds now. It was strange to think how quickly a species evaporated when there was no next generation of creature, creatureness somehow more dependent on difference than Rebecca could have said, before. Before everything changed. Of course, the ferns could still produce. And those few with asexual, apomixic knowledge, which amounted to a self-knowledge freezing time just to keep going.

The cloning programs went on, though not enough to feed even this stunted world. And the mutation experiments, the backwards promise of radiation, meant that anyone who remembered the Cold War couldn't help but feel the irony in the business-as-usual

mitosis going on in reiterated cells. Iterations of iterations of iterations of a copy of some original pattern, DNA blueprints. No more arms race, now, but a race to see if we can still change, reproduce without pure replication, without labs, before some bacterial mutation hit one of those samenesses, wiped us out.

They still ran limited programming from the cities, when they could control the riots and the marches. Rebecca had heard the problem described in so many ways now. "We've essentially stepped out of the evolutionary path. Without meiosis and sexual reproduction, we'll be vulnerable if bacteria learn to mutate again before we do. We won't be able to protect ourselves as a species, any of us." They said it was a virus, that it had started in animal cells, branched out, chewed through cell walls next, plant cells, and burrowed in. She didn't pretend to understand it.

The nurseries were full of children exactly like their parents. And no one was asking how a generation might fix the problems its identical fathers and mothers had made. Generation Stop, they were saying, while time kept running without them in a different, frozen world.

And there were problems, too, with the clones, people said. Though you didn't ever really know since that was inside the walls of buildings more secure than the White House had been, before. The blurred line between after and before made it difficult to know exactly where the point of no return had been, when they had passed through it like a veil and into the valley.

Bell would have said it started a long time ago, but then she always thought a story pedaled itself back out of sight through unrecorded generations. And she might be right,

but there had to have been a verifiable moment, too, objective on a man-measured scale, at least, when someone did something or said something or threw something away that led, eventually, to the virus and the end that was only an end until it wasn't.

***

So there was no reason to think of this death as any more final than it might have been aboveground, before frozen genes and panicked splicing and nothing seeming to cut through a flattened future. She could tell herself.

She'd dragged a chair to the side of the bed and sat herself down in it, but now her hands were too still. He wasn't coughing. The breathing was small, though, and full of words. *The same way we all go*. The thought drifted up and floated like scum on the surface.

"I ever tell you about the time Sukey and Pollywog and I found the bears' den?" she just said, her throat bone dry, like talking through a length of pipe. Rough edges cut her lips to pieces.

He shook his head, but his eyes didn't leave Grandmomma's photo. Emily had never noticed before, but there was a chipmunk peeking out from the rhododendron behind her.

"Well, we were hanging out with Farmer Brown that day, and he said he'd seen a big ol' bear roaming around the woods off his cornfield. Said he was worried it might tear things up." Half-evaporated between them, her words made the air spongy, somehow. And the sheer ridiculousness of what she was saying pushed against her from behind. There was nowhere flat to stand; she just kept sliding off. "So we thought if we could find it, we might scare it away for him."

Granddaddy looked at her, and Emily stopped. His breath tried to harden into syllables, but nothing came. And when he pointed, shaky, without his hand lifting off the quilt, she didn't have to look to know what he wanted. Emily leaned over and slid the Bible up off the table, feeling the wooden thickness of its pages, pressed into a single lump. Like you couldn't crack it open to save your life.

But it did open, and the pages sifted so thin in between her hands. She looked at Granddaddy and didn't say anything. He just waited with his murky breathing, waded through the muck and debris of his body, waited for her to start.

Not knowing what it was that was wrong with him was the same as not knowing where to start. The same as not knowing, when it came to that, what had happened to them all in the first place.

She started reading at random, but his hand brushed the quilt like turning pages. And she flipped forward, watching him treat the quilt pieces like shuffled papers. A burnt-orange diamond shape under his palm, simultaneously soft and hard. "Gospels?" she asked. The hand stopped moving. "Ok." Sibylline squares and diamonds, the quilt edges burned her eyes.

