

2011

# Truth-Telling in Four Books of Appalachian Poetry

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## Recommended Citation

Jolliff, William, "Truth-Telling in Four Books of Appalachian Poetry" (2011). *Faculty Publications - Department of English*. 32.  
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# Truth-Telling in Four Books of Appalachian Poetry

WILLIAM JOLLIFF

## Under Consideration

*Sawmill Boys* by Neva Bryan (Saint Paul, VA: Brighid Editions, 2010) \$11.99, paper. ISBN 9780615358758, 76 pp.

*I'll Fly Away* by Dory L. Hudspeth (Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2008) \$12.00, paper. ISBN 9781599243528, 29 pp.

*The Well String* by Noel Smith (Louisville, KY: Motes Books, 2008) \$10.00, paper. ISBN 9781934894019, 140 pp.

*No Matter How Many Windows* by Jeanne Bryner (Nicholasville, KY: Wind Publications, 2010) \$15.00, paper. ISBN 9781936138067, 106 pp.

Truth in literature, especially poetry, is sometimes tricky to talk about. Yes, we know that the poet's voice is always a masque. But a poem's claims of truth, whether stated or implied, carry aesthetic as well as rhetorical weight, and different claims invite different judgments. Whether she's reaching for Truth with a capital T or chasing a covey of little ones, we expect a poet to touch us with her truth.

Neva Bryan's *Sawmill Boys* presents—or her persona gives the impression of presenting—a pretty clear vision of the truth about the world as she sees it. The collection doesn't impress with technique, but it hits a target that many books of poetry miss: it's a good read—and it feels real. The first poem, "Wanted," is constructed of working-class particulars laid over a foundation of passion, then secured with the earthquake-proof straps of straightforward craft (21). It's a "personal ad" written in verse, soliciting the speaker's pipe-dream of a companion—someone who's part poet ("He reads Berry / Bishop / Bukowski"), part mechanic (he "cusses manifolds"), and part comfort-food cook (he "mixes mimosas, bakes / biscuits, stirs gravy").

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Bryan's passionate, ironic tone persists throughout the first section, *Fire*, then turns to nature, both pristine and disfigured, in the next section, *Earth*. The message of a poem like "Scream of the Butterfly" is not subtle: "The rape left her black / with diesel and fairy dust: / the fleeting promise of coal" (21), but Bryan is equally deft in the more delicate tone of her porcelain-perfect "Sumac":

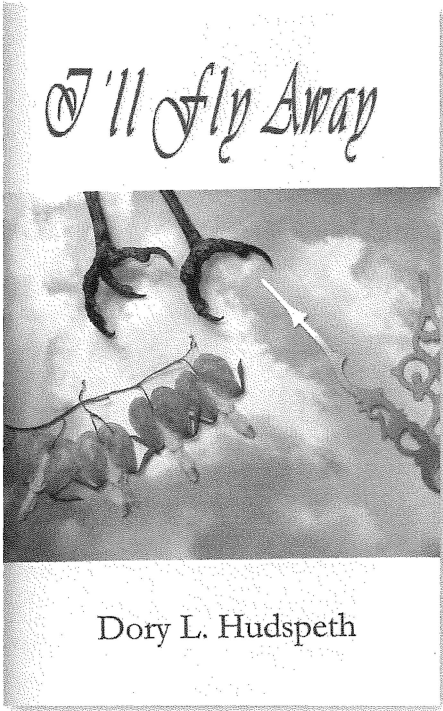
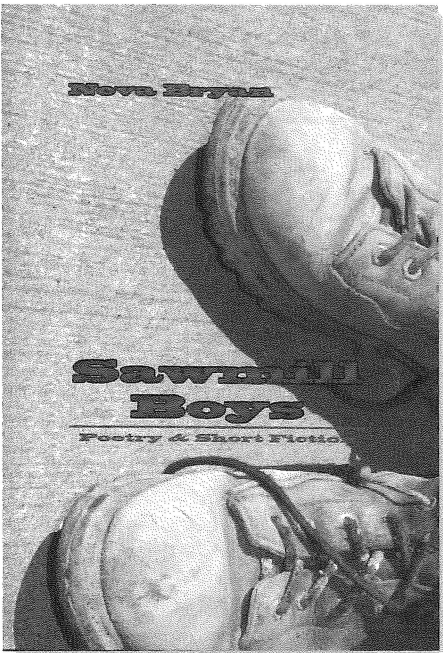
Sumac,  
Fuzzy head bent,  
Reminds me where I am:  
Appalachia, backbone worn down  
With grief. (22)

