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Ben seethes when Sharon insists that mixing green beans with cans of fried onions and cream of mushroom soup is Southern. As if calling it Southern somehow keeps the Northern world at bay. As if being Southern is the ultimate exotica. As if green beans and mushroom soup isn't Good Housekeeping recipe American Style Number 1A. Ben recognizes his green bean anger marks a downhill slide in this relationship. He can no longer be treated as an alien interloper. He wasn't born in Iceland. //

"Green bean casserole is plain American," he patiently explains in the tiny kitchen with the peeling linoleum, the rhododendrons outside catching the drizzle. Sharon is making grits and red-eye gravy and country ham, his favorite breakfast. She isn't wearing a bra and she looks good. She won't meet his gaze.

"Try South Dakota, Indiana, even New Jersey. They know green bean casserole served with hot dogs wrapped in crescent rolls and fucking patriotic Jello." What he is saying is her family's hard-scrabble backwoods existence messing with a wilderness far beyond control has left them stupidly provincial. They aren't the first family to work the land. His ancestors crawled into the wilderness further west without ever clamoring to be called Daniel Boone. Where he came from, people traveled north, south, east, west. //

Ben is tired of tobacco and chickens, of sleeping with his feet exposed to the air in her too-short bed, of her old house with the curtains keeping the sun light at bay, tired of the black bog of

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family dinners at her mother's. He has put in his time fishing for bass with Papa Ray in the quiet morning in green water rich with moss and minnows. He isn't unappreciative. He has learned everything he knows about gardening, livestock, catfish, hush-puppies and peaches and gooseberry pie from her family.

But the time has played out. Three years of traveling back to her North Carolina roots from college has given them a history. Three years of playing house and taking care of each other. Three good years with nakedness and oblivion. But a degree is meant to open doors. To move and shift. This argument is about staying or starting over with a clean slate. What he wants is to go west of the Mississippi where he can teach.

Two weeks later Ben leaves the bottom land of sweet potatoes, mosquitoes, and earth mother knowledge of crystals like a wounded sixteen year old. In his hurry his tires spin at the mud searching for solid ground. Halfway through Tennessee he is still fumbling through tapes and mumbling half aloud, like if he finds the right music, life will make sense. A hundred miles back he'd pitched the bluegrass out the window. The Mississippi River lies 300 miles due west. Two months later he is in a rental trailer perched on the fringes of suburbia in Kansas City, Missouri on the edge of plains in August humid heat three days before he is due to teach English to ninth graders. After three weeks of flooding the teaching market in cities he knew little about--Denver, Kansas City, Chicago, he took the first job offered. The chaos of the U-Haul cross country plunge still lingers, his world relegated to boxes and organizing categories, not to mention the nagging worry about becoming a full time professional teacher. A toaster still sits in the back seat of his car.

He is pared down, and a little mean—he'd celebrated his twenty third birthday a week before in his new world where he knew no one to call. Missing Sharon lying close and her Southern silliness, he had called her. But she was out. //

Friday morning two days before school starts, the half-working air conditioner does not dent the heat. Ben is working feverishly. He goes through the last of the boxes, finding more to throw away than to save, determined to be settled before teaching starts. He needs a hammer. He needs to check the oil in his car. He needs to understand the complicated school schedules, the health plan, the pension, what he will wear and where he will park. He needs inspiration for speaking to 9<sup>th</sup> graders every day for the next year. He has made this choice. He stifles a desire to try Sharon again. This train is moving forward, not backward. The phone rings and he leaps to life, and it is his brother, Don, insistent. He is in town in a last minute layover. Can Ben pick him up?

Ben listens all the way from the airport to Don's frustrations with his new San Francisco job, from Ben's point of view a cushy enough situation. But Don, at thirty, is on his fourth meteorologist position in his fourth city. In his new suit he is used to the bright lights. He hasn't yet mentioned home in St. Genevieve. With Cardinal baseball wafting from the dusty dash, Don's world seems a universe away. Don doesn't know his panic facing his new responsibilities. Don would already have completed what needs to get done since he knows airports and schedules, and responsibility; he has been to Stockholm, Bangkok, and London. Being lost on the plains, where the sky dominates and dust kills trees isn't any place Don would choose to be.

