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GRADUATE HUMANITIES

A multidisciplinary program bringing together students and faculty from a variety of backgrounds to collaboratively explore the interdisciplinary intersections of the arts, historical, cultural and literary studies within an open, exploratory, and experimental graduate-level educational environment.

Everyone has a story

In 1965, federal legislation created the Appalachian Regional Commission, which described Appalachia as “a 205,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and portions of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.”

In 2023, a weekly program “Inside Appalachia” on WV Public Radio rebroadcast its “What is Appalachia” episode, which shared the recorded answers of people living in Appalachia when asked if they considered themselves Appalachians.

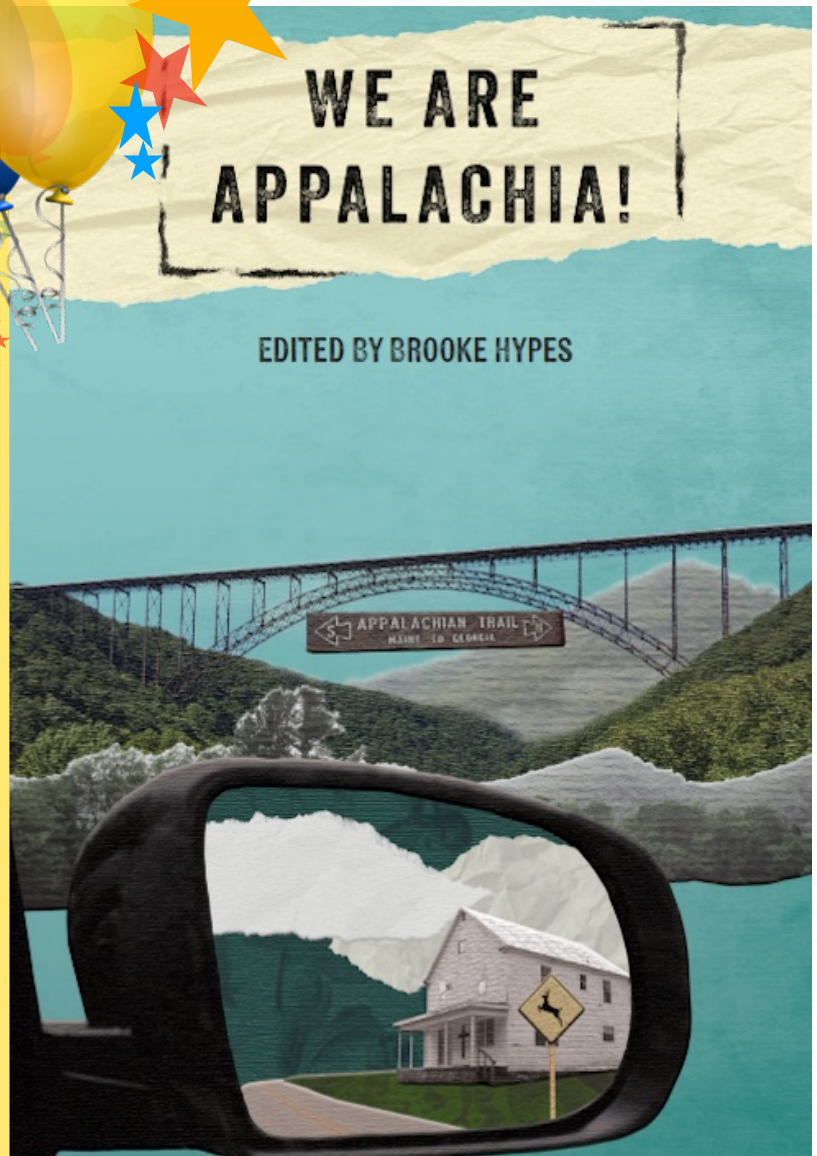
In 2024, Mountain State Press published *We Are Appalachia!*, which showcased the written memories of Graduate Humanities students and friends.

In this issue of Graduate Humanities, we are pleased to publish excerpts from five of the twenty-six writers who contributed to the making of the anthology, *We Are Appalachia!*

—Trish



Celebrate with us!



LOOK inside



Marshall University
Graduate Humanities Program
Dr. Luke Eric Lassiter, Director
Trish Hatfield '08, Assistant Director

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What Happens When You Bring Together Two MU Programs, A Program Director, A Teacher, Her Students, Her Writerly Friends, and a Publishing Company?

That's Right, You Have a Remarkable and Marketable
Anthology of Original Writings.

And Here's Their Story and Their Stories...



Author Cat Pleska—English and Graduate Humanities Program Faculty and President and Editor-in-Chief of Mountain State Press—moderates a public reading of *We Are Appalachia*.



