

SLATE GRAFFITI

By

Alex Pickens

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Director of Thesis: Luke Whisnant

Major Department: English

ABSTRACT

Although sometimes the subject of scholarly and artistic publication, the complexity of vanishing cultures in Appalachia often defies exposition. The elusive identities of the inhabitants are articulated within this collection of poems which embody the worldview with themes of religion, labor, and nature (environment). The poems create a nexus of meaning, particularly when the theme of nature is tied to labor (mining and logging) and when the Christian faith plays a role in the lives of the residents. There is a mythical theme that resurfaces, with references to Theseus and Sisyphus, to reflect the antiquity of the mountain range itself and the way that many of the residents are lost in labor and time, byproducts of previous American epochs. In addition to more objective depictions, there is a personal voice that embodies the author's two decades spent in Appalachia, with particular focus on nature.

Slate Graffiti

A Thesis

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by

Alex Pickens

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Director of Thesis: Prof. Luke Whisnant, M.F.A.

Thesis Committee Members:

Prof. Amber Floras Thomas, M.F.A.

Prof. John Hoppenthaler, M.F.A.

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APPROVED BY:

Director of Thesis: _____
Luke Whisnant, MFA

Committee Member: _____
Amber Flora Thomas, MFA

Committee Member: _____
John Hoppenthaler, PhD

Chair of the Department of English: _____
Lida Cope, PhD

Interim Dean of the Graduate School: _____
Kathleen T. Cox, PhD

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Rail Town

manifestos in obscenities or
directions to the nearest heartbreak
on slate and river overpass

I sit and read the code of a town
settled by colonials who got lost
in mountain ravines

descendants of disbanded soldiers
who built a broken paradise
forgotten by the outside world

neverminded by neighbors
like the man fishing from the bridge
on the edge of Clifton Forge

the water is dead downriver
from the paper mill but the idea
of fish is enough for anglers

the new preacher arrives at
Iron Gate Baptist Church to tell us
that this, too, shall pass

coal trains rumbling through
in the afternoon leave kudzu
rippling like a dream

Lost Generation

When I was a child, I listened
to the prophecies of toothless
soothsayers at gas stations,
men whose vision was filled
with fading dreams, those fields
of promise where machines
are now rusting in the sunset;
the scalded mountains I jumped,
stump to stump, counting droughts
and fires in the rings, reading
nature's genealogy, my
Appalachian lineage;
neighbors who waved at me
with broken hands encased in
calluses from years holding
steel and powerline cables.
When I was no longer a child,
I traveled through boarded-up
towns like Hope Springs,
where the born again sing
in outlaw country bands,
to not be soon forgotten,
but I left that place and found
you, and we escaped together
into the night and each other's
eyes, but when we grow old,
rather than die in a home,
let's go back to the days
we rafted down mountain streams,
back when adults were deities,
drivers drifting off to sleep
behind the wheel as we lay
in the cargo bed, renaming
all of the constellations.

History's Obituaries

Rusted trains in railyards
idle in Knoxville, far
from the Roanoke valley
where sages sing of mines
and mills in Shenandoah
hills, pock-marked, heat-cracked,
complaining that the world
has passed them by as they
reminisce about the days
when the world passed them by
slower. Condemned by neglect
and demolished by budgets,
no one left to gentrify,
West Virginia watches
their children wave diplomas,
tickets to somewhere else,
leaving fishermen adrift
on fake lakes and women
wondering when they will
come home. Chestnut groves
reclaim Alleghany
as machines lie idle
in coal veins and the quiet
after the storm fills homes
when the glory of living
gives way to the peace
of forgetting, and all
history's obituaries
are written on the faces
of aging loggers and
dying miners that I
cannot read anymore.