"They don't even make postcards." Don says. Ben grips the wheel hard, facing down a barreling tractor-trailer with headlights at eye level. This VW is too old to be nimble, and pretty much a death-trap, but Ben drives fast through a landscape of car dealers and hardware stores, unsure about the routes to get to his home. All his choices lead to mean edged highways he would hate to die on. Past a Knobtown biker bar with lurid neon and three police cars in the parking lot with red lights flashing, Ben remembers Don's first glory when everyone in town knew he was going to California to be on TV. While Ben was closing out high school and working at the neighborhood grocery store, Don was formulating polished, linear plans for a successful life. /Nothing just happens overnight/, he told Ben. All Ben knew was that Don had never worked double shifts, never smoked cigarettes or stood bored on a Friday night waiting for closing as cars drove by in a swish, fueled by the rumble of music in the humid night.

Don isn't sure even now if he can stay at his new job. "New York is the center of the universe for this technology." He will go to Italy in July if he finds the time.

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When Ben lights a cigarette, Don looks over with disdain. "Why are you still smoking?"

And Ben feels stupid like he is ten again, like he has been caught at the county fair hanging out with tattooed carnival workers. He has felt this way before.

"It's not that big of a deal," he says, aware of his younger brother whine. He wants to tell Don to fuck off. Instead, he drives faster. There is nothing to say.

Ben knows there is no reason to fight. Don's life is a green trail stretching to the mountain top. He will breeze out tomorrow. They are in the river bottom wasteland of concrete plants and abandoned plant stands, and Don talks on about his California friends who own property and play with stocks. In the distance the bright lights of the shopping center are busy in the suburban night.

They purr up the gravel drive and see the trailer bathed in the streetlight. Ben jokes. "I always said everybody should live in a trailer at least once."

"You've lived in better places," Don replies.

Inside, Don takes a hard look at the plaid sofa, the twenty year old refrigerator, the ironing board propped in the living room. He said nothing. Ben is exhausted. This is his brother and he is glad to be with him, but he feels the pressure of all he needs to do. "I need some sleep," he murmurs. "Yeah," Don answers, "me, too. I think I'll read the paper and then hit it. Thanks for getting me." Ben nods, smiling. Don will be sleeping on his pull out couch, not twenty feet from each other like they'd done as kids.

The night closes in. Don snores in the next room, and Ben is wired into the movie of himself breaking down under the pawing needs of energetic fifteen year olds. Out in the pasture behind his trailer, the train comes and goes, already a bumping squealing night ritual. Beyond the track is the Pfizer fertilizer plant, a mere half mile away. Ben feels alone watching factory smoke drift past the full summer moon. How could he let Sharon go? He remembers dancing on the river bank to the light of a campfire. So exotic now in this concrete suburb where all is uprooted before it becomes old, like nothing is good enough to keep just the way it was. He isn't going to cringe and look for an exit.

At four Ben stands on his porch smoking and studying the late night cranking business at the pesticide factory as lights from the railroad yard sweep over in a surreal haze. Across the field of thistle and rock and burrs, the truck traffic is nearly constant. Out the front window headlights from early morning traffic on the highway outline the trees. Across the gravel and the four lanes of highway is the high school where he will teach come Monday. He can see the huge Tiger head implanted on the front looking his way. Ben feels the prairie, the black sky and days of dust stretching ahead. He just wants to feel at home. He watches the five thirty train roaring through his back yard. An hour and a half later he wakes to the sound of the football team practicing, hitting the dummies.

**B**right and early twenty four hours later on Sunday his last day of freedom, Ben bursts through the door. He has been up since five. He has been to the airport and back. So Don can wing his way westward once again. He immediately attacks the last of the unopened boxes, serious now as he feels snake-like obsessive whispers (like a father) about school time discipline and work and sacrifice. He will address the world tomorrow--no matter what condition he is in. He has one day to get there.

**D**espite Ben's worries, the first week of school is exhilarating. He is passionate enough, and the students listen and like him. He is the youngest English teacher, and the only male, of course. Together he begins to find who these 9<sup>th</sup> graders in five classes are as they write and negotiate classroom rules and vent over school policies. Mostly though they talk to learn each

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others' needs. It will take weeks just to know their names. Already he is scrambling to make the day run smoothly and to hide his improvisation.

