

Butterfly, Kentucky

by Karl Zuelke

When Cherise Baker was a wisp of a girl, she had trekked on her own into the hills, across the river and across the tracks, up the deep greenness of the holler and over and down three ridges, and on the way back home had stopped under an overhang to wait out some rain and found art works on the wall back in a cleft. If any person knew of them they had kept it quiet, but she doubted such silence was likely. She staked a claim on them that rested inviolable within her own steadfast secrecy. They were old. The black and pale greenish growths that took an uninterrupted century to establish had grown in places across the chisel marks. It had taken luck, and some sunlight breaking just right through the clouds, and a distracted, daydreaming eye to see them. Whorls, waves and spirals, and stiff-fingered hands, some crosses and some holes drilled, and what might have been a butterfly, arrayed like fancy constellations across the rock.

It was a half-day journey to get there and back on foot, and began feeling risky as Cherise grew, what with stories of pot growers setting trip wires to old guns aimed down the gullies that led to random fields of their crops, and her own womanly looks that she felt the power of by the way men had begun to act and that she would just as soon have done without. Get caught by a strange man alone in a valley under the rhododendrons and all you had to depend on for safety was the quickness of your feet if there was a way out sideways, or else his own sense of right and goodness, which, when it came to matters of sexuality and her aloneness with men, didn't amount to much as far as Cherise could tell. And she would show the engravings in the cleft to no one else. So she visited rarely and took sustenance from a knowledge that she kept arrayed in that other dark cleft of her private heart.

Cherise left home for the university at the northern tip of the state, spent the summers away up there, working at restaurants and fitting in extra classes, hearing all the stories from home but staying away except for winter holidays, where she holed up reading books in her bedroom and came out to wisecrack at the ignorant TV shows her mother watched. Christmas and Thanksgiving visits stirred up swirls of homesick, but Cherise had determined to make her own way without the tug of the hills dragging her backwards. When she moved home for a while five years later, to get her bearings, she found her two younger brothers clad in Realtree camouflage tearing up and down the valley on a pair of ATVs, her mother at work in a diner serving men who worked mining equipment, and the ridges across the river flattened.

“Look here, Mama,” Cherise said, pointing out pale, naked landforms on the

computer screen that looked from outer space like fingerless gray hands dropped on a green carpet. Town names flickered over Busy, Combs, Butterfly in the hairpin bend of the river, and over the city in Hazard. The tales Cherise had heard at school, the papers written and articles read, of outrage and amazement and grief, of double-crossing deals done in secret, one after another, of hidden tree-huggers' cars found out and run down by D11 Caterpillars, of bullets through activists' windows, had found but tremulous voice in Butterfly.

"Ain't much left."

"How they get these pictures so fine?"

"They have satellite cameras do it from space."

"From space?"

"They put 'em on rockets and send 'em up."

"I thought it was only the CIA could photograph in such detail from space. I prefer to not look at it, space pictures or otherwise."

"It's real, though, Mama."

"Not if I ain't a-looking at it."

Cherise directed her eyes' gaze upward from her own driveway and determined the straight edge of a coal field through the trees left along the top of the valley as a screen. She crossed the river, crossed the tracks and scrambled up the ridge and up the treacherous, loose edge of the spoil zone, and finally up top found gray wastes flat as a bowling alley laid out to the horizon. The deep holler across the river and the three steep ridges to climb and the cleft with the art works were long gone, so that Cherise stood at the verge knowing her mother had been right, but it was too late. Time stopped at the limit of the spoil and space on this earthly plane stopped, and in its place yawned an implacable jurisdiction of void emptiness and gray abandonment that made the feet in her boots turn numb. There was no turning back, so that her two choices were die on the spot and become rubble or to look the bastard mayor of this obdurate realm in his face and admit him. No sideways escape offered.

She gazed one last time upon the ruination, cursed coal and made her final appeal to God in apology for that curse, then turned away. The contiguous pull of Cherise's familiar home hills, that for five years she had resisted with all her intellectual strength, stood out now by the wounds it bore. In its midst gaped an insensible hole, like the delicate presence of nerve-lively skin on your face that you only notice after a dentist's shot of Novocaine spreads to it and numbs it. She drove into town and sat in a chair at Jack's barber shop, the barber who had cut all the men's hair in her family as long as she knew. Jack greeted her as befitted a friend's daughter, with some surprise and a decent affection she knew to be genuine, and the men waiting their turn were friendly and asked after her father and her two brothers, and her uncle Caleb and his three boys, and her uncle Ethan, whose wife had borne him five girls but no sons, and her mother's brother, Daniel, and his boy, Cody. She answered with politeness and let the rest of the talk drawl around her without adding to it. She paged through a magazine without much interest in its contents. When her turn came, she had to remind Jack of it, then she climbed into the red vinyl chair.