Poster of "We Are Appalachia!" Celebration Ceremony at the Marshall University Drinko Library in Huntington, West Virginia, to honor the students, alums, and other writers who contributed to the anthology.

By Cat Pleska
From the public reading, September 17, 2024

< First, I want to explain how this book came about. In the spring of 2022, I was teaching "Memoir in Appalachia" for Dr. Eric Lassiter, Program Director for Marshall University's Graduate Humanities Program. He asked me if I would teach a course for the next semester titled "Mountain State Press: Publishing Appalachia." I said, "Sure, sure, I'm ready. Good to go." Since 2018, I'd had between 20-25 interns from the English Department with the Press. So I had pretty much developed the curriculum to teach students about how publishing works.

Writers who become authors, work diligently for years, if not decades, for the craft, the skill, and the creativity to produce something they hope becomes a book. Writers also work hard to create just one piece to be published in a collection, journal, or magazine. I've heard their stories, fraught with any number of challenges, to get their voice out there through publication. It can be a real struggle.

I can appreciate all that effort, being an author myself, but I think it's helpful to understand how these publications are actually put together and the extraordinary work it takes to manifest a publication.

As it turns out, students wanted to know. In our seminar, we had a full—at first, overfull—class with students from the humanities program and the English department. They may have been interested in publishing their creative work, employment as editors or marketers/PR people for publications, landing well-paying jobs for internet content, working for a publishing company, or simply knowing how things work on the other side of writing.

My next idea for this class was to have students do a creative work, for their assignments, and I would publish them in a collection, an anthology. Being President and Editor-in-Chief of Mountain State Press, I had the wherewithal to do it. I know the kind of writers we have in this school are phenomenal,

and I wasn't worried a bit. I knew it would be absolutely wonderful to have them showcased in a book. So I asked my students if they wanted a theme of some sort for the collection. Unanimously, they decided on Appalachia. I did not prompt them. I did not suggest. That's what they wanted to do and that's what their pieces are focused toward.

So the students created stories, essays, and poems in the class, which I graded, but I told them that after the semester, when we start getting this ready for publication, "Your works might undergo some revision." This was good for them to learn because there are differences between what we do for class work creatively and what we do to publish a book.

But the contributions for the anthology were a little too few for a fuller publication. I wanted a small book with a little heft. So I reached out to retired Marshall faculty to submit, one distinguished alumni, and other folks I knew that had Marshall connections. Plus, at the same time, I was teaching Appalachia Literature to undergraduates and I asked a few of them to submit as well.

I sought out other folks to help us. The line/copy editor is retired Marshall faculty. A former undergrad student of mine, who majored in graphic design here at Marshall, expressed an interest in doing the artwork and setting up the whole book to add to her resume, so she came on board. And I asked a graduate humanities student if she'd be interested in becoming the editor, and she agreed. I taught her how an anthology is put together as well as a book in general and it was released in April of this year. So it's through and through a Marshall product, with one tiny exception. I asked our state poet laureate, Marc Harshman, if he would submit a poem, and he graciously did.

Since publication, sales have been heartening and quite good. They became even better because of recent events in the news when who and what Appalachians are once again has come under public

scrutiny. Well! We have part of the answer right here, in this book: *WE ARE APPALACHIA!*

These stories, poems, and essays prove the fact we are diverse. Always have been. We are not a specific set of characteristics but a multitude of descriptors. We think of this region each in our own individual way, but I will tell you a few things we do have in common that are binding agents for this region: We care about one another and the world. We support each other. We are friendly—just ask the folks who look at us strangely outside this region when we throw up a hand in greeting to a perfect stranger. We are smart. We are hard-working. And, oh my, we do love to tell stories

And I'll tell you one more thing about this region, and especially in West Virginia, and at Marshall: we have world class literature. The rest of the folks from elsewhere need to learn that.

The literary arts are extraordinarily important. I asked in a casual poll of my writer friends: Do you know of creative works that changed individuals, that changed communities, that changed society, that changed culture, that changed the country, that changed the world? They all jumped on and said, "Yes, without a doubt," and began to quote a number of creative writers to prove it. This is why I'm thinking there's another book there. To take to task what all these contributors mean to the world.

Winston Churchill did not say this, but it has been attributed to him: When asked to cut arts funding in favor of the war effort, he simply replied, "Then what are we fighting for?"

That is what I think of when we teach our students in the arts and humanities—not just skill and craft, but ways to understand how the world works, how people really are, and to believe they can make a difference in ways small and large and everywhere in between.

These students deserve the accolades they've earned, so with me, please, let's applaud their life-affirming good works. >



Writing ... is not just about organizing and "putting down on paper" (or "putting up on the screen") already existing, organized thoughts; writing itself creates new thought. Put in more practical terms: you really don't know what you want to say until you begin to write it.

