

Spring 2019

Appalachian Goodbyes

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Houston, Emily, "Appalachian Goodbyes" (2019). *Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects*. Paper 793.
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APPALACHIAN GOODBYES

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Bachelor of Arts with
Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Emily Houston

Western Kentucky University

May 2019

* * * * *

CE/T Committee:

Dr. Alexander Olson, Advisor

Dr. Tom Hunley

Dr. Dale Rigby

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2019

Dedicated to Appalachia

For its winding roads through mountains,
the clench of my stomach slipping over the edge.

For its coal towns sprinkled with abandonment,
the black coating on my fingers and my lungs.

For its Dairy Cheer in Floyd County,
the fried food settling in my gut, an old friend.

For its four-wheelers whizzing on main roads,
the clench of my arms around Papaw's waist.

For its family gatherings with new faces every time,
the kiss on the cheeks and "how've-y'all-been."

For its crowded, double-wide trailer on holidays,
the five different versions of potato salads.

For its bitter air, filling my lungs on a winter afternoon,
the sharp relief of familiar needles in my chest.

For its pulling gravity, forcing the return,
the warbler, out of sight, surrounding you with songs.

For its too-tight hug at the funeral,
the clamor of grief in white-knuckled grips.

For its graveyards mounted on tops of hills,
the wind whispers its welcome home,
the roots of the mountain wrap around
the coffins until they are part of us all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Dr. Olson, for reading the first poems that led to this and telling me that my words were powerful and for making me believe that my words were worth saying. You were the first person at this university who told me I had talent, and I can never thank you enough for helping me see that I should not give up on my writing. Dr. Tom: Thank you for introducing me to poetry and for challenging me to write poems that I never would have otherwise. I will admit that I was frustrated and stressed when I walked out of Capstone with the assignment to write in Japanese poetic forms about relationships, but I am grateful that you pushed me out of my comfort zone and introduced me to forms that pulled out thoughts and feelings I never would have expressed otherwise. Dale: I am not sure if you remember, but that day in your office when you told me I was capable of more, that I have more intelligence than I was expressing in my writing, you kicked my butt into gear. Thank you for believing that I was capable of more and not letting me be complacent with my writing. To my family for making this place home even when I wanted to run away and for helping me even make it to this point. I love you all and am grateful that you helped me love Kentucky. To Michael for endlessly supporting my writing even when I refused to let you read any of it (and, more largely, supporting me through everything and anything without fail. I love you stupid amounts). To Murray for never outgrowing me and never letting me outgrow you. You somehow became my best friend despite my best efforts, and this last year would have been impossible without you. To Appalachia for holding me steady even as I tried to hide every part of you deep inside me.

ABSTRACT

This is a collection of poetry and nonfiction using the Japanese poetic form of haibun (a back and forth between haiku and prose, both sections attempting to clarify and further each other while approaching the subject in entirely different manners) as a form of memoir instead.

This collection is about my home that has not always felt like home and what it means to love and hate an Appalachian identity. It is also about my relationships, both with Appalachia and the world outside it and with the people who call it home and the people I have met when I have left it. It is about hurt and pain and loss and grief and confusion and frustration and love and happiness and family, but it is mostly about learning how to leave and remain and come back all at the same time.

Keywords: memoir, poetry, Appalachia, family, relationships

VITA

Education

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Communications Intern | Honors College at WKU | January - May 2018

Student Assistant | Academic Commons at WKU | August - December 2018

Communications Intern | Citizens Campaign for the Environment | May - July 2017

Peer Advising Undergraduate Intern | Office of Scholar Development | August - December 2016

Chief Resident | \$100 Solution House | Fall 2017 - Present

Campaign Volunteer | Jeanie Smith Campaign | August 2018 - November 2018

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Editorial Staff Member | *Zephyrus* Creative Writing Journal | Spring 2016 - Present

Director of Academic and Student Affairs and Senator | Student Government Association | Fall 2015 - Spring 2018

Awards/Conferences

Sigma Tau Delta International Convention | March 2018 and March 2019

- Presented a collection of poetry at the annual convention after being accepted in 2018 and 2019

Mary Ellen and Jim Wayne Miller Celebration of Writing Contest | Fall 2016 and Fall 2018

- Finalist in 2016 and Second Place in 2018 for poems

Goldenrod Poetry Festival | Spring 2017

- Third Place winner

Cherry Presidential Scholarship | 2015 - 2019

- Selected as recipient for a full academic scholarship

Publications

Houston, Emily. "Ars Poetica." *Zephyrus*. 2016. Print.

--. "Last Light." *Zephyrus*. 2016. Print.

--. "A Haibun as an Appalachian Goodbye." *RUNESTONE*, vol. 5. 2019. Web.

