

Preface

Constructing Heaven

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

—“*Song of Myself*,” *Walt Whitman*

I dress quietly, not wanting to wake my partner, John. Leaving the cabin, I head for the guest house, ready for some coffee and some time alone to write. Along the path, across the fence, the horses stand, enjoying the cool of the morning, the absence of biting flies. Dew drips from the pine needles, and thistles edge the pasture, small explosions of lavender, reminding me of Scotland, where my mother’s family came from: beautiful, prickly blooms. Stubborn, able to survive the harshest landscapes. An endurance I admire.

In the downstairs breakfast room, I pour coffee, listening to the music in the kitchen, where the guest house owners are preparing a big country breakfast, what smells like pancakes and sausage. Out on the upstairs screened-in porch, there is no music, only the sound of a crow, the hum of pool machinery. From this perspective, I can watch mist rise from the coves of the Potomac Highlands, hear a flicker rapping somewhere, watch a hummingbird fly by. Here I can muse on heaven.

In *Storming Heaven* by Denise Giardina, one of my favorite authors, the character Carrie Bishop states, “Heaven is where everyone you love is all in one place.” I think of that quotation when John and I take one of our too-infrequent trips back to my hometown of Hinton, West Virginia, and find ourselves sitting around the Sunday breakfast table with my sister and my father, tucking into fresh-baked biscuits, bacon, and scrambled eggs. I think of that quotation here, too, spending the weekend at Lost River, this gay-owned bed and breakfast in the hills of Hardy County, West Virginia.

An earthly heaven can be difficult to construct when your loves seem irreconcilable. For gays and lesbians in Appalachia who want to

live full lives, who want to embrace both their gay and their mountain identities, who refuse to dismember themselves in order to assimilate, it can be very difficult to find some compromise between love of the same sex and love of home. If a gay man flees to the city, he is often encouraged to drop “that funny accent” and “those country ways,” to feel ashamed of his mountain culture. If a lesbian stays in the mountains, she might face bigotry and abuse, especially from intolerant fundamentalist Christians; she might feel obliged to stay in the closet; she might suffer from the relative lack of social and romantic opportunities.

My compromise has been to live in university towns in Appalachia: Morgantown, West Virginia, for thirteen years, and now Blacksburg, Virginia, for the last fifteen. In such towns, I can feel safe in a liberal, intellectual atmosphere. As an academic, I can even combine my seemingly contradictory passions and teach both gay and lesbian literature and Appalachian studies. And I can stay in the mountains, close to what remains of my family, for, as Loyal Jones so eloquently points out in his famous essay “Appalachian Values,” we hill folk are powerfully attached to our native places and our kin.

Lost River achieves a heaven that admits both a love for mountains and a love for men. In Hinton, as much as I cherish my family and the landscape of Summers County, I will never feel entirely welcome, entirely safe. It is a small town, full of folks who would more than object to the kind of man I am, and I have spent years arming myself with the emotional equivalent of a thistle’s thorns against that kind of hatred. I have too many unpleasant high school memories to forgive that town: a split lip, a note pasted to my back stating “Kick Me, I’m Queer.”

Here at Lost River, however, an entire gay enclave has grown up. It’s one thing, after years of loneliness and romantic debacles, to finally find a lover and together to develop a protective circle of like-minded queer friends with whom to socialize. It’s another thing entirely to find an active and open gay and lesbian community in Appalachia. Lost River is unique in this respect, at least in my experience. It is true that most of the members of this community are urban transplants—Lost River is only an hour or two from Washington, DC—but still I delight in being able to stay at a gay bed and breakfast or dine at a gay-owned

restaurant without having to leave the mountains, without having to make the trip to Key West or Provincetown, New Orleans or Dupont Circle, Greenwich Village or the Castro. As much as I love those places, as often as I might want to escape to them for brief vacations, they are not Appalachia. I could never live there. They are not home.



The pancakes and sausage are tasty, the gay camaraderie about the breakfast table boisterous and witty. This morning I'm wearing one of my Ajaxx 63 T-shirts, with "Butch County Forest Service" blazoned across my chest, a slogan many straight folks won't get. It combines those apparent antipodes, gay culture and rural life, and harkens back to my undergraduate days at West Virginia University, where I tried to satisfy contrary halves of my intellect by majoring in both English and forestry. Later, by the pool, I'll be reading *Rebel Yell 2*, a collection of short stories about gay men in the South. I am, in other words, immersing myself this Lost River weekend in *All Things Queer*, which is a delicious relief when one spends one's life entirely surrounded by straight, mainstream culture.

