



Kevin Sparks

## WINNER OF THE 2022 WRITING APPALACHIA CONTEST

### MAJOR

English

### HOME

Charles Town, West Virginia

### ESSAY

This piece is a non-fiction, personal essay written for Ann Pancake's English 352 class, Appalachian Literature of the Environment. It connects my own experiences with that of two different texts, "The Milkweed Ladies," by Louise McNeill and "The Protests at Blair," by Victor Depta. Through these connections I emphasize the importance of implementing safe change for the environment as to maintain a strong connection to it.

### WHY WRITING MATTERS

Writing is the perfect way to think. You can think as loudly, powerfully, or exploratively as you want to. It's like throwing a pebble into the giant, muddy lake that is your brain as you're then left to sift through what came up, finding the most precise expression for your ideas and creativity.

## A Way Appalachia Shapes Individuals

Just beyond the backyard at my family's home in Charles Town, West Virginia lies acres of land owned by wealthy farmers, the Whitlocks. A part of this land creeps up alongside our property on either side until it reaches the county's road, enclosing us within a square. To the right of our house is a part of their land my family and I lovingly call "the weeds."

Within the weeds, lies the "fence line." This consists partly of a wooden fence that runs vertically down from the road and into the weeds, while the other part consists of two rows of large trees surrounded by overgrown weeds and bushes with viridescent vegetation inching up their trunks. In between the trees was barely enough room for children to squeeze into, which brought my brother and I many adventures. In Appalachian writings such as *The Milkweed Ladies*, by Louise McNeill and "The Protests at Blair," by Victor Depta, I can feel the strength in their emotions regarding the land and environment and understand how Appalachia shaped us as people. I sympathize with their feelings of loss that come when that land, with all its history, is taken away.

My brother and I spent much of our childhood outdoors, exploring the fields and forests behind our home and especially exploring the fence line. Within it, there was a clearing surrounded by sticker bushes in the shape of a circle. The trees here created a shady canopy so dense we couldn't see the sky overhead. A thick branch came out from a larger trunk and angled upwards at a slope, sticking out above the canopy. At the top, we could see miles of the surrounding land and if we quietly stayed up there long enough, deer, foxes, groundhogs, and squirrels would come and go underneath us. There were thick, brown, malleable vines that we would climb on. Because these vines seemed to interwin, we called them "monkey swings," as they reminded us of the giant, green monkey ball fruit we saw in the fields. This was a place where I could let my imagination run free, and even after my brother and I grew up, we can still feel those memories.

Despite being born nearly a century earlier than I was, Louise McNeill nurtures similar experiences of joy within her environment. Her descriptions of the environment run deeper than just her own personal experiences, as it defines and becomes part of her family as well, such as Granny Fanny. "...She was wild and running free...she still roved the rocks and waste places, tended her ash hopper, which made lye for her homemade soup...and gathered pokes of horehound and "life-ever-lasting"...the seal and saddle of a mountain woman" (McNeill, 23-24). Granny Fanny became directly tied to the land, as her routine and life were entirely shaped by the environment around her and this became an extremely notable feature of her character. The land becomes a part of the people that inhabit it as it sinks into multiple facets within life. "In the winter I sometimes went out early and walked the fields of our farm alone...Sometimes I could feel the others close around me...the gray, sleeping, wood mice; the little striped ground squirrels; and the soft curled-up rabbits, the snoring old ground-hogs, and the ring-tailed racoons" (McNeill, 63-64). McNeill has become attuned to the land and she feels as if she can sense the animals as they hibernate. The descriptions of the animals makes them impressionable and creates a juxtaposition with the "dead" winter atmosphere. Through her writing, readers take in a strong sense of place and understand how important Appalachian land shapes its inhabitants.

In my senior year of high school, the Whitlocks began building houses in their fields, so they also built a road near the fence line and almost entirely destroyed it. Trees were torn down, the tall weeds, vegetation and bushes all cut down and trashed. The thick branch that stretched above the canopy now barely reaches two feet off the ground. Construction vehicles tore up the ground on their way through, transforming a place I spent many formative years into an ugly, dirt blight.

I grieve for this place because the same experiences that shaped me will, in a way, die with me. No other children will be able to experience the fence line. Older generations of Appalachian people have this same feeling in a much larger capacity as many of them own land here that holds importance to their ancestors. This is clearly portrayed within Victor Depta's, "The Protests at Blair." "Them assholes coming up here...How would you like it if somebody tried to take your farm away, or your steel mill or your line of business...These are our mountains" (Depta, lines 1-5). This Appalachian speaker is upset at changes that are occurring within his environment by outside forces who have no connection to the region trying to forcibly exert their will on the local people. While his feelings are excellent for protecting the land, it creates antiquated ideologies that drive younger generations away, and prevent the region from growing. Appalachian people understand how damaging these ideologies are, as he hears how the rest of the country stigmatizes him. "...That idiot journalist over there in Charleston—I read every one of his slanted articles, and each time I got mad all over again." (Depta, lines 46-49). He acknowledges the poor appearance the people within his community have, and expresses contempt with this perception; however, this cyclical mindset is dangerous for young people, as it drives a wedge into their relationship with the land, making them want to leave.

This religious fervor to protect Appalachia has prevented the cultivation of what made the land special: the shared experiences of those who lived and thrived off this environment. Instead, the hurt they felt from outside sources has caused them to sequester into familiarity, ultimately causing more suffering at the hands of those outside forces. Understanding how to correctly implement change that can coexist with the environment will continue the special relationship between the people and the land while fostering progression and longevity for Appalachian people.