--. "Ode to My Father." *Zephyrus*. 2019. Print.

--. "Trenta-Sei of an Appalachian Winter." *Zephyrus*. 2019. Print.

Fields of Study

Major Field 1: English with a concentration in Creative Writing

Major Field 2: International Affairs

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A table of contents is required for a Capstone Experience/Thesis Project at WKU. While I have meticulously chosen how to organize this collection, there is no clear way for me to divide that up for a table of contents. There are divisions and shifts, but it would ruin the surprises of writing if I spelled those out for you here.

*And when they lay my body in the green, green grass,
I will whisper secrets to the animals that pass
'bout the times I walked away, about the times that I've ran back.
'Cause inside,
I am Appalachia.*

Josiah and the Bonneville

Appalachian Goodbyes

Emily Houston

I stopped on the side of the road when I drove back to Kentucky by myself for the first time, even with my parents' voices in my head telling me to only stop at well-populated exits. The large sign welcomed me in, and amidst the rush hour traffic spilling over the bridge from Cincinnati to Kentucky, I maneuvered my silver Ford Fusion across two lanes and onto the side of the road, hardly noticing the bump-bump-bump of the rumble strip or the shredded remains of tires that came before me. Instead, I tilted my head back against my seat, closed my eyes, and pictured that sign, listened to its whisper: *Hello, welcome home. You've been gone so long. How are you?* Tears carved a path into my skin. My blood thrummed with the word *home* even after I merged back onto the interstate, continued my journey south until I saw the sign for my county line. The last tightness in my chest dissipated at the sight of exit 94, as I felt the safety of Clark County, of Winchester, wrap around me.

But that's not the beginning. The beginning is more elusive than that. It led me to that stretch of road, but it was earlier, when I was younger, maybe, or later, before I went to college, or it is now with me attributing meaning and significance to a memory that might be meaningless. I am sitting here trying to spill out what it means to be Kentuckian, what it means to be Appalachian, in the face of J.D. Vance and well-meaning but ill-informed outsiders, when only Appalachians actually give a shit about Appalachia. That's too blunt. Let's rewind.

My parents began divorce proceedings the summer before I turned twelve. Or, rather, my father left behind an echoing slam when he walked out the front door and my ears did not stop ringing with the sound for years. Part of me is still curled in that dark dining room, tucked between the wall and the cabinet, pretending that I could not hear the

argument between my parents, pretending that I did not cause it. It was a beginning of sorts, a first lesson: I could be left behind. This place could be left behind. My father, with mountains ever-present in his voice, never struggled to leave. Never paused to say I did not deserve to be left, that it was not my fault he was gone. Then again, I was born from his own heart, stoic and reserved and rarely affectionate, but without the rolling temperament of Appalachia in my veins. I was a hill, never the mountain. For the weeks after his first departure, I refused to see him, and my mother, who wanted me on her side, allowed it.

There were other beginnings. Here: My first encounter with death is as a freshman in high school. I am at a football game on a Friday night. Our team is guaranteed to lose because it always loses, and I have never felt anything close to school spirit. Still. I am there. Red George Rogers Clark High School t-shirt on, hair in a high ponytail, laughing with friends. The laugh gets stuck in my throat when Brack, another friend, approaches. Says *Oh my god did you hear? A little boy just died. Whitt Goff? His brother is a year behind us.* Brack doesn't say that Whitt was only 9 years old, the same age as my brother, and his brother Tucker and I were born the exact same day, or that he is my brother's best friend, or that I have known Whitt and his family most of his life, have known him as the little boy who flirts with his friend's older sisters and always asks to hold my hand when I walk next to him. Brack apologizes at school the next week for being the one to break the news, for being the one to see grief paint itself across my face and hear the hiccupping sobs amidst the bright lights and the cheers as our school somehow scored a touchdown. I tell him that it is okay. I leave out that I crawled into my brother's bed that night and told him it would be okay, that I held his shaking body and let him wipe his

snot and tears on my red shirt until he cried himself to sleep. That in my head I swore I would do anything to prevent him from feeling this again. That I swore not to leave him.

And here: When I am sitting shoulder to shoulder, knee to knobby knee, with my cousins and second cousins and every slight relation is crowded into that small living room, listening to a child read the Christmas story before we all spring on the presents under the tree. It is the morning after that crowded tradition, lingering behind my Mamaw as she makes me breakfast and feeling the comforting weight of the mountains wrapped around our shoulders. Those mornings taught me quiet contentment, taught me how to exist in a place, no matter how small, but there was always a thrum underneath of something else, something calling me, begging me to pay attention for even one moment.

The beginnings don't really matter in the end. What matters is this: I have a habit of leaving before I am left and of staying when no one should stay and of looking for escape routes in every place. Maybe I got that from my father, too.