He calls Don three days into his first week. It feels as if Don's visit was a month before. Even now Don is clueless Ben is awash in his first professional job, that dealing with fifteen year olds might be overwhelming. Don repeats his whining unhappiness, his vows to find the perfect job where he gets the respect he deserves. Ben ends the call silently cursing Don.

Saturday morning with one week under his belt of all round success, and Ben, used to give and take of the crowd, can barely contain himself as he eagerly straightens the chaos of the brainless, all go week. He takes three hits off an old joint he has carted all the way from Alabama. He picks at the high school yearbook he had dutifully carried from apartment to apartment. There is Jackie Sommers in black and white looking adventurous and fresh—with a smile, her eyes seeing everything. She was a friend, on the side watching. He barely knew her. Once only they had been alone. He in her house in the summer when the air conditioning insulated. Sitting on a basement couch close enough to touch working on college applications with Ben wondering whether the electricity could cause something to happen. Ben wondering whether she felt the same headlong impulse simply to let go.

They remained the kind of friends that didn't need to talk—the memory of energy feeding still. Ben stares again at her photo, seeing her beauty. He starts then the letter to her to right what had never been said. A letter assuming Jackie is far away and married with two kids and a lawyer husband in Houston Texas. He writes, thinking of her breasts underneath the white oxford shirt on that quiet afternoon with only the family dog as company. That house where they met in St. Genevieve is where this letter will go—if he sends it.

The windows are open and a light rain hits the tin roof; off in the distance is the humming of the highway. In Jackie's yearbook smile is the knowledge of what could have been. He wishes now he had spent more time with her. When he finishes the letter he walks to the mailbox and sends the letter back to the home town which seems a thousand miles away.

**O**n Monday morning, the teachers' lounge swirls with activity. Ben stands in a corner reading the fist-full of office messages from his mailbox. He has seven hand outs he needs to copy before class begins in 17 minutes. He feels a tap on his shoulder and he turns in panic. His principal, Dan Hurley, looks at him intently and not too sympathetically. Dan as usual is immaculate in his shiny suit with white shirt and tie. He wears his hair in the flat top he has had since he was a boy. In Dan's office, Ben has seen pictures of Dan as a boy scout in Olathe, Kansas. Looking at Ben now is a bloated version of that open faced Catholic boy eager to please. Dan pulls Ben aside. He has something to say. /There's a meeting at Central Office at eight thirty. A substitute has been hired for you./

//Ben is confused and he nods, looking to Dan's eyes. But Dan has no time for questions, he is already turning to leave. As Ben watches Dan's receding suit, he is unsettled. He shoves his hand-outs in his mailbox. What about his kids and the poems and writing and jokes to make time flow? He wants to believe this is a normal Dan interruption, that it is standard practice to pull teachers out of class. He enters the crowded hallway with students banging at lockers and laughter and talk signaling the start of the school machine. There are friendly calls from students as he moves to his room where a substitute already scribbles directions on the board. Christy, already his unofficial helper, is there in the front sit doing her homework.

"I thought you weren't going to be here."

"I'm not."

He moves on, heading for the front door and the parking lot. How can anyone take his place?

Ben drives into the bright sun tasting something metallic. Now that he isn't teaching, he feels like taking the detour to home and sleeping. Is Sharon already at work drinking her coffee? Does she feel him thinking of her? Those mornings waking and clinging, her arms reaching

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bringing him awake, her stretching, naked and lithe. Before it all got tighter and tighter like jeans shrinking in the dryer. He thinks about Sharon all the way to the Central Office.

The entry way and the secretaries are cheerful enough. Ben sits, wondering if it is all a mistake, on a couch bought from an educational catalogue. The secretary who motioned him to this seat wears bright red lipstick like a too cheerful Sunday school teacher. What do others know that he doesn't? His contract maybe, his choice of health plans, a missing transcript. No other teachers are milling about waiting to be interviewed. Stifling a feeling of doom, Ben moves to a plastic seat closer to the secretary feeling like a junior high boy ready to be disciplined.