She read through the story four times, the flourescents humming overhead and his labored quiet like a basso profundo, spongy earth and the words were seeds, Mama had said. Emily's throat burned, but she kept going, listening more to those sounds: the lights, the breaths, than to any part of the narrative she'd heard so many times. She was reading the space inside the bunker. And it was her name. His. All their stories, revolving interrogatives, took up her whole brain as she stared at the minute type.

He wouldn't drink any water. Just wanted her to keep reading. She read through Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, kept reading through Acts and into the letters, kept going, dragging the words out of her up the sides of her throat, scraping rougher as the only way she knew how much time had passed, and that was pain time, which isn't the same.

...for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross... She saw him see it. Then he was gone, too.

***

She stared at him. "Are you kidding me right now?" The words came out harder than she'd intended, but she didn't take them back.

"Well, yeah. We're still there, just underground is all." He ran a dust rag over the top of the bookshelf, picking up the picture of Russ's parents, wiping under it, and putting it back in the same place. Em had asked if they could put that away, but he'd wanted to keep it.

"But we're in a bunker." Her gesture took in the walls more than anything else, themselves and all their *things* contained between them. "We could be anywhere in the world and it wouldn't make any difference."

"But we're not anywhere in the world. We're here."

She shook her head, swallowed that first, corroded edge of claustrophobia back down again. It helped to close your eyes, but she was afraid if she did, this time, she'd drop out the bottom of whatever place was left.

***

The Real Astaire

Well, was and wasn't:

watched soaps and went

the wrong way round

the floor at his daughter's coming-out,

played bridge and drank old-fashioneds -

genius, perfectionist introvert

hiding out the side door with a smoke -

also snuck into pornos with sunglasses on,

kissed Mama goodnight, good Omaha son,

broke his wrist on a skateboard

at seventy-odd, got up early,

walked, ate little, floated, teased,

played pool like Terpsichore,

Well, found a way.

***

When she was little, Em had liked to pretend she could walk on the ceiling. She'd lie on her back and look up, sometimes stick her feet up in front of her to see what they would

look like there. The best place to do it was Aunt Grace's house, where there were more things like ceiling fans and inset lights and differences in the heights of this room and that one. More things to navigate, like an obstacle course. But you could do it anywhere.

Even the bunker, she thought, leaning her head back along the top of the couch and swinging herself up into that other gravity to make her way across the still-flat space. She had to step over a fluorescent light, and the vents were cold on her feet, but otherwise it was smooth until she reached the wall, where the door fit. She had to step over a low wall to get through the opening, from this angle, and she imagined making footprints on this side, then the gap, and footprints going into the next room.

In this version of space, of course, there was no chance of getting aboveground. It was already underfoot. Reversing gravity was one thing, but this wasn't the place to do away with it altogether. Or you'd lose the surface in new ways. Em imagined floating off into space that got bigger wherever she drifted. She thought about seeing the planet from outside any atmosphere, out where everything probably looked pretty much the same as before. That earth-shattering earth image, the blue planet, would be the same, rotating whole. Except that it wasn't.

Em let her footprints fade out and then lifted her head and watched Granddaddy shuffling through Grandmomma's old recipe cards.

It would have been nice to watch a movie tonight, even one they'd seen a hundred times, but of course the dvd player had broken after a few weeks, and they'd been left with discs that stood in for remembered stories you couldn't read.

"Did you know I saw Mark Ruffalo once?"

"Who's Mark Ruffalo?"

"Oh. He's an actor. He's in all those superhero movies, and some other things. You ever see the one about the fighter? With Steve Carrell and that other guy?"

"Don't recall it." He pulled out the recipe for peach cobbler, held it up to her, put it back.

She could almost smell it, but then her brain was full of dirty dishes. Mama's sink. She would have used the old bowl with the blue and red stars on it. "Well, he's in that one."

