◆ *Companion to*

Dust in the Bottomland:

a musical monodrama for present-day Appalachia

Nate May

and

Andrew Munn

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Printed in West Virginia.

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Dust in the Bottomland
Text and music by Nate May
Premiered 22 August 2013 in Huntington, West Virginia.
Performed by Andrew Munn, bass; Nate May, piano.
Duration: ~ 40 minutes.

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Photographs by Nate May.

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1.
Stephanie's flower shop.

In a room with forty-five plastic flower vases,
each one filled with daisies faded to coffee stains.
On the floor is a stripe of scuff from a shoe that is
waiting in a closet
under stacks of purple plastic mums.
In a room with buzzing lights and a humming furnace,
waiting for the phone to ring or the night to fall.
On the tip of my tongue are words filled with sounds that are
weaker when they're spoken,
weaker still when no one is around.

The ledger behind the
counter is filled with the
writing I used to
copy when I was a child.
On top of it sits a
medicine bottle that's
orange and plastic and
empty except for a
wad of cotton.[1]

(The last flower she sold me
was a dandelion from the yard.
I paid in snail shells and gave it to the girl
with the Elvis lunchbox.)[2]

In my mind her face is painted with streaks of coal dust.
With a coal-black hand she tries
to rub the streaks away,
but they grow darker each time she tries.

I got the call yesterday in Detroit. I had put off coming home for ten years, and my time was up. Stephanie is in the hospital, and this could be it for her.

Home is here in West Virginia, but I knew home wouldn't be home anymore. Home had coal underneath it, so home is gone now.[3] *Mom, Dad, and Stephanie have new houses, but they still aren't homes yet. Mom and Dad are fighting more. And Stephanie… well she acted like she was in control.*

Being an addict can teach you to act.

My first stop is here in the flower shop – I found a key taped inside the mailbox, where our parents used to leave it. It's a whole world she made for herself, and for that town. She built this world when she was in control – when she didn't have to act. But the move changed that. It wasn't just a move, it was an uprooting – memories were literally buried or blasted away. And she turned back to the thing that she could once count on to make her feel human – pills.

2.
St. Andrew's Hospital, Intensive Care Unit.

I know you wouldn't want flowers in your room.[4]
I know you'd want to escape them here in
your hospital room but there they are,
dozens of them.

[Reading from cards:]

Your old mutt ain't scratchin' at my door no more. I understand Louetta's keeping her for now. Russ went down to see her, said she licked his hand and her eyes were clear, but she still had one or two nasty welts on her ears on account of the cowflies.

Child, Jesus knows that you're a lost lamb. And I'm praying hard that you'll find your way back into his fold. But before you meet Him there on Canaan's shore, I hope you'll come back and stay a little while.

That smell you were smelling was a seized clutch bearing. We got her fixed up and changed the oil gratis.[5] Eddie said he'd take her off the lot, but when I smelled whisky on his breath, I said, *you'd better send someone else*.

Got two coats of primer on the fence. Don't be surprised if your neighbor's black cat has a few streaks of white.

Buttercup, you lay there long's you need to. Lord knows you sure do need the rest. But I'll sure be happy when you open up them pretty green eyes.

I know you wouldn't want flowers in your room.
I know you'd want to escape them here in
your hospital room but there they are,
dozens of them.

I try to imagine what it's like to be in such a profound sleep. This image keeps coming to mind – I don't know if it happened too many times or just once in a dream – it's a hot, muggy day, and I'm in the corner of a department store parking lot. Somewhere in some strip mall. And there's a walnut tree, with the walnuts scattered around, some of them busted open and looking like guacamole, and smelling kind of pungent. And there's some grass trying to grow in a crack in the pavement. And there's trash scattered around – cigarette butts, coke cans, candy wrappers. It feels like I have nothing better to do but just to be in this parking lot, thinking lethargic, half-baked thoughts and getting sunburned.