Ten minutes later she motions to Ben with a kind smile, and he shuffles into the superintendent's chambers—the name in gold plating on the door—Bernard C. Uhls. The sun comes into bright from the window, on Ben and the bear-like, friendly Superintendent he met once before for a ten second hand shake. Ben's smile is tentative, still seeking the clue for meaning. Bernard's gray suit doesn't hide his expansive stomach. He seems friendly as he motions Ben to a chair before his clean and polished desk.

"Ben, I am glad you are here. I wonder if you would answer some questions for me?"

"Sure," Ben replies, knowing now something beyond his teaching is behind this meeting.

"Do you like to write?" Bernard asks.

Ben stammers something about stories, poems, film sketches, letters, a half-done novel. He is blushing. How to explain a journal? He makes no apologies for his talents. He talks about a paragraph published in the newspaper when he was in third grade. And about his journal writing emanating from the National Writing Project.

"Why do you like it?"

Ben talks about the need to get something down, to leave evidence and record stories, and the value of writing in learning about his students. About the power of practice and learning from his mistakes. He is becoming increasingly nervous, his voice quavers. He slips a hand to cover a twitch in his chin.

"How often do you write?"

"Not enough. I try to make writing a habit, but sometimes school gets in the way." Ben looks down under Bernard's steady gaze. He doesn't know yet what he has done and his energy is draining.

"How are classes going?"

"I like my students. They have energy. The first week has gone better than I expected. I have only been in town for two weeks. I have much to learn, sir."

"Call me Bernard," the superintendent says. He pulls at his desk drawer, peers within, then holds up triumphantly a thin grey book Ben quickly recognizes as his journal, his chronicle and history. He is numb, the game is over—he is ready to give the fat man his fingerprints.

"How...?" Ben stammers in a weak sense of outrage.

Bernard reaches for his phone. Ben struggles to understand the journals travels to this office. Did Dan Hurley pry in his desk searching for contraband? (Was he suspicious all along?) Who knows about Sharon across the volleyball net like a predatory cat, the rides down from the mountain while she pawed at his pants? About Tom in his acid trance howling with the coyotes? He wants to bolt. But he sits quietly as Bernard talks on the phone with Ben's journal still in his hand.

"Send them in."

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Bernard looks at the journal. "A girl in your class found this in her homework."

Ben is washed up on the beach, jellied and beaten.

The District Principles—nine in all—enter, and Ben realizes they are here for him. Next to him sits the Assistant Superintendent, Clyde looking like a western horseman with evangelist slicked black hair. Clyde who enthusiastically welcomed Ben after the first interview now scowls and avoids Ben's nod of recognition. The other Assistant Superintendent, Jim Brockman, a Baptist deacon and former coach, meets Ben's eyes. Next to him, looking tired is Dan Hurley, who two weeks before shared his intimate boy scout stories.

He thinks of brother Don, newly awake, with a toasted bagel and cream cheese and an espresso, reaching for his Wall Street Journal, oblivious of what is going on. Brother Don feeling the golden cool California sun. Ben is freezing in the air-conditioning. Bernard clears his throat. "Ben, tell us about yourself."

Ben stumbles first. His mother the school teacher with decades of unselfish giving. His father's work ethic and quiet strength. The family passion for travel and seeing how others live. His work history from paper route at twelve to working through college. His confirmation in the church, the 7th grade championship softball game, the writing award in 10th grade, being an Eagle Scout. His new teaching profession, the desire to give students voices, make them life-long readers who question. Ben gains confidence as he takes stock. If they are going to fire him anyway, they need to know who they are letting go.

When he stops Ben looks for signs his frank and modest overview has had an effect. He knows well enough that the attitudes in the journal (which are everything) do not fit the role of high school teacher. He has broken a code and allowed the hidden to mix with the air. He scans faces. Who has read the journal, and how much have they read? Who has read the sections describing his Dan Hurley as an authoritarian nerd?

Clyde has a question. "Ben, do you have designs on any of your girls?"

