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A Letter From the Editor

By Luke Godsey

Dear Readers,

Thank you all so much for reading each issue of The Appalachian Free Press! Ever since becoming Editor in Chief back in October 2024, it has been my pleasure to bring to you stories and works by authors from all over Appalachia. As we move into our Fall issues, I want to implore our readers to submit works to the press. We do not discriminate against ideologies or perceived level of quality (which is often higher than you give yourself credit for). Our goal is to showcase the countless voices of Appalachia and to provide a space to uplift otherwise overlooked authors and ideas. Past authors featured in the Press have gone on to win prestigious awards for poetry, non-fiction, among other accolades. With that being said, I hope you enjoy the new issue of The Appalachian Free Press!

Enjoy Reading!

Luke Godsey
Editor in Chief of the Appalachian Free Press

Mountain Roses

By Susan Evans

The kitchen smelled of Pine-sol and lemon Joy, and the only sound was the hum of the GE clock on the wall. Afternoon light filtered into the room, illuminating the white laminate table trimmed in red piping and supported by chrome legs.

Sitting precariously on red vinyl chairs, my big sister and I solemnly watched our mother's hand move a pencil over paper, forming perfect rose petals and sepals, elegant vining lines, and tiny veined leaves. She'd draw daisies, too, and tulips, plump cherries, and berries in clusters, her dark hair falling over her shoulder. Magic bloomed from Mama's fingers on those slow afternoons on our quiet street with the big mimosa spreading its shade over our front yard. I'd be mesmerized. Sandy, too, brown eyes wide with wonder at Mama's paper roses.

Mama's roses came with a story born from suffering, as is often the case with beauty. She had a natural artistic flare, but was too poor growing up for such extravagances as art classes. Born in 1925 in a small, humble hamlet in eastern Tennessee, surrounded by virgin forest and ancient mountains, she grew up during the Great Depression. Mama was lucky to have cornbread, pinto beans, or biscuits on the table. Like a little ferret with a head of hair like nettles and a fiery temperament to go with it, Mama deserved her father's nickname "dynamite."

She didn't learn fancy drawing at school, either. At five, she and her year-older sister, Kate trudged to Unicoi Elementary School, an old, converted hotel. Bedecked in scratchy, flowered feed sack dresses their mother stitched on an old treadle sewing

machine, the girls toted apple butter biscuits packed in oatmeal boxes.

The school burned down when Mama reached sixth grade. From then on she scrunched on a pew at a local school, and scribbled on a tablet resting in her lap. No library, few books, no gymnasium, no desks, no music, one small blackboard, and, certainly, no art.

Sister Kate quit after graduating eighth grade, and Mama continued on for two years at Erwin High School, walking two miles to catch the bus. When she reached tenth grade, her father refused to pay for books, so she reluctantly quit. With no money for school and little money for food, art lessons seemed as likely a probability as spinning straw into gold.

Mama didn't learn to draw at her first job, either. She was fourteen years old, and it was 1939. The United States was finally shaking off the deathlike grip of the Depression. She and Kate lucked out and found jobs working for the FDR's National Youth Administration. At the new Unicoi Elementary school, they graded papers and washed dishes. They made \$17.00 a month. With that money, they could buy a dress, a pair of shoes, and have change to go to the movies in Johnson City. They believed themselves rich.

Another of Roosevelt's recovery programs began only two miles away near Limestone Cove. There were two camps of four hundred young men, their average age nineteen.

If Mama didn't have anyone to sit beside in church, all she had to do was stroll down the street on the way to church. One of her sister's beaux only had to say, "Mayme, pick you out a boy." She looked around and chose the prettiest one

she could find.

While the young Howell women were occupied with boys from the local CCC, Great Britain declared war on Germany. And in 1940, the United States military conscription bill passed. Dark storm clouds loomed below the horizon, threatening to encompass Tennessee, America, and the world.

In December 1942, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, and Roosevelt and Churchill declared war on Japan. Germany declared war on the United States four days later. The CCC camps closed, much to Mama's disappointment. One day after Mama turned seventeen, the first American forces arrived in Britain.

Times grew bleaker and shadows lengthened, especially for the poor like Mama's family. President Roosevelt issued ration books to every civilian since so much was needed to supply and fund the war effort. Food, clothing, gasoline, fuel oil, stoves, firewood and coal were all rationed. Mama could only get one pair of shoes a year, and she liked shoes. And, of course, no art supplies – not even a stick of colored clay -- much less a crayon. Even paper was rationed.

But within months, a new prevailing wind funneled through the Unaka Mountains, aligning circumstances within and without; a heaven-sent convergence of railroads, natural resources, and hungry humans desperate to survive. The gust gained strength enough to swing folks in Unicoi County around, as if they were part of an old timey square dance. For the first time in a long time, something actually came up right. Just like roses.