But it's also something else, that image. It's, this place. This is the place I escaped from, ten years ago. The place where I felt forgotten by the world.[6] *I would see Dan Rather on the TV set, and I would think about who he was looking at when he stared into the camera. Millions of Americans. But he wasn't looking at us in West Virginia. He was looking right through us.*

This is the place where Stephanie threw kerosene on a garbage fire. This is the same hospital where they took her, where they squeezed out ointment from a tube and wrote her a prescription for OxyContin.[7] *This is the place – some field not far from here – where her high school boyfriend showed her how to crush up the pills. You get it a little wet with spit, wrap it in a dollar bill, and then crunch it with your teeth. She caught on fast. This is the place – a few miles down this highway here – where Mom would take her, every morning before school, to get her methadone. She told me she once saw a man there with no teeth eating a bag of chips. The sound it made in his mouth, when he gummed them into a paste, really seemed to haunt her.*

Crows. There are crows too in that parking lot, all oily looking, bathing in a puddle. And an earthworm that's just crawled out of it, drying on the blacktop.

It's time to leave this hospital – time to get some rest. Tomorrow I'll go back to the mountain, to the place I used to call home.

3.
Driving at dusk.

In the car with Mom and Dad and the radio preacher
with our backs to silent thoughts in a sterile room.
On the mountain the tongues of flame touched their lips,
and they knew just what to say.[8]

We were playing hide-and-seek, down by the coal tipple. I was hiding on a tree branch – in plain view but just above her field of vision. I watched her looking everywhere for me, checking the same spots two, three, four times. But she never thought to look up.

4.
The old neighborhood.

Today on the hillside with my father, this is what I found:
Lion's mane hanging from the crook of a beech tree;
A sugar maple with the slightest tint of red;
An F-One-Hundred filled with buckshot holes;
A limping doe with fawns that bolted when we cracked a twig;[9]
A patch of mountain laurel greener than my sister's eyes;
And the sound of a wood thrush, and its echoes in the valley.
The shadows of tree branches falling on the forest floor;
A Christmas fern with fronds extended like a peacock tail;
The must of soggy leaves when the wind is low;
A rotting log soaked with rain from this morning's storm;
A cloud of gnats that seemed to panic when they heard my voice;
And the print of a bear paw in the mud beside the stream bed.
An iron mattress frame, rusted and twisted and sunk into the clay;
Four dirt-caked dolls in chairs beneath a willow tree;
Hunks of busted rubble where there should have been walnuts;
A sediment pond where there should have been a beaver dam;
A drainage pipe where there should have been a fox den;
An eighteen story dragline where there should have been a hunting stand;
Distorted angles where there should have been God's fingerprints;

And sky
where there should have been a mountain.

Fields of lespedeza where there should have been a forest;
Squeals of giant machinery where there should have been cicadas;
Boulders chipped by auger bits where there should have been sassafras;
Drainage the color of blood and piss where there should have been a stream;
Gray-black films of dust where there should have been moss;
Unrelenting sun where there should have been shade;

And sky
where there should have been a mountain.

> These things that never could have changed,
> these things not even dreams could rearrange,
> the everyday world[10] I passed through in haste
> has all been erased and replaced
> with something
> deranged.

We used to count the cars on the coal trains, and be so proud when we got all the way up to a hundred without giving up.

When I was in these woods last, I was a senior in high school. I couldn't wait to leave. College in Iowa meant I didn't have to come home on the weekends. And I didn't. Or in the summers, or at Christmas. I always found a reason.

Maybe it's because I always knew it would happen. Ever since I was seven and I dug up a coal rock from the backyard, and kept it secret, apart from my other rocks. And of course there were other signs – the operation was expanding – they bought up all the mountains around us. I didn't want to break their hearts with the news. And I didn't want to be around when it happened.

I wonder if it would have been different if I had been here. Not that I could have saved her, but… forget it. It's no use thinking that way.

It's early, but I can't sleep any longer. Before I see Stephanie today, I think I need to see Papaw and Uncle Silas, and Aunt Roberta, and the rest of the crew at Hodgkin Hill cemetery. Up there, they've seen everything. Nothing's new to them.

5.
Driving at dawn.

From the color of fungus on a fallen log
came the cloth that made my mamaw's quilt.
Now the same orange is billowing up
from a smokestack past the horizon at dawn.
I smell the sulfur and I know
I'm among the hills that swaddled me.