Dinner Bell

the preacher leans
over the podium
about to go overboard

the guy in the hole
there's no hope for him
but there is hope here

women fan themselves
and nod and amen

*come unto me all ye
that are heavy-laden—*
that's what draws the men

potluck with smiles so broad
dentures almost fall out
grey heads watch children

through cataracts and await
that uncloudy day as
jokes follow the breadbasket

the only thing broken
at the dinner table today

He will wipe away every tear—
that's what draws the women

Logging Trails

often my footprints blow away
in red clay of dusty trucker tracks,
roads without names, without signs,
without direction, without end

black bears brush briar bushes back,
nibbling berries that drip from thorns;
deer flick ears, asleep in the shade,
watching black whips race across leaves

the susurrus of a breeze shakes
treetops, a lull, a no-man's-land
between consciousness and the sun
gathering in pools, ankle-deep

mailboxes and street signs emerge,
churches and driveways, numbering
the innumerable and naming
the nameless—yet we are all still lost

Wise County Coal Country

Nevermind what you've heard of me.
I take what cannot be returned,
break what cannot be burned, mind
like storms that churn with sayings made
meaningless by too much experience.

This is coal country and we have fought
wars on Blair Mountain, we faced bombs
dropped by our own President, and we
still stand, gripping steering wheels
like sailors leaning on rudders: we

navigate wrecked realms, secrets
buried beneath layers of leaves—
I am not your NPR special, nor
an elegy by a success story;
I am all that's left of this place.

Leave me behind, let me die, this
is all I have in life, these mountains,
the contours that bore me and my kind,
the wilderness God made, the night
that howls in the distance as I drive,

a Viking in a pickup truck among men
who moved mountains and smiled
crookedly at night skies from within
a hole, men who distrust the Golden Rule—
but 'til Judgement Day it will have to do.

Lake Johnson

Locusts and cicadas
chirr, the lake smooths
into a glassy abyss
star-kissed by eyes

of lovers listening
to each other's hearts
and the bullfrogs'
mantra to midnight,

oars left ashore, where
horizon storms flash:
gods muttering lost
prophecies in their sleep.

Tributaries

grindstones in thought rivers \ grist alluvium obnubilating
forgetful backwash placid \ beneath Tarzan-swinging uppercuts
to the sky that trembles when \ falling inspiration jackknives
the unknown with blood-dripping knuckles \ grisly barroom tangoes
to be the last king of the delta \ a cornered dog with Jim Beam
and Jack Daniels filling the sea for occipital lobes \ roll Jordan roll
into an Aspirin-induced fog \ hanging in a cypress morass and
memories ambushing at the crossroads \ that vibrate into the sea
of mistakes where fractured friends reflect \ some anamnesis
that conjures from the intersection \ of collective subconsciousness
like the ids on Easter Island \ watchheads awaiting the Final Conclusion
when civilization recalls the barroom brawl \ it never escaped

Constellations

Was Prometheus just a pyromaniac
who wanted to watch the world burn,
and mankind mistakenly thwarted him
by trapping his fire in lamps and urns?
These are the questions that bug Vern and
me when we've had too much sweet tea,
sitting on the couch on our roof, trying to
remember where we left the Big Dipper.
Was Theseus a crazed psychopath
in the right place at the right time,
conquering goddesses and monsters
before the rest of us could even try?
This is a fair question, I tell Vern, who
would like to get his hands on a goddess
or two, but what are the heroes for, who
are damned to fill all of our metaphors?
Is Sisyphus a Wall Street workaholic
who believes that he is in paradise,
while we exhaust ourselves every day
avoiding our labor from nine to five?
Vern chews on this and then supposes so,
though a shadow has passed over his face:
he stares through his toes at the sky until
a constellation appears in his eye.
What if Icarus was just a colossal insect
who got mesmerized by the noonday light,
and what if we jump from bridges because
we see stars in the water at night?