"Short as you can stand to make it," she told him.

"How short are you talking?"

"Gone, short."

"Gone as in 'all gone' gone?"

"I want it gone," she said, crying a little and hiding it, looking down, waves of soft brown hair across her palms.

"I need to talk to your mother, Cherise. You're upset about something, and you can't just walk into a men's barber shop and ask to cut your hair all off."

"If you won't do it now, then I'll do it with a butcher knife myself."

"It just ain't regular," Jack said, looking to the other men in the shop for some aid.

"Hand me them shears," she said, reaching, but Jack got there first, holding the shears back.

The other men, witnessing a scene about to unfold in the barber shop, offered opinions.

"Can't you cut the girl's hair for her, Jack, if that what she's asking?"

"She's a paying customer."

"Back home from college, a woman now. It's her choice."

"I can't do it," Jack said, dropping his shears in an apron pocket and reaching for the broom. "I ain't a-cutting that pretty hair offen your head. I'm sorry."

Shears, however, were available in the dollar store, and the cashier had no opinion as to what use they might be put.

"What the hell did you do to your hair?" Tanner, her brother, said. "Ma, will you look at this!"

"Honey, what did you go and do that for?"

"Couldn't tolerate the weight of it," Cherise said.

Her father came home, smelling as always of grease and diesel oil. He shook his head sadly, said, "It's your head."

And after that, the momentary attempts Cherise made at escape into the hills up the other side of her valley gave way to orange flags, burning oak and poplar piled into ragged heaps by the D9s, and AMFO explosions that tilted chimneys in the valley floor along the river and showered rocky debris that flew a half mile to punch fleeting rings onto the water's surface, and so the sovereignty of naught squeezed the bight of the river valley from both sides, and nervous squirrels in the narrow twisting remnant of trees scratched open sores in their fur and the fishes in the river attempted escape by jumping onto the banks and toadshade trilliums wilted even as it rained.

Cherise spent days walking up the valley road and back down, all the way to Typo and back again through Butterfly and Krypton to Busy and Yerkes, eating Doritos chips for lunch and breakfast, wiping the yellow salt onto the back of her pants and throwing the bags into the ditch, and drinking sticky warm Coca-Colas and throwing the plastic bottles into the ditch, lined already with litter and trash, and she took up inhaling the rich, aromatic tobacco smoke of Marlboros and flicked the lit butts into the ditch too.

"What's happening to you, girl?" her mother asked one morning, pulling a t-shirt over her head as she dressed for work at the diner. "I can't hardly recognize you no more. Never been a brighter and prettier girl, and now is this what going off to college done brought you to?"

"Mama. I have never been happier."

Her mother's black t-shirt read "Power. Progress. Coal." on the back, and on the front the outline of an RH400 excavator and the caption: "Got light? Thank a miner."

"Reverend Richardson's been asking after you."

"What have I done?"

"Your appearance is a tale. You're gaining weight and losing your figure, your hair looks like you cut it with a Bush Hog, your face is all broke out. My darlin', your clothes ain't clean and you're not bathing regular."

Cherise said nothing.

“Don’t set there and burn with shame, Honey. Talk to the Reverend.”

Reverend Richardson, it appeared at first, aimed to discover for himself whether anything untoward and immoral was afoot with this burgeoning young woman, commonplace as that was in these mountains, and had always been. Satisfied after a tactful probing, he let this particular line of questioning subside. He said then that the problem of her changed appearance and unusual behavior had taken on a deeper mystery for him and for the whole community.

“The Lord God works in mysterious ways,” he told Cherise, who nodded and agreed that the Lord God was indeed a mysterious entity.

“His forgiveness is manifest all ’round,” he explained, and Cherise could only agree that His forgiveness was boundless and permeated the very air that surrounded them.

“He expects you to keep the Sabbath day holy,” Reverend Richardson said. Cherise offered her promise of a return to church service next Sunday. An honest smile crossed the narrow bones of the Reverend’s face as he rose and walked her to the door. Cherise’s heart lifted a moment from the swoon it had endured this long summer, but it broke at the same time against the good man’s earnestness and the work-a-day wisdom that brought him honor in the eyes of his flock.

