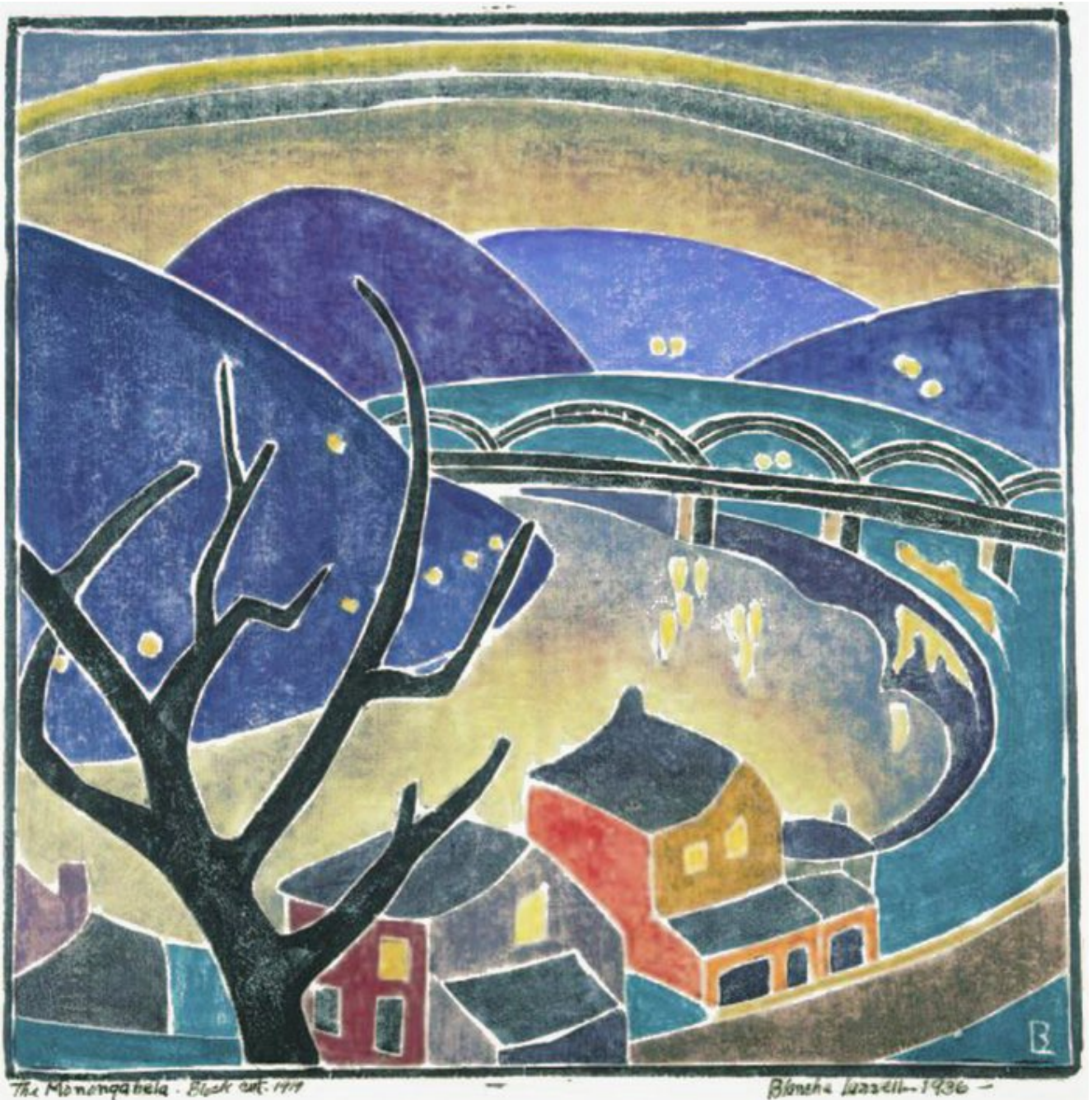


Becoming Remarkable, Part 1



The Monongahela, Blanche Lazzell, 1926

Hollywood Parking

Small towns have it.
You park up front and walk in
just like in the movies.