Piedmont Afternoon

bumblebees and linen-winged butterflies
on itching green fields beneath bluebird skies,
new-mown lawn in the glistening Aegean dream
at the end of the footpath, feet in the stream

dragonflies rock, sleepily hunting, sunbeams glide,
poplars and sycamores sigh as heat droplets slide
from waxy leaves and settle on ambling sages
checking mailboxes for post from forgotten ages

jobbers nod in the shade, backwoods almagests
picking flat tops, singing of moonshine grail-quests
prognosticating about harvesting fulvous fields,
hiding behind the Kroger from saber-tooth machines

as brushfire horizon builds to a silent inferno, distilled
into anaphia-inducing droughts, with tankard filled
and bullfrogs thrumming guttural mantras to fireflies,
we drink deeply of the South and close toilworn eyes

The Reel

On midnight shadows he floats with the loons,
pitching and casting his baited hook overboard,
a bobber twitching as catfish nibble his mind,
fiddle strung under his chin, a fishtailing grin
in the ripples, he warbles maniacally. The sky
drips moonshine into the pools in his eyes as
he casts, spinning, flying on the spool, twisting
as he loses grip and flutters away on currents,
jigging in the depths while I weigh anchor.
I smile as we laugh and reel down the river
and he winks until only a grin remains in the stars.

Slanted Autumn Sun

Afternoon near an empty house, the roof
caved in, I watch through the pines as
migrating swallows use these mountains
as bearings for a better place. A bear
ambles near Sinking Creek, the sun
wet on his mane, paws falling heavy
to leave deeper tracks for rivals, but
he'll be gone, along with his footprints,
after the rain. The smoke of scarlet oak
in a wood stove fills my head with blue
memories as I search for a sign in the stars,
but the stars are incomplete here, hidden
by the next mountain ridge. Somewhere
between dusk and a vision, Smoky Mountains
drift, where deer dive down rainy ravines,
and I sit up a while and watch the forest
fill the houses we built. Like swallows,
we follow these mountains and creeks,
leaving behind fireplace stones, antlers,
and bones down in the valley where
my neighbor once lived, his driveway
the old highway where moonshiners raised
hell in almost heaven. But it's quiet now.

The Sacrifice

The cormorant glides,
oil slick shadow
on the flawless lake,

sending glass ripples
through arrowheads
that tremble, marshland

hoplites rattling spears
to defend shores
from submerged hunters:

the leviathan
angling downward,
a rippling black flag.

Red-wing scouts cry out,
the wraith breaches,
crescent fish speared,

like Moses' staff raised—
animals gaze
with wonderstruck eyes

on the sacrifice
giving them life
in the wilderness.

The Remnants of Camille

She came up the Mississippi, they say.
The mountains should have wrecked her
but she wasn't done destroying the world
when she got here, looking for her creator.

High-water marks on the mountain's ankles
disappeared as an Oldsmobile sank in the undertow;
rage poured from ravines and swept souls
to freedom—freedom from coal, from black gold

that had us hammering our way into the underworld,
ears ringing, backs broke, rasping with raven wings
in our chests: flapping, floundering, surfacing
now in the rainy abyss, the leviathan's hiss,

death slithering through twisted hemlocks,
crushing villages that we wedged in ravines.
No one can remember why we came here—
to be masters of our fate, or to be forgot?

She came back to settle a score, they tell us today,
but we were just trying to make a living then die
when her last gasps were wringing out the sky

Backstage Alleghany

Stratus curtains fall on mountain ridges I walk,
meandering with the streams in the ravines,
cool droplets streaking the smutch on the shale
as I wait for the counterweight to descend, gales
softening here to a gentle breath that smells
of dead leaves and tangled root tendrils, where
carbuncled toads bask, blinking in moss luxury.
I, a gnomon in a timeless place, pause to let newts
find their seats, then continue exploring backstage
along abatures that double back, past luciferous
aphids in the mist: stormy seas from distant shores
settle here, filling dripping hills where I linger
between acts, watching woodpeckers and owls
in the rafters dream of termites and mice.
The drizzle drains my senses 'til voices in stone
hollows whisper, curtains part, light shines
from dripping sunbeams, and I resume my role.