Writing for research and publication, then, is primarily an ongoing, ever-changing intellectual activity and is ultimately partial, incomplete, and tentative; rarely if ever conclusive. Put another way: publishing is not the mark of "true writers" who have "arrived"; writing and publishing is a constant struggle for edification (which, after all, is what this is all about).

Writing well and for publication is hard. Anyone who says otherwise is either lying or delusional.

~ Dr. Luke Eric Lassiter, Program Director, from his "Writing for Publication" Syllabus

Introduction

By Brooke Hypes, Editor

< As a daughter of Appalachia, working on this anthology with Mountain State Press has been a great privilege. Appalachia is a special place, misunderstood by both outsiders and natives.

We hear a lot from non-Appalachians about snake-handling churches, banjos, and cousin marriage—enough to make many of us wary of admitting who we are and where we come from. We become the surprisingly well-spoken Appalachian, the surprisingly knowledgeable Appalachian, the surprisingly tolerant Appalachian.

And so we learn to hide our Appalachian selves in a world that increasingly values a type of privileged cosmopolitanism that remains largely inaccessible to ordinary people (inside Appalachia and outside it). We leave parts of ourselves behind, crucial parts, in pursuit of a dream that has never been ours.

The image of the poor, rough-talking, uneducated hillbilly who lives up a hollow persists in part because we so rarely have conversations—real conversations—about what it means to be Appalachian. Dialogue seldom goes beyond banalities about an imagined Appalachia that does not exist and has never existed. And it is all too easy for us to lose sight of what Appalachia really means to us amidst discourse dominated by stereotypes and resisting them.

But there are people committed to having meaningful discussions about Appalachian identity. This anthology is the product of a group of such people, brought together in a graduate-level Appalachian Studies seminar at Marshall University in Spring 2022. Consequently, this anthology largely includes the works of previously unpublished graduate students. Mountain State Press President and Marshall University Professor Cat Pleska also identified a handful of outstanding undergraduate writers who have been included in the final manuscript. This anthology owes much to Marshall University faculty, staff, and students, including President Brad Smith, who graciously wrote the preface to this book.

While the anthology later came to include well-established Appalachian writers such as Carter Taylor Seaton, Marie Manilla, and Marc Harshman, the heart of this book belongs to the everyday Appalachian, as yet unknown.

I hope you find authenticity within these pages and among the diverse contributors to the anthology as we explore the Appalachian experience. Sometimes that experience is beautiful, sometimes it is terrible, and often it is bittersweet.

This is a book for all Appalachians, that celebrates all Appalachians. And if you are someone with only passing familiarity with the region, I hope you find something here that helps you understand us better.

I invite you all to join this dialogue about what Appalachia is and can be. Because... We are all Appalachia. >



Hannah Secrist '23, Laura Bentley, Cat Pleska, Kate Dooley, Eli Asbury '23, and Brooke Hypes '23 after reading aloud their stories from *We Are Appalachia!* at Taylor Books, Charleston, West Virginia.



Aria and The Fae Queen

By Hannah Secrist '23

< The school day crept by; however, my mind wandered back to the dreams from the previous nights. They piqued my curiosity and held my attention throughout the day. I arrived back at the house, walked up the worn plywood steps, now sagging from age, and went inside. Aneesha was busy on the phone trying to

convince her neighbors to buy our food stamps for fifty cents-on-the-dollar and what a “good deal” it was. Not seeing Cletis, I figured he was either passed out on the bed or in his “greenhouse” working on his “garden,” the one that CPS hadn’t found out about. I waved to Aneesha, signaling my return,

before unloading my stuff by the door.

I grabbed a snack before heading back outside to walk among the blooming red buds in the woods.

Venturing further into the forest, I found an odd ring of mushrooms in a clearing. They formed a large circle about ten

feet across. The fungi looked edible, so I picked some for Cletis to sell to keep the utilities on. Foraging for mushrooms, ginseng and truffles could be lucrative if you could find the right buyer. Cletis knew plenty of buyers. With my mushroom stash in tow, I returned to the house.

Upon entering, I kicked off my shoes in the foyer. "Oh, Cletis," I called out in a sickeningly sweet voice. "I have mushrooms for you to sell."

He peeked around the corner—a greedy gleam in his eye.

"Shrooms? Good. I hope they's the white puffy ones," he slurred, as he teetered down the hall. He finished chugging his beer, belched, and crushed the can to his head before discarding it on the floor in the foyer.

I watched the can as it hit the dry-rotted linoleum with a clank, where it joined the others. What a complete swine. Why does Aneesha stay married to this dead-beat? I thought.