"Where did you see 'im?" Granddaddy asked, shutting the lid and pushing the box back along the tabletop.

"We were at a local festival of some kind. You know Lucas took me to a few of those." It suddenly occurred to her that, among other things, Lucas had considered himself the revitalizer of culture in her life. Her culture. Fuck savior complexes.

"What kind of festival?"

"Storytelling, I think. But it was sponsored by a co-op or something. You know, local foods."

"And you saw this movie star? Was he just there, or was it part of the program?"

"Just there, I think. With his kids. Lucas flipped out a little." She had too, but she didn't say that. "It was weird."

"Ok."

"You ever seen anyone famous?"

"Saw Billy Graham once."

"Oh, ok."

"And your Grandmomma met Donald O'Connor."

"Who's Donald O'Connor?"

"You don't know who Donald O'Connor is?" The name was just sounds by now.

"Um, I don't think so."

"He's in *Singing in the Rain*."

"Oh, right. Ok. The not-Gene-Kelly guy." She looked at the wall, at the photo of Grandmomma sitting on the porch swing.

"You know who I actually got to know pretty well, though? Maybe you heard of 'er."

Em looked back at him.

"Emily Eller."

"You don't say." She grinned. "Wait, isn't she related to Ben Eller?"

"The one and only."

***

Snapping the picture out of time,

he smiled and substituted a gilt frame

for the live one lost.

There'd be time enough to forget

what he'd been thinking and feeling

when he took and punched it out,

slicing around the edges

while the promised chemical reactions,

their light and spatial sensitivities,

filled a paper retina,

ready.

But now,

her face

still registers the things

that were true

in the moment

(and didn't know they were being

snuck from context

in such repeatable ways).

She's still thinking about her mother's hands

and the drier being just about ready

to go off downstairs

and the fact that she might miss it

and should probably go see.

The fabric that's so close to dry

will go to make a quilt

to keep someone warm

when other things get lost.

She smiles right into the shot

like the sun going down.

***

There's something impossible about endings.

Jim's mother always put down a book with a certain expression on her face and in her hands; even Em had noticed it once, a long time ago. And when she'd asked was there something wrong with the book, whatever it had been, Bell had shaken her head and just said she wished she knew what happened to them all after the end. Rebecca had brushed it away as an idiosyncrasy, peripheral at best, but now she wasn't sure.

An ending seemed inconceivable after all this - at best fictional. Even death, the death of a whole species, didn't actually stop time. It would keep unspooling after she was gone, and if, some invisible day, there were no more people, an unobserved planet would keep rolling around the sun until the death of that single star, and then space would go on, and whatever things still lived in it, after that. If you looked at time as a measurement, of course, it depended on human beings, but the recordable thing, whatever it was, kept going past the person with the stopwatch. And even puncturing that continuous stream of numbers on the screen didn't change anything; you just penciled in closure, and it laughed.

You don't think about these things when you're lying in a hospital gown, holding your newborn daughter. Jim's there, too, and the nurse is giving you a minute to yourselves, so time seems to curl around you like a protection. "I'll give you a minute." There's nothing like it. Of course, even that isn't Emily's beginning, but you imagine it is because now you can hold her and meet her eyes and recognize yourself there, and he's beside you. The moment fills up and defines itself out of all the rest, and you think, *Something's starting here. This is a beginning.* And it is.

Rebecca stopped and looked down. And there it was.

Hunger pulled the whole of her insides taught, and for a mad second she laughed out loud before she could clap a hand over her mouth - like someone else's hand. *Quiet, Rebecca. Now, look.* She knew what that was, not growing, exactly, but having grown and fallen, no birds to eat it, off the serviceberry bush.

She hadn't made jam last time it fruited, which had been the last time, period. But what about this weakly perfect berry? Scanning the ground, she couldn't see any more, but she also didn't move from where she stood. Just the one. The trees standing between them and the Shaners' old place just stayed silently rooted, swaying a little in the sluggish breeze, facing her. Was this the first or the last serviceberry? Beginning and ending looked too much alike by now.