A Haiku for my Dad

My legs run but I
don't disappear like you did.
My heart is stuck here.

Ode to My Father

Time wraps a blanket around my shoulders,
but I struggle to get warm
in its threaded embrace.

I would rather be wrapped up
in the polluted rivers,
entangled in weeping willow branches
by the riverbank, toes embedded in mud.
I wondered for years how you could leave

when all along I have been doing the same,
pulling up roots I mistook for weeds
until I lost all my tethers and tried
to force torn roots back into the dirt,
tried to sink myself into that river,
hoping that the water would weigh my lungs down,
keep me under, but my body always
floats back up, unanchored to the land,
desperate to let the river run its course
and sweep me off.

The Name of a Heart

That beginning of a Sunday morning,
light streaming from the heavens.

That smell of biscuits baking
as Mamaw sways by the stove.

That morning glory curled around
the porch, hummingbirds resting nearby.

That cemetery perched atop the world,
the impossible climb to reach her.

*

That middle afternoon, bodies
curled together in the warm glow.

That smell of Mom's peppermint as it
wafted through the living room.

That succulent taking root
where nothing else would grow.

That barn, a quiet backyard memory
of wondering if I could remain.

*

That end of smoky days on a dusty
garage floor, radio thrumming.

That smell of wintergreen
chewing tobacco on Papaw's lips.

That weeping willow in the back,
branches breaking underneath me.

That river of mud flowing fast,
my feet desperate to be swept away.

That one day I won't be able to stay.

Triolet in Appalachia

These trees hold me in this world.
Roots like mine were not made to stretch.
Vines wrap around my heart in curls.
These trees hold me. In this world,
I alone am trapped in the swirl,
feet teetering along the edge.
Ah, these trees! Hold me in this world.
Roots like mine were not made to stretch.

A Zen Tanka

Hummingbird wings on
cold mornings in soft blue hues,
heartbeats legato.

Summer-green voices fade in
the lukewarm death of our youth.

The first time I imagined leaving Kentucky I was six years old. My teacher placed *Dinosaurs Before Dark* into my hands, and weeks later, I had walked through England, Ancient Egypt, the Caribbean Sea, and the Amazons. I looked around myself after my journey was completed, gaze falling on cold mountains and dilapidated trailer parks, and I found faults in it all. The people, with their coal-stained lungs and their backwater beliefs. The land, for allowing itself to be ruined. The schools and the churches and the companies and everything that held people there when I thought we should all be fleeing from the hills and into better, more beautiful lives, only achievable somewhere else. I wanted—wanted with a fierceness that I did not know I possessed—to claim some other identity. I did not want to be Kentuckian, did not want its elongated vowels, its Southern hospitality, its feminine disposition. I refused to acknowledge the roots with thorns embedded in my legs because I did not truly feel Appalachian.

My parents moved us to fringes of the region when I was only a toddler, and though my dad never voiced a desire to escape it, my mom got her first taste of freedom when she moved to Lexington for college, and I don't think she ever wanted to go back. I have a few scattered memories of living there, of the molasses accents, of poking at an opossum on the side of the road to see if it was only pretending to be dead while my training bike lay forlornly on its side, forgotten. I remember the small community pool behind our house that felt as if the world had left it behind some years ago, and we were the only ones to discover it still had purpose. I was never Appalachian, though our great escape from the mining towns was not really an escape—it only led us to the fringes of the region where the town's inhabitants preferred to think of themselves as different, despite more than half of its students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The county had

an inflated sense of worth due to its proximity to Lexington, to a flourishing city that had no commonalities with the mountains to the east. Few people who live in that city claim Appalachian as part of their identity.

Growing up, we visited my grandparents, visited Floyd County, so frequently that the visits blur together. During the drive, my eyes would inevitably slip close, fingers loosening around old copies of Nancy Drew novels and head rattling against the window as the car moved. Despite always sleeping during the trip, I somehow knew the way by heart. Knew which mountain meant we were only 30 more minutes away when my snores stuttered to a stop and my eyes peeled themselves open, checking to ask Mom one more time if we were there yet. The trip was repetitive—nearly every weekend, we would make trips to go visit both sets of grandparents, one in tiny Auxier, perched above a muddy river, and the other on top of a small mountain in Prestonsburg, the car always precariously hugging the edge to reach it.

I struggled with identifying my home in those years. The visits with family would light something within me, some distant longing that I did not understand. Suddenly, my heart was on the floor of my Papaw's dusty garage, and we would both work on it, wrap our fingers around his tools, check for holes in the rubber, pump it with new air when necessary. He taught me how to work on tires during those visits, and his customer would sit patiently waiting by his desk, reminiscing about his own grandchildren that he had not seen for months. When I lost interest, I would skip out of the garage, taking my heart with me, and down the steps to his kennels. A quick, clicking noise between my teeth would draw all of Papaw's hunting dogs towards the gate, tails wagging as I slipped my hand between the wire to rub at their heads.

