

West Virginia Poetry



by [Carl Nelson](#) (March 2022)

*"It is what it is," was never more true
than of West Virginia poetry:
'photography in words,
tossed with slices of Dickens
in a rich squirrel sauce'.*

*– Hazel Tensinger,
"‘hollerin’ poet"*

has an extractive economy,
much like the state from which is
mined coal, pumped oil, harvested hardwoods,
and rivers used to discharge pollutants downstream
and to move commerce cheaply.

There's legislature and law firms to extract money
from the big corporate entities for all these lucrative
misadventures.

Next come the doctors, corporate medical LLCs, and assisted
living services

to extract fees from the entitlement plans, and class-action
torts,

and finally, last in line, are the funeral homes,
some of the best preserved property in the area.

Emigration and the army siphon off the youth,
creating that lonesome, homespun echo
through the hills and hollers,
the coal trains exorcise.

Even the poetry is extractive;
matter-of-fact, traditional work,
sold from chapbook stands
which doggedly retail the flora and fauna,

the floods and catastrophes,
labor struggles and histories,
foods and communities,
hand to mouth lives,
in a casserole of strong and sketchy families
way back it would seem as the carboniferous era.

West Virginia responds better to poetic treatment than many other locales. It has history, and history means echoes of what has never been new under the sun, which is what poetry is. Appalachia is so old geologically that it's wrinkled. Hills and hollers call across to each other. The haze smokes hardwoods. The roads dwindle away in turns and twists and across creek bottoms, only to grow again, gain gravel, asphalt and finally enter small towns. If all of this doesn't seem poetic, then I don't know what to do with you. Maybe plant you in a booth in a red plastic franchise somewhere and drive off and leave you. There's a lot of hard choices poetry back here has to make, short lives to do it in, and we can't encumber ourselves with idiots. Some people may get the hang of metrics through chopping wood or counting railroad ties. Others might get the hang of metaphor, when they see the family resemblance as they thumb through the old scrapbooks of the kinfolk. Still others seem to appreciate the poetics of real muddy through lines in all the silted trash in the cricks and rivers hereabouts, which like step families' intermarriage-salad mixings, from when it chances to slow and settle out, stew, and something else grows there from it. West Virginia poems are a bit like potholes in this way. The little towns, ridge top roads, hollers and cricks sport a lot of poem titles.

NON-FICTION POEM OF APPALACHIAN NAMES

Looking at a relief map of West Virginia
is like children shadowing ants in the grass,
with toothpick road signs and mile indicators,
with most names recorded by a travelling tinker,
having had been through the rolling mill of a local brogue.

Tick Ridge Road, Running Right Road,
Grassy Run Road and Dead Man's Hollow
were all ways to get somewhere,
as were Racoon Run Road, Bear Run Road, and
Turkey Foot Road by way of Dark Hollow and Society Hill.

And there appeared some unique little specks also,
such as the towns of Pinch, Cucumber, Left Hand, Man and Odd,
also Brohard, PeeWee, Booger Hole, Hoo Hoo, and Looneyville.
Burnt House, Scrabble, Pie, True, and Sassafras,
Friendly, Nitro, Frazier's Bottom, Big Ugly, Red House and
Jane Lew
were all places of diminutive note.

Whereas relations names formed as if
whittled at while passed around and down
through multitudinous generations.
Squeak, Zip & Cornie, Pud, Mont & Bess, Donnie,
Tommie, Melcie, Scooter & Pork
conjure worn and creased sepia colored photos,
polished shoes on old porch steps or old car running boards,
stood before the gasoline truck or small town dry goods store,
with their pets, Punch and Judy, Otis, or Tater –
or before hay wagon and barn located atop
Sally's Backbone way up Fish Creek out Blue Knob Road.

Sustainability is a current progressive golden calf of worship. And a passing nod is made to this among poets, especially who desire publication in the more elite journals. (Often, you must clear away a lot of sustainable brush to get at what could be there.) So you'll read about strip coal mines, and slag damned creeks, poisoned well water and other sorts of extractive hooliganisms among the politically active. But sustainability in the West Virginian poetic sense is more akin to pagan ritual. That is, whatever has reoccurred throughout time immemorial must necessarily have been sustainable and so is of note. The seasons are rather durable. So are plants, forests, rivers, cricks, edible forage, animals, kith and kin. Nothing just happens to be here. Just like the boulder the trail curves around, it has a long history. The devil, sin, and snakes have also been

around a long time. And the Lord, in this respect, is a rather recent invention, which they still labor on Sundays to include in their calculations. Mostly the Lord is something relied upon when it comes to dealings with other humans. About the animals and forests He is rather silent, seemingly satisfied enough to outsource and rule these creatures through Mother Nature with her gaggle of wayward demons and elves.

