

# **WALK TILL THE DOGS GET MEAN**

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MEDITATIONS ON THE FORBIDDEN FROM  
CONTEMPORARY APPALACHIA

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## Preface

When five women came together a few years back with a proposal for a panel for a national conference for writers, we began with questions about silence. All of us had roots in southern Appalachia and planned to talk about how our heritage was both a strength and a source of enormous expectation—from our workplaces, families, and the culture at large—to remain silent. We quoted short story writer Tillie Olson, who speaks of “times dark with silence . . . silences hidden . . . not natural silences.” Our proposal considered silence as necessary renewal for ourselves as artists, but also as an unfortunate and even dangerous act of submission. Most importantly, we planned to discuss the power inherent in finding our voices as women and as writers.

The following spring, these ideas reshaped themselves for a second conference for the Appalachian Studies Association in Boone, North Carolina. This time two of us moved deeper into our questions, focusing our ideas on place and experience. What did silence have to do with our own heritage? How does the act of silencing relate to the place called Appalachia? And wasn't the lack of sanction by American mainstream literary culture a kind of silencing? How did that form us as writers? Did it teach us what we should and should not say? In first world definitions, we are often considered quaint—hillbillies and banjo pickers, primitive mountaineers, idealized in the effort to make us fit in to a larger paradigm. But *whose* larger paradigm? And was our place as writers within it or outside it? Wishful thinking on someone's part? Folklore? Tradition? And what happens to outsiders who break established codes and norms?

At that conference, at the invitation of Gillian Berchowicz and Ohio University Press, our proposal ideas became the beginning concept for a book. Soon, Tillie Olsen's silence transformed itself as a

subject, becoming the silence of family, geography, love, birth, death, religion, and sex—all of our most profound troubles and triumphs as individuals. We became more and more interested in work from a “new Appalachia”—one concerned with a fierce need for an environmental, familial, intimate, and cultural language powerful enough to break our traditional culture’s need for compliance and acquiescence. The word “forbidden” entered our conversation.

One of us grew up in Eastern Kentucky, first in Harlan County, then in Johnson and Floyd. There, forbidden things abounded. Dancing and playing cards. Questions about Our Lord and Savior. The chance to go here, there, yonder, see all those foreign places. Getting above your raising with anything from books to desire to fierce determination. Power wasn’t exactly forbidden, especially for women, but the rules for women involved particular circumspection. What one could or could not do when it came to the backseats of Plymouth Valiants on a Saturday night. Bathing during menses. The unlikely necessity of an education, when marriage and children and ensuring the generations ahead was the most likely future. This one of us read everything she could get her hands on. She read Melville, Hawthorne, Emerson. She traveled worlds belonging to men: Dostoevsky, Mann, Kazantzakis. And somewhere, somehow, years passed and she discovered the voices of her own hills. Agee, Still, Haun. *Mildred Haun*. A woman, writing about what could have been, should have been known. The voices of other women reached out to that one of us until she dreamed big, longed aplenty. The enormity of the Whole Wide World was not an easy prospect for a young woman who was raised to be humble. No voyage out seemed quite right except for the stories and essays that finally began to find their way onto her own pages.

The other one of us grew up with a different take on forbidden things. As the daughter of bohemian intellectuals whose own parents had left the farms of mountain North Carolina for left-leaning, artsy jobs in southwest Virginia, she spent years learning how to break the supercilious language codes of respectability and decorum imposed upon her by that generations-old class leap—one should never say *fuck* in a book preface, for example, she knew, or make nonessential references to the genitals of either gender. Far more seriously, though, it was Appalachia itself that was outlawed and banned. Appalachian literature was especially forbidden—too folksy and nostalgic by half,

the intellectuals said. Not edgy enough. Not modern. Not cool. But weren't they—weren't *we ourselves*—full-blown Appalachians? Born and bred in the hollows just like our mothers before us and their mothers too? And had not all these women and men been educated in Appalachia? And taught school there—many of them—and read Philip Roth and William Faulkner and Eudora Welty under the tree in the green valley there below the Blue Ridge? Why were we excluding our own selves from our own canon? And could we really write like sex-crazed hipsters from Newark, New Jersey, or men in white suits from the hot, old Mississippi Delta that we'd never even laid eyes on? And what would be the cost to us if we tried?

Originally titled *Writing into the Forbidden: On Cultivating the Courage to Speak*, the essays we have gathered over the past two years consider a myriad of challenges to voices new and established in contemporary Appalachian poetry and prose. The writers we have worked with during these months understand the power of forbidden things and have taught us incalculable truths about the courage it takes to challenge silence and to speak.

In our collection, now titled *Walk Till the Dogs Get Mean: Meditations on the Forbidden from Contemporary Appalachia*, both established and emerging poets and prose writers with roots in Appalachia write about families left behind, hard-earned educations, selves transformed, identities chosen, and risks taken. The writers in these pages consider the courage required for any number of inheritances—faith, poverty, woundedness. They explore what it means to be tough, both in memory and in language, as well as what it means to be generous, to reach out beyond the confines of place as well as inward to the gift of language. These writers travel far away from the boundaries of traditional Appalachia, and then circle back—always—to the mountains that made each of them the distinctive thinking and feeling people they ultimately became. The essays in *Walk Till the Dogs Get Mean* are an individual and collective act of courage we are proud to have gathered together—one we hope will inspire new writers from the mountains and beyond for years to come.

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