With the swaying of cattails in the drainage ditch
comes the knowledge that the wind still blows here.
A concrete building with a painted sign
has to fight to hide its gray from the sun.
I see through its windows and I know
I'm among the hills that swaddled me.

Under towering chestnuts that once ruled this place[11]
there was nothing like time as we know it now.
Then we learned how to count in our sleep
and we slept while efficiency took our world away.

Here, on this road,
there is a ghost,
there is a fading shadow.
When my vision blurs
my memories bend,
take on shape,
and fall into a domain
where each one of them comes
with a taste in my mouth
and I feel like it's here.
In my ears
there is a man
who gathers wood for burning.
When I try to sleep
I hear him walking through the wet snow
and I know that I am among
the hills that swaddled me,
I am still here.

Down in each of the hollers that my friends call home
there's a spirit of knowing that you dig your own grave.
So they suffer the curse of those who break this ground,
and each shovelful of dirt brings them further from their peace.
I see the calluses and I know
I'm among the hills that swaddled me.

When I think of the mist that settles on the waterways,
I see pictures in magazines trying to sell this place.
But now this place is surrounding me and I see
there are truths here that have been lost on the rest.
I see the hills and I know
I am in the place that molded me.

The fog on my window
tells me you're sleeping and
I know your eyelids
have pictures that I can't see.
The drug in your bloodstream
may not forgive you but
I understand you and
I am beside you now.

Not surprisingly, they have nothing to say. The dead just let everything come and go. Stephanie may join them soon – it's a different sleep than the one she's in now. I found the place where they would put her. She'd be up high enough that the dust from the mines couldn't reach her. It's a small plot, but with just enough room to plant some poppies around it.

Papaver somniferum – *Stephanie taught me this – it means "sleep-bringing poppy." Sleep is in such high demand that there are wars over the poppies that bring it. Sleep is so much easier than dealing with life – with problems that just breed more problems. I just want Stephanie to wake up. But I think I know what that feels like – waking up.*

Notes -- Andrew Munn

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[1] Take a day this autumn to find the nearest coal-fired power plant. Look for the train tracks and watch the miles-long train bearing unearthed coal to the boilers, watch the empty cars snaking back for another load. Who mined that coal, and what was in their heart as they operated the continuous miner a mile beneath the surface, or the long wall miner beneath the high wall? What is in your own as you use the electricity it generates?

We see it today, and West Virginians have seen it for decades:, mines closing, moving to the western coal fields where coal seams and profit margins are bigger. Some coal cars will follow the rails to active mines, others will be retired, perhaps scrapped, or sit empty, caked in coal dust, accumulating leaves.

[2] I had a red plastic lunchbox covered with characters from the movie *Hook* when I was in Kindergarten.

To much of America, West Virginians are “others.” Stories of deep dark hollers in Appalachia and its thick-accented people erect a wall between “Main Street America” and West Virginia – a wall over which one can look with a mix of pity, fear, and lack of understanding, or simply ignore.

Activists like me who have moved to the region have an alternative version of this other-making wall. In my effort to counter the denigration of West Virginians, I elevated the people with whom I worked onto a plane above my own: they were local residents, directly impacted by mountaintop removal, perhaps intimately acquainted with the ravages of prescription drug addiction. It took a good two years in the mountain state to internalize that people are people are people, all navigating their circumstances as best they know how. Their remarkable courage or insight was brought out by the challenges they faced, just as these traits have been brought out of people facing other struggles, be they in justice-seeking social movements or hardship in every day life.

West Virginians have a unique history and present, but it is folded into a common history and present moment shared by much of America. And, we all grew up under the same cultural hegemony that gave me a Hook lunch box and an unnamed girl in the 1980s an Elvis lunchbox.

[3] Home was in the path of a tornado, so home is gone now.
Home was flooded in the Mississippi flood of 1992, so home is gone now.
Home was close to the San Andreas Fault, so home is gone now.
Home was had coal underneath it, so home is gone now.

When I heard of Lindytown, West Virginia, I thought it was exceptional: an entire town of retired coal miners and military veterans bought out so that Massey Energy, and now Alpha, could expand a mountaintop removal coal mine around it. To the boy who grew up in relative affluence of State College, Pennsylvania, this was unthinkable. It was not part of my reality. Certainly not in America.

