

Jeff Mann
English Department
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, VA 24061-0112

GAY AND APPALACHIAN:
THE SHAKY HIGH WIRE BETWEEN SUBCULTURES

In February of 1991, I met Thomas in the weight room of Virginia Tech's War Memorial Gym. A mutual friend introduced us over the bench press. I was fascinated. I'd been single and celibate for a long time, and Thomas was just my type: short, muscular, hairy and exceedingly intelligent.

We had many interests in common, including neopaganism and the occult. By April, our afternoon conversations over coffee had led to an affair. It was a furtive and complicated one, since Thomas already had a longtime boyfriend.

I was hardly concerned with morality, however. It was intensity that demanded my devotion. Given a choice, I have often opted for the aesthetic over the ethical.

Both Thomas and his lover Jon were planning to leave Blacksburg in September, after Thomas finished his master's degree and he and Jon found jobs in the Boston area. Thus, with our time together circumscribed both by the narrow limits of adultery and this upcoming end-of-summer departure, I was determined to enjoy such a tumultuous passion while I could. For the first time in my life, it felt as if a man I loved might actually reciprocate that feeling. And, already in my early thirties, I had enough of a sense of mortality to know that such ardor might not come again any time soon, if ever.

In July of that year, while Jon worked late at a nearby bookstore, Thomas and I took a walk together. We ended up in a patch of woods on the outskirts of Blacksburg. Once in those woods, out of the public eye, I became affectionate. He was very handsome, our hours together were always short, and touching him was a rarity and a rapture I could never get enough of. So, as soon as the leafy shadows surrounded us, I stroked his hair and then draped my arm around his shoulders.

When Thomas resisted this simple affection, afraid we might be seen, it suddenly struck me how different heterosexual and homosexual relationships are in this regard. For gay men and lesbians, public displays of affection might invite homophobic violence. Single for most of my adult life, I had almost forgotten this fact. Now, beside a man so desirable I found it difficult to keep my

hands off him, I was reminded of how dangerous it is for two men to touch, especially in rural and small-town settings, where everyone knows everyone's business and there are no sheltering gay communities or liberal urban neighborhoods in which same-sex couples might feel safe. As attached as I am to the mountains of Appalachia, for once I wished Thomas and I were in Washington, D.C's Dupont Circle area or San Francisco's Castro Street.

Walking with Thomas, suddenly paranoid, I couldn't help but think of Hester Prynne, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*. She enters the forest to meet Dimmesdale, her former lover, and the wilderness, as scholars have often pointed out, is emblematic of lives beyond convention, beyond society's pale (both literally and figuratively). So in the forest, illicit lovers, out of sight of puritanical eyes, might be together. But what if, in those woods, the lovers are found by hostile witnesses? The danger might be even greater than in small-town streets. I thought of being discovered in this fairly isolated place by homophobes and wondered what sort of violence might flare up, who might be injured, who might or might not survive.

RISK

Dinner over, we walk off mint juleps,
down a path busy with bikers and joggers,
the tremble of lovesick aspen, honeysuckle
banks, elderberry froth I bend to your nose.
Driving as wildly into ripeness as we,
these cornfields, the distant horizon
of Brush Mountain. I notice the first
tiny lines across your brow as you grin
at a joke and soft-punch my arm,
I try to memorize the colors in
your frank and fond high-summer eyes.

In twilight's first hint, with what tenderness
do you catch a passing firefly on your fingertip.
"Good omens," you say, as the mourning dove
yearns above bulrushes, as the red-winged
blackbird, all intensity of poppy-fire
and poppy-black, leaps off a wire, as
a tiny insect creeps from its chrysalis
and clings dizzy with rebirth along an aster stem.

Whenever you enter my sight, my arms,
summer saturates us, evolution accelerates,
nakedness rilling with honey and sunlight.
No sense of mine, made modest by loneliness,
ever dreamed such surpassing. Only you ever
made my love welcome, could face half my fire.

Leaving the busier paths behind--
sad adolescents with Walkman withdrawal,
old couples trailing leashed dogs--we walk
above the cornfields and into woods:

Appalachian summer shade of white oaks,
sweet cicely, jewelweed, Hester's escape.
Only in the forest do we touch.
Alone at last, I reach for you. You pull back,
peering fearfully about brief vistas
of only trunk and leaf. What letters
would madmen carve on our chests?
About your shorter but twice-as-strong frame
I wrap an arm, imagining with what bear-fury
I would knife any threat to you, some attacker's
blood splashing over my shuddering hands.