Theseus

Lost in a black labyrinth,
the hard-hatted folk hero tries
to get free by digging deeper,
clawing at the walls that riddle
Appalachia with a lignite
latticework of tunnels. Men
are sacrificed to the bull market
as firedamp ignites and friends
vanish in cave-ins, but they
keep digging, scratching to earn
a living, prying the world apart
until the grid of lifelines
switches to nuclear plants
and the black halls are quiet,
leaving miners with no more
monsters to fight except those
inside: he claws at the walls
to remove deposits as he chokes
in hospitals and nursing homes,
fighting until he at last succumbs
to the black lung and returns
to the mountains he came from.

The Rapture

When I go, I want to go
like that trout a hawk
carried over the treetops,
still swimming and fighting
and flying and gaping
at the world it escaped.

Flurries

wind
scatters

cloud-
shaken
feathers

heaven-
blown

kisses
waltzing

wayward
love

angel's
greeting
falling

landing
on cheeks

melting
when it
touches

mortals

Still in the Mountains

If you stand still enough,
the birds will fly close to you

standing by a stump, pausing
with an axe between the stars,

antitwilight pink on the peaks
until night comes and you sleep

with Orion on the mountaintops
and watch nighthawks migrate

south, the boomerang birds
that come back every spring.

If you stand still enough,
the birds will fly close to you

and bears will walk past you
and treetops full of squirrels

will sway in the midnight moon,
fish will glitter in the bend

and the otter will bark at you
along the creek where you

sit smiling because he
thinks he was there first.

If you stand still enough,
the birds will fly close to you

and you will feel weightless
and you will carry that feeling

with you, wherever you go,
because you will be still

in the mountains, the faceless
beauty of nature, the places

you can return to any time
you stand still enough.

God's Afterthoughts

The sunset is painted
with Sahara sand,
a civilization
blown halfway round the World,

dust of pharaohs, temples
and tombs of leviathans

now a million motes
in the stratosphere,
fading as ravens ride
dusky purple shadows

through black streetlamps with no
bulbs, candle snuffers

above me, catching
a shooting star, a
wanderer, lost in all
God's afterthoughts.

The Last Dark Zone

man-made constellations fill Richmond, clocks
and planes and neon Milky Ways that make men
drunk on bottled sunshine, staggering like shadows
lost in the light, searching for a dark place to dream

push past the dusk, swim beyond Blue Ridge breakers,
find forgotten backroads, then follow the whippoorwill's
warble into a mountain nocturne, where only angels' eyes
glitter from Heaven as men quest into western Virginia,

the dark zones north of Eagle Rock, beyond Warm Springs,
where foxes ghost the slopes and roads end in moonlit ravines,
the last refuge of sleep, and beneath layers of shadows
we will hang our hammocks in the mountain laurels

The Dogfight

Work is just a way to break
up the monotony, use the body
and the time God gave to *teach*
us to number our days, until times
change and we search for new ways
to mark the earth and crack worlds
apart, lay pipelines from highlands
to Blue Ridge, drive with linemen
into the night in search of broken
poles, into Appalachia, the place
where only circles are unbroken,
where God cursed man with labor
and man cursed Him right back,
where contraband can be found
in old hollow trees and homeless
can be found down on the corner
screaming, "Life is a dog fight!"

Waffle House

In a Waffle House tonight, I smile at jokes
the cook is cracking with the eggs for dinner,

Elvis Presley crooning “Blue Christmas”
from a juke box with a tiny Santa hat

until comebacks sizzle from good-natured
waitresses who are starting to dance.

The city sleeps in starlight, cosmic pain
and chaos softened by time and distance

while an Amtrak rumbles by, the last
passengers going home, like a lullaby

as my wife tenderly touches my hand
and smiles, happy to be where I am.

We say grace and remember He came to be
with the broken, the hurt who repent—

in a Waffle House on highway fifty-four,
where Christmas Eve was meant to be spent.