This spiraling wind first hovered over Southern Pottery in Erwin.

Hot out of the ashes of its beehive coal-fired kilns, the magical Blue Ridge dinnerware emerged, elevating ho-hum decaled pottery into flowing-petaled and leafy

tendrilled hand-painted, mini-works of folk art. Like fingerprints, no piece was exactly alike, except that each spoke of a mountain women's struggle to survive, and seared her tale onto bisque.

The wind wasn't done yet. It moved on down the road, picked up speed and swept past the old Fishery, shaking pine needles off the trees, lowering the Indian Grass, and kept going until it blew open a new door called Opportunity at the old post office where the Howells waited by the cold hearth for a fire to ignite.

First, Kate dressed in her Sunday best, clutched her purse, and assumed a resolute, business expression on her thin face. Slinging her old scarred leather bag over her shoulder, she shut the big door of the post office, and waited patiently near the road for the special bus that linked Johnson City to Erwin. She vowed to her mother she'd keep the wolves away.

Kate's new job at Southern Pottery and her absence made Mama even more antsy. She bristled with impatience, floundering around like driftwood on a barren beach. Tired and bored with sitting around with no money in her pocket, nowhere to go, and nothing to do, the wind pushed her towards the action.

Gone was the scrappy, nettle-headed little girl of yesterday, and in her place stood a young woman with a long curtain of dark, curly hair, a set of dancing chocolate eyes, and a pair of Betty Grable legs.

A pretty face doesn't put coins in a purse, though, so one hazy blue morning, Mama trailed behind Kate to board that bus to Erwin, wearing a tight sweater, pleated skirt that barely covered her knees, bobby socks, and saddle shoes. She slung her own leather handbag over her shoulder.

The hiring boss at Southern Pottery eyed Mama with interest, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. Finally, he asked, “What makes your eyes so brown”

Seeing her blush and squirm, he softened and finally said, “Bring a birth certificate showing you are eighteen.” At only seventeen, she couldn’t fetch a birth certification, but he put her to work anyway. Mama was paid a starting wage of forty-four cents an hour and, after ninety days, ten cents more an hour.

When Mama began Southern Pottery, its labor force reached over a thousand, with approximately one-half painters, mostly women plucked from the side of the mountain. Many servicemen’s wives flocked to work, waiting anxiously for their boogie woogie bugle boys to come home.

The business was massive -- the size of a football field -- operating nine gas-fueled kilns, twenty-four hours a day, every day, producing twenty-four-hundred dozen plates daily, and a whopping seventeen million pieces a year during the 1940s.

Over time, two-thousand decorative patterns were underglaze. Pattern names reflected the romance and whimsy of the era and place: Mountain Rose, Tussie Mussie, Tutte Fruitti, Shoo Fly, Appalachian Garden, Autumn Laurel, Snippet, Moonstruck, Erwin Spring, Enchantment, and Daydream.

High fired, this stoneware, hard and durable. Unbreakable, almost. Like Mama, like Aunt Kate. Like mountain women.

Finally, Mama received the art lessons that fate had in store for her!

On Mama’s first morning, she sat at a table in a straight-backed chair, long hair pulled back, beside a bespeckled, older woman. Water bowls and painted and unpainted dinnerware cluttered the surface. Paintbrushes stuck out of glasses like cowlicks.

The room smelled of earthy bisque and paint fumes, and mingled with the clamor of crockery being stacked and loaded on racks, the clatter of wheels trundling down the aisles, the not-too-distant trains hissing and blowing their whistles, and the voices of hundreds of workers.

The artist showed Mama how to form petals and leaves, stems, and vines, using various brushes and different techniques. Her brown eyes watched closely as the artist mixed sparkling colors on a wooden palette.

Painters were assigned teams of three to four people. Each morning, a pattern and a palate of the paint colors was placed in front of them. A lead artist painted the most prominent part of a design, then passed the piece to another that might paint a bud, then onto another painter to paint the stem, and another, the Leaves.

Sitting down was the worst part of the job for Mama, a restless young spirit, only seventeen, and similar to mountain wind that rises and descends the slopes endlessly. She shifted in her seat often and moved around, mind faraway and active as a darting minnow zigzagging in the laurel streams.

My mother was quick as silver and so competitive that she'd outshine the sun if she could. Her fierce dark eyes focused her attention to her training, and soon, she easily daubed a paint brush onto her palette and swirled vibrant colors. Camellias, cyclamen, poinsettias, bluebonnets, and sweet peas flowered from her brush tip onto bisque teacups, saucers, bowls, and plates.