For the now dispersed residents of Lindytown, it was real, and it was not an exception to the rule. Each day wealthy interests, be they coal and gas companies or gentrifying urban developers, force families to relocate. In Lindytown and the many other erased communities of southern West Virginia, the process goes like this: they strip mine the mountain above, blast each day, and run the coal trucks down the narrow hollow road; already low market-value homes diminish in value whether from blasting damage or the loss of quality of life; it's no longer a nice place to live and most of the kids have moved away; coal company will give me more than market value for my house; alright, I'll take it – it is a way out. Now the company owns the empty town, and in the case of Lindytown, donates it to the fire department to train firemen in real burning buildings; the homes are gone, and it was a tax write-off.

In Lindytown, one elderly couple stayed. The woman had Alzheimer's, and her husband knew that moving would take away all she still knew. As Alzheimer's blurs and erases memory, mountaintop removal obliterates continuity. As her memories of the place went, so to did the place itself.

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[4] Is Stephanie sick of flowers, working around them day in and day out in the flower shop, or do they symbolize well-intentioned artificial sweetness in times of hardship? I think she swings between the pole of prim sweetness painting over life's challenges with familiar cultural signifiers and the pole of gritty dismissal of responsibility: it's all so fucked up that it's not worth dealing with, not worth painting over – give me a way out. Keep your comfort.

[5] Some clichés are true. Generosity is alive and well in West Virginia.

In early childhood, I traveled to Greece with my parents each summer. My parents are archeologists and had an excavation in the mountains north of Athens. It is in rural Greece, amidst land cultivated for agriculture or used for grazing goat herds. We, and other Americans, would routinely comment on the kindness and generosity of people in rural Greece. Sharing of food, life stories, unrequested gifts, showing genuine curiosity and concern, all for strangers.

These traits of functioning community exist in West Virginia. Yet, the words "hick" "backwards" "white trash" are more often heard on the lips of Americans talking about West Virginia, than "kind" "generous" or "humorous." Why is it that we celebrate the rural people of other lands, while denigrating those in our own? Some hear the stereotyping and proudly defy it or wear it as a badge, and others, such as the protagonist in Dust in the Bottomland, internalize it and it shapes the course of their lives.

There are substantive criticisms to be made of West Virginia, as there are of any place; but these criticisms and efforts to change the status quo ought to come from empathy, and with understanding that the circumstances that define present-day West Virginia have been created by those who wield the levers of wealth and power and see our communities, mountains, and people through the lens of quarterly earnings reports and political "reality."

It is a testament to the resiliency of human kindness that much of the individual agency people exercise in the midst of this is to help a neighbor, share food with a visitor, or give a free oil change.

[6] This is a feeling I sought out in moving to West Virginia, but this is a feeling many West Virginian youth escape as they leave the state to build careers or simply find reliable employment. According to Generation West Virginia, the population of 18 to 45 year olds decreased 6.5% between 2000 and 2008 in West Virginia while it grew 0.6% nationally. Just as people across the United States learn that West Virginia is a place not worth giving much thought to, young people here learn that West Virginia is a place to get out of – these mountains and small towns in narrow valleys are not "the world" - "the world" is the urban centers, where the cameras are, where the factories have gone.

It makes sense to feel like that in a national culture that looks down on your home place. In a world fixated on where it is going rather than where it is, the "real world" is in the urban or suburban areas, places in which the economic and political order have entirely displaced the biotic world and masked our relation to it. The places of consequence are the board room and office, not grandmother's house by the creek and her well-tended garden plot.

[7] I've spent a lot of time talking with people about their hopes for their communities and the challenges they face. Inevitably, the conversation turns to prescription drug addiction – a family member trying to get clean or one who can't be trusted anymore, the house to avoid, the neighbor dead, the mining injury that led to unemployment and addiction. It seems that pills were meant to be a safety net. They are prescribed when a person is at their most vulnerable. Vulnerable to pain and vulnerable to the firm grip of physical addiction.

Some hitchhikers I pick up have asked "do you like to party?"
I respond, "yeah, I enjoy a good party with friends."
"Want some pills?"
"No, I don't party like that."
I take them a couple miles down the road and drop them off.