Designs? Appreciation maybe, but not designs. How to explain his love for their beauty, how they tower above the boys with their still growing just firm half-womanly breasts, with the potential they don't yet realize? He has written about his girls in his journal, describing in detail their innocent beauty, their clear, open eyes.

"I don't go for girls on the brink of puberty. I prefer the older ones." He stops. Anything more is trouble. "The bottom line is I would never inappropriately touch one of my students." His look to Clyde challenges any hint he might do otherwise. Clyde nods. This is what he wants to hear. He has enough womanizer in his veins to appreciate Ben's appreciation of beauty and grace.

"Did your journal go home on purpose?"

"No. I didn't know it was gone." His voice trails off, thankful this is the truth. What he knows is that his personal life—something only his—has slipped into the public domain for these men to take home.

Then he waits--the hard questions about marijuana, wild life on St. Simon's Island, Georgia, grits and nakedness hang in the air waiting to devastate. He waits for the journal to drain into the air. Sharon in the garden harvesting dill and thyme. April abandon at the beach. Descriptions of the size of Dan Hurley's head. A week's lust for a fellow teacher. Nakedness and drugs and more. Maybe Clyde sees only pitiful, unfinished fiction that can easily be dismissed. Maybe Bernard has not read closely. In the quiet air no questions appear. Barnard hands over the journal. "Let's try to keep this out of school."

Then Ben is excused. His directions: Go home. Wait.

On Ben's way from the room, Dan Hurley takes him aside.

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"We'll wait and see what the group says." He is still cold, unconvinced of anything. Dan Hurley has read every word.

Outside in the wild air Ben knows the artifice of stability he has cultivated since he took this job is gone, blown away in the hot breeze from the highway. In the car the plastic upholstery is boiling, it is not even noon and already his week, month, year has been brutalized—his devious adolescent nature exposed. He drives, numb, past the high school and out to the country hedgerows of hawthorn, sumac and sassafras. The cows in the fields are oblivious to his fate, and he contemplates never stopping.

By a creek sheltered from the sun he watches early fall leaves in slow drift downstream. He wants Sharon, her gentle reaching for his hand, her music and food. Where is she now? Can she feel long distance his horror? He stands feeling shaky. He hasn't eaten. He is not teacher or lover, he is a child waiting a decision. He slides on sunglasses and drives back to the trailer in the baking sun. At three he sees the kids free of school walking the railroad track, backpacks on shoulders. He waits, feeling his sins.

The phone rings at four fifteen and Ben jumps, startled back into life.

"Jim Brockman here."

Twenty minutes later Ben sits in Jim's office. Jim has his feet up and as he talks he watches the band practicing on the football field. Trophies sit behind his desk along with pictures of his family. Ben notices a cross on his lapel. Jim is all business.

"I was impressed by what you told us this morning. It took bravery."

Ben shrugs. "I put myself there by being stupid."

Jim continues. "When I was young I did a lot of wild things, riding trains, working out West, sometimes without any money. I don't regret those experiences. They helped make me what I am. The bottom line is that I see a good person behind your experiences. Because of this, I have voted to keep you with us." He looks to the window again and smiles. "Would you pray with me?" Ben nods. Of course he would do anything.

"Heavenly Father, bless this young man and lead him to the path to righteousness. Show him the goodness of your mercy. Aide him in instructing minds. And help him live up to his abilities. In Jesus' name. Amen."

Ben isn't back in his trailer ten minutes before the phone rings. This time it is Dan Hurley reporting his latest news. The iron in his voice is gone, though the old boy scout affection hasn't returned.

"Ben, I'm not sure what went on today. I was ready to let you go. But you convinced people of your worth, and I respect those opinions. So we want you back at work and we will treat this like it never happened. The girl, Caroline, is being transferred from your class."

Ben broke in. "I'd like to talk to her parents and apologize."

"No, that wouldn't be good. They are fundamentalists. They read the journal. They gave the journal to the superintendent."

"But..."

"No, it would not be good to talk with them. That is my job."

"By the way. I read the journal," (he pauses), "and parts of it are good. We'll talk more tomorrow. Let's put this behind us."