He snatched the mushrooms from me and gathered them into his clutches, like a dragon protecting his hoard. He inspected each one for bruising, then moved onto sniffing to ensure they weren't spoiled. After determining their value, he eyed me pointedly and asked, "Where'd you git these shrooms? These look too good to come from the woods."

"I uh...I found them in a meadow, growing in a big circle with other mushrooms."

He glowered at me for several uncomfortable seconds before launching into a tirade. "You stupid girl! That was a fairy ring! You don't mess with them winged supernatural sort. Take 'em back, now." He shoved them back toward me then turned and stormed up the hallway, cussing and yelling for Aneesha.

I stood dumbfounded with an armful of mushrooms and chalked it up to Cletis being a superstitious drunk. Another reason why I

couldn't wait till I turned eighteen—when I could leave.

It was Friday evening and the first of the month, Cletis and

The school day crept by; however, my mind wandered back to the dream from the previous nights. They piqued my curiosity and held my attention throughout the day.

Aneesha's favorite. The time when all their acquaintances, friends and neighbors came by late at night to buy the fresh "produce" from Cletis's garden and Aneesha's famous "pot" pies. Our house became a drive-through well into Saturday morning. Thankfully, they did this on the weekends. While I loathed it, the extra income allowed us to buy things we needed and sometimes wanted.

I lay in bed that night with the windows open, enjoying the fresh cool air and the faint scent of flowers. A subtle breeze rustled the curtains, circulating the stagnant air in the room. Most of the buyers had come and gone for now, and I was beginning to finally fall asleep. As I drifted off into slumber, I dreamed of the same melody from previous nights.

I jolted awake to a quiet house lit with a full moon. Restless, I got up, dressed, and went for a walk through the silvery forest. As I went deeper into the woods, I heard the faint, tinkling sound of laughter coming from several people accompanied by lively sweet music that sounded vaguely familiar to me.

I continued along, curious about what kind of party was going on. The trees started getting closer together the nearer I drew to the voices. The understory was overrun with vines which made

navigating difficult. After coming to a stop at a clearing surrounded by hawthorn trees, I crouched down behind some bushes.

Strange, I never knew this expanse was here. Toward the edge of the meadow, I saw a large, unnaturally colored fire, which shifted among each shade of the rainbow. Several were seated around the flames, chatting. Others behind the main group were playing instruments. Smaller creatures flitted about and glowed a plethora of colors.

They looked like nothing I had seen in the natural world. Many were lithe creatures with longer extremities than humans. Several featured wings that were webbed, feathered, or translucent. They had pointed ears and wore clothing of different materials from animal-hide to various fabrics. Their skin ranged from blue or coral to traditional human hues. Remembering what Cletis said about fairies being winged, it dawned on me that's what these were. I realized they were fairies, or Fae—as they were called in books.

Behind them was a medium-sized cave that glowed from the inside with a warm light, reminding me of a sunny, spring day. Suddenly a beautiful melody came trembling through the earth and reverberated across the clearing. The hawthorn bloomed along with the surrounding rhododendron and red buds. The Fae around the flames began to sing, and the whole of the forest joined in as the ethereal music filled the air.

A Fae, tall and regal, came from the light of the cave; she stood above the others and wore a silver diadem. Her complexion was fair and her skin glittered in the firelight. A dress of purple velvet and silver gossamer adorned her slender form.

"Your Majesty!" exclaimed one of the male fairies near the cave. "What brings you to the mortal realm?" >

Do You Remember

By Eli Asbury '23

< Dear Mamaw,

Do you remember when I used to stay with you all the time? I slept in mom's old bedroom. I remember waking up with the sun filtering through the blinds, asleep in the hand-me-down crib. As I was standing up, you walked into the room to check on me. "Well!" you said, surprised and happy, "when did you wake up?" Our smiles matched in size and warmth. I will never forget the love I felt as you picked me up for a cuddle.

Do you remember about a year later when I was two or so and how you helped me get dressed? This time I was getting out of a warm bath. It was cold by the time I finished splashing and playing, and half of the tub was probably on the floor. You didn't care. When I was at your house, I could do no wrong. I was – and am – your baby. After the bath you said I needed pull-ups. For some reason I knew where you kept them – in a drawer by the bed – and I raced into your bedroom to grab one. You thanked me for getting it. You have always helped me when I needed it.