Here, there was no pressure to wear the same clothes as my friends, to scrunch my nose up at the idea of getting dirty, to modulate my voice to theirs. The accent slipped out in any conversation with my grandparents, and I flung myself at the chance to go fishing by the river, watching with rapt attention that night as Papaw relieved the fish of its guts and Granny turned it into a meal. My fingers always curled a little too tightly into the backs of their shirts when we had to say goodbye.

Whenever the molasses slipped into my own voice after these visits, I was quickly corrected by both my mother and my teachers, an attempt to remove the seed of the accent before it could ever bloom. I was never Appalachian because I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood, the daughter of an engineer-preacher and a stay-at-home mom who would have burned down the world for my success. I was never Appalachian because I was ashamed of it, fought hard to speak with Standard English, and turned up my nose at anyone who used “ain’t” or “y’all” at school because it was improper, uneducated. I wanted to leave Kentucky the first time I picked up a book and realized the rest of the world shone so much brighter than my small town. It was a steady thrum in my heart for years, pushing me to do whatever was necessary if it meant I could leave.

But even while I twisted my lips in an effort to avoid the accent that all my family had, it was there at the bottom of my words, prompting a man in Ohio to remark on the twang that coats some of my words like sugar, the waiter in Alabama to tell me that he had known I was from Kentucky before I had even sat down, the woman in New York to light up when she first heard my voice and tell me she was from Kentucky too, and my middle school science teacher to ask how my trip back to the mountains had been after I

said “good morning” that Monday. It was always there, waiting to slip out if I would only let it.

Trenta-Sei of an Appalachian Winter

Winter is even more bitter in mountains.
It whispers of early deaths on melting roads
without beds of lilac to soften.
My heart is somewhere under the snow,
and without a hand to hold here,
I forget how to banish my fears.

It whispers of early deaths on melting roads.
Outsiders don't understand the ways we've fallen,
but I know how the rivers used to flow.
Now, even the trees have grown brown and solemn.
My heart burns with desire to be near,
but when I am, the world becomes unclear.

Without beds of lilac to soften,
I drift back to the ground slowly,
waiting for the day this place is forgotten.
The earth tells me there is no point in my growth,
but I try to let blossoms burst from my ears,
even though I'll be incomplete for years.

My heart is somewhere under the snow
where it waits, growing sodden,
and I listen to the soft caws of a crow.
I used to hear the mumble of robins,
but now even they avoid the tears,
and I learn to exist in a different sphere.

And without a hand to hold here,
nothing can stop me as I sink lower.
Winter has never been so severe,
and ice grows where rivers once flowed.
I used to be able to persevere
when the mountains felt more sincere.

I forget how to banish my fears,
and let them grow, uncounted.
All I have left is a wasted frontier,
with all its hopes fallen,
and change is rarely a volunteer.
Please let me disappear.

My Warbler Sisters

Geothlypis Formosa,
small and beautiful ground bird,
my Kentucky Warbler,
with your yellow underbelly
and your olive green wings.
There! in your hidden nest
at the base of my shrub.
Your lungs and their turtle-
turtle-turtle-turtle song in the middle
of my September.

Youngest sister,
small and beautiful treasure,
my unexpected jewel,
with your blonde curls
and green stains on your knees,
hidden in the weeds
of my life.

A Haiku Sonnet About Not Leaving

Lavender blooms in
June outside a bedroom view,
and forgets the sin

of us, me and you
thinking we could ever leave,
wishing to escape.

They called it naïve
to leave the earth in bad shape,
its grass dried neglect.

Do mountains forget?
The blue hills are only wrecks
and filled with regrets.

I still long for a new breeze,
but I never leave the trees.

My dad left Kentucky at the same time as my sister Abby. They both moved to New York in the summer, built new homes inside of an unfamiliar place. It felt the same as the summer before my twelfth birthday. In the aftermath, I was full of fury that he would not come back and refused to see him, only wanted him in my life if it was in the house I knew, in the life I could control. I refused to let his perceived abandonment burst out of its cage and through my lips; instead, I told my friends on my twelfth birthday that he was only at the store, buying ice cream that he never delivered. I wondered at my ability to keep the evidence of war off my face, to hide the leaking wounds as I walked by his office of untouched books and the chair that he used to sit in, holding my hand as he prayed I would feel no pain before pulling my baby teeth from my gums.