The quiet hung off her shoulders like a smothering blanket. Because she knew the answer. Didn't need to push past a sterile land to see the future when so many people had already starved and gone. They were running out of food, themselves: Jim had thinned down so much. He looked more like Ben than ever, now.

"Rebecca, come back in the house!" She heard his voice behind her and turned, saw him waving at her strangely, then leaning back inside the door for something, pulling out the rifle. That's when she heard the someone moving, looked up and saw him not two dozen steps away, hands out and watching her.

"Listen, I just need help is all."

"You go on, now," Jim called. She knew, without looking back, that he was pointing the gun. That deepening man-tone was in his voice, sidling out fear.

The stranger stopped, but he didn't turn around. Kept his hands stretched out. "There's nothing to buy even when we have the credit. We've been living on last year's garden, but it's almost gone. And what we *can* buy, there's something wrong with it, ain't no nutrition."

"We're all in the same boat, buddy," Jim called across her. "You go begging somewhere else. There's nothing for you here."

"What's going on, Jim?" Rebecca heard Ed now, quieter, but his voice still carried toward her clear as anything. She knew he'd be standing behind Jim, watching over his shoulder.

And she imagined Jim shrugging his shoulder into the stock and shaking his head at the man. "Go on, now."

"You all're Christians," the man said, looking at Rebecca now, and letting the words go between them with all the guilt lit clear. Something came loose between her ribs, and she turned around again to look at Jim, in time to feel everything speed up around her, while her insides stayed slow.

In the same, stretched-out second, she felt the stranger lunge close, the air molecules jolted out of the way, swinging back and forth and steadying like rocking boats or ducks flushed, off-center, then settling back to the surface, strung apart. There was the minute change in temperature, with the fever feeling coming off his skin, and maybe he brushed her sleeve when he fell. She didn't have time to look once the gun went off - snap went time, sound broke itself up around the edge of that single, reverberating shot. Cracked like the most efficient thunder stroke, condensed for accuracy.

The quiet, too, settled in with the molecules of space, filling up the void where the man had been breathing before the shocked-empty sound of the gun. Rebecca couldn't hear the sound of her own breath for a second, and when she looked up - something made her look - there were no clouds overhead, just dusty blue, close as the ceiling of a cave.

***

The story you told last night

made up the difference between

telling and being, healed less a division

among worlds than a sight that divided

seed from stalk

from story.

Compass steady with the balance

of man, woman, deer, corn,

you told us less what Selu said and did

than what she was and is:

the ways we know responding,

weaving baskets to hold the bones

of our parents, our children,

moving out and in again

like one slow, woven breath.

***

And suddenly the bunker was empty. And all the edges inside it multiplied like looking in a kaleidoscope. His body multiplied like a mountain pushed up from molten rock, a core, and it made more edges, made lines that didn't connect with anything else. Nothing connected. And the tangle was also empty, with sharpness not meaning, just cutting the everything that had been there a minute ago down to nothing, shredded-up and still shredding.

It was hard to breathe.

She put the Bible on the bed, next to him. Caught herself - doing what? - and set it back on the table, still open. His eyes were already closed. They hadn't made it to Revelation.

Emily sat still, watching him lie there, stiller than she was. Empty body. And the panic ruptured all over her insides. Pushing the chair over as she stood, Em threw up right there, on the floor. Stared at it. Went and got a cloth to clean it up, then almost didn't. She wondered were the tears coming. All the edges grinding against each other.

When she was done, she sat back down and tried to breathe between the lines, heart pounding syncopated skip-beats in her ears and making it impossible not to see how empty this place was now. The false floor actually, finally, fallen out. Her scream was like somebody else's when she doubled over to make room for that much more empty.

But there it was, his name, coming out of the cover as she shifted, angles bringing it up like conversation welling from where Grandmomma had had the gilt letters engraved. Looking at it, there it was

with place seeping between symbols

of sounds fleshing words

and blurring into bowls

for holding some entire world

past real.

