

Myth, Rosin, Dust: A Trinity

"No avatar, no scion, no vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust."

— Cormac McCarthy

I.

Could I be forgiven for imagining that it began on the train to Cleveland? I see my great-grandfather there in the modest passenger car, second class probably, as it yaws and winds out from the Alleghenies and across the ancient moraines and the land offers then a fleeting look at Cuyahoga Valley, a last glimmer of topography that preludes the slow pitch down to the Lake Erie shoreline. A Woolworth's suit, uncomfortable because the air in the car is stagnant even with the windows open and it being early September and his hard skin is, still, unused to worsted.

It is 1919, and he is on the train to Cleveland. There is a momentary lull in the Spanish flu outbreak, and only a few passengers can be seen wearing masks. I know him by photographs, a poor measure of a person, and by stories, a better one. I know from pictures that even as a young man his face is lined and that even now, scrubbed clean, he bears the invisible film of coal dust, to be seen instead by markings on his face and the dangerous flint in his eyes. It is a hard life, digging a two-foot coal seam. He has seen kettle-falls crush a man in an instant, the reverberations of which exit the mine at the driftmouth like a scream from hell. He has seen a malnourished woman, his neighbor, die after bearing stillborn twins and when laying her in the pine coffin he built, he had to break her arm to fit all three of them in.

I imagine, without proof, that he believes this is why. He believes in unionization, the collective staking of fortunes, because without it there is no fortune. There is only fracture: lonesomeness in the wilderness.

I point to his name, right there, on the delegate list. United Mine Workers of America District 23 Local 3340, Varilla, Kentucky. It is he, and he alone, representing the county at the national convention. The war is over; demand for coal is down. Prospects have darkened.

He shares my name. Or, more rightly, I share his.

We construct myths by that which is left behind. But he was once there, flesh and blood and rage and love. He was once there, sitting alone on the train to Cleveland.

II.

I had played banjo for many years, teaching myself the syncopated, bluesy eastern Kentucky style of folk music. Then, I picked up the fiddle. This began with a cheap piece, something ordered online and constructed from horrifyingly inexpensive laminate or — heaven forbid — plastic, and I remember: When I ran the brand new bow over the strings it made no sound, a caesura of where sound should be, the way a good knife slices noiselessly through a steak.

A physics lesson: The bow's sound on the strings occurs via infinitesimal skips caused by friction. This is made possible by adding rosin to the bow hair, which when dragged across the string surface catches and relents, causing the string to vibrate and emit tone. Rosin, a miracle. A translucent orb, which melts on a stovetop but fractures at room temperature like a beer bottle. I think of pine pitch stuck to my hands as a child, the way it catches skin at the slightest brush, how it persists in a way water and soap can't persuade. I learned early on to rub dirt on those spots to take away the tack.

Rosin, one might say, is a kind of antilubricant, a hurdle to optimization and mechanical efficiency. It enables beauty, in the proper hands, beauty abetted by obstruction. And then in due course even obstruction falls away, the friction dissolves into itself, and the fiddle sings.

Months later, I bought another violin, apparently made in a factory in Germany around the time my great-grandfather took the train to Cleveland. It might have, at one time, been held and played by someone much like him. The violin was again priced modestly, given its poor condition — a luthier at a boutique violin shop told me it would cost more to fix than it was worth. That it was a losing proposition. We seemed to differ on the very nature of value. I left without spending a cent on the fiddle's repair. In fact, I deemed, it didn't need it. It

made noise, I knew, noise that even in my hands was sonorous, supple, good, and right.

This essay will not be a study in the lapidary pursuit of grace through art. It will not trace my odyssey from nascent fiddle sawyer to virtuoso. (This, in fact, did not happen.) It won't be a hymn to practicing diligently, because I'm hardly a specimen of such. The fiddle resides mostly in a hard case cradled by felt and humidifier packs, because the air in Alberta is dry and because when I open the case the wood of the violin smells like a country church pew. I am transported.

Don't think of me in solemnity, cloistered away, a stony devotee of music. Instead, picture me in the attic room, fiddling.

III.