I was still determined to leave and to explore when he moved away, but I was not grateful for the opportunity that either Abby or my dad presented. I was angry that they could leave while I was stuck for another three years, trapped in the place that I had spent my whole life training out of my voice and my face and my mannerisms. I did not want people to look into my eyes and see the blue hills or listen to my voice and hear the slow-rolling river. I wanted to blend in, to seem like a native instead of a tourist in the places that were far from home. I never achieved the distance I desired. When I moved to New York for the summer to stay with Abby, I wore the pale blue Walgreens uniform, helping to print photos and cash people out and straighten shampoo bottles that fell and fell and fell. I realized that the people were the same. The man with schizophrenia urging me to be careful, the woman whose phone opened more pictures of genitalia than I expected to see at 9 am on a Tuesday, the boy who followed me around the store asking questions

about my relationship status—they were all variations of people I thought could only be found in the mountains of Appalachia.

At the end of my first summer in New York, I spent most of the drive resenting the flat land of Pennsylvania and Ohio that was on my trip. The hills started to grow as I approached Cincinnati, at the same time the first Kentucky license plate appeared on a car in front of me. I could not stop myself from waving as I passed the car. Slowly, more and more Kentucky license plates began to appear around me. They beckoned me towards the home that I had always been desperate to leave. After I passed a tractor-trailer with a Kentucky plate, its driver honked, and when I glanced back through the rearview mirror, I saw the smiling face of the truck driver, arm waving at me in greeting as if knowing I had finally left but had still found my way home.

A Haibun about the Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) in my skin

The second doctor drained the infection and called the first doctor an idiot. I should remember the bloody pus leaking down my arm, but mostly I remember his face. He convinced me to go to the doctor with a promise to hold my hand, to stay by my side. Instead, he was in a chair feet from me, talking to the doctor who cut into me to help me heal.

eyes wide, skin ashen
how did we get here
his gaze averted

Haibun in which I Am Not Playing Doctor

I was nine years old and it was a normal medical procedure, but my mother never took me to your office again. Imagine this — prepubescent girl, laid back on a doctor's table, paper crinkling underneath her legs, pink polka dot panties pulled down. Too far, too revealing.

a cold foreign touch
heartbeat rapid-fire and fear
sweat pooled at temples

My mom's brows furrowed on the drive home. She said nothing. I sat in a booster seat, still too small to sit without it. My head leaned against the window, and the rough bounce of the car on the road thrummed inside my skull. Trees flitted by on the 30-minute drive back home, and my hand rested over the gap between my freckled legs. Doctors only did what doctors are supposed to do.

I shy from his touch
it won't hurt, he promises
I still feel the pain

Today, I mention the doctor to Mom. Her face droops. She claims we stopped going because of the long drive.

Haibun about a Hot Summer Day in Upstate New York

He made me sip his cherry ale, but he didn't hold my hair back when it burned its way up my esophagus. He hovered— hands at first grasping at strands before giving up, leaving them to dangle in the way of too much wine and shitty beer on an empty stomach.

water splashed on skin
summer heat curdling the air
sax buzzes nearby

I leaned over a portable sink, forced strands of hair under running water. I could not see what was left, and he was too drunk to see me.

Appalachian Goodbye

the heat left my heart
when your kiss began to sting
winter whispers now

My Mamaw had a recipe that cannot be replicated, not even by my mother. It requires the trembles from hands that are weakened by cancer to mix the gravy *just* right. I remember how it has to be prepared on a Sunday morning as a farewell before we leave the mountains and return to school. How it needed to be prepared in that double-wide trailer with its screen doors always open, so that one fly would buzz too close to the biscuits and Mamaw would holler for one of us to get the fly swat. About how Mamaw used that fly swat on us if we gave her any sass. About how Eastern Kentucky feels a little emptier without her there. About how I haven't been back to her grave since the funeral.

At the funeral, I stood next to the too shiny coffin surrounded by too many bright flowers and stared at the body resting inside. She was in a dress because she wore dresses most days, long flowing dresses that brushed gently against her legs as she walked barefoot around the trailer. She tried to embody the femininity and grace of Myrna Loy, the actress, her namesake. She chose her jewelry each day with care and tried to keep her tired hands as steady as possible while doing her makeup. I remember standing there looking at her remains and wondering who put makeup on her, wondering why they had not managed to get it right the way she always did.

An aunt approached from behind while I stared at my Mamaw's face. Maybe I had been there too long, so mesmerized and terrified of an empty body that people became uncomfortable. She told me I could touch Mamaw if I wanted to, could give her one last kiss. I didn't want to touch death, to become acquainted with it personally only for it to come for me next. But, my aunt stayed there, hovering at my shoulder, watching me carefully, and I knew I was expected to cry and to hold onto my Mamaw's dead hand

and prove to everyone watching that I was mourning. That I was capable of putting aside my own comfort for the sake of being a normal human being with normal responses to tragedies.