The sunny afternoon goes too quickly, as vacation time always does. Phil, Dan, John, and I vacillate among the hot tub, the chilly waters of the pool, Manhattans in plastic cups, and a few chapters in our magazines or books. For dinner, the four of us end up at the nearby Lost River Grill. Everything in the restaurant reflects the dual nature of this valley, the unusual combination of urban gay culture and native Appalachian ways. The owner is a handsome, well-built gay man who lives part of the week in Baltimore; the waitress is a local high school girl whose West Virginia accent and small-town friendliness immediately make me feel at home. The menu ranges from fairly exotic Mexican options to meat loaf, fried chicken, and other down-home specialties I grew up on, including—to my gourmand delight—a case full of homemade pies, including apple, peach, and coconut cream. The customers are either middle-aged and elderly Hardy County natives, usually heterosexual couples, or gay men and lesbians enjoying one another's company. Everyone seems to get along.

This peace was not instantly achieved, the owner tells us, as we gobble our tortillas and rib eyes. When he and his lover first bought the business, the local ministers encouraged their flocks to boycott the place. This unpleasant state of affairs lasted only a month, until the pious realized that the Lost River Grill was the only place in the valley to eat out. For once, the calorie-covetous flesh won out over the narrow-minded spirit. Appetite conquered prejudice.

Last summer at Lost River, I experienced prejudice of a different sort, reminding me of what an odd creature I am, cultural amphibian insisting on both worlds, Appalachian and queer. John and I were enjoying barbeque at another gay-owned establishment and chatting with a male couple from DC, when one of them said, “Well, you two can’t be from West Virginia. You seem too literate.” I smiled stiffly and raised my hand. “West Virginia here. I’m from Summers County. I teach Appalachian Studies at Virginia Tech.” He had enough grace to be at least mildly embarrassed.

Alone with John later, I dropped my polite mask to snarl like any rural dweller, “Why the hell do these big-city folks come out here if they’re just going to mock us? Why don’t they just go home?” My resentment of such Appalachian stereotypes is only slightly less strong than my detestation for those country fundamentalists whose religious attitudes make life for many gays and lesbians miserable, full of loneliness, self-doubt, and fear.

Divided loyalties, perhaps. Still, I refuse to relinquish either world. I insist on it all. The late-summer pastures full of ironweed and gold-erod. Muscular, hairy, goateed men—just my type—marching in the West Virginia Gay Pride Parade. My father’s gardens, the buckets of tomatoes and cucumbers he proudly brings home, the jars of spaghetti sauce and chowchow and corn relish he and my sister put up. Harness-strap boots, my black-leather motorcycle jacket, my leather-flag baseball cap. Listening to Tim McGraw, Brooks and Dunn, Melissa Etheridge, Joni Mitchell, Kathy Mattea as I drive my dusty pickup truck down winding West Virginia back roads. Harpers Ferry, Helvetia; San Francisco, Key West. Leather bars like Charleston’s Tap Room or the Baltimore Eagle. “Poor Wayfaring Stranger,” one of my few specialties on the lap dulcimer. Lobster and paté, brown beans and cornbread. *The*

Journal of Appalachian Studies, The Gay and Lesbian Review. In my life, at least, these contradictions coexist. They cannot be separated.



For many, the desire might be to separate these poems, to set them apart, to tug out the references to mustaches and chest hair and stick to cornfields, ramps, and tomato stakes. As defiantly as I cling to both mountain and queer heritage, such segregation would be my first tendency, and, in the past, in the few volumes of poetry I've published, that has been my decision: "hillbilly" poems here, "queer" poems there. They seem incongruous, not to be mixed, like sodium and chlorine, chemicals that explode when combined.

Similarly, up to now I have published poetry *or* memoir, not a combination of the two. Indeed, some readers might prefer that I stick to one genre, not blend the two as I do in this book. Mixed-genre books are a rarity, an odd hybrid most agents and publishers would eye askance. No one knows quite what to do with them. Like gay Appalachians, such books resist simple labeling, simple pigeonholing.

Here, however, I have chosen to mix not only regional identity with sexual identity, but also poetry with prose, and these amalgams are a relief. It has been a difficult process, the work of decades, my attempts to make sense of the many complex and often contradictory facets of my personality. The hard-won integration resulting from that process is reflected not only in the content but in the form of this book. Mixed genre allows for many voices: the melancholy, romantic reflection, and solemnity of my poetry; the sharp humor, anger, political reflection, and storytelling of my prose; the necessary density of poetry; the roomier space of creative nonfiction. In order to more clearly meld the book's disparate elements, I have often borrowed phrases from related poems to title the segments of memoir, and hopefully the two genres here complement each other, memoir making more understandable the poems, poems lending greater depth to the memoir.

Thus, this collection is an attempt to reconcile my loves in my work as I have in my life. It is my attempt to construct the heaven that Carrie Bishop imagines, in which my passions—for the beauty of mountains

and the beauty of men—may intertwine and, even in their tensions, achieve some kind of integrity, some tenuous wholeness. What I want is unity, however briefly achieved, like that cool morning at Lost River, drowsy horses standing in the mist, September dawn dripping from the trees, and the thistles, hardy as Highland warriors, enduring what they must, stoking their lavender fires, brandishing their swords, fusing in one stalk loveliness and ferocity.