For some it may be fun for awhile, started it for the high, not the pain.

[8] I do not know what life is for those who have lost themselves or a loved one to addiction or have lost their home places to industry. Those who inhabit a

body that is not theirs to control, or a town that is not what it once was. There are no words to compensate for such loss. It is unclear what actions will lead to a change in conditions. Will the continued decline of coal in West Virginia leave more addiction in its wake? What can a community do to heal, and indeed can a community heal, from the permanent alteration of its environment and the unnatural addictive powers of synthetic narcotics? There is a long and definite list of damaging ways to relate to these problems, but an honest assessment gives no definite answers on what to say and do.

[9] To understand the landscape of West Virginia, you need to discard notions that separate human communities and the environment. The population of southern West Virginia is spread throughout the valleys and hollows, in strings of homes on the creek and river bottoms, clustering in small towns. From the bottomland it appears that your community is surrounded by mountains. The view from above is that each mountain is surrounded by communities. There is no unpeopled wilderness, and save for the few larger towns, there is no area that feels as if it is entirely separate from the forest and mountains.

The meshing of human communities into the landscape is equally harmonious and acrimonious. Walking a ridge with a mining engineer to inspect a proposed surface mine in Fayette County, the engineer stops to explain how if they had been permitted to build larger valley fills they could simply “clip off the finger ridges” and then “peel the mountain away layer by layer” moving the rubble to the valley, but that without the valley fills they would only be able to “cut a bench in the mountainside” and mine little more than half the coal in the mountain. We continue walking and he bends down to gently grip a plant and fondly says “This is a great place to dig ginseng.”

I feel irreconcilable cognitive dissonance between appreciation of ginseng and engineering its habitat's eradication. Yet thousands of men and women who work to extract coal from these mountains hold this contradiction within them. The same finger that triggers the surface mine blast smoothes soil over seeds sown in the spring garden below. Decades of surface mining have permanently carved this contradiction into the landscape.

[10] Often when I am outside of West Virginia and speaking of mountaintop removal or other ills in West Virginia, I'm asked "Why do they let this happen?" A much more entertaining response than the political economy lesson I'm tempted to give is a story that Larry Gibson would impart to make the point. Larry Gibson was a man who refused to sell his piece of mountaintop, and when it was left an island above thousands of acres of flattened mountains, he turned it into a park for all the world to see. He spoke with fire and breathed courage into all those he met, and did it with sparkling love and humor.

A man goes to work for a pig farmer and after being there a day asks the farmer "My god, how can you stand this?" And the pig farmer says "stand what?" In the words of Larry Gibson, "you see, the pig farmer had been working in shit all his life so he didn't notice it. That's how my people are with coal."

We like to think that in this age people are freed of the conditions in which they are born, that somehow through rational thought we can see through the world that immediately surrounds us and create our future independently of the forces that shape us. This is an illusion of the privileged. Individual agency is exercised within the bounds of conditions that change with the totality of collective behavior. The protagonist of Dust in the Bottomland leaves West Virginia, propelled by the idea that the world that counted was somewhere else and by the lack of readily apparent economic opportunity, and Stephanie fell into addiction. Was it her choice? He will now wrestle with the decision to stay or go. What drop in the bucket of collective behavior does he want to be?

[11] Dozens of abandoned coal camps and mines dot in the New River Gorge. Old coke ovens and store houses overgrown by fifty years of forest appear as if from an early Roman settlement. Once booming towns, whose citizens dug coal to power the nation, are half boarded-up. The stop light's only use is at shift change.

Scarred mountains are marked by absence. Absence of the lush Appalachian forest blanketing steep slopes carved by the trickling eons. Permanent absence.

I'm struck by the impermanence of what we build and the permanence of what we destroy.

The Genesis of an Exodus: *Dust in the Bottomland* and People Like Me

1. *She swallowed the spider to catch the fly.*

There's a word found in the medical profession which can be used to explain the wickedness of the problems of Appalachia. These problems – poverty, addiction, environmental degradation, poor health, poor education – imagined together, form a family portrait that is the only image of Appalachia known to most Americans, a portrait photographed, filmed, illustrated, and joked about *ad nauseam*. The word is "iatrogenic," literally meaning "caused by the healer" and used to indicate symptoms whose origins lie in attempts to alleviate other symptoms.

