Rebecca Watkins

Rebecca Watkins holds an MFA in poetry and an MSed from the City University of New York. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Ginosko Literary Journal*, the *Quartet Journal,* the *Amaranth Journal, The Banyan Review*, *Sin Fronteras,* and *The Roanoke Review* among other literary journals. Her creative nonfiction has been shortlisted for *The Malahat Review*'s Open Season Awards. She is the author of *Field Guide to Forgiveness* (Finishing Line Press 2023) and *Sometimes, in These Places* (Unsolicited Press 2017). More of her work can be found at rebeccawatkinswriter.com.

Sounds Like Home

1. You're Not from Here, Are You?

The first time I went to my ex-boyfriend's home on the Upper East Side, I finally knew how different we were. The apartment had a doorman, tall windows looking over Central Park, and fresh floral arrangements in the polished foyer. During dinner, his father told a joke speaking in an exaggerated *hillbilly* accent. I don't remember the joke, but I remember how I felt, my face hot with a mix of shame and anger that turned my stomach. His accent didn't quite match my mamaw and papaw's, but close enough. I calmly explained to him my family talked like that, hoping he would stop. He didn't. He had a gleam in his eye that wasn't jovial; it was the edge of a blade. That was the moment I knew I would not marry that boyfriend who sat silently beside me.

2. A Story of Migration

Like millions of others who migrated from the Appalachian Mountains, my paternal grandmother, my mamaw, took a Greyhound bus through the Cumberland Range, leaving Harlan

County, Kentucky behind. A coal miner's daughter, she had a father who died of black lung in his fifties. I imagine she must have been afraid to leave that lush valley of green where families stuck together and the sun set at five, disappearing behind rock cliffs and slipping into gorges. Married with three little boys, and another one to come later, she followed her husband, my papaw to Cincinnati. He knew he didn't want the poverty that came with a lifetime of digging for coal in the dank belly of the earth. He'd seen the men emerge from underground, faces covered in soot, the only thing visible, the whites of their eyes.

3. To Be Defined/To Be Erased

Once in a class in graduate school when I first moved to New York, I opened up about where I was from, saying that I was half *App-uh-lay-shun*, which is the way we say it in the Ohio Valley and Eastern Kentucky. A classmate who'd never even been there corrected me. Telling me, "That's not how you pronounce it. It's App-uh-*latch-n*." I felt ashamed and confused. Did this woman know better than I did about my own culture?

4. When You Are the Problem

When industries like mining and timber became mechanized, and many mines began to close, people began to flee for a better life, creating what would pejoratively called: *hillbilly highway*. This referred both the roads that lead out of the mountains and the movement itself. The term *hillbilly*, derived from, of course, *hill* and then the Scottish word *billie* meaning friend or companion, now conjures the stereotype of impoverished and ignorant whites from rural areas.

In 1954, my grandparents rented an apartment like many others from Kentucky in the urban neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine, a place once settled by German immigrants. As the tide of Appalachians moved in, many of the original Germans moved out. The ones that remained sometimes clashed with their new neighbors, whose mountains accents made them difficult to understand. Their presence in the city became known as the Southern Appalachian Migrant, or SAM*,* problem, and, as reported by The Urban Appalachian Community Coalition*,* they "were the victims of 'active discrimination' that negatively affected their job opportunities, education, health care, living conditions, and sense of identity and community." When their children (like my father) went to school, they were enrolled children in special classes. Because the teachers didn't understand their accents, it was assumed that Appalachians couldn't learn, a stereotype that has persisted to this day.

5. A Ghost Town

I didn't grow up like my grandparents, working on farms and in the mines or like my father who held on to his heritage by going to Kentucky for holidays and summers. In the mid to late 1970s and the early 80s, I was raised on city streets with Appalachian whites and Southern and urban Blacks. After generations of diaspora, of living in cities and migrating to others, I wonder how many of us with Appalachian heritage like me are now simply *white.* All that once made us unique, distinguishable beyond our skin has become a frayed tether connecting us to a past that isn't ours.

The place inside of me where my culture should live feels like an abandoned mining town, a ghost town. I've seen the black and white photos of vacant coal towns like the Blue Heron, empty but for the buildings, the bridge, and the tipple, where coal was processed on both sides of

the Big South Fork River. Weeds now creep over the vacant houses and snake through the rusted skeletons of cars. But if I look hard enough, I'll see myself there in the way my hands crave soil, the way bluegrass music makes my feet move, the way I need to be among the green hills to breathe after I've been with people for too long.

6. Be Vague

For years after I moved to New York, where I went to school in New York City, I didn't say much about my background, not understanding then that's how you erase your history: Don't tell anyone where you're from. Eat your voice like you eat your shame. Don't say your parents are from Kentucky. Don't say you are from Over-the-Rhine, at least not in the 1980s, when crack addicts shook in doorways and people were afraid to drive down Vine Street because they might get pulled from the car and shot. Pretend you are from the gentrified version of your neighborhood or be vague: I'm from the Midwest. If they ask where, Cincinnati, the Queen City! Or if you are in the mood, go way back: I'm Scotch-Irish. Ulster County, I think, generations ago. We came from the lowlands of Scotland to Ireland to the mountains in the Carolinas and Kentucky.

7. You'll Need a Chisel

Does my history run like a seam of coal through the rocks? What belongs to me and what belongs to others? What do I chisel and blast away to find the truth? I've heard the names *white trash, hillbilly, red neck,* and *cracker.* When I could, I left my family and home, moved around, earned degrees, and landed on the East Coast where for decades I didn't tell anyone my parents were from Kentucky because I had tired of the jokes. But not speaking is a slow attrition of self.

8. I Don't Have an Accent

I must have known, but I don't remember anyone telling me. Maybe it was implicit, but I scrubbed Kentucky from my throat early on. When my father dies, that sound dies with him. I know, of course, how to speak proper English without an accent, or much of one, without the dialect of parents or region. I know how to change the words/change the way the words leave my mouth/change the shape of my mouth for the sake of the words.

Warsh the clothes=wash them

spigot=faucet

over yonder=over there

the holler=the valley

I know now how to use proper grammar.

It's not, *she don't*; it's *she doesn't*.

It's not, *where're you at?* It's *Where are you?*

But sometimes when I am tired or lonely my voice becomes a honey song. It sounds like summer nights with fireflies, it reminds me of my mamaw's giggle, her soup beans and corn bread. It lilts and lulls like the bluegrass hills of Kentucky.

9. Returning to the Stories

What I understand now is if you lose your voice, you also lose stories of survival. My ancestors grew gardens on hillsides when there was no money; the women's hands harvested and canned. My great grandmother, the one whom I never met but who I look like, pulled her small derringer from her pocket when a man threatened her family outside of a movie theater. My mamaw, who had arthritis biting at her bones, crawled up the stairs to save her grandchild from a

house fire. The men who didn't die early from black lung or sometimes drank worked with their hands building and repairing or creating something new. My father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were stone masons, mechanics, factory men, and business owners. I know they fought to survive because I still feel it reverberating in me the way I don't back down from a challenge, the way I never give up even if I should.

10. Home

But lately, I am forgetting. The sounds are tucked under the years like all their bones under the earth. The music of fiddles I never learned to play, the noise of crickets in a humid summer night, the fizz of pop when glass Pepsi bottles are opened on the screened in porch, raindrops sliding down the kudzu vines or hitting a tin roof. There are days that I wish I hadn't gone so far away, days I want to crawl my body back into its old skin and say, forgive me. I'm home now.