Appalachia is clearly part of her identity, an identity explored in catalog pieces such as "Where I'm From." In "Moving Grundy," she presents a mixture of pain and hope for the region that ends with a compelling and mysterious promise: "We shall walk on water: / Ghosts no longer— / only mist on the river" (25). Her subjects are engaging, and in poems like "Autumn Sacrifice" she demonstrates that she can craft lines that perfectly meld sound and sense: "Leaves deny death, / But frosty breath withers. / Branches scratch testaments" (26).

Bryan's third section, *Child*, is more predictably Appalachian, and those of us who share her experience of listening to grannies, picking garden truck, and generally working out a childhood in the vicinity of hard times, will find plenty to like. The final group of poems, *Woman*, carries us through the changes of adulthood with a clear sensitivity that is not always comfortable. True to tone, however, Bryan ends with hope—and more than a little defiance: "I'll not crack when I turn forty, / For when forty pushes me, / I'll push back" (48).

The book also includes two stories, as accomplished in their own way as the verse, with her witty, ironic, and down-to-earth voice. The story "Sawmill Boys" comes a little too near romantic comedy for me, but "The Devil's Better Half" is nearly dark enough for anyone's Breece Pancake sensibilities.

Whereas Neva Bryan's poems discover their truth in the narrative of personal experience, Dory L. Hudspeth's *I'll Fly Away* consists primarily of very brief lyrics. At their best, her poems are proverbs, truth-sayings, aphorisms—full of wisdom, paradox, and humor.



Her only extended narrative poem is "Sailing to Sunset," in which a middle-aged couple watch each other in a restaurant. He drinks too much; abuse is implied; he begins to choke. And she watches him, knowing that he is dying and that she is letting it happen. The poem's final lines tell us, "She only thinks of sunset colors, / And how sad it is that / He will never please her that well again" (15). While the *wife justifiably kills husband* genre may be a little overused, this one is both psychically unsettling and aesthetically gratifying.

More typical of Hudspeth are part-proverb, part-koan pieces like "Knowing the Way":

Water never loses  
its sense of direction.  
It always knows  
the way down.  
So do stones.  
But for a prank  
they double back,  
rising during hard winters,  
just to prove they can. (3)

Having spent my youth hauling new rocks from old acres, I can verify that—*however they do it*—the poet gets it right. "The Way Things Fall" is equally true. She catalogs mistakes that can ruin a cake, then brings her metaphor home: "Insufficiencies and excesses / don't explain how my life / came to happen this way" (5). And like most wisdom writers, Hudspeth can be funny. Here's "Problematic":

An apparatus that fixes  
problems almost before  
you know they are there.  
I need to get one,  
maybe two. Or maybe  
the new improved model,  
Fiasco-fixer. (11)

Hudspeth's chapbook is not a demanding read, but it's a good one, pithy and smart.

Noel Smith's *The Well String* is packaged to raise anticipation. Motes Books is developing an impressive catalog of fresh work, well presented: this volume features an attractive design, a blurb list by Appalachian heavy-weights, and a Foreword by Silas House. For anyone interested in Appalachian poetry, it's a must-read.

The book fulfills much of its promise. It's structured as an account of four generations of a fictional Appalachian family, the Catons, from 1880 to 2007. The historical eras cover the region's transformation from agricultural self-sufficiency through colonization, exploitation, and the aftermath.

The book claims to be a "narrative of the fictional Caton family," and that is the frame, but the continuous narrative is problematic. The multiple rhetorical stances within individual sections result in discontinuities. In successive



poems, for example, the point of view might vary from first-person, or third-person omniscient, to third-person limited. I sometimes found myself jarred by shifts in syntax and diction, only to realize that the point of view had changed. Given the generous size of this volume (140 pages) and the abundance of strong individual poems, creating two separate books might have been effective: one with stronger narrative coherence and another of poems that could have better tolerated shifting points of view.