2. *The Tree of Knowledge meets the chainsaw of progress.*

Standing just outside the limits of the garden of Eden and filled with resentment for our eviction, we vowed to build a new Garden: a place equally insulated from suffering, but of our own creation instead of God's. We would beat Him at His own game. We would become Creators and Destroyers. We would play by our own rules.

So we planted the seeds for what became known to sociologists as a "risk society" – a society that, through its own attempts at mastering its domain, transmutes the risks of nature (drought, blight, tempest, etc.) into risks of modernity (nuclear meltdown, environmental degradation, masses of refugees, etc.).

When industry settled in the Appalachian mountains, it was generally the kind that profited from the land, which was among the most verdant in the world at the time. Timber, mining, and agriculture were all undertaken by hardy individuals at first, and then replaced by corporations, becoming increasingly efficient and centralized. The Appalachians were then no longer their own bosses, but became, reluctantly, part of the machines that were expected to deliver Eden to the nation and, if Destiny was to manifest, the world.

3. *"Mountaineers are always free," being West Virginia's state motto.*

These industries alternatively, even simultaneously, took care of individuals while stripping them of their agency, dignity, and, eventually for many, means of survival. Endless solutions were put on the table: mining would solve economic problems, reclamation (when such a thing emerged) would solve environmental problems, and prescriptions would cure any ailments that arose. A culture of dependency overshadowed a proud mountaineer culture.

As the industries have waned, economic problems have multiplied, and solutions have grown more desperate. A new method of mining – one that involved greater destruction of land than ever seen before, and required fewer jobs to do it – was proposed and adopted as a solution in the early seventies. This was named by the industry, seemingly without any concept of the violent resonance of its own words, "mountaintop removal mining." Pain – a problem faced not only by miners, but by workers and non-workers everywhere – was also given a solution in 1996. The drug was called OxyContin – it was a pure form of the opiate oxycodone, protected from any abuse by an impenetrable time-release mechanism which also allowed it to work for a longer period of time than ever before. Naturally, a solution was quickly found for the inconvenience of a time-release mechanism to those looking for a powerful high. And a new problem arose out of this solution: a huge jump in prescription drug abuse, including overdose deaths, felt especially hard among the "regraded" hills of central Appalachia.

Whether this correlation between mining and prescription drug abuse, noted in no uncertain terms by a 2008 study by the Appalachian Regional Commission (*An Analysis of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Disparities & Access to Treatment Services in the Appalachian Region*), has in it an element of causation, is impossible to establish. But Kentuckian psychiatrist Artie Ann Bates sees them both as stemming from the same physical force:

> Entropy has to do with the quantity of disorder in a system which contains energy. As [a physicist] illustrated it, start with a piece of paper in hand, such as the Gettysburg Address, then set it on fire. One might get 100 BTUs of energy. One could not, however, start with 100 BTUs of energy and get the Gettysburg Address.
>
> The same would be true for the process of mining coal in the Appalachian Mountains, and with drug addiction. One could blow

> off the top 150 feet of a mountain, shove it into the holler and stream below, mine the coal, burn it for the BTUs of energy, say, for an air conditioner. But one could never start with an air conditioner, or a power plant and get an Appalachian Mountain. One could not start with a drug related death and get a living person.
>
> - ("White Opium, Black Coal, and the Appalachian Revolution" in *Appalachian Heritage*, Spring 2008)

4. *The dust in the bottomland.*

This is a decidedly bleak outlook. Much of the writing about Appalachia, both by insiders and outsiders, has shared this bleakness, often depicted in a picture similar to the following one, found in Harry Caudil's 1963 book, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands,* which ushered in a new national attention to the plight of Central Appalachia:

> Most saddening of all are the myriads of men, women and children who sit on the front porches of shacks and houses gazing with listless unconcern at the world. The creeks and yards are littered with tin cans, paper bags and cartons, nearly half of which bear the stenciling of the Commodity Credit Corporation. The cloak of idleness, defeat, dejection and surrender has fallen so heavily as to leave them scarcely more than half alive. Their communities are turning into graveyards peopled with the living dead and strewn with the impedimenta of a civilization which once needed them but does so no longer. (346)