No valets. No sinister parking garage.
And when you're done, you pull away.

In small towns they may even help you
carry the purchases to your car.
Just meditating on it is like
fly fishing on a stream.

Where a lot of business is conducted
with a slight smile,
the cadence is lulling, the chatter laconic.
And the people open slowly with a twist,
like a can of snuff.

I was talking with an old guy at the pool who ran the gambling
out of the Parkersburg area for several decades. "I was a
kingpin!" He said leaning back in the Jacuzzi with a twinkle
in his eye. He said the Police Chief asked him a few years
back how they kept the drug dealers out in their day and he
said: "We'd bundle them into a car and drive them across the
(Ohio River) bridge into Belpre and dump them off. We'd tell
'em that they were no longer welcome in Parkersburg." He told
them further that, "West Virginia is off limits to you."

He said the Police Chief then asked, "Well what did you do if
they returned?"

"Then," my friend said, "we drove them halfway to Belpre."

He controlled the gambling in a tri-state area, and "if you
were going to open a bar in the area, you had to come to me."
He knew all the customers (who were all vetted locals) and
would cut them off at a certain point, if they were losing too
heavily. Then he'd call around to the other joints notifying
them that they weren't to be allowed in there either, as they
"had mouths to feed." (This is corroborated in the
book, *Violence in the Valley* by Robert D. Newell.)

They ran the drug dealers out, "because they would suck all
the money out." By leaving their citizens illicit but locally
controlled gambling and liquor, the police were able to keep
the area drug free at that time. Nowadays, the police know

very well what is going on, but there is little they can do. In the beautiful Julian District of Historic Parkersburg, an acquaintance of this fellow had been trying to sell their home for some years with no luck. Apparently, it's because after dark the druggies filter in from the surrounding decrepit neighborhoods, like vermin, to burglarize autos and whatever else.

I've met many pleasant people back here, but it is not uncommon to find, after you've gotten to know someone, that they've done hard time.

Rural Pacification

This spectacle which makes you tremble
comes with chili dogs and cheesy fries,
as the hills reverberate with the roar of
thirty hell-bent modifieds rumbling 'round a dirt oval
on a lovely evening in West Virginia.

As the dirt clouds rise into large thunderheads over the
raceway,
A participant's wife trailing kids,
wearing a jersey which reads,
"I have dirty thoughts,"
climbs the bleacher steps.

You have to wonder,
peering down through this murk
what God thinks of all this throbbing clatter
chasing its tail.

The corners are taken on two or three wheels,
the straight-aways at 89-90 miles per hour.
The burly violence passing the time quietly in these hills
is like the vast oil fields trapped beneath,

which is bled off slowly into the army, mining, drilling, construction, transport, farming, refining and marriage: let loose weekends to hunt, fish, watch sports and drive real fast.

Does the Lord realize how hard we struggle to be good?
The games and diversions we invent
to domesticate these simulations of sin?
So that we might build a New Jerusalem on firm soil
from little seedling churches that sprinkle the hills?

One of the first things I noticed upon moving back here from Seattle, in order to be nearby my wife's relations, was how far back families' tenure in the area extended. A lot of the land hereabouts was first bequeathed to soldiers for their service in the Revolutionary War. So it's not peculiar to encounter a Daughter of the American Revolution. A poetess of acquaintance is related to the Johnny Appleseed Chapmans on one side of the family. And the Friendly side on the other was one of the earliest foreign whites accepted by the local Native Americans. She told a post-Civil War story recounting how a long-ago relation returned home, after walking the distance from Andersonville Prison in Georgia, so dazed and bedraggled they didn't recognize him.

Violence is not uncommon in the family histories. One older poet's great, great grandfather was a butcher in Belpre, who argued with and killed a Negro customer with a cleaver and ran away to North Carolina. Nevertheless, it seems he began a new life there and died a respected citizen of the community. Next in line, her great grandfather, killed a fellow he found in the orchard with his wife. I believe he ran away too, but not to such an auspicious end. And his son was rumored to have done away with a bothersome mistress.