She held perfectly still so she wouldn't lose the gold burn of letters, if the light reflected off them at the wrong incline. They stood up inside the leather, off the leather, looking back like intention, and she remembered what he had said about chicken noodles and angel food cake, of all things, where you used the whites and yolks and didn't waste anything you couldn't help.

There were the tears.

That's when the filtration sound, so constant it was inaudible, even more than the humming lights, stopped.

***

There's a bright thread running through it,

thread, like learning lore-steps, supper on the stove,

and stirring that much death in, bit by bit.

Sweet in the going-gone of it, we wore out - had to hit

the pan and sizzle down the grain - drove

bright threads through it.

Take cornbread oven-hot, some fruit sliced-up, pit

dug from a flesh-tight cove,

where death stirred, bit by bit,

but still: there's the trace of it run down slit

edges of quilt-crazed shade: white-hot azure, mauve

of bright threads running through it.

So that greens meet gold meet rough, patch-browns, while the grit

between joints says *we made joining pain*, wove

in a shuttled death, just bit by bit.

So, leaning down to get the fires lit,

you see it, how the heat and color clove,

their bright thread through it,

as we stirred just that much death in, bit by bit.

***

"Come on, now," Papaw said, through his pepper-gray whiskers. The whole forest of them tore up where the words muscled through, closed back completely after. Lips thin and hard like bullied combs.

There wasn't much choice when Papaw said it like that, which was the only way he ever talked. You just listened. "Skin on down the tree and put your shoes on for church," was just about the longest thing Ben had ever heard him say. And he'd scraped such a rough, raw patch down one leg coming down a trunk he'd climbed a hundred times.

Papaw waited, running an invisible tongue across his front teeth, sniffing. It was a language too, and when he clicked his teeth together and shrugged the age back off his shoulders, Ben knew he'd better be ready or that would be it. The old man would be off without him. He'd already shoved a handful of cartridges into his pocket and picked up the rifle like a walking stick.

Ben retrieved his father's gun from the cabinet under the stairs and made it back to the kitchen in time to catch the screen door on its swing, push it back and jump the porch after Papaw's narrow figure. The old man was down the steps and under the pecan tree before he stopped and looked behind him. "Watch for bears." Nothing in his face gave away if he was joking. And then he was off, going leggy down the hill and under the first

October trees while Ben scrambled to keep up. They'd slacken closer to the good places, but for the next quarter hour or so, it'd be a kind of test.

The McCunes took shots from their barn loft, out over the fields, but Papaw never raised a gun near a house or even livestock if he could help it, not since his Uncle took the family's bone china set of six down to two and a half with a supposedly unloaded shotgun. Wasn't so much the china, though, Daddy said, as the near miss is could have been. He'd had it from his Granny that the shot came deathly near his sister.

So you had to get out in the woods a piece before Papaw would start to slow down and nod at the different, definitive places you kept moving past. Where one thing or another happened, hunting. Wouldn't know them unless you'd heard the stories, and you wouldn't hear any of those out hunting with Papaw. You had to put them together later from the things Daddy and Uncle Zeb got past each other, some of which was true. The one would wait for a detail wrong and jump in, so it got to be a game, seeing who could tell the wildest story and still pass it for gospel. Occasionally, after a big meal of chicken and mashed potatoes with gravy and the last tomatoes sliced right out of the garden before frost, they'd sit back and let the other tell one through, just grin. But mostly they competed to see who could catch the other one. Drove Papaw crazy, though; he'd get up and go fill his pipe in a way that shucked off him full of impatience. "Just like to hear one without interruption for once," he'd said, biting down on the pipe stem; "Don't give damn who tells it," which caught everyone quiet for a minute. That was hard language for Papaw.

They were moving slow when Papaw finally pulled up and waved, just one, loose-wristed gesture, like throwing something down. Ben stopped and looked around.