Images of an exotic, destitute Other can be seen, with varying levels of nuance, in the history of photography in Appalachia, from Shelby Lee Adams to Stacy Kranitz. We also read it in the stories of Breece D'J Pancake, who breathed a rugged romanticism into the hopelessness of his West Virginian characters. The documentary *Oxyana*, released this year, is perhaps the most recent and most haunting manifestation of this image. Shot in Oceana, the town that, partially by coincidence, Andrew and I visited as a basis for the story of *Dust in the Bottomland,* the film is an unnarated series of interviews with prescription drug-addicted residents, all of whom feel trapped by their addiction but continue it, frequently in front of the camera, because they have seemingly, or explicitly, surrendered control of their lives or hope for a better future.

In most cases, these images are intended for a national audience. But Appalachians are no stranger to them. To some, they are accepted as the truth, and they continue the cycle of dejection. Others lash out against them as affronts to their dignity. In fact, because depiction of Appalachia has been so fraught with these images, every new depiction faces a gauntlet of criticism. If it contains these images, it is seen as degrading and profiting from a pornographic taste for ruin, but if it avoids them entirely, it's glossing over the real issues, and reads like tourist propaganda.

There are writers, filmmakers, and artists at work, however, who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty with this problem. They recognize that the strongest force that can counter the curse of hopelessness is a renewed sense of cultural dignity, but that the message of uplift will only be heard if it is spoken from a knowledge of the realities of the region. Insider voices are more likely to be trusted, and outsider voices are sometimes automatically mistrusted, as was the case for Hugh O'Connor, the Canadian filmmaker who was shot and killed in 1967 while filming in eastern Kentucky, by a man who saw it as a retribution for the years of one-sided portrayal of the region. O'Connor's work, which he saw as a solution to the region's problems, was seen instead as a problem – an iatrogenic one – to be solved with murder. Needless to say, the cycle continued.

Many of those doing nuanced work today have a combination insider-outsider perspective – they grew up in Appalachia, pursued education and opportunities elsewhere, and returned with a new skills and a compassion for their home. This includes the photographer Roger May (no known relation), the filmmaker Elaine McMillion, and the irreverent-but-humanistic writer Scott McClanahan.

5. *The good Samaritan meets the prodigal son…*

Returning to home to Appalachia is also the story of the narrator of *Dust in the Bottomland.* And it's my own. I was raised in Huntington, West Virginia. I left when I was eighteen with a sense that I had exhausted its opportunities. I saw it in terms of the dearth of musical training that it provided me compared with my peers at music school, many of whom had been groomed from a young age. It wasn't until I went abroad – I spent a year in South Africa – when I started to realize that, rather than having overcome the entropy of the my hometown, I was immeasurably formed by the varied forces of it. There, in South Africa, where I was collaborating with musicians and poets who were part of a movement to restore dignity to the formerly-colonized Khoisan people, I realized that I owed something to my

own home, and that it was a source of the rich material that would help me reach a genuine artistic expression.

I met Andrew in Ann Arbor in 2007 when we were both music students at the University of Michigan. Shortly thereafter, he moved to West Virginia to work as a community organizer. We stayed in touch, and on 15 January 2012, I received an email from him with this paragraph:

> I'm really interested in collaborating with a composer on pieces for bass voice based on texts that explore gender, modernity, love, identity, and alternately rages/simmering with hatred/disgust of society and sensitivity and love for people/life. I have no time line - are you interested?

I was interested, and immediately saw how our mutual interests could synergize for this project. I had also just heard Steve Mackie's "Lonely Motel," which turned me on to new possibilities in contemporary music-drama. As projects tend to go, the more I thought about it, the more ambitious it got. First it was a song cycle, then it was a monodrama. It became clear that it had to be of significant length, and we had to have money to pull it off. We would have to both be dedicated to it for an extended period of time.