“Poverty reigns in this world,” the Reverend declared in his sermon that Sunday, “yet the bosom of these here mountains sustained us and our forefathers for many a year. This is because we had been a God-fearing people.”

Nodding and a soft “amen” or two came from the congregation. A kindly man, normally soft-spoken and familiar, the Reverend Richardson was not usually given to accusatory fire on Sundays, though some of his community craved such performances and would attend with enthusiasm the traveling old-time tent services that came by now and then. But his claim that the people had been righteous once implied that they were no longer, and an eyebrow or two raised, and the congregation’s attention sharpened.

“But do you know that if you ain’t saved you ain’t a-going to heaven?” he went on. “This knowledge can help guide us, can’t it? You know that the Holy Spirit, he guides me in the way I ought to go. How many of us in our Christian lives have been maybe a little bit crossways or turned around? But you know what? This Bible right here is what I heard preached when I got saved. When I feel a bit crossways, it guides me. This is the right thing, the right way, and there ain’t no variableness in it. I had this here Bible preached to me, and it put the conviction upon me, and through that the Holy Spirit spoke to me and showed me that I was lost.

“Now one thing taught to me from this here Bible, is that worldly wealth equates to sin. That’s right. Jesus tells us in Matthew, Chapter nineteen, verse twenty-four, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.’ Can you imagine pressing a dog through the eye of a needle? No you cannot. Can you imagine pushing the shiny new red and silver and glossy black sport utility vehicles, that drive daily up and down our roads, through the eye of a needle? You cannot. And furthermore, with wealth comes retribution, at the same moment, at the same time, so that the riches of the world we enjoy interrupt the progress towards our salvation even as we enjoy them. The Lord tells us so right here in the Old Testament, in the Book of Amos. In Chapter three, verses ten and eleven, he tells to the people who have stored up in their castles what has been pillaged and robbed that ‘an enemy shall surround the land, and strip you of your strength.’ Many of these covetous and sinful men are individually named in God’s Book of Amos. God says in Chapter two, verse two of one of these men that, ‘Moab shall meet death

amid uproar and shouts and trumpet blasts.’ Even now we hear daily in our once calm valley the blare of the warning siren, the loud call of ‘fire in the hole,’ the uproarious thunder of great explosions. And should you not ask yourself: Is this not a forewarning of the retribution of God for the sin of avarice? Or is it even the retribution itself, visited upon us even as we enjoy that there wealth? Is the loud warning of the siren not the trumpet blast that God speaks of? Is not the call of ‘fire in the hole’ the shout? What of them blasts you hear, that rain shattered bits of rock down upon your homes; are these not the forerunners of the uproar God tells us of? And I will say to you, I believe that yes they are the fire, the uproarious, explosive fire—and the sulfurous brimstone that waits in hell if you are not saved. Is this not that same sulfur that turns your cricks to unnatural yellow and unnatural orange, and is it not put there by God as a warning of what is to come if you have not invited the Lord into your heart and given praise for his salvation? Lest ye repent, ye will not be saved.”

It was a good sermon, and Cherise’s father remarked after the service that it was uncommon stylish preaching for the Reverend. He came near to speaking in tongues! But that the ammonium nitrate and fuel oil explosions set off by the International Coal Group, Incorporated had been ordained as God’s retribution seemed doubtful to Cherise, and she did not go back.

In her travels down and up and down the roads that week, Cherise continued all the way one morning into Hazard and sat at a booth in the diner where her mother worked, arriving shortly before the lunch hour.

“Let me get you some coffee.”

“Coke and a hot dog, Mama.”

A group came into the diner, a young man in his twenties, and three young women of similar age, strangers from their dress and their talk, of a type she was familiar with from her days at college, the girls with clear, pretty faces. Their discussion turned to the aggressions of coal mining, which marked them without a doubt as strangers. Across the river from the diner, a mile-long train rolled on, every car laden with coal. It passed beneath the billboard advertising the Black Gold festival in Hazard scheduled for the fall.

This group spoke of the sacredness of the hills, who had never lived in the hills.

“Eastern Kentucky is a symbol to the whole country of ignorance, poverty, disease, and servitude,” the young man said to his listeners. “And all the politicians can do is find new ways to kowtow lower to coal companies and kiss their greedy feet.”

And while Cherise found agreement with him in substance, some of his argument left her staring at her Coke. On another day she might have spoken up and helped correct him. A group of truck drivers, with the tell-tale black dust darkening the creases at their neck and inside their elbows, heard as well and began to talk.