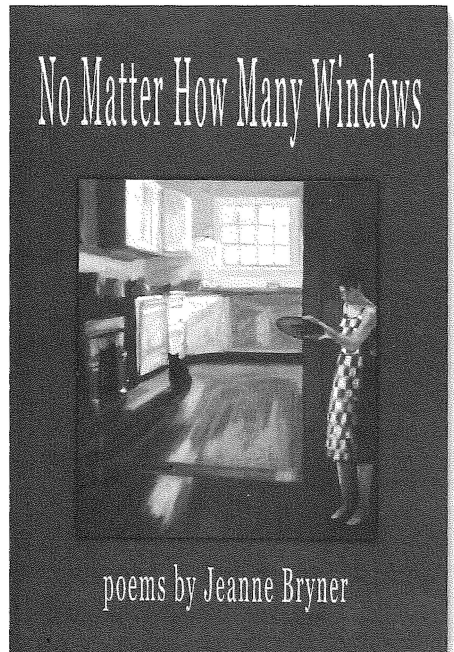
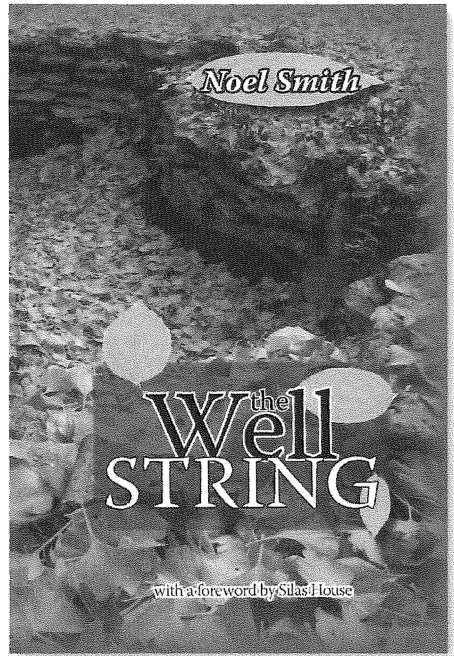
The strength of the volume is in the individual narratives. “The Coal Speculator” (44-55) offers the compelling tale of a man who visits Appalachia to buy mineral rights and never goes away, and it features enough twists and turns for a novel. “How Aunt Nellie Fixed Myrtle Jones” (110-13) resonates with humor and the tone of a truth-teller who remembers 50 years ago more clearly than 50 minutes ago. And the title poem, “The Well String,” presents the narrative of young lovers preparing to plumb the depth of a well, concluding with a near-perfect lyrical, metaphorical turn:

... It zinged tight  
in my hand, like I held your life,  
you at the other end. I walked on  
until you were a dot in the green.  
So far away, all that love  
singing in the string. (105)

Occasionally, Smith seems a little too typically Appalachian, but when, as in the poem above, her metaphors keep pace with her storytelling strengths, her poems achieve the satisfying ring of truth.

We learn from the Foreword that Smith spent enough time in Appalachia to know her subject and that she used her experience to give historical validity to her work. That makes her book a quasi-opposite of Jeanne Bryner’s new collection, *No Matter How Many Windows*—another book in four generational sections set in the same time period. Whereas Smith has created a fictional narrative core and developed it with the truth of lived details, Bryner uses the truth of her own family narrative, then fictionalizes for narrative immediacy.

From a craft perspective, Bryner’s poems show astounding technical achievement. Bryner’s brilliance is in her deft, almost unnoticeable shifts in



Winner of the 2011 Tille Olsen Prize from the  
Working Class Studies Association

points of view. Much more complex than simply writing from four women's perspectives, within a section she subtly moves from the voice of the subject to that of the poet commenting *about* the subject, without any disorientation. It's masterful.

The narrative begins with Bertha White Stiles, Bryner's great-grandmother, and ends with the poet herself, though the poet's narrative presence is discernible throughout. I wonder if Bertha could ever have verbalized the eloquent resentment for her husband that the poet gives her character. But the complexity enhances the poems. Bertha begins by resenting her patriarchal marriage proposal—and with good reason. In "James Asks for Bertha's Hand, February 1898," as her suitor talks with her father in the barn, his "left boot kicks / hay and snow and shit," and her father just keeps on harnessing his team. He simply "cinches up and says, / *Yes, you can marry her James*" (8). Bertha reads the situation clearly: "My bosoms are apples / and his eyes does all the saying / of what he wants to lay / hands on." The resentment persists ten years later, in her house that, "no matter how many windows," never has "enough light" (9). After 13 years of marriage, Bertha, pregnant and weary with seven children, begs her father to "make James stop" (10). Again, her father is in the barnyard, this time watching "till his bull humps each cow." Then he tells her it's "*not my place*" to interfere. Bertha is left "praying / to be dead."