My hand shook as it touched first the glossy wood of the coffin before reaching in and touching the hand that had smoothed my hair down my entire life. I leaned over and pressed a kiss against her cheek, but I jerked away as soon as I made contact as if the death that had captured her was trying to latch onto me, too. Her hand felt wrong, like plastic skin, too doll-like. My fingers smoothed themselves down the fabric of my dress, trying to wipe away every trace of what I had touched before I looked at the person beside me, face blooming red as I hurried to find my mother. When I was sure no one was looking, I scrubbed my sleeve across my lips, removing that last trace of her, too.

I was relieved at the burial when Mamaw was lowered into the ground. I knew that I would not be able to feel her hand again, feel the death trying to drag me six feet under with her. I was safe from it. From her.

I did not cry about her death until months later.

My dad moved from job to job, first in Kentucky, then to West Virginia, before settling in New York. I tried to rip pieces of myself out for him to take because I wanted him to have something other than a house empty of family and memories and love in a colder state. I couldn't imagine him there. I was angry that he was gone and guilty for not being able to follow him even as my brain urged me to go, to go anywhere else.

How do I leave Appalachia when she is buried here?

A Tanka about Us

His lips met mine on
the peak of the mountain though
the farthest we went
that summer was the bed of
his truck at Sky-View drive-in.

A Haibun about Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) in the Heart

I forgot how to be okay that summer. The infection on my arm sprung up out of nothing.
The infection in us did, too.

his hands did not stay
they wandered away from me
he thought I was blind

MRSA killed two people from my town years ago. I look at the scar on my arm every day.

A Sedoka Where I Try to Drive Away From Us

why does winter seem
so much warmer inside you
no matter the pain you cause?

*don't let the warmth leak
out of your summer heart please
my season is too bitter*

Appalachian Goodbye

his lips left imprints
scarlet emblazoned on cheeks
but he is not here

I was never taught how to say goodbye to someone you know is not returning. That fall, when Mamaw was deteriorating in front of our eyes, Hospice was in and out of a revolving door of constant care. We thought each weekend would be her last. She slept a lot in that time, and I could feel her death in my chest every time her eyes slipped closed. We sat by her side, holding her hand, wondering if they would open again. Again and again, they did. Sometimes her blue eyes were clouded over with pain and exhaustion and a deep desire for everything to be over already, and I more than anything wanted to reach out to her in front of everyone, take out the tubes and needles, throw away the medications, and let her sleep peacefully. Let her go without all the suffering. Prevent anyone from asking her to fight a battle that we all knew she was going to lose. A cloud of guilt had permanently nestled in my head at these urges, forcing me to face the selfish thoughts behind wanting to let her escape.

I can remember quiet mornings with her and my mother in the kitchen, the first restless child awake, the pops of grease as Mamaw cooked the sausage for her gravy. Mom and I would both try to help, but Mamaw was insistent on doing it all herself. I have never been able to figure out if her continued refusal was more due to her stubborn effort to prove that she was still capable or her genuine desire to serve everyone around her. Her pushes for us to sit down and relax while her unsteady hands prepared us a meal grated against me. I wanted to push back, to stand next to her and stir as she instructed. But I wanted it more for myself, to gain another memory with her, than I wanted to lighten the weight on her shoulders.

In her moments of clarity, she told my aunts and Mom about her dreams. Each time she slipped away, each time we all felt death creeping up our spines and into our

lungs and hearts, she was dreaming of a field of her favorite flowers, tulips and daffodils and morning glories. In the distance, she could see a shadow of a man, his steps measured and calm, picking his way across the field of flowers where she stands in awe. She could not stop herself from reaching out, even though the man was still too far to reach. Each time her eyes slipped closed again, the man was closer, and she kept reaching out, waiting to be close enough to see his face, to touch his hand. Mom and my aunts were comforted by this still, but hearing the dream always filled my gut with a sense of foreboding. They knew she was with God, and my aunt Lorrie painted the description of the dream for each of my Mamaw's children, painted Mamaw as a young girl with streaming blonde hair surrounded by every flower imaginable and a man in the distance in a golden haze, waiting to meet her.

My aunts and Mom cried in relief when she told them that she was so close, that she could almost see his face, could almost touch his hand that had risen now to reach for her already outstretched arm. She did not open her eyes again. I was not there that day. Mom and my brother Kaleb were, but the rest of us were back home with my step-father, celebrating New Year's Eve at my uncle's house. When the ball dropped, I felt a pit in my stomach, felt something essential to me disappear and leave the rest of me wanting. Mom called ten minutes later because she had not wanted to spoil the immediate giddiness of ringing in a new year, but I knew before the phone ever rang. Mamaw's last words to me were for me to be good, good enough to see her again one day. I still don't think I will.