Do you remember when Brittany and I were running and playing in the yard while the sewer was being replaced? Carefree, we screamed and shouted as only children can, winding along the deep craters in the ground. We stopped for a mid-afternoon sip of soda – Pepsi, to be specific. Mom and Papaw have always loved their Diet Pepsi, but we preferred the regular stuff. I gulped down half the can and opened my mouth to suck in some fresh air when all of a sudden a bee flew in my mouth. My once joyous squealing turned into screams of terror. Wide-eyed and panic-stricken, I ran to you. Mouth agape, hands grasping my hair, I tried to explain The Bee without words. You soon noticed the terror in my eyes and my silence and swiped a finger through my mouth to rouse The Intruder from its cave. The monster buzz-buzz-buzzed its way

out of my mouth, and all I could think was the pain a stinger would cause. Once The Bee made its escape, I sobbed in your arms, relief flooding through me. The comfort you give me is something I will always cherish.

Do you remember how I constantly skinned my knees as a child? You would tell me to slow down or to run in the grass, but I never listened or even learned from my mistakes. I was always too excited to see you, so I ran as fast as my little legs would take me, racing my own heartbeat trying to be the first to give you a hug. I've fallen more times than I can count. I've skinned my knees,

Mamaw, you've always given me the freedom to be myself, to explore, to create, and to just be weird.

You helped me become who I need to be.

elbows, hands, and cheeks, but you always picked me up, crying and screaming, and carried me into the house. You would sit me on the counter in the bathroom, blood trickling into my socks and on your floors, and you would dab at my wounds with a wet washcloth. A Band-Aid could fix anything, so you gently placed it on my hurt. You kissed and hugged me, and everything was always better. You have always taken care of me, healing my wounds, kissing me better, and hugging me tight.

Do you remember crying when Brittany and I put on fashion shows with our new school clothes? Every year before school started, we would go shopping for new clothes. As soon as we finished shopping, we would try on every single outfit for you. It started as claps and happiness, but then you would cry. I used to think it was because we were growing up and that made you sad. Looking back, that was part of it, but I also know you only had three dresses to get you through all of high school. You didn't have a lot and people made fun of you for that. Knowing that your grandbabies had more clothes than you could have ever wanted must have filled you with so much joy.

Do you remember my first girlfriend? I was terrified to tell you, scared you wouldn't want a queer grandkid. But you loved and accepted me for who I was and always encouraged me to be who I am. My freshman year of college I came out as transgender. You call me your grandson and respect and accept my identity.

Seeing my niece and nephews grow up with someone like you in their lives has made me realize how important you are. Mamaw, you've always given me the freedom to be myself, to explore, to create, and to just be weird. You helped me become who I need to be.

You still feed me every time I come home. I know that you did not always have a lot of food growing up; you were born shortly after the Great Depression ended. I know that you did not have much but you made do. Now you have enough food to feed anyone who stops by with your good ol' country cooking.

Mamaw, I hope I can be more like you. You have taught me that family is important and we should do all we can for them. You have taught me to always have a full pantry and an even fuller freezer.

Thank you for all the lessons you have taught me.

Mamaw, I know you have experienced more joy and sorrow than I will ever understand, but you always kept going even when you did not know how. You are a mother figure for us all, the matriarch of our family. You have taken us all in, given us shelter,

given us hope, allowed us to thrive under your guidance and care. I only hope that you have experienced even half the joy I have from being in your life.

Any time we talk, you always ask if I need anything. My answer is always no, but I always ask if you need anything too. Your answer never changes either,

"Yes, I need for you to come home!" Mamaw, I love you so much. I appreciate everything you have done and continue to do for me. I hope you know how much you mean to me. Oh, and I do need something. I need me to come home, too. >



III Momma: The Wicked Witch of L.A.

Rachel Fortune '23

< When I was little, we grew up on a hill because my momma knew you didn't want to be down low when the flood water hit. It hit often, and it hit hard. She lives her entire life like this: preventatively.

Melissa Lynn Gray started her education as a Catholic school drop-out and finished with a master's degree in education from Marshall University. The inspiration of countless playthroughs of "Hot for Teacher," the pretty blue-eyed math teacher who wasn't scared of the shop boys; in fact, shop math may have been her favorite class she taught. She told me a story before my first day of teaching about how she stood, twenty-three and shorter than every boy in the class, in front of them and held her hands behind her back. It made her look tough, and it covered the fact that her hands were shaking. I'd say she got the hang of it, as nothing scares my mother anymore. As she readied herself to retire last year as a Logan Wildcat, a motivator, a math teacher, I watched her recount her plans and reconsider this decision, worrying about her school, her students, and her classroom. For years, motivational posters haunted the walls, with the expo-stained white board that was once a chalkboard in her old room (the same dusty chalkboard that she accredits to her COPD - a nonsmoker, mind you).

My mom outlasted chalkboards, projectors, ELMOs, and most recently Smart Boards. She's seen thirty-five senior classes walk the stage, just as she saw those same kids wide-eyed and afraid on their first day of high school. She's built dozens of homecoming floats, chosen every prom theme from castle to casino. I was lucky enough (though I didn't know it at the time) to

have four years of my own in the halls of LHS as a student - never her student, as we both accepted that could never work (we knew this early on as she counted on her best friend to teach me to tie my shoes because of our inability to work together in that setting: teacher and student). Though it felt more like a curse than luck a lot of days, I have most recently shared this school with her as my co-worker.