6. *…who almost meets a watery end.*

I knew I could depend on Andrew because I had tried it once when my life was at stake. We were backpacking in the Cranberry Wilderness in Eastern West Virginia and we came to a stream with fast-moving water that was above my waist and extra-terrestrially cold. As I was crossing, I lost footing and began to be carried downstream, but Andrew had planted his large frame in the middle, leaning with a stick against the current. Like a hapless child, I let him reel me in to safety.

7. *His dog is named after Gandalf's horse.*

He has since proved equally steadfast in his work for this project. No matter what is rushing past us – tight deadlines, frustratingly difficult rhythms, daunting organizational tasks – he always approaches it from a state of stillness. As I have been working with him, I have also grown more and

more awed by his monolithic voice, and the attention to detail he puts into the music.

8. *I don't know why she swallowed the fly.*

The poet Denise Levertov, speaking on why she didn't mix her poetry with her activism, said, "you can't make a good poem out of 'ought to.'" *Dust in the Bottomland* does not have a didactic motive, and I would hope that even those who disagree with us on the solutions to the problems it portrays will still relate to its story. But presenting this story is itself a political act: we are taking Appalachians, so often treated as the sad clowns of America, and giving them not just a voice, but a voice from the classical tradition, one associated with times and places much more venerated than southern West Virginia in 2013. We are responding to the man who, speaking in *Oxyana* about the plight of their town, says, "Nobody's gonna care. This is West Virginia. They think we're just a bunch of inbred pieces of shit."

It would be hypocritical of me to think of this piece as a solution to the problems of Appalachia. Perhaps we'll see it follow the path of so many other solutions and become the source of more iatrogenic problems. But if one looks at the most problematic solutions in history, I think one will find that many are motivated by fear, greed, desperation, or other narrow-beamed states. As I write, having moved away from a decent-paying job in Michigan to seek unemployment in West Virginia, I can say that this piece, as dark as its materials may be, was created from a place of joy and love – which, as prescriptions go, have minimal side-effects. "Where there is joy," says the *Chandogya Upanishad,* "there is creation."

To the gentleman from Oceana, my response is this: This is West Virginia. We're just a bunch of Americans with hopes, fears, labradoodles, SOLO cups, Christmas lights, migraines, shotguns, opinions, personalities, theologies, dialects, and celebrity crushes. Our stories are personal. Our stories are regional. Our stories are cosmic.

Bios --

Andrew Munn is a West Virginia based community organizer and bass singer. For the past four years, Andrew has worked in communities dealing with the impacts of mountaintop removal coal mining to support and coordinate opposition to mountaintop removal and begin the long term work of building a new, health and sustainability oriented economy. He has worked with Coal River Mountain Watch, Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, and currently the Southern Appalachian Labor School. As a singer, Andrew trained at the University of Michigan where he studied with George Shirley and Stephen West. While at the University of Michigan, Andrew sang the bass role in Dominck Argento's opera, Postcard from Morocco. He was a student at the Aspen Summer Music Festival's Opera Studio in 2006. Andrew is continuing his studies with Dennis Bender at the University of Kentucky and is preparing song and operatic repertoire for performances, auditions, and competitions in 2013-2014.

Nate May is a composer, pianist, and music educator active in diverse realms of music. Originally from West Virginia, he graduated in 2011 from the Jazz and Contemplative Studies program at the University of Michigan, where he studied piano with Geri Allen and Ellen Rowe and composition with Paul Schoenfeld, Andrew Bishop, and Stephen Rush. In addition to being a dedicated student of jazz and classical music, he has studied Carnatic music in Mysore, India, and African music in Cape Town, South Africa, where he produced the album *Kalahari Waits* for indigenous poetry and improvised music trio Khoi Khonnexion. As a dance accompanist, he has been on staff at the University of Michigan and Interlochen Arts Camp, and has played for classes given by the Martha Graham Dance Company, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Hubbard Street Dance, Paul Taylor Dance Company, Lucinda Childs Dance, and Mark Morris Dance Group. His collaborations have included many works for dance (with Wanjiru Kamuyu, Inae Chung, Jessica Bonenfant, and Jamie Johnson), music for an original dramatic production by Jeff Daniels (*The Meaning of Almost Everything*), and music for film and poetry performance. His current projects include a commission by the Aurea Silva Trio and an evening-length dance work for Wanjiru Kamuyu.

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