Sustainability also has an air of the romantic. One might think just the opposite; that sustainability were the most conservative stance around. After all, it's a rather tedious ecological accounting which is called for; and a due diligence which is near infinite if not OCD. But for this reason, sustainability, like true Marxism, is an ideal not actually realized. For over the long term nothing is sustained. The tribolite lasted 30 million years. Pretty good, but still no cigar. So that at the fringes of sustainability – that is, tradition – out where all of the new thought is produced, romantics roam wild and free. And this is where much of the poetry thrives, their lyricism composting in the blackwater systems. Terrible events of cruelty and loss all tossed together and churned to create grace. Much of this poetry is found within Fundamentalist sermons, union rallies, or bluegrass standards. It can get kind of wild, violent and superstitious.

EDEN

just eat the apple,

“But we didn’t

fermented it

we cooked and

with mud
and woke up
on the one
side of our face
and stars on
the other."

– Eve's recollection

In the heat,
where the sky was caught lingering
on the pond's surface
along with trees and butterflies,
twinning the mind of God,
a rock was tossed
by scroungy little kids,
who jumped in after.

In the hissing summer heat
precious things
like dragonflies in visions
part for rocks which shatter,
the porcelain face of Beauty.

Now when I look for Paradise,
I see only carp with gaping mouths,
or weeds that have sprouted in my lax mind
amid the old license plates and busted coolers
of Eden.

Appalachian people can be a high-handed, a trait which runs through all classes of the area like a coal seam. You'll see it sticking its neck out from just about any inhabitant of this area at one time or another, as if you were on a road making its way through various cuts in the highway bank. And local poets are prone to the tic as anyone. It's a sort of fascist stance. One way or another, if you don't look like what they are doing, you're likely some sort of a bootlicker.

HIGH-HANDED APPALACHIANS

A quality which marks Appalachians
is their high-handedness.
They'll tilt their heads back to respond,
as if a retort were a reply,

and converse as if staring from a poolside recliner,

with fat limbs and tattoos...

Well, what the hell? You live in ugly homes in blighted areas and drive rusted trucks, most people would say.

Appalachians will expect people to be obliging but react as if being bullied when pulled up short.

"Who are you to come in here and ask me that?"

They'll gossip, quarrel, and stare suspicious from porches,

from which they'll share a limited number of interests, and spit. And the receptionists and quick stop attendants often act as if somewhere between saying something, and you're not being worth their time.

God only knows! But they do spawn an inordinate number of preachers – damned determined individualists, following parole and felonious intentions such as embezzlements – to right the error of our ways. Who are petty frank in their demands, also.

In this manner, the poetry organizations have a rather left wing/ union cant and can be a bit militant regarding their heritage and cultural stance. The women especially qualify.

Local poetry events are often characterized by the title, "Women Speak Out", or something of a militant nature. They tout themselves, pat themselves on their communal backs, and reinforce whatever outcry that has gained traction. It's about leading the conversation without having left the home or the area in one's affections. They fancy themselves 'forces of nature', and by all rights should be tracked on the local Weather Channel as a public menace. Indeed, the battle for the high moral ground in this area can carry on in a simmering feud, between corporate welfare and the ravaged earth, like a coal seam fire. Or as an eroding war in which the men play the truant boys behaving badly, while the women prolong West Virginia's existence through sheer endurance.

So there is much pagan ritual bleeding through the poetry here. And when it rebounds off the Fundamentalist bedrock, it recoils superstitious and is prone to witchery, which all blends curiously with the old traditions, espousing things often quite strange and animistic. For example, one poem tells of an old rural woman, one early spring day, out beating the ground with a broom to "wake up the earth". There are poems and writings mentioning the Bottle Trees:

"She knew that there could be a spell put in trees, and she was familiar from the time she was born with the way bottle trees kept evil spirits from coming into the house – by luring them inside the colored bottles, where they cannot get out again" –Livvie, by Eudora Welty

RITA MORGONE / West Virginian Poet

It is said of the dead, that there are those spirits

who never leave
for being weighted here
with immense grief,
and so haunt us till we're wont to speak,
voice their lament and make things sound.

And as grief is the luggage of the specters
such as all the life about
and in the ground around
us groans of,
Rita wore hollow black.

As suckling to the spirit's call
she bore the profession of loss.
In a wood and book lined burial vault
of séance and tarot,
she dealt the cards of fate's resolve
under an astrologer's caul.

Rita fought with Death itself,
and its leeching grief
which cements its spell and is like a thief.

Lovely Rita Morgone, Wraith of Nought,
conducted as serious a business as any.