And so we walk, naming the species of trees
and shrubs, pointing out the pale trail
of lightning along a dead oak, hearing in distance
wasp-drone interstate traffic. Ears and eyes
always wary, ready to fly apart like atoms.
This tenderness could kill us. Nevertheless
at forest-edge I turn, bend down to honeysuckle
alchemies of moustache and lips. At risk,
your handsome face, your restless brain.
So easily shattered--sudden fists, knives,
and all your hard-muscled health's unknit,
irreparable in a second, chrysalis crushed,
a heap of sticky crystal. Our hands part

as we leave the woods, as the sun puddles

into purple over Brush Mountain, as
I recall the heckles, recall the swell
of a punched lip, a friend's bones found
in the town dump, beyond any peril or safety.

"Risk" from *Bones Washed with Wine* © 2003 Jeff Mann,
published by Gival Press, LLC. Reprinted by permission
of Gival Press, LLC.

Being gay and being Appalachian sometimes feel to me like mutually exclusive subcultures. Trying to balance the two identities feels like walking along a precarious tightrope. So many gay men and lesbians, faced with intolerance in rural or small-town settings, try to forget their Appalachian roots and flee to the big city, where urban gay communities will provide them with both friends and lovers.

But what if you don't like cities? What if you were brought up with such traditional Appalachian values as attachment to family and to place? What if you detest the urban annoyances of noise, traffic, overpopulation? What if you'd rather hear bobwhites than disco beats? What if you prefer oak trees to skyscrapers?

That summer, meeting Thomas as often as I could, contemplating his imminent departure, I asked myself whether I would be willing to follow him to Boston--if he were single, if he asked me to, if our circumstances were different. The only good thing I could see about his relationship with Jon was that I would not have to make such a choice. I loved mountains, I loved men. The two passions seemed inimical to one another. Choosing one, I would have to turn my back on the other. In this situation, at least, the choice was already made, and not by me. It was made by Thomas. Despite his attachment to me, an attachment whose depth I was never able to gauge, he had made it clear from the beginning that his life with Jon was his first priority, and that his plans for the future all involved urban settings.

So I found myself in the abject position so many had suffered before me, loving a man whose first loyalties lay elsewhere. I cursed Thomas, I cursed Jon, I cursed my own perverse and foolish heart. Trying to set my misery in a larger context was one of the few consolations I could find. Often, as I drove back and forth between Blacksburg, where Thomas and I met, and Hinton, my hometown, where I still lived at the time, I would stop at my Aunt Doris's farmhouse for a

visit. She was a woman living alone, who had married and then dispensed with a series of lackluster husbands. I admired her independence, I admired her fertile vegetable gardens and her slew of livestock. Often we would share meals, and, over that good country cooking, she would tell family stories, tales of passion and triumph and loneliness that helped me bear my own torments. The sort of connection I sought to share with Thomas had been sought by my ancestors, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Knowing that my story was only one of a long line helped me survive.

MOUNTAIN FIREFLIES

(for Doris Roberts)

The long drive home from lovemaking--
mountain roads, catalpa bloom, mists rising
in the first rush of rain. Axe-cleft,
memory still moist with our mingling,

I stop at my aunt's for coffee. While rain shakes
the black walnut leaves, she ladles out stew,
slices coconut cream pie--recipes used for generations.
In her eyes and face and hair my grandmother lives still.

I listen for hours, tales that ended under headstones
just up the hill, the Ferrell family graveyard.
A bowl of wilted lettuce hurled at a husband's face,
the slow carcinogens of mismatched marriages.

The wife, discovering adultery, who wrote Roosevelt
and had her husband transferred across the continent.
Men staring at the gunrack, staring at the fire,
hearing the awful river ice snarl and crack.

The great-aunt, who outlived her husband
by forty years--graying alone in the Richmond
home they'd shared, leaving his shirts still neat
in the drawers, his hat and coat still hung in the hall.

Under all those gravestones, small sagas
as intense as mine. How you haunt,

how I cherish the touch we thieve
from time--their dust pulsed as such.

How the heart splits in half, dull buried
bulb with its own serendipitous seasons
rising slow and aching into petal and scent.
All as axe-cleft with love as I.

I leave after the storm subsides,
looking once towards the hilltop, where
I will cease the heart-long and hunger,
the rush and cling and spin.

All about me, mountains and pastures
my ancestors worked, distant treefrogs
chirping, darker peaks of barn against
meadowed sky. And fireflies everywhere,

constellations to match the sparks
above, as if I strode the Milky Way,
pulsing with the gravitationals of stars.
Fireflies rising from the wet grass,

spiraling about the chestnut trees.
Galaxies drifting up from graves,
dispersed consanguine fires.
These fragile linkages of light.

