

# In Kentucky

by Sandi Keaton-Wilson

In Kentucky  
 where my ancestors have all lived,  
 except the ones from overseas  
 before the big crossing  
 of the Atlantic and their bloodline, before  
 their coupling with Cherokee,  
 we live and die by our hand, by the land—  
 become kin to the earth as much as if  
 its water is our blood,  
 its soil our cells,  
 and roots, my lands-  
 they go down deep  
 “‘pert near plumb thru to China.”

My granddaddy’s breath, death  
 depended on what he put into the ground  
 as well as what he took from it.  
 He worked the earth and mines with  
 equal sweat seeking, eking out another day’s wage  
 profiting little.

He tried to live by burley alone  
 bedding, pegging, chopping, suckering, topping,  
 cutting, hanging, stripping—  
 back in the days when you tied your hands  
 in more ways than one.  
 The buyer’s price never met the cost of living.

He stooped to mining never seeing sunshine,  
 yet he tried by digging, picking, shoveling  
 his way out of the hole.  
 It’s a fact that scrip doesn’t go  
 as far as scripture  
 because coal mines and company stores  
 don’t allow for laying up treasures.

Granddaddy picked up a hoe at ten,  
 a cigarette at fifteen, and a miner’s lamp  
 twenty years later.

In Kentucky  
 through decades we continue the legacy,  
 as we, like he, grow and smoke tobacco,  
 choke on coal dust until  
 payday  
 when we face the blackened breath of death  
 and die  
 the only way we’ve ever known how to live.