After painting, Mama stacked pieces on long boards at the end of her work station. Then "floor boys," dressed in overalls, loaded them on racks to be dipped in

glaze and baked in kilns. Finished pieces were then carefully packed in wooden barrels, filled with local farmers' straw, and driven by truck and loaded onto railroad cars. To market, newly-made dinnerware rolled out, covering miles and miles of rail from the southeast coast of the United States to further north, and way out west.

Kate and Mama bought furniture with their paychecks and carried in groceries for their mother, little sisters, and brother. They bought their mother some dresses, too. She only had an old blue one since her husband spent his money on moonshine and other women.

Three long years later, a new, prevailing wind -- carried like a great wave across the Atlantic from Europe -- sailed over the rocky ledges of Unaka Mountain, lingered for a brief spell in the forest laurel, and finally swept down across the small Tennessee county. Snatches of gossip and heady rumors floated throughout the pottery, swirling around painting tables and near the kilns and molding rooms, setting workers abuzz. The air crackled, charged with an electricity alternating between dreadful fear and fervent hope.

When she first heard the rumor, Mama frowned down at her scuffed shoes under the painting table, and exhaled a deep breath. She sure hoped the gossip was true. She wanted the boys back, and she wanted to buy a decent pair of shoes.

On the second of September, the sun glowed atop the sleepy Unaka and Buffalo Mountains and a delicate breeze wafted warm across Unicoi. Mama and Kate, stifling yawns and bickering as sisters do, caught the bus to Erwin.

At ten-thirty AM, slumped at her work table, dreamy and distracted, Mama mixed rosy-pink paint on her palette for the fan-shaped petals of an Irish Rose. But

her mind bloomed elsewhere to a place where soldier boys gazed in adoration, as she reclined resplendent in her mint-green, ruffled gown under a gnarled oak tree. Bursting her daydream, the company loudspeaker crackled on, and a voice announced, “The Japanese and Germans unconditionally surrendered! The war is Over!”

Everyone whooped, “Whee-e-e-e!” and jumped up from workstations. Mama threw the paintbrush onto her worktable, wiped her hands on her smock, then yanked it off, and grabbed her purse. With hundreds of workers at the pottery plant, she marched out and danced around in the autumn sunshine. People tossed their hats in the air in jubilation. The buses came and Mama and Kate celebrated at Guy’s Cafe in Johnson City. Hamburgers sizzled and the jukebox jiggled to patriotic songs and swing music. To Mama, the war had been nothing but a blame nuisance. Her first thought was: ooh! new shoes! And her second: the boys are coming home!

The following fall, Mama’s sisters fixed her up on a blind date. On a picnic at Davis Springs, Mama looked over her slice of watermelon, and decided Floyd Hopson looked just like a screen idol with his black hair curling around his collar. And those long-lashed blue and brown eyes were swoon-worthy!

Six months later, Mama married Floyd. She quit her job at Southern Pottery when she became pregnant. That last day, she lay her paints, palette, and brushes down, and left her dreamy flowers and girlish colors far behind. For four years, roses bloomed around her.

Ten years after my mother married, Southern Pottery’s business fractured like

crockery colliding against a stone wall. Weakened by post-war development of plastic dinnerware and a rise in Japanese import ceramics, the pottery's magic spell flickered and sizzled out. No mending charm could restore its glory days of the 1940s. Like irrelevant paint swiped away with a sponge, even its buildings disappeared.

Only a few old timers survive to tell the Blue Ridge story, and only a few faded photographs remain. What used to be is almost lost in the white mist of memory.

But time has not tarnished Blue Ridge's jewel-like colors, many fresh as the day they were painted, joyful, playful, and magical as forest foxfire. Perhaps a million pieces remain: Red Nocturnes, Sunshines, Grandmother's Garden, and Forget-Me-Nots. Some decorate kitchen walls, some perch in cupboards, some rest on dining room tables, but all -- like the pattern Circle of Roses -- connect heart to heart all the ancestors of Southern Pottery's painters to each other and to their mothers, their aunts, and their grandmothers.

Before she married, Mama dreamed of being a missionary and traveling overseas. Aunt Kate wished to be a nurse. In their young hearts, they wanted their lives to mean something. They did. Like Southern Pottery, time has not tarnished the beauty of their sacrifice, the power of who they were, and the poignancy of the stories they shared through their art.

These two women, and many more like them, dedicated their youthful energy, and their hard labor during years that should have been the best time of their lives; and sent their gifts on trains rolling out of Erwin and into the heartland of America. They, too, had heart, and a flaming hope for a brighter tomorrow

I can imagine Mama and Aunt Kate throwing back the covers and rising from their old iron bed with a straw tick mattress, leaving younger warm bodies behind,

and dressing in the early green-blue light from the windows of the old post office. They'd eat a biscuit, standing up, and hurriedly apply ruby red lipstick and Maybelline cake mascara moistened with saliva. Then, before leaving, they'd kiss their pale thin mother on her soft cheek.