"Mountain Fireflies" from *Mountain Fireflies* © 2000 Jeff Mann,
published by Poetic Matrix Press. Reprinted by permission
of Poetic Matrix Press.

Thomas and Jon left for Boston in September 1991. Disconsolate, I
returned to the celibate bachelorhood I had known before, a state made infinitely
bleaker by the memory of the six months of mutual passion I'd stolen with
Thomas. Though for a time we kept in touch, meeting in New England in March

1992 and then in the D.C. suburbs in the spring and summer of 1995, the end finally came, via the modern impersonality of e-mail.

It was soon after Thomas and Jon left Blacksburg that I was given the opportunity to teach Appalachian Studies at Virginia Tech, where I'd been teaching literature and freshman composition since 1989. The class was to become my way to make peace with a region I both loved and hated.

My feelings for Appalachia had always been complicated. For a long time, my native region was only a place to escape from. How could I forgive the miseries of high school in Hinton, West Virginia? I was called "queer" often and once even punched on the street. My lesbian friends were constantly mocked and hounded. In college at West Virginia University, I had avoided the Appalachian Literature course my friends took. Instead, I'd read gay novels describing the pleasures of New York City, Fire Island, Provincetown, and San Francisco.

However, after years of dreaming about an exciting and fulfilling life in urban gay culture, I discovered, when I moved to Washington, D.C. in the fall of 1985, that I couldn't abide the crowds, the cars, and the commercialism. Suddenly, having access to gay bars and bookstores didn't seem to be worth the trouble or the expense. So, after teaching for one semester in the cold and unfriendly halls of George Washington University, I had returned to the mountains, to gardens and pastures and woodland.

Now, in the painful aftermath of Thomas, teaching Appalachian Studies began to remind me of how much about the region I loved, how much the region had shaped me. I could relate to the Appalachian kids in my classes, the kids who were alternately proud and ashamed of their accents, of their mountain backgrounds. Reading essays about Appalachian culture, I remembered my Aunt Sadie, rinsing freshly gathered crecyc greens; my grandmother, teaching me how to make pie crust; and my father, showing me how to split wood with a maul and a wedge. Surely these things were more important than gay bars, at which I'd never met anyone of depth anyway?

About the time I'd decided that I would spend my life in the mountains, (albeit in a liberal university town where I could feel safe being open about my sexuality), about the time I'd reconciled myself to a perpetual bachelorhood in an area where gay social opportunities are infrequent, I met John. He was an assistant in a faculty computer workshop my department had encouraged me to attend. We had a few friends in common, and we'd read many of the same books. A few weeks after the workshop ended, we began to date.

John and I have been together since 1997. His family's from New England, so he was initially unfamiliar with mountain culture. Getting to know

me, he's gotten to know Appalachia. Most often, this discovery has taken the form of mountain food, since I'm an enthusiastic cook.

GATHERING GREEN TOMATOES IN THE RAIN

Anyone who knows me knows
I've waited years for this--
sleeping late on Sundays with a man
so kind I'm suspicious, as I was

all over Ireland, where the solicitude
of strangers made me fear a mugging
waited around the corner of each hospitable
word. I curl for hours against your back,

its soft larch-bough wings of fur,
I curl into the rain's incessance, that first
steady autumn rain, summer's sodden
funeral. Almost noon when we rise.

"Fried-green-tomato weather,"
I announce, that Southern delicacy
I have promised you for weeks.
"Are they breakfast food?" you wonder,

and now we are huddled together
by your stoop-side garden, beneath
your huge cathedral-arch
umbrella, temporary oasis of dry,

feeling the hemisphere slope its slow
day-by-day away from the light.
I am bending and cupping firm
unripe jade stippled with storm,

retreating to the kitchen, slicing them,
coring out the tough bit of pithy white.
"The secret ingredient," I announce,
hillbilly hierophant, taking down

the sugar bowl, mixing that touch
of sweet with cornmeal, salt, pepper,
heating up the sine que non of
Southern cooking, bacon grease,

easing the dusted tomatoes in,
frying the coating a crackling
gold-brown. Perfect with Tabasco,
with the mozzarella-and-fresh-basil

omelette you fry up, the melon
you slice. Grinning, we gobble
every bite. All the years
before--giving, giving, gifts

to those who could not care,
would not give back.
How well we make a feast together.
Those years of waste are over.

“Gathering Green Tomatoes in the Rain” first appeared in *Wind*, Issue #88.