Initially, those romps through the folklore and dark superstitious tales of the hills and hollers of West Virginia were interesting. But as times passed I couldn't understand how these Dark Side aficionados could bear the uniformly bleak, emotionally impoverished, redundancy of it. Eventually what had at first seemed quite lurid, dramatic, shocking, and arresting, leveled out like the outflow of muddy stream spreading over the sucking mud flats of its estuary till finally feathering into the vanishing presence of an oceanic expanse. I grew to dislike the cloying, mumbo jumbo. They were portends without manifestations; apparitions without substance. In the end there was no mystery and so no commerce between us. And I wondered if the practice didn't have a lot in common with an alcoholic's survival: boring, tedious, depressing, and generally fearful. The witchers I knew came from alcohol plagued families. Perhaps this represented a psychological transposition, an Appalachian creative act.

Rita did have quite a bit of knowledge of the uncanny happenings of the area. One day I spoke to her about a report of a haunting which was causing a problem at a very high tech facility, (I believe it was a buried particle accelerator, somewhere in SE Ohio), my brother in law had mentioned in passing. Workers there complained of ghosts. But the odd thing was that the spirits appeared in halves. (I can't remember if it were the upper, or lower body half...) She remarked, however, that this was not uncommon; curious certainly, but not uncommon.

Though ethnically homogenous as Appalachia tends to be, our poetry group was also quite eccentric as Appalachians also

tend to be, (though appearance often portends a simple lack of taste). We had couples, singles, divorcees, the widowed, lesbians, gays, concealed carriers, a schizophrenic, and one rather mouthy, loud transvestite with terrible fashion sense-but otherwise decent guy – who served a tour in the Near East. (I thanked him/her for her/his service.) It seems he had been unemployed with a pregnant wife and sitting in their apartment in Cleveland watching TV and wondering whatever he could do to save them from being tossed out onto the street during the build up to the Iraqi War, when an ad for the Army came on. He enlisted. How it all transpired that he ended up working at a Deli in West Virginia dressed as a woman, I don't know. But he needed sartorial help.

A poetess, who had once bitten off a part of her husband's ear, had as harsh a laugh as could be imagined. It would shock the beejesus out of an audience much like a pop-up illustration from a children's book of horrors and goblins. She was a retired grammar teacher. And both her poetic and personal criticisms followed that line.

"You're just trying to punctuate me!" I often protested.

She snorted.

For ten years or more I frequented playwrights groups in the Seattle area regularly. Actors would read our scripts and then the clutch of us would discuss what seemed to work and what didn't. Then, we'd re-write, or not. Then have it re-read, or not. Then seek a staged reading, or not. Then seek a production, or not. Then seek a better production or not. All the while internalizing critiques and struggling to make the work better (more re-writes). The theater is exhausting. When you witness a musical production (one of the most arduous stage endeavors undertaken) which has finally made it to a prominent stage, you have to wonder what the hell

they have left to sing about? How do they even have the breath left?

It a common occurrence, uncommonly voiced, that professionals grow to hate their customers. Nurses come to hate patients; rock stars mock their fans, and as a playwright I grew to dislike the audience.

So after the crushing demands of writing for the theater, upon moving to our spot beside the Ohio without original theater productions, I returned to writing poetry. The meetings of the poetry group I joined back here were held in the small living room of a fairly well-known poet among a small ragtag coterie. At my first meeting, they listened to my poetry politely and various comments were made, until the two Brahmins of the group raised their eyes to inquire: "Who do you imagine is going to read this?"

"What audience are you writing for?" They demanded querulously.

"I didn't think poetry had an audience," I replied cheerfully.

WRITERS' GROUP POEMS #1

Chicken Nuggets

She had strode in, in a miasmal fog of faux energy,
hugging everyone, smiling gratuitously,
leavening all in thrall to patchouli oil,

as the Poet Laureate of a nearby college town in flowing blouse.

We hugged and repulsed.

The next step was yet to be taken.

My poem about my wife titled, "Love Nugget"
didn't go over well.

I had equated her with Chicken Nuggets
doused with – the ever popular condiment back here – Ranch Dressing,

I referred to as White Privilege,
and I mentioned us voting for Trump
and watching the same programs.

"I can't see myself enjoying this," the Poetess clucked,
her head bobbing forward and back.

"Egg-laying days are over?" She pecked.

"Fluffed up?" Her eyes crossed as she stared over her beak at me.

"It's not the sort of endearment
I would like."

"Well, I didn't write it for you."

“Who do you expect to send this to?” Another hen intercalated.

“Who do you expect to respond to this?”

“I am planning to print bales of it,
and drop them from airplanes,” I replied.

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Carl Nelson is currently working on a book of memoirs and poetry celebrating his current area of Appalachia titled *Become Remarkable*. To see more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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