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Trouble and Balm

Laura Long & Doug Van Gundy, Eds. *Eyes Glowing at the Edge of the Woods: Fiction and Poetry from West Virginia*. Vandalia Books, 2017.

Eyes Glowing at the Edge of the Woods: Fiction and Poetry from West Virginia, edited by Laura Long and Doug Van Gundy, marks an important moment in the history of Appalachian literature. This impressive new anthology presents a diverse range of contemporary writings—stories and poems by sixty-three writers representing a wide variety of backgrounds and sensibilities—all connected through place: the heart of Appalachia. Assembling the work of established writers, such as Ann Pancake, Jayne Anne Phillips, Maggie Anderson, and Mary Ann Samyn, next to the work of dynamic emerging ones, such as Ace Boggess, Elizabeth Savage, and Jessie Van Eerden, *Eyes Glowing* creates a vibrant patchwork. And what comes through, across this diverse collection, could also be called heart, or grit, or resilience. For while much of the anthology grapples with the after-effects of lost industries, including poverty, environmental destruction, disability, and various forms of abuse, it also remains attentive to the magical moments that can inhere in even the most difficult circumstances.

In Ann Pancake's "Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley" (the title story of her collection), the three-year-old protagonist is not only mentally and physically disabled and the product of an impoverished, drug-addicted, broken family, he is defiant and determined. This defiance is expressed through the boy's resilient imagination and in his desire to finally speak his story. Similarly, in Mary Ann Samyn's gorgeous lyric poem, "West Virginia, or What Do You Want Me to Say?" both the natural world and the human one possess "the intelligence of sorrow." However, against this backdrop, the beauty of nature continues to offer space to reflect, speak, and sing.

This is not to say that everything comes up roses throughout the collection. In story after story, poem after poem, writers wrestle with the legacy of strip mining (as in Meredith Sue Willis's story, "The Roy Critchfield Scandals" and William Woolfitt's poem, "Absentee"); deforestation (as in Matthew Neill Null's story "Natural Resources"); environmental catastrophe (as in Anita Skeen's poem "In Chemical Valley"); and underemployment (as in Laura Long's story, "Dark Early"). But again and again, these works attest to a deep love

of place. As Long puts it: “Even our state song is about leaving and pining to come back: ‘If o’er sea or land I roam, still I think of my happy home, and my friends among those West Virginia hills.’ Honey, you’ll move to a city or some flat land, and wind up homesick.”

Other stories and poems across *Eyes Glowing* imagine temporal and spatial worlds that fall outside of modern West Virginia. In Jessie van Eerden’s story, “Edna,” the narrator’s present is haunted by the poverty that she endured as a child and married to escape. Denise Giardina’s “Thin Places,” excerpted from *Fallam’s Secret: A Novel*, considers “a place where you can ever so briefly glimpse what lies beyond, perhaps even talk to God.” From Greece (as in Gail Galloway Adams’ story “Olives”) to a man from another planet (as in Sara Pritchard’s story “What’s Left of the Jamie Archer Band”) to the hypothetical scenario taken up in Ace Boggess’s poem, “‘What If There Weren’t Any Stars?’” the anthology attests to a cosmopolitan and even cosmic spirit alive and well in the heartland.

Poet Laureate of West Virginia, Irene McKinney, frames the collection: as the source of the anthology’s title, the author of the opening poem, “To My Reader,” and the contributor of “Homage to Hazel Dickens.” In addition, Maggie Anderson begins her poem, “A Blessing,” with the following epigraph from McKinney: “Inside the mind there is a balm / I know it and I say hello.” Here, McKinney and Anderson, like others across the anthology, consider nature’s ability to put us in touch with the endlessly renewable source of the divine. Personally speaking, never have I felt so at home in an anthology: here in the heart and mind of West Virginia.