The finality of her retirement scares me and makes me yearn for my momma and the safety she gives me. Ready to attack a co-worker who mistreats me and willing to strike fear into any student who gives me a hard time. I felt this fear and thirst for maternal comfort only when she began cleaning her room and among 90s teaching tools and ancient calculators, she found an Avon Barbie Doll. She'd hid this Barbie in her classroom two decades prior, protecting it from my dad who was in the throes of a nasty addiction, and Barbies could gain a few dollars toward a fix at one of the many local pawn shops. When she handed me that doll, unwrapping every child-proof wire brought about yet another horrendous sob and I needed to be back in her arms as a child, her child.

My momma stands around five foot eight with the biggest butt you have ever seen (every kid in school made sure I knew this). Her blond curls (dyed now but once as natural as mine) still lie on her shoulders and her blue eyes still shine. She no longer fits in the corduroy jumper I have heard many of her past students go on and on about; "when she wore that jumper, everyone was happy." Her wrinkles show years of frustration with children, both her

students and her own blood-born children, myself, Sara, and my dad. I think back to a time mom told AT&T that the hundreds of dollars in charges were from

She told me a story before my first day of teaching about how she stood, twenty-three and shorter than every boy in the class, in front of them and held her hands behind her back. It made her look tough, and it covered the fact that her hands were shaking.

her out-of-control teenage son - referring to her husband, my dad. We went together, two teachers, mom and I, to get Botox for the first time this past winter because even with only two full years of teaching experience, I am already developing the same wrinkle. We went together to tackle yet another battle (from Teacher Strikes to Juvéderm dates), this battle was fought with fifty units of Botox. We both left, looking at ourselves in our phones hoping for instant results.

Staring into my iPhone, I look over at her and see through her magic—finally. Her power is only now clear to me.

I thought I hated my mother for a long time. I watched her attack my father day in and out over an addiction he couldn't run from. I saw her at her worst even though she only gave us her best. I see her magic shine through as ever present as that wrinkle on her forehead, that magic that you can only comprehend when you're of a certain age and have lived enough life. For me, the age of forgiveness and understanding. Though I will never know firsthand the heartbreak of watching the love of your life (from thirteen years old) turn into a completely different person, another

Appalachian tragedy, another victim to opioids. She not only lost the father of her children, her best friend, but she lost us for some time. Sara and I were too young and naïve to understand that sometimes the bad witches aren't always the green-faced, black-clad mistress, but sometimes the pink-gowned and glitter-adorned one, floating down in a bubble. I think to myself every time I hear a song from *Wicked* that it must have been written about my momma. She faced pain like Elphaba, who only wants the best for all and is still deemed the wicked witch.

My mom defies gravity every day and I cannot even fathom the magic she'll be capable of by the time she reaches "mamaw age" and her magic turns into that granny witch magic; my momma got her magic early because she had to.

My stubborn-ass momma went half a century unmedicated. Now she's finally taking better care of herself because it's the first time she's the only person she's been responsible for. Her tense shoulders now only stand at half mast, and maybe a few years into retirement, she'll start to relax — one of the few things where she does not yet excel. >



Peggy's Story

By Peggy Proudfoot Harmon '23

< Fall began on September 22nd, 1956. Dad always said that home had a different feel from any other place on earth, especially in the fall. He would know after being drafted to fight in Europe during World War II. Few from home really knew what it was like to be somewhere else, so when Dad made these observations, I believed him. Fall in our part of the West Virginia mountains always heralded the brilliance of a forest teeming with color. I always likened it to the quilts that the old grandma and her sisters would make. Fall certainly looked and smelled differently than the mountains in late summer. On warm sunny September days, the mixture of sun and color was blinding in a wonderful way. As the days grew shorter, the cool evening air would periodically lead to a hard frost in the night, bringing even more color to our world in the early morning sun.

I suppose that this Saturday in late September was like any other in my life. I was almost sixteen months

old. I was born to parents who could have been the Appalachian poster couple for parents of the Baby Boomer generation. My brother was five years old, and my dad's parents lived across the small, paved road from us. Since we were both "planned" (as my mother used to say), life was pretty good. Our general store was located beside my grandparents' home. This completed the triangle of our family complex. This type of family living situation is a fairly common design with Appalachian families – but that is for another day.