In 2021, I think: Where does information come from, and how do we trust it? It floats like particles in the air. With too many to sift through.

I.

Years ago I began in earnest to write a novel concerned with the Harlan and Bell County War, a coal miner's strike in southeastern Kentucky that erupted in the early days of the Depression and ended violently, suppressed by a coalition of police, mine operators, and ordinary members of the citizenry. Sandwiched in a bituminous-rich valley between the long spines of Pine and Cumberland Mountains, which run parallel at a diagonal through the doleful, lonesome corners of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia, the miners who resided there faced

unprecedented obstacles to unionization, and indeed were some of the only miners in the nation not to have cohesively organized by 1931.

We should not be lulled into ascribing primitivism to such a place. Middlesboro, Kentucky, the largest town in the vicinity, had a J.C. Penney (a Wal-Mart stands there now). Bell County had courthouses. It had a school board and restaurants and a wealth of slot machines, enough to earn the town the moniker "Little Vegas." Yet it is difficult to describe the hopeless conditions for much of the area's working class. Those lucky enough to own ramshackle houses on inherited land often had no electricity or running water. Miners who did not own property outright rented company-owned houses with their own bodies' labor, at a steep cost. Their children, weedy and malnourished, shat bloody in the ditches. The notorious scrip system, used to pay miners by tonnage in lieu of legal tender, kept them in an all-but-inescapable cycle of poverty and debt. By then, the UMWA's efforts to organize and strike in the area had been utterly stymied. John L. Lewis, the tyrannical, larger-than-life president of the union, was accused of simply representing, in all but name, the interests of mine operators and capitalism writ large.

Around mid-1931, a radical, more essentialist movement called the National Miners' Union began its creep into the Cumberland Valley, to the great consternation of authorities. The NMU had emerged from the Third Communist International in 1928, had swept through Pennsylvania's anthracite mining communities and, of note, held particular appeal for Black miners, who were among the most downtrodden.

And then the travails of the Cumberland Valley miners caught the attention of leftist writers and thinkers from the Northeast. There are names any student of American literature would know — Theodore Dreiser (the sun setting on his writing career, he had set himself to activism), Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, among the last cohort of writers of pre-war social literature. They

gathered in drab New York taverns in the winter of that year to discuss what was to be done. The result was the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, which worked the levers of national media to raise awareness of miners' mistreatment, and bankrolled the bussing of students and other activists to eastern Kentucky to stand in solidarity on the picket lines (anticipating, by three decades, the Freedom Riders who ventured at great peril into the Deep South). Dreiser himself made the trip down, earning prompt charges of carpetbagging by locals, who would just as soon have kept the situation a local affair. In November, someone leaned toothpicks against the door of Dreiser's room at the Hotel Continental in Pineville, KY, where he was suspected of staying with a woman to whom he was not married. When the toothpicks were observed to still be standing at sunup, Dreiser was booked on charges of adultery and cavalcaded, ignominiously, out of town. Within three months, nineteen-year-old Harry Simms, a labor organizer from Massachusetts, was murdered by police less than fifteen miles away.

II.

I think Eudora Welty wrote the best depiction in literature of fiddling: *He had never examined a fiddle at all, and when she began to play it she frightened and dismayed him by her almost insect-like motions, the pensive antennae of her arms, her mask of a countenance. When she played she never blinked an eye. Her legs, fantastic in breeches, were separated slightly, and from her bent knees she swayed back and forth as if she were weaving the tunes with her body. The sharp odor of whisky moved with her.*

Churchgoing folks of the old days called it the devil's box, fearing all those latter-day Pandoras unleashing the weird, unearthly noises — studied or no

— from inside the f-holes. It was said to change a person, to draw their very being away from the designs of God and to something more bestial. It made the feet wing and buck in perfect time across the puncheon floors of churches and community halls. It is plausible, given that most Appalachian dance music was pioneered by Black musicians, that much of this sentiment can be chalked to thinly veiled racism.

I am drawn to the idea of the body translated, sent into convulsions and tongues not by the Spirit but by the Flesh, the hypnotic swaying of the arm. Elbow up, I'm told. Wrist loose.