There was no story attached to this one, that he could remember, but he knew better than to ask. They'd paused under a buckeye, but off to the right, where the land reared up in waves, the poplars and oaks and flame azaleas gave way to the edges of rhododendron: the slick a tangled, shade-cool mass. You could almost feel the cool coming off it from here. To the left the woods stayed open, though, and through the lady ferns Ben thought he saw a patch of Indian Pipe, there under the chestnut.

Papaw was half-crouching when Ben looked back at him; his wide hand splayed on the buckeye's smooth, plated bark, but higher up, high as a man's face, were scratch marks raking up the symmetries. The crouch, the watching out into the trees, it felt like when the schoolbus goes by, past the driveway, and you know it's time to walk down to the road to meet it coming back. Only it wouldn't be taking you to school. Something like that in Papaw's shoulders, between the blades of them, and Ben knew he'd go to meet it, whatever it was that looked so familiar, but somehow aimed itself at different place.

The woods were quiet then, and Ben felt the skin of his arms go taught as wire, the hair pulled up straight on the backs of his hands, and everything trained for the radio waves coming off Papaw now. He stepped right up close behind him and stopped, looked where the old man was looking, waited. And there she was. Not moving. She never stepped out from anywhere, just came forward with the noticing, seeping up out of the woods like light warming up in places it already fell, just sheering off the minute between one cloud and the next, loosed brightness stopping the breath inside you.

The shape of her stepped out of the woods without walking, already looking straight at them, upwind she was and all. But Papaw never raised his gun.

Looking in her ceaseless eyes, Ben remembered something, a story he'd forgotten. Papaw's tale, just told, like all the others, by someone else, by Granny, this time. And it was her tale, too. Her strong, thin voice wound itself around them as she told it, the words just ridges in the thread of it, and not separate things at all. About Papaw going out at night, hunting the thing that had dismembered three turkeys in the last two weeks, glutted them open to the slope sides and left little between the ribs. He'd gone out in the dark with his gun, and Granny told how she'd almost tried to stop him going, feeling something else underneath it all, hidden and maybe not to be disturbed, knowing you had to protect your flock, though. There was a long night, then, waiting for Papaw to come home, watching the fire in the woodstove burn down to its most cautious self before she stoked it up again, ready for coffee when he came back. There was the long of it, that whole night, outside, too, with Papaw going searching through the places he knew the turkeys roosted, the apple trees and plum. The moon had made some light, and the stars, Pegasus shouldering up the southeast sky, when he heard her whistle, not like a cat at all, and just the once. Then those small, answer-sounds that froze him straight through. Up ahead, in the dense apple branches, fruit coming ripe in a week or so, her gaze had burned in place of the stars. Granny told that part in a whisper, and Ben had seen the constellations change around those eyes, while they decided about Papaw. Winking out, a shadow had dropped down and split itself across the orchard shadows, gone. And Papaw had gone home, too. Never saw her again. Never lost another turkey either.

And with his mouth clamped dry shut, tongue pressed behind his teeth like it was cemented there, Ben understood why, though he couldn't have put it into the story any more than Granny could, or Papaw. She looked at him, and then she was gone.

They came back with a half dozen squirrels and a rabbit, nothing bigger, and Papaw let Ben skin most of them himself, watching under his eyebrows for the clean tug down the body. Mama took and boiled them up, and Ben watched the others eating a minute before he'd take a bite himself, sopping a biscuit in the good, brown gravy and letting the story settle back a little. Suddenly hungry. And Papaw winked at him over the table, just once.

***

There'd be the steam scrolling off that cake

like nothing a prophet ever tasted, I thought,

'cept maybe in a vision.

Thought of angels came over me like

ants in morel-made chambers,

whole rooms rich

with being brought back from the dead

and small bodies going in and out:

not invisible,

just unnoticed.