A Dodoitsu About Saying Goodbye to a Tree in Appalachia

There is no heat or ice
in my veins. I have always
had the weeping willow blood.
It flows through like tears.

Haibun at Myrtle Beach

I crashed into the water with my sister at my side, both of us screeching “For Narnia!” Giggles escaped lips only to open the gates for ocean water to fill our lungs and pull us under. We did this again and again, only stopping when our legs were too tired to propel us back through the surface.

salt rushing into
lungs in a push to find air
waves break, I am free

Last summer, she stopped talking to me. We did not run into any oceans together, reaching for each other when we emerged. My messages went unread. Can you stop existing if no one is around to see you?

your hand and mine, torn
bodies drift far in the world
when do they return

I have been chasing after the people who leave me since that funeral. At my cousin's wedding, my father passes me his glass of wine in front of Granny's reproachful eyes, urges me to try a sip as her voice ratchets up three octaves. "Kevin Ernest, don't you dare let that child drink that," she cautions, but there is no threat in her voice, only shock. I wonder if it is the same shocked voice that she used when he was too young to be drinking and Papaw passed the jar of moonshine to him. The voice that expressed disagreement, but had none of the strength to enforce its opinions. I take the glass from his hand under Granny's eyes, and I do not know what it is that stands out the most—the obedient desire to please Dad in some way, to be the reason he laughs, to be on his side against Granny, shoulder-to-shoulder with him throughout life, or the wild touch to the smile I toss at Granny, the daring to do something forbidden, to astonish her and everyone else with my actions, or the bitter glint in my eyes as I raise the glass to my lips, the need to surprise Dad with the courage he thinks I lack, to make him see me as something more than the passive 13-year-old that pales next to his vibrant firstborn.

I sip Abby's drink at a bar with her friend before we attempt to regroup with Dad and his friends George and Heather. We find them at an Irish bar, which Dad calls Molly McGee's because of the Irish bar back home he used to frequent. Here, I fall back into my role as the second child, the quiet one, the one who he calls once every two weeks instead of every day, the one who never surprises him. He buys Abby shots. Buys George shots. Buys Heather's shots. Buys the bartender shots. And he is laughing the entire time, eyes bloodshot but it is the smile I love on his face, the laugh that I always want to win out of him.

When the wine slips its way between my lips, it curls around my tongue, offers me a first taste of a temptation Dad never resisted. I want to swallow it easily, want to continue to surprise everyone at the table. I can feel their gazes waiting for my reaction. Dad, ready to clap me on the shoulder if I impress him. Granny, hoping that Dad has failed to corrupt me with this one taste. Abby, waiting to take the glass from my own hand and sip a drink that she is familiar with already, to add onto her camaraderie with Dad. Mom, who is not there, but who I can feel watching me anyways, waiting to tell me that I will not become my alcoholic father under her watch. My nose scrunches up at the bitter fruit on my tongue when the taste registers, and I scramble for my glass of water, draining it in efforts to wash every essence of the wine out. I can see Granny's internal sigh of relief.

At the bar, Abby teaches me how to take a shot of tequila while Dad is distracted. She licks her hand, sprinkles salt onto the wet skin, swallows half of the shot, bites into the wedge of lime. Then, she slides the remainder of the shot for me to try. She, like Dad, believes in the image that was forced on me. Of innocence, of purity, of a sinless life. I do not have the heart to tell her otherwise. I lick the pale skin of my hand with care, sprinkle salt with a concentrated furrow between my eyebrows, and the tequila slides down my throat. I can tell she waits for a wince that does not come.

Dad laughs and tells everyone that I am his favorite, the only sober one, the perpetually serious child. He can count on me, he exclaims. I blink at him the same way I

did at 13—eyes wide and trustworthy. I never had the luxury of being the fun child, the equal, the one who can throw back shots with him. It did not surprise me when Abby moved from Kentucky, starting graduate school in central New York, that Dad quickly found a job that pulled him away, too.

The summer before I turned 21, before I entered my senior year of college, I decide to live with Dad. I tell myself that this is my last chance before graduating and entering into “actual adulthood.” Remind myself that I had not stayed with him for more than a week at a time since my parents divorced when I was 12. I chose Mom in the way that Abby had always chosen Dad, but I blamed him still for that abandonment, that urge to follow and be near Abby even if it meant being 700 miles away from the rest of us. I moved to New York that summer with that desperate urge to forge the connection I had lost at the divorce. To move back into the photograph of me atop his shoulders, wide grins on both our faces, of me urging him to drive faster and faster, to tear the road wide open while Mom was not looking, of everyone in my family knowing that I was a “Daddy’s Girl” through and through.