“My grandfather and father were in the coal business,” one said out loud. Then turning to the strangers, he said, “They turned your lights on and heated your homes.”

“What’s the cost?” the young activist responded. “The health and culture of the people. The ecology of the hills. The oldest mountains on earth turned upside down. People only tolerate abuse on this scale because their sense of place was brutalized out of them a long time ago.”

“How about I brutalize my foot up your backside?” said one of the miners.

One of the women said, lip curled up, “They teach you that in coal mining school?”

“I quit high school at seventeen and went to work to support my family because my father couldn’t breathe no more. You might think twice before you insult my education again.”

“Did he smoke?” the young man with the girls asked.

“You and me gonna step outside,” the miner said, rising.

The young man stayed in his booth but voices raised, and others in the diner joined.

“Tone it down.”

“He means to provoke you.”

The police arrived and settled the incident, and when one officer asked Cherise’s mother to explain, she told him, “I believe they found the trouble they was looking for.” The four were driven away in the back of two patrol cars.

Cherise watched from her booth, and when the diner had cleared out, she continued drinking her Coke, with a layer of water on top and turning warm. Her mother sat across from her and Cherise lit up, blowing a stream of smoke sideways.

“It’s all strife, isn’t it?” she said.

“I suppose it is. I’ve never known anything different. They fought the same fight over timber here once before, and of course there’s always been coal to fight over. Don’t know if it’s ever been this ugly though.”

“This is the last fight, I believe.”

“There’ll be something else.”

“I have to leave this struggle to you and Tanner and Jeff.”

“Ain’t much fight in them two.”

They both laughed.

“Well, Mama, I’m leaving it to you then.”

Cherise drew on her cigarette and passed it to her mother. Grace took the cigarette from her daughter’s slender fingers, raised it to her lips, and felt the drug of it rush her veins. There was no heart in Grace for a real fight. Raising a family in Perry County determined which side of the struggle over land and coal she would adopt.

“You need to go find your own way. No more walking aimless up and down the road?”

Cherise stubbed out the cigarette and rose, and Grace watched her cross the room past the brown Formica tables and black metal chairs, the dark paneling and the neon beer signs, and push out through the door. Grace felt again the pang that rose every time she looked at her daughter’s hair, ragged and uneven, a declaration to the world of some kind of devastation that was hard to fathom in such a girl. Cherise’s childhood had been one of sprightly intelligence and pure spunk, straight A’s, sass and backtalk, all leavened with down-deep humor and kindness, so that the more she sassed, the more her teachers and her classmates appreciated her.

Grace mopped the kitchen floor and changed the grease in the fryers. Since she had offered to help out Diane who needed to attend a function at her son’s school—who was in trouble again, no doubt—she stayed through dinner, serving burgers, chicken and beer to tired mine equipment operators, truck and bulldozer drivers, and finally dragged home after nine o’clock. Grace took a grateful shower and settled in to watch TV with her husband. His nails seemed permanently blackened, but she took his rough hands in hers and rubbed them.

Cherise didn’t come home that night. The door to her little bedroom was open in the morning and the bed wasn’t slept in, which caused Grace worry through the early morning preparations at home and the drive into town. She woke the boys, who didn’t know what had become of their sister. On the way into the diner, her son Jeff texted that Cherise had arrived home shortly after Grace had left and was already asleep, which was a kindness.

Grace returned to the house that afternoon to find Cherise just rising.

“Did you stay out all night someplace? Look up an old friend or something?” For a woman of twenty-three to stay out all night now and then was nothing, except that Cherise’s behavior as of late didn’t lend itself to comforting explanations.

“Yeah, Mama, found some old friends.”

“Well, that’s real nice.”

Cherise stayed out late again that night, and the night after, settling finally into a pattern of sleeping all day and disappearing up the road after supper and staying out till morning, which went on for two full weeks. No inquiries produced the names of her friends, just a guilty evasiveness and not much talk.

Grace set the boys on her trail one night. “Don’t let her catch you and don’t follow her far. I just want to know where she’s heading. That girl worries me.”

Next night, Tanner reported. “She walks half a mile up the road, turns into the woods across the road at that old log cabin that’s falling in, and she crosses the river on that old cable bridge nobody ever goes near. Then she goes across the tracks and heads straight up the ridge like a goat, and that’s as far as we saw.”