My grandparents Bertha "Nanny" and "Grandpa Frank" owned and ran our general store, so being located next door was handy. Grandpa Frank was left several hundred acres which he parlayed into a small fortune – again in Appalachian terms in 1956. He opened a small coal mine and a lumber mill in addition to the store. The store was not a "company" store, although people did buy on credit.

What follows is my family's story and mine.

Frank's Story

By all accounts, Grandpa Frank enjoyed his enterprises, choosing to spend his life working. The lumber mill was a natural fit for Grandpa Frank. Mill Creek became an incorporated town in 1904 when Grandpa Frank was five years old. His grandpa Melvin had been the mastermind behind the benefits of an incorporated town, one of which was to sponsor a

school and teacher for children up to 4th grade. After that, kids were apprenticed or worked on the family farm. Grandpa Frank was sent to a lumber camp to work at a lumber mill called Wildell in the wilds of Randolph County at the age of nine in 1907. He grew up in that lumber camp, starting work as a water boy for the mill's sawyers. Grandpa Frank rode the train

from Mill Creek to Wildell, so he could come home on weekends. He learned the lumber mill trade, became a sawyer as a teenager, and served as the catcher for the Wildell Sluggers baseball team.

On a crisp Saturday night in that September, my life with him in it was disrupted. Grandpa Frank and Nanny's birthdays were one day apart at the end of September. Their wedding anniversary was the day after that. I suppose that's why Grandpa Frank gave Nanny the gift of a gas clothes dryer (a big present for two occasions). Living in the country motivated learning how to do it yourself, so Grandpa Frank installed the dryer. That Saturday evening (in a story told to me by my mother), Grandpa Frank and Nanny had supper at our house at 6 o'clock as usual. After eating supper and cleaning up, they kissed us goodnight and my dad went to play poker with his old army buddies.

My mother was good at entertaining herself with books after we went to bed, so all was well as I curled up in my crib with the comfort of sucking my thumb.

Sometime later I felt an explosion or heard my mother screaming for help. At that young age, it's not clear which came to me first. Mom was always specific in her retelling of the "fire," so I'm not sure about what I actually remembered. According to her, I slept through the entire disaster. Everyone ran to the scene to see Nanny run in and out of her burning home, first bringing Grandpa Frank out to the yard and then bringing out her mother – a woman we called the "old grandma."

Grandpa Frank was severely burned, as was Nanny. Forgetting that we had a phone, my mother ran down the road to Betty Matthew's screaming for help. My whole family and Betty Matthew all waited for the fire trucks and ambulance. People in town came out in droves and blocked the road, slowing down the trucks.

Bertha's Story

I was born in 1899 in Braxton County, West Virginia to a family who worked all the time and hardly ever smiled. Momma said that there was nothing much to smile about out on our farm in Newville.

Our old farmhouse was drafty, and we didn't have a car, so you might imagine that we were miserable. But between all the work on the farm and church, we didn't have time to be unhappy or too sad. The fact is that we were Methodist - our lives revolved around the family and church. When I was a young teenager, my boyfriend Barry Bright bought a camera, and we were able to record our family fun times. Some of them at the church and some at the cemetery where we would often spend a hot summer Sunday afternoon visiting with the deceased.



Unidentified women at the Newville cemetery.

In 1917 I was eighteen years old, several young men in Braxton were interested in me. The choice of suitors was a bit greater than the most populated area of Newville, which counted a population of around fifty, twenty or so being male. But only around ten eligible males. One of the ten spotted me somewhere around Newville, and Barry Bright and I became an item for several months, but to me it seemed to be years.



Our Gang at Newville

I taught Sunday School and Barry was always there with me.

I found the situation unsuitable; I sold eggs and milk from our farm to local people, a task for which Momma gave me a small sum. That sum grew to providing the exchange for a ticket to Weston where I would stay with Bess and Walker in their new home. It was going to be a grand life in the city. Bess had arranged for me to work at the lunatic asylum. I will admit that I was skeptical at first about being around "crazy" people, let alone working on their behalf. Oh well, "it's a job," I thought to myself. Like everything else in life, I would set my mark and work toward it.

My mark became to get to know my new surroundings and go to work. That all seems like a million years ago – when I broke Barry Bright's heart, before I even met Frank. >



The House Up White Oak Hollow

by Brooke Hypes

< Route 61 runs through Fayette County, West Virginia. Locals aptly call the stretch of road between Deepwater and Oak Hill, Deepwater Mountain. The road, carves through the hillside and runs alongside a mountain brook called Loop Creek.

Chugholes that might be more accurately called craters pit the road, and yellow signs warn of falling rocks. I would say the road has fallen into disrepair, but I never knew it to be in good repair to begin with.

Maybe that's my youth showing. Maybe that's Fayette County.

Somewhere along the road, a sign proclaims, "ROADS TO PROSPERITY."