After James deserts her, "Bertha Puts Her Wedding Band in a Cigar Box": "Chores never get done, that's true, but / nothing's heavier than a ring" (15). The focus turns to the misery of poverty and sacrifice, as Bertha places out some of her children and loses others, even employing some of her girls with a bootlegger. By the section's psychologically perfect ending, her death from cancer feels like a blessing.

In Part II, we follow the story of Mary Alice Stiles, the wife of one of Bertha's sons (and the poet's grandmother). With change comes some relief, especially with poems like "Old Forest School, White Creek, West Virginia, 1911," in which Bryner crafts a metaphor that joins together the journey of Christopher Columbus, a little girl's tearful confusion with menarche, and a sensitive teacher's empathetic understanding. "Poem for Martha Virginia, Stillborn, October 1928" returns to the consequences of poverty, capturing that singular pathos of mothering a stillborn child: "This raw night, another twist in the pull / and haul of a mother's rope, / / blind rocking of both bodies, / the terrible lullaby" (29). After the loss of a friend's son in the Korean War, Mary Alice states, "Never in my life have I held a gun, but I'd slip my knife / through the windpipe of who done this" (33). Bryner's perfect idiom and detail leave no room for doubt.

Section III features Bryner's mother, Wilma Stiles Henderson, a likeable, wittypersona in psychological distress. "Mama Goes to Beauty School, Wheeling, West Virginia 1942" is a straightforward account of that country girl's successful entrance into a world of strangers. It also recognizes a family's sacrifice that made her schooling and self-assurance possible. Wilma tells us, "A couple of

town girls was rough as cobs in their talk, / but I'd just drift back to my station, clean scissors and comb / knowing every day ends and I could always go home" (48). This section moves into the era of Appalachian diaspora, so a recurring motif is that of displacement and the longing for home—a defining theme of much of the best Appalachian literature. Wilma's stressful move into an Ohio city holds the promise of work for her husband, though her own strong bond to home seems little considered. Worse yet, she has been out of a mental hospital for only two months, she's pregnant again, and she's "feeling tangled up / like my girls' wet hair." Her disorientation and anger color her description of the coming child: "our baby will be born with both fists in the air" (55).

Wilma's story is the story of many Appalachian women of her generation who found themselves yanked from the mountains and dropped in a city, making her final poem all the more fitting: "Things Mama Learned the Hard Way" features Wilma reflecting on her life, her mother, and what might have been—from beyond the grave. She tells her daughter, "Maybe you could write a little bit / about my life, there was nothing to it, really" (62). Clearly, Bryner does *heartbreaking* as effectively as she does *horrific*.

In a clever transition, Wilma's poem from beyond the grave leads to daughter Jeanne's first poem, "In Utero," a thank you to her mother (65). The 18 poems of this contemporary section could stand as a fine chapbook on their own, but they are infinitely more rich because we know, in depth, the background of this particular Appalachian woman growing up in an Ohio city. The topics here are common to Appalachian writing: taking weekend trips back to the mountains, being ridiculed for her dialect in public schools, and enduring the trials of growing up. But Bryner crafts them with utterly uncommon facility. And her less regionally oriented poems about everyday family life are just as fine.

Bryner's range also includes *uplifting*. In "Where Water Speaks in Tongues," for example, a family celebrates a communion with a picnic of bologna sandwiches and fishing, and "it felt right, felt holy" (80). In "Chores," she concludes, "to live anyplace in this world is a risk and gamble" (84). She shows us, through four generations of her family, the risk that is living often results in a hard life. But there are triumphs, and a soul deep enough, with observations sound enough and a longing to tell it all, sometimes yields the truth.

Neva Bryan has given us truth in the confessions of her life. Dory Hudspeth has given us truth in her well-distilled wisdom, and Noel Smith has created a truth in the context of story. That's a rich assortment. But it's safe to say that Jeanne Bryner has done all three and then some. *No Matter How Many Windows* is the finest new book of poetry I've read this year.