***

Emily stopped to wait for Grandmomma and Granddaddy to catch up, looking down at the trail between her shoes. She would be going off to college soon, finally

getting out, but in addition to the beer smell and the crushing pronouncements and thick-wristed gestures, there would be no more meeting-in-the-middle hikes with her grandparents, at least not for a while. That she would miss.

A catbird snagged shadows through an elm beside the trail, which made her see the nuthatch going down, too, headfirst, and the gray squirrel watching her. He snapped his tail with spastic intention before turning and whisking himself behind the trunk, effectively disappearing. Emily waited for him to come back around the other side, but he didn't, at least not before she heard their footsteps behind her, and the broken sound of light conversation bouncing off the leaves.

Granddaddy was breathing heavier than normal, coming in sight between the trees, along a bend in the path, and then swinging into full view with Grandmomma smiling at something he'd said. When he saw Emily, he pointed along into the woods, waving his hand to either side of the trail. "You see all the Indian cucumber?"

She shook her head. "Is that like regular cucumber?"

He laughed. "Well, you eat both, but no. Kind of similar taste, though."

Grandmomma drew her arm through Emily's and pulled her close. "You excited about college?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Decided yet what you're going to study, or are you tired of the question?" she asked, ducking under the shadow as a jay dove from poplar to bare-armed hemlock overhead.

"No, I'm not tired of it," Em lied. "And maybe English."

She nodded, "That'd be a good one."

Granddaddy scrape-kicked his shoe through the dried-up reminder that this was, first and foremost, a riding trail.

"Ben, *what* are you doing?"

"Nuthin," grinning. The grin angled itself up into the trees and the light, even dappled, made him squint, enjoying it. "That's a buckeye," he said, pointing. Emily looked. "The seeds are poison."

"Well, I won't eat any, then."

They walked on for a while together, slow, and once a string of three women rode past on horses, the animals aimed straight and steady down the path, calm, muscled roundness of their bodies ticking through on heavy-hooved legs.

Em had ridden a horse once, one of those tourist deals. She'd signed a waiver and worn a helmet and straddled the imperturbable gelding, Bubbles. They'd followed the lead horse down a carefully picturesque trail through the woods, while the guide warned her, confidentially, that he'd seen a bigfoot once, not far from there. Eyes glowing.

Something small moved under the ferns, and Emily jumped. "Watch out for the booger man," Granddaddy nodded sagely, grin giving him away.

She laughed. Leaned on Grandmomma's arm. They went on down the path.

***

So she'd go up. That's what it meant, in the end: leaving the bunker. Emily pulled the quilt slowly over his face and turned, crossing to the desk on the other side of the room. It took a long time to walk across, like an uphill friction lengthened the couch and the table and the walls along the way. She had to stop and reorient herself by the bookshelf; she'd missed the desk, cut too far to the right. But now she was here, she paused to look for it, found the book and slid it out from between Shakespeare and James Still - her skin cold and smooth against the binding.

When she did sit down at the desk, Emily opened at the end. *The World was all before them, where to choose their place of rest...* She shut the book, pushing it across the desk, and leaned back, staring.

Sitting,

she was filling up the space,

its shape long dragged open.

And when she swallowed,

the walls struck matchspark images

that flared and flickered out,

warming to the friction

of her body,

of her brain.

***

Remember you are dust,

and I do, standing barefoot

on tile, watching the mirror

for signs of transmutation,

Pyrophysis.

Dust-pronounced,

I am ash, am raised,

am fire-shocked cells

that feel and pause

and gather up

the intervening earth.

Paradox

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Vita

Laura Claire Schaffer was born in Washington, D.C., to Shari and Martin Schaffer, and grew up in northern Virginia. She attended the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, graduating cum laude in 2011, with a B.A. in the Program of Liberal Studies and a minor in the Glynn Family Honors Program. She taught high school English for four years at Saint Joseph Academy in San Marcos, California, before moving to North Carolina to pursue her M.A. in Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University. She received this degree in May of 2018 and is now enrolled in Boston University's M.F.A. Program through September 2019.