The road is dotted with small, unremarkable communities. If you keep your eyes on the road, as you probably should, it is easy to miss modest signs marking the end of one place and the start of another. Robson, Page, Kincaid, Wriston. They seem to be indistinct places until you travel the road times beyond counting. A grouping of churches and some small houses with peeling paint comprise Robson. When you reach Page, a weathered sign proudly announces you have entered the Page-Kincaid Public Service District. As you come into Kincaid, you will find a community nestled between the railroad tracks and creek and, if you're lucky, you might see some horses grazing in pastures. And Wriston—in Wriston, you'll find a gravel path with one of those ubiquitous green road signs, which says White Oak Fork Road.

Whatever that sign might say, my grandfather still calls it White Oak Hollow.

If you travel up this path that can scarcely be called a road, you will find a small cluster of houses. None of them really catch the eye—they are old, modest houses. But

Our Sunday trips to Fayette County were all-day affairs. ... I made myself sick more than once trying to read as my mother sped across the steep, curving road, and I'm sure my teachers did not appreciate my crooked writing that even I could barely read.

one house, an old Jenny Lind structure, sits up on the hill, perched over the road and creek below.

I have seen this house in old family photos countless times. The porch has been closed in, the siding is different, and the foundation isn't exposed like it was. I have never set foot in this house, and the pictures don't match reality anymore, but this house and its memories call to me like no other place.

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Even though our day-to-day lives were firmly rooted in the Charleston area, my parents would drive us ninety minutes to the south every Sunday to go to church with my maternal grandparents. We passed probably a dozen churches of the same denomination on the way there, and I would bet most of them had more members and better facilities, but we still made the

drive. My family has attended that church for at least five generations now. For my family, worshipping there is sacred in a way it cannot be elsewhere.

Our Sunday trips to Fayette County were all-day affairs. We would leave before eight in the morning and get home sometime before six. As I got older, that time became harder and harder to spare. I made myself sick more than once trying to read as my mother sped across the steep, curving road, and I'm sure my teachers did not appreciate my crooked writing that even I could barely read. I often wanted to stay home and rest, but my mother was firm. Sunday was for church and visiting. And so it was until I started college.

My friends would tell me about their church services in buildings with huge sanctuaries and youth groups, often involving elaborate orthodox rituals or lively sermons and contemporary music. But I have never been able to feel whole and at home in these places, no matter who I am with. Church means a little white building on the side of the road where my grandmother leads the congregational singing while my grandpa plays old hymns in four-part harmony, perhaps just a bit faster than anyone else would.

**

Music and Fayette County go together. From the time I could read, I could sing with the rest of the congregation. I learned to love the hymns we sang from worn old books, with shape notes and words I had to look up in dictionaries. Music has always moved me in a way sermons couldn't—to my mother's consternation, I would read from the hymnals instead of listening to our elderly preacher or looking at the verse he directed us to. (Continued on back page.)



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(Continued from Pg 11.)

I have always been able to remember hymns more clearly than even common Bible verses.

I have my grandfather to thank for my love of music. He showed me how a piano works, explained what makes an organ different, and gave me a crash course on how to play the cumbersome contraption that is a 120 bass accordion. When I started to learn guitar at ten, I was soon playing with my grandfather at church and

practicing with him after church. To this day, he seems to think I share his encyclopedic knowledge of hymns, expecting me to know songs I have neither heard nor seen, and leaves me in the dust squinting at the tiny shape notes over his shoulder. Even after fifteen years, we still like to make noise together when we get the chance.

My grandmother loved music too. She had a beautiful voice and the confidence to use it—I have

neither. Singing always embarrassed me unless my voice was safely hidden by the rest of the congregation. Even as she lost parts of herself to dementia, she kept singing. She always wanted to hear me sing, but I never had the courage until after she died. Now when I sing, I think of her and wonder if maybe I am just a little bit like her, and that music and hymns will remain such an indelible part of me that I will never forget them. >

Read the unabridged version of these and twenty-one other stories in *We Are Appalachia!* It's available at Taylor Books in Charleston and from Amazon.

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Peggy Proudfoot Harmon '24

Masters in Humanities
(Cultural studies/ Certificate
in Appalachian Studies)

Project Title: "Culture Soup: A Tygart Valley Dish."

Assumptions for Teaching Writing

- Everyone is an expert on their own experience.
- Everyone has a different learning style and pace.
- Learning is easiest when individuals are respected and supported.

Assumptions for "Workshopping" Writing

- "Conversation is our human way of creating and sustaining—or transforming—the realities in which we live." ([The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter](#))
- Transformative conversation informs our writing.

Trish Hatfield, MFA, Graduate Humanities Instructor

Spring

2025 SCHEDULES

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