Kentucky fiddlers were known to have begun a phrase on an upbow, an unusual technique even for the customs of rural music. When I try it, it feels like skewering a butterfly to a pinboard; the comfortable correspondence of a downbow to the first beat is discarded for a wild, eruptive jab into the air. It pushes the tune into existence, gives it animus, like slapping the rump of a horse to set it on its way.

III.

On Election Day in 2016, I watched the maps of eastern Kentucky and West Virginia blush deep red, and I stopped working on my novel for many months. I thought: The same regional forces that had repudiated the insinuations of New York City had just welcomed all of it and sent it to the White House, a contingency that did not track for me. Even suspending any political presumptions I had, and accounting for socioeconomic anxiety, I could not comprehend it. Had I so fundamentally misunderstood my people as to disqualify me from writing about them? Was I barred from telling even the stories of my family, whether lived in blood or merely in the imagination?

I.

Kin never raised me on such stories; what I know that's verifiable, I know from documentation. His death certificate (cause: black lung); his draft card from 1917 (he never went over); and photographs, which progress from his youth expressed in grainy sepia tones to more sober, resolute images of him as a stooped, slender old man, who sometimes would lead my mother, a toddler, around the yard by a finger in search of persimmons. There is 8mm film footage of him, too, playing an archtop guitar in the blazing fingerpicking style of the area, derived from banjo players. Or at least I am nearly certain of this — the footage is silent, deafeningly so, and myth has a way of making one certain they have seen things, a reality wished and hoped for, almost desperately.

The stories passed to me by even his own children were steeped purely in Appalachian myth: The train that took him to Cleveland instead was a train he rode illicitly through the American West. A hobo's life. He supposedly even carried that archtop guitar with him, singing by campfire. The guitar, at least, still exists — a second cousin hung it on a wall.

II.

Everything we love about traditional mountain and Southern music we owe to Black musicians. The modality, the de-emphasization of melody for rhythm, the ease with which lurid stories from the news are ripped from the headlines and fitted, immortally, into song. Countless tiny, homespun *Tristram Shandys* set to music, vessels for what frightened, vexed, and moved the people of

a bygone time. Many playing styles, many verses, simply represented molecularized communities, isolated by geography, by race, by poverty. Or all of it. The corpus of music passed down to us can blend traditions, and often erases individuals — especially when curated, badly, by modern-day tastemakers — yet it collectivizes and hands to us something of the past, something to begin excavating.

Kentucky fiddler Ed Haley, who was blind and refused to record commercially because he feared being swindled as a result, learned everything he knew from now-nameless Black fiddlers. So did Dock Boggs, and Darley Fulks, and Ola Belle Reed. Haley recorded only on a consumer phonograph at home, recordings which themselves now sound almost lost to history. Yet in 2020, country star Tyler Childers, who grew up a half day's walk from Loretta Lynn's childhood home, recorded an album of traditional fiddle tunes, at least one sourced from Ed Haley. The title track, an original, decried police violence against the African-American community, and on the day of the album's release Childers released a video asking his listeners, largely white, largely supporters of then-President Trump, to wake up and let empathy take over. The album went straight to the top of Billboard's Folk chart.

III.

In such an information-saturated environment as ours, facts (or their stand-ins) function collectively and as ubiquitously as the air we breathe. Whom do we consult when all the air looks, tastes, feels the same? We retreat to the familiar. We allow ourselves to be carried along, to take what we know of our family, our friends, and make what we will of it.

And so: The Cumberland River, which helped carve the Valley and whose source is just over the border in Virginia, flows through Bell County and Pineville

and tracks west. It collects the tiny flumes that flow from the mountainsides, and the sulfurous waters of Yellowcreek, near where my great-grandfather was born, worked, and died. The Cumberland meanders onward, into the west, and widens as the land flattens. It carries the waters and swells at a certain point to a mighty river flowing past farms and homesteads where fiddle music is still played sometimes, often just on a porch for friends; it flows past both red- and blue-hued signs endorsing politicians, and it flows past cemeteries where people have died old of lung cancer and years of hard living, or died young of overdose, or accident, or murder. And the river goes on like this, all the way to Nashville.

Word count: 2605