I went to the bar with him that summer multiple days a week once we were both home from work. I met his friends, hovering at his side most days, and watched as they all drank themselves into varying degrees of a drunken stupor. Cindy and Billy were the calm wife and husband with daughters the same age as me, who were a safety net when they were there. Cindy would speak in soft whispers next to me, rolled her eyes with me at the loudness of the drunk men. Tommy was always the worst. Tommy, whose hand would brush my body in ways that he framed as accidental. These touches only occurred when his girlfriend and Dad were too far away to see. I stuck closer to Dad’s side

afterwards. Though the bar was full of Trump-talk, wandering hands, and a strange amount of physical affection from large, drunk men, I never stopped going. I stuck to Dad's side, gambled with him on Thursday evenings, and when his friends started offering me drinks, I drank next to him, too. Dad called me a sot whenever I threw back shots of Jameson with him. When I switched to Bailey's, he laughed as I told him it was like chocolate milk, seeing some element of that 13-year-old who turned her nose at wine blending with his almost-adult daughter. I wonder if Mamaw would see that 13-year-old, too, or if in winning Dad's affection, I lost hers.

A Haiku About the Corner of Happy and Healthy

we felt happy then
smiles wide, healthy cheeks rosy
breaking from nothing

An Appalachian Goodbye

My mamaw and I used to wade through the creek by her doublewide, minnows slipping in between our fingers, darting away from the nets we tried to ensnare them in. My toes curled around the mud-covered rocks, grounding my legs like fragile twigs, as murky water pushed south, seeking its own escape from the mountains we called home.

her fingers and mine
grasping at each other for
a steady warm touch

She faded from the outdoors, and the hummingbirds flitted from flower to flower, searching for her gentle touch. The minnows disappeared, too, and I would search where the water used to flow strong for the traces of our footprints in the mud. I never had any luck.

family is mud
beneath our too heavy toes
pull me under too

Another Haibun

I came back to school after the weekend, and my science teacher recognized his home in the sound of my words. His eyes searched my face, and the image of fingers digging into the rich earth, rooting into the mountain beneath, painted itself on my rose-touched skin.

freckled skin maps out
the mountains. people
find homes outside them

Appalachian Goodbyes

Lilac fades in sun.

My roots long for a new breeze.

Who will say goodbye?

My cousin once questioned why I chose to study English when I had the ability to study math, science, or engineering. He told me I could have gone to space, if only I had tried. Maybe he was right. Maybe I could have studied something that would have taken me far away from Eastern Kentucky, as far as I could ever hope to get. Instead, I chose English, and while I still expected it to take me away from here at the time, somehow it only served to take the nails I had so carefully removed and push them back into my feet. Somehow along the way the friends I made who owned their Kentucky identities pushed me to look closer at my own. If all beginnings really did have endings in them, and my endings had beginnings, too, then I did not know where all this really began. I still felt six years old, still felt like I am newly discovering a vibrant world around me, but that world shifted from being outside of Kentucky to inside of it.

When I travelled to Ireland this past summer, I stood on the edge of cliffs and felt my heart dive into the sea. I felt the way the grass curled around my feet and the way the air swirled across my skin. I drove through mountains that did not look like my mountains, spoke with people whose accents did not move with the same molasses as my own, went across an entire country in only a week, and got drunk at a quiet bar in the middle of the day. It was beautiful, but everything still made me think of Kentucky. Leaving only made me feel closer to what I will eventually come back to, provided me a new lens to view my own world through, and filled me with the longing to see more of the world to better understand my home. When it was the only place you had ever seen, it was not hard to assume it was static. To feel that there was no future in its foggy mountains.

I can see why my Dad wanted to start his life over. But I also understand why people keep coming back. I understand why Mamaw stayed until she died and was buried on top of a mountain that felt impossible for us to reach. I needed to leave, and at some level, I still need to leave. I love Appalachia because I have left. I know I am going to leave it again, and again, and again, and when I come back, it will still be here, blue hills rolling into mountains and plain voices rolling into rivers of slow truths and kindness.

In Ireland, I walked through narrow, crowded streets, carrying a small cup of handmade, fresh-from-Irish-cows ice cream, and peeked into the small shops littering the town as I went. Most were overly touristy, reminding me of light-up Kentucky keychains that fill the gas stations on I-65, as if anyone who drives through is after a memento of their experience of constant road construction and traffic. I eventually stumbled into an area less frequented by tourists with a small music shop and a graveyard for nuns across the street. The Irish shopkeeper at the small music shop told me to try to walk between the raindrops when I peeked out her door, attempting to muster the courage to dart back into the rain to walk back to the bed and breakfast. She had spoken to me as soon as I opened the door, calling to some sense of recognition that I could not explain. I did not buy anything, but I wrote down names of Irish musicians to research, accepted the cup of tea she offered, and kept her company until I finally forced myself back under the drizzling gray skies.