

Words in Appalachia

by Frank D. Moore

After Mother erased the day's words
 from the blackboard—easy, difficult;
clean, dirty; kind, cruel; courage, fear—
 she and I left the one-room school
 with its rows of seats for eight grades.
 At the Mainous house we crossed
 the swinging-bridge over the creek,
 our bodies tilting toward the water,
 Mother reminding me not to run.
 The late afternoon sun, glinting
 off a tin roof, tripped across
 the water like skipping stones, leaving
 a watery swirl: amber, copper gold.
 We had started on the path home
 when a voice thrashed through leaves:
 “Anne, if I had a twenty-two
 I'd blow your goddamned head off
 and leave it on a fence post.” Grace,
 Grace Warren and her son Rudolph.
 “Who the fucking hell gave you the right
 to whoop my boy? How would you like it if I
 beat the shit out of Franklin the next time he
 comes to our house?” That day,
 Rudolph reached around in front of him
 and grabbed Maudie Creech's
 small breasts, so my mother,
 sending him out first to cut a switch,
 lashed at his long legs while Rudolph laughed.
 Grace, wren of a woman
 with a crow's voice,
 still unseen, unleashed a volley
 of words I'd never heard before,
 or if I had, never so bewitchingly strung
 together with anger, with danger.
 I loved Grace. She gave me treats,
 like pinto bean sandwiches, forbidden
 at home. I loved Rudolph, too,
 who had taught me desire in his bed
 and how to steal change
 from Mrs. Caudill's cedar chest.
 I had never seen my mother
 so silent, so still
 so I moved closer to her,
 my arm touching her arm,
 while Grace's words exploded

in the colors of water,
 in the scrubby hills behind us,
 in the mouth of a miner's abandoned
 shack, once a storehouse for dynamite.
 Promising to "wipe the floor
 with your fat ass until it is only
 a memory, if it ever happens again,"
 Grace melted away into silence,
 leaving ripples of water, the rustling
 of dusty late summer oak leaves,
 us, at first, unable to pick up our feet.

We, who usually went separately,
 walked close together all the way home,
 Grace's words hissing at us from the creek.
 As we walked up the front path,
 hot-pink flowers leaning toward us,
 Mother finally found her voice:
Don't let me ever
hear you
say any
of those words!
 We could not know that Grace's words
 would rise up from the creek
 when least expected:
 hoeing the garden in the spring,
 before church on Sundays,
 when we lay down at night to sleep.