Since the fall of 1998, teaching Appalachian Studies has been occasionally balanced for me by teaching Gay/Lesbian Literature, a class I'm proud to say I pioneered at Virginia Tech. It's very gratifying to be in a position that allows me to support both Appalachian students tired of being called hillbillies and gay/lesbian students tired of being called queer.

Teaching this complement of courses, I feel as if the conflicts between my mountain identity and my gay identity have been almost entirely resolved. Being with John helps enormously. If I were still a single gay man in Appalachia, I suspect my old resentments against the region would be running high. As it is, I see myself as amazingly lucky to be able to reconcile two loves that once felt irreconcilable.

Recently, this reconciliation was made abundantly clear during a visit to my hometown, where I was reminded of how much my family's encouragement has allowed me to achieve the peace I have. Though my mother was initially

upset by my homosexuality, she eventually came to terms with it, and I am very thankful that she got to know John before she died. My father, an articulate and energetic liberal, has written several editorials for *The Charleston Gazette* which have supported my sexual orientation and have savaged homophobes and fundamentalists. My sister, whose husband is black, is more than aware of how nastily the world can express its disapproval. Her strength and defiance only confirm mine.

My father is an inveterate gardener, and by summer's end he has put up innumerable jars of produce. One weekend last fall, when John and I visited my family in Hinton, he and I helped transfer these many jars to the basement. As we passed boxes of canned vegetables from hand to hand, I thought about how much I enjoy returning to Hinton to see my family and to admire the beautiful landscape, the conjunction of mountains and river and sky. I thought about how much I'd changed, how much my hatred of the region had diminished and how much my love had grown. I thought about kinship, those who face adversity side by side, those who work together to create safety, shelter, and sustenance against whatever cold may come.

LOVING MOUNTAINS, LOVING MEN

Today, mid-November, my lover, my sister, her best friend and I, we're carrying box after box of Ball jars to the basement, riches my father, a passionate gardener, has grown and canned. Lime pickles, spaghetti sauce, green beans, tomatoes, strawberry jam.

Hinton, West Virginia, is much the same, that Appalachian town my teenaged years so wanted to escape. There's a storefront preacher shouting about perversity, a bookish boy with a split lip. There are the usual jokes and graffiti about morphodites, there's

a gang outside a Madam's Creek farmhouse shouting "Come out here, you queers. We'll change you." No wonder this shy scholar has been lifting weights, on and off, for twenty years. Lately I'm looking

for someone to teach me the fine points of boxing.

Now I know only five hours away, amidst the D.C. traffic, the crowded sidewalks, men are holding hands along Seventeenth Street,

buying gay novels in Lambda Rising, sipping Scotch and flirting

in the leather bars. But I want to be here, in West Virginia,
where my ancestors worked their farms, where, today,
we four form this assembly line from kitchen to basement.
My lover hands me a box of bread and butter pickles,

I hand it off to Laurie—recently returned
to Hinton, recently fired for loving women—who lugs it
down the cellar stairs. There, amidst the cobwebs,
my sister's lining up the jars, greens and reds,

with their masking-tape dates, joining the other summers
packed away. I want to be here, where the season's
first ice collects along the creeks, where the mountains'
fur turns pewter-gray, and my father mulches quiescent

gardens with fallen leaves. Who cares about the town itself,
the petty politicians, the surly street loiterers, the sour Baptists,
those many sets of small-town disapproving eyes?
I come from a family of mountain misfits as it is.

My sister's husband is black, my father plays Beethoven
too loud, reads Trollope, and writes savage editorials
skewering religious fundamentalists and the NRA.
Countryside and family are why I return. Hang the town.

Cocktail time, I'm mixing up Manhattans for us all.
John's giving my father computer advice, while
Amy and I simmer pinto beans and turnip greens,
bake a cast-iron pan of cornbread. On the counter,

for John and me to take home, she carefully
sets apart a jar of spaghetti sauce, a jar of jam.
By early evening, my father's gone to bed,
my sister's headed along the Greenbrier River

to her husband. John's drowsing on the couch,
I'm finger-picking a little guitar by the fire.
On the mantelpiece my mother's urn rests.

The boy who fled from Hinton twenty-five

years ago, he's here too, the boy who dreamed
of packed disco bars, summers on Fire Island,
fascinating city men, the boy who did not yet know
what family meant. His hair is thick and black,

his beard is sparse, still dark. He shakes his head,
watches me, can't believe I've willingly come back,
even for a weekend. Fingernails of freezing rain tick
the windows, the hill-coves are filling with mist.

Home redefines us, we redefine home. Shyly,
he touches the silver in my beard, amazed at
how well opposites finally reconcile--
the way we love mountains, the way we love men.