Outside, under a leafy canopy of green, they'd wait for the bus. They'd giggle, remembering a devilry, like the black cat thrown into the Pentecostal church window on a girl one Sunday night, and listen to the dawn chorus of mourning dove, trilling insects, and breathe in the perfume of honeysuckle, pine, and mountain laurel.

Later, hopping off the bus, purses swinging, brown hair sitting lightly on their shoulders, eyes bright and cheeks glowing, they'd lift their chins, ready to tackle life during uncertain times and wrestle it to the ground. Kate, the oldest, shyest, more tender-hearted and insecure, and Mama, standing firmly in her power, confident, bold, and steely.

That was eighty-two years ago. It was seventy years ago that my sister and I watched our mother spiraling rose hearts from her fingertips, curving stem and vine lines, and adding petals, one by one, in perfect symmetry.

Mama didn't leave me much materially, but she left me an enduring memory of a humble kitchen bathed in light from a back window; of the clean scent of her long, chestnut hair; and of Sandy and me drawing close to her ticking heart, as magic bloomed from her fingertips.

Long ago, we and our little house drew in deep slow breaths together, but, somehow, even today, those yesterdays' scent of roses lingers still.

Memories

By Sheilah Queen

I remember her leisurely stroll to the mailbox

Placing a green laurel leaf between her hands and blowing

The high-pitched whistle filled the country air echoing through the valley

She taught her grandchildren to make the same mountain music

She had always lived in these hills

It was where she grew up and got married

Made a home

Settled beside a gurgling creek

Planted daffodils

Tailored dresses using a Singer pedal sewing machine

Started fires in wood heaters on cold winter morns

Sung lullabies to babies while holding them tightly in her arms

We loved and revered her

Will always remember her Southern cooking and words of advice

This warm and nurturing woman

We called Mom

What is Melungeon?

By Ethan Godsey

When someone talks about the Melungeon people many different thoughts come to mind. Is Melungeon a race of people, a slur, a part of an identity? The answer is both yes and no as the history of the Melungoen people is an interesting and complex story that is well worth learning.

To start, the word Melungeon is a slur for people of mixed race in the Appalachian region of America. This is due to a high population of mixed race peoples in the area from white settlers, free people of color, and even some native people, though most were of mainly European and African descent. The use of Melungeon as a slur was mostly phased out in the 20th century when modern Melungeons reclaimed the term as a source of identity and pride. This is wonderful as its use as a slur was rather biting as seen by one of the first recorded instances of the word. In the minutes of Scott County, Virginia's Stony Creek Baptist Church a woman was noted as saying to another person that, "she harbored them Melungeons.". This quote shows that at the time the Melungeon people were seen as lesser than, and that allowing one into your home was seen as harboring them like an illegal item.

Living as a Melungeon was rather difficult for a long time, this is due to a wide variety of myths and lies about the people. Many people believed that Melungeons were identifiable by deformities due to being mixed race. Some of these believed deformities are Familial Mediterranean fever, polydactyly, and Anatolian bumps. They also believed that they had dark skin, high cheekbones, and bright eyes, all of these things are untrue as most melungeon people are white passing and have no genetic issues like those provided. Despite many being white passing many were discriminated against, especially in 1924 in Virginia when they passed the

Racial Integrity Act and solidified the one drop rule. Due to this Act anyone with even “one drop” of non-white blood would be subjected to the dystopian Jim Crow laws. Due to Melungeons being mixed race, despite many being white passing, they were classified as black, were discriminated against and given limited freedoms. It was seen as an insult that the Melungeons could be seen as white, as seen in December 1943. Walter Ashby Plecker wrote to officials that “colored” people were disregarding the Racial Integrity Act by passing as “white” or “indian”. He notably noted the “Tennessee Melungeons” and forced them to be reclassified as black. It wasn't until 1967's Loving vs Virginia case that the Melungeons were no longer forced to be labeled as the race they mostly resembled.

The modern culture of the Melungeon does not exist due to there never being one unifying monoculture of the people, instead most Melungeons typically have the very same culture of their neighbors and surrounding community, this is also true for past Melungeon peoples. Despite not having any real cultural precedent there are many Melungeons who have created their own “Tribal identity” if they have native ancestors. Though this is not all Melungeons as not all have native history, and most are of African and European descent. To this day there are many Melungeon people to be found in southern Appalachia, most white passing but containing a deep history and legacy of strife and pain of any mixed race people of America.