It took Grace two nights to process this news. Sure enough, the girl’s boots had mud caked in the lugs of the soles. The fear of devilry and witchcraft became a concern, and dreadful as it was, such a thing might explain the girl’s odd behavior these past months. Grace decided, though, that rather than call in the Reverend Richardson immediately, which would cause no end of talk and supposition, she would find out for herself first. After supper that night, about a half hour after Cherise left the house, Grace followed with a flashlight.

A new trail led behind the old cabin, where the original old Staffords had built their homestead two hundred years before, when there weren’t any roads, and folks didn’t particularly care if there was any coal at all in these hills. She knew from stories passed down that they had farmed the river bottoms with mules and prayed that the river wouldn’t flood their fields once the crops had been planted. It had to have been a hard life, but it was an honest life, and she had never heard but that people nourished a fierce pride in their insignificant, honest lives that they would not have traded for all the luxuries under heaven.

The bridge was four cables strung across in a square arrangement, with wooden ties made of black locust across the bottom two, a wood which would wait a century before it gave up and decayed. Some were missing, but the ones left were strong and the bridge was more useable than Grace expected. It swung low to the water, which was a comfort.

Grace found the trail Cherise had worn, and as Tanner reported, it headed straight up the ridge. The problem was that it led directly to the new active coal field ICG had been blasting on all summer. The roar of loaders and trucks wafted into the valley all day long, along with the constant belching and groaning of the drag lines that scraped up the mountaintop rubble and deposited the whole blessed thing one bucket at a time into the valley alongside. Grace approached through the trees and faced the flat land that had newly appeared, and she was shocked into dumbfoundedness at the scope of it. She saw level, bare, blasted rock-land clear to the horizon in a region where men had once fought over two flat acres because they could plant some corn and some beans and thus make for themselves a life. She turned away and followed Cherise’s path, which followed the river upstream to the right, where the hillside changed to a sheer cliff, and then it turned left again up a valley.

It was getting dark, but even with a strong flashlight it didn’t seem safe scrambling around in the woods at night, on a trail she didn’t trust, where it didn’t take the major drop off over the river to provide for a dangerous fall. There were gullies and cliffs

aplenty of a smaller scale that were just as treacherous. She spied a light, though, under an overhang, where there was no call for a light, and headed for it.

Cherise was engrossed in work of a mysterious nature with a hammer and a screwdriver, with a headlamp on. Grace couldn't see her face but was reminded of evenings of calm concentration back when Cherise was in fourth or fifth grade, working on her state report projects for geography, her innocent looks flickering in calm concentration. She researched industry and agriculture and cities for these reports, cutting pictures from magazines and maps and gluing them onto colored construction paper which she bound with colored ribbons. Cherise had done South Dakota one term when they studied the West, and Delaware the next for the East, and New York for the North, and Iowa for the middle section, and when it came time to do the South, Cherise had been the student honored with Kentucky as the subject of her project. She had done it on blue paper and she had glued a close-up portrait of Man o' War on the cover, his sorrel coat shining like copper. The students had presented their reports orally to the class, with the parents invited, and Grace had almost fainted with pride to see this confident, beautiful young daughter of hers engage the audience with a masterful talk on the history, and culture, and industry of the state she was so pleased to call home.

"What are you doing, Cherise? Can I help?"

She stopped. "I'd love for you to help, Mama."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm making art, as you might call it."

"Making art? Honey, this here overhang and the whole damn hill is gonna be gone in less than a month."

"I know that," Cherise said. She had been standing on a portable chair, and she got down and switched off the light on her forehead.

"But I don't understand why."

"I'm heading North or West or South, or off to Europe or Japan, or the North Pole, or wherever chance takes me. I'm saying goodbye to these mountains while there's still mountains to say goodbye to, Mama. And I ain't never coming back. People were here before us, you know. They tried to leave us something."

"It's terrible, I know it is. I just saw over there for the very first time myself. But it does give us a life."

"It ain't life it's giving you, Mama."

"I don't want to argue it with you. Do you know what it means to your father to finally work a steady job like a man?"

Cherise paused, looking out over the silhouettes of the trees. "Just help me then."

Cherise shined her light on the wall and explained the pattern she had planned. Whorls, waves and spirals, and stiff-fingered hands, some crosses and some holes drilled, and what might have been a butterfly, arrayed like fancy constellations across the rock. They worked together, taking turns with the hammer and screwdriver until the sun came up, then followed the trail Cherise had made back down, and they got home just before the blasting started.