Her grandfather committed suicide, following the suicide of his best friend. And her father killed himself by drinking lye following the closing of the local chair factory in Marietta,

which threw hundreds out of work when it succumbed to the Depression in 1937. Her father's mother was a town prostitute, "one of the nastiest people you'd ever meet." And her mother was walking in Marietta as a child, when her other grandmother told her mother not to "look over there". Near the town's center, a fellow was hanging from a downtown tree.

Another poet bit a piece of her ex-husband's ear off. "I told him I would if he didn't get off me." Another poet's mother was celebrated for "doing whatever she wanted." Her husband was the town drunk. Having gotten to know the women back here, I'm guessing the two proclivities were related. This same writer remembered, as a child, discovering her uncle hanging from their front yard tree, another suicide.

One woman's husband tried to shoot her on three separate occasions. He missed her the first two times and shot himself in his foot the third—possibly because he was a manic/depressive alcoholic. She visited him at the Athens, Ohio Insane Asylum at one point, where he was locked up for a time, chained to a wall in the dirt basement behind large wooden doors.

Another woman relation of hers used to take the earnings from her boarding house to the bank by walking along a lonely stretch of railroad track. One afternoon a fellow passing the other way tried to rob her, so she shot him. She then went to find help and report it. When they returned, no one recognized him, so they rolled him down the bank and left it at that.

Poems of Mayhem

Appalachian Criminal

Early one morning, while walking the dog,
as just a few kitchen lights burned,
I noticed the decal on a neighbor's car:
the name of a local band

just across river
out of Parkersburg, West Virginia.

The warm air was heavy with moisture,
slightly sticky to the skin
like drying blood,
still tacky,
as I read ... "*Appalachian Criminal*."
And I wanted to go there.

Shoot people. Get crazy. And die.
Do whatever awful shit they got goin':
waving blood slippery pistols,
slip-slidin' up muddy banks on yellowed leaves.
Pour me a double shot of
pullin' at the roots and kickin' it
all down and dirty.
Nothing political.
Just cash and carry,
with opiates, crimes and poor livin',
mildewed trailers and a rising death toll
among the rural middle-aged males,
in sleeveless shirts and tattooed faces,
all growled adenoidal to a cranked up fuzz tone
and toss in a fiddle.

I wanna howl.
I wanna growl.
I wanna die large
and be buried deep.

There's hushed stories of long-ago Klan affiliations among
some. Often they were a husband who wouldn't say much about
their doings or whereabouts, but disappear for meetings on a
regular basis. At one time a poet friend had a grandfather who
would disappear this way carrying his garments in a butcher
paper wrapped bundle. She said he came home one night looking
upset over something which must have occurred and never

attended again. The mother kept the brown package in a back room for a while and then finally burnt the Klan garment in the woods so as to be done with the whole business and (I would suppose) not have the past fall out of the closet to incriminate them at some time later.

On the other hand, lots of residents speak of friendships with black members of the community. My barber used to visit her aunt's farm and play behind the false walls of the old home which was used as a stop on the Underground Railway. The small cluster of homes known as Cutler, Ohio is known for its old families of mixed breeding between the black slaves who came North and the Native American community which harbored them. Just a block from our home is a historical marker noting where the states of Ohio and Virginia nearly came to blows over the illegal kidnapping and return of slaves who had made it across the river into free territory.

More recently another poet friend spoke of a family in her youth which lived out in Doddridge County, West Virginia who had a daughter who was seeing a 'colored fellow,' and whose grandmother didn't like it. So the boyfriend got it into his head to walk up and confront the woman about her attitude. He parked his car out front and walked up to the porch to knock on the door. The grandmother appeared where he began giving her a piece of his mind. She listened a bit and then said, "Could you wait here a minute?"

The fellow waited while she walked back into the house and then returned pointing a rifle—at which point he took off running. He made it to the car and drove off. But he found the way he drove to escape was a dead end, so that he then had to turn around and drive back by the house, where the woman got off a few more shots.

Afterwards, the grandmother called the Sheriff to report herself. "I took several shots at this fellow," she said.

“Did you hit him?” The Sheriff asked.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Okay,” the Sheriff said. “I’d just let it go then.”