Ben sits with head on his desk. Act like nothing happened? As if anything can be turned off. He

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reaches for the phone book and calls Caroline. He takes a deep breath and introduces himself to Caroline's mother. A half hour later he drives into an endless neighborhood of new ranch homes. Caroline and her mother are waiting and Ben feels driven.

In class Caroline had been quiet, sweet, pretty and smart. Surely the journal confused her. Enough so that she took it to her mother. Who took it to Bernard. Ben wants only to wipe away the stupidity of it all. Then Caroline smiles in the opened door as if he has done nothing wrong. Her mother is just behind the door.

Ben gives them no time to start. He blurts out his message.

"Dan Hurley told me not to come by. I'm sorry to bother you. I just needed to tell you in person. I'm not really the person in that journal. I can't leave you with the wrong impression."

By then the mother is hugging him and Caroline is crying like it is her fault. And she is hurt to hear she will be moved from his class. They drink tea and talk. And he stays for supper. Afterwards Caroline and her sisters play gospel songs on their guitars. Caroline's mother hugs him again as he leaves promising to come back soon.

It is eight o'clock and Ben feels nauseous driving home. An hour later Clyde calls to say Ben is "a fine young man," and Ben thanks him and apologizes again.

**B**en spends the rest of the week with his one and only responsibility -- more than a hundred ninth graders. Preparing for theater and oral reading and asking for opinions. Feeding writing and reading every day. Scouring anthologies of literature and planning themes and writing assignments. Discovering by trial the pulling together of classes, he spends nearly every waking minute on teaching for he is only days ahead of his students in planning. Vocabulary tests and Romeo and Juliet. The lady and the tiger and the most dangerous game. Maya Angelou and Jimmy Santiago Baca and Sharon Olds and William Faulkner. He is surviving school and almost thriving. He draws looks in the hall even from those he doesn't know. His students come to talk before school begins. He works to meet expectations of his colleagues and new friends-- Marylou, a thirty year old divorcee with a ten year old daughter, and Jim McMillen, the yearbook newspaper advisor and one of the most popular teachers in the school. There is talk of faculty basketball games, of drinking beer. All in all Ben has had a successful week (if he forgets his day of vacation).

**W**hen Ben wakes at four to the train he reaches for Sharon. After a month of school he knows well the factory smoking in the dead of night with a freight train loading--/ugly/ showing its face like road-kill along the highway. He smells cat urine in his closet and he knows the cat has peed on his laundry pile again. He closes his eyes and tries to bring Sharon close. She knows things no one else does.

He wakes again at six feeling a reprieve. It is Saturday morning. The last train echoes in the distance, out into Kansas now following the river bottom into the dryness. He has work to do. Within an hour Ben is setting up a fish tank stocked with koi. A pile of school work lies ready to be read. Ben thinks of calling Sharon but he doesn't.

Two hours later in the middle of his oatmeal the phone rings. He hears the quiet voice and feels the shiver from the past. It is Jackie. She just received the letter (forwarded from her parents). She has read it twice, unable to believe he sent it. Ben listens for evidence she understands the letter's foggy message--"I always was interested in you and have wondered often what it would mean to spend time with you." And that is the message she has received and she is flattered and interested. She is happy. She lives twenty miles up the road in Independence, and she is a dental hygienist.

At seven Ben is pawing through his new wardrobe. He is dressing casual—a shirt and jeans—for Jackie. The same outfit he wore for his first visit to Sharon's catfish pond home. He

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remembers sitting in his car watching the lightning bugs drift skyward and Sharon quietly unbuckling his jeans and taking him in eagerly with her mouth. He cringes, seeing again Sharon's brother leaning on the barn sixty feet away.

Surely all that and more was in the journal. He doesn't have time to check. He grabs his keys, heading out for Independence and Jackie.

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**Mark Vogel** has published articles on adolescent literacy in numerous journals for the past fifteen years. Recently, he has focused on writing poetry and fiction as well. Stories have recently appeared in */Cities and Roads/*, */Knight Literary Journal/*, */Whimperbang/* and */Our Stories/*. Poetry appears in */Poetry Midwest*, *English Journal*, *Cape Rock*, *Dark Sky*, and other journals. He has directed the Appalachian Writing Project for ten years. He is currently Professor of English at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina.