



Mountain VISTAs
a community chapbook project

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None of the work on this project was done by VISTAs on project time.

cover photo:

Mill Point

- Jennie Terman

Letters from the Editors

We had basketball games in the elementary school gym in Nellis. I was on the team because I was still young enough then to play. We had baseball games. We never won a single game in two years...It was exhilarating. I was reborn—like I had finally found my soul.

– Senator John D. Rockefeller IV, VISTA in Emmons, Kanawaha County

Your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor often will be difficult. But you will have the satisfaction of leading a great national effort and you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man.

– Lyndon Johnson, speech to inaugurate first 20 VISTAs, 1965

The magic and difficulty of running one of these volunteer Corps is that the Corps itself has to be able to attract volunteers. You can't draft them...You can't pay them...You have to give them something over and above monetary rewards, and you can't use compulsion...You challenge them.

– Sargent Shriver, 1st Director of Peace Corps and VISTA, 1963

It is important to understand that people who have been brought up in places and with backgrounds very different from your own see the world and themselves in ways you may have trouble understanding

– Susan Whittlesey, *VISTA: Challenge to Poverty*, 1971

VISTA doesn't define what you are. You don't know what you are.

– unnamed VISTA, from *VISTA: Challenge to Poverty*, 1971

“Mountain VISTAs” is a title which describes both the people whose writings are represented in this little book and the unique nature of the Allegheny Mountains where they lived and worked.

For the past ten years our organization, the Pocahontas Communications Cooperative, has sponsored AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers working in the mountain communities straddling the Virginia-West Virginia border. During that time more than 250 people have served as VISTAs in these communities, most for one year, some for as many as three. They have been men and women, old and young, natives of the area and folks from across the nation. They brought a variety of skills and perspectives to the work, and were affected by their VISTA service in many different ways. Several of them are good writers; they have produced poetry, short stories, and essays. Three books published by our cooperative have had major contributions from VISTAs: *Above the Smoke: A Family Album of Pocahontas County Fire Towers*; *Roland Sharp, Country Doctor: Memories of a Life Well Lived*, and *The Old Man of the Mountain: Eldridge McComb*.

This small collection of writings and art will give you a hint of the talent these folks brought to their VISTA experience. Some of the pieces are about their VISTA work, while others were inspired by the communities and people they came to know.

Some are simply expressions of their creative imaginations. Our editor, Emma Eisenberg, came to be a VISTA in Pocahontas County from New York City; LeAnna Alderman wrote our introductory piece as a high school senior; her family has lived in the area for generations. They share both a talent as writers and the experience of having been VISTA volunteers with Pocahontas Communications Cooperative.

We hope you will enjoy experiencing their Mountain VISTAs.

– Gibbs Kinderman

For the Pocahontas Communications Cooperative, Dunmore WV

I was a VISTA in Pocahontas County, West Virginia from June 2009 to June 2010, though all told I lived in the community about two years. I worked for High Rocks Educational Corporation, an innovative youth development program and non-profit organization. Though I didn't always feel connected to the term “VISTA,” I quickly learned that whether I felt like one or not, in the community of Pocahontas County, I was known as a VISTA and associated as such. And in that way, I came to understand that I was linked to, and included in, not only a whole world of support and shared experience, but also a history and legacy of the VISTA program that is illustrious, complicated, and fraught, particularly in Appalachia.

What we forget about VISTA sometimes is that it was set up as a poverty alleviation program, and as such, the placements VISTAs are given must in some way deal with poverty alleviation and the communities they are placed in must demonstrate a need for VISTAs to be there. However, this fact says nothing in particular about the people in the communities the program aims to serve. The quote on the previous page, directed towards new VISTAs entering new communities rings so ridiculous to me – “people who have been brought up in places and with backgrounds very different from your own see the world and themselves in ways you may have trouble understanding.” Of course they do. Of course, though this quote makes it sound as if VISTAs were going to the moon, or to a state penitentiary.

Though it does little good to erase the differences between people – yes as a VISTA I met people from different backgrounds as me, yes I was sometimes met with challenges I didn’t know how to handle – it is equally unproductive to assume that people who become VISTAs and people who become people living in communities served by VISTA programs are *necessarily different at all*. Anyone who has served as a VISTA or who lives in a community touched by VISTA programs knows that the reality is much more complicated. Several of the contributors to this chapbook challenge this insider-outsider dynamic by being born and raised West Virginians who became VISTA volunteers in their home or neighboring communities. Furthermore, several contributors to this chapbook, myself included, were VISTAs and then became not-VISTAs, just regular people who received

mentoring and generosity from other community members that exceeded all expectation.

But perhaps what is most important is also least tangible. In the world of VISTAs living as community members and working as professionals in the Pocahontas County Communications Cooperative service area, things happened, and they were powerful. Friendship happened, love happened, music happened, stargazing happened, gardening happened, jumping in the Greenbrier River happened, hard work happened, meetings of minds happened. Sometimes conflict happened and was a site of learning. It is these moments of personal transformation, understanding between people, and everyday life that I see shining through most vividly in these accounts of what it is/was like to be a VISTA in this area of West Virginia, present and past.

Much of what’s been written about the VISTA program focuses on how VISTA volunteers gave – hope, assistance, etc., and in many of the writings I’ve read by or about VISTA volunteers, there is a language of exchange, of giving and taking: “I didn’t give nearly as much as I got,” “ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man,” “I took away from this experience so much more than I could have imagined.” To me this language of giving and taking has no place in a truthful and complicated understanding of the VISTA experience. What I hope this small collection of words and art by VISTAs conveys is what it is to live and work and play in a community of people who you care about both in idea and in practice; to try to be a truly positive member of a community that may or may not feel like your own;

to fall down as a person and grow yourself up in front of a community at the same time as it is your *actual job* to try to make that community stronger.

What I would like to say about my VISTA experience in Pocahontas County, West Virginia, first and foremost, and regardless of what I got or gave or didn’t get or didn’t give, is that I lived there. And that I really liked it.

- Emma Eisenberg



Viney

- Emma Eisenberg

Majesty

They stretch upward to the sky before me, higher and higher. Their majestic grandeur and lofty beauty consumes the land around them, presenting a vision of power and fortitude. These mountains, which have stood here for generations, these trees with their many rings and scars; they continually draw our eyes upward to the sky. They assure us that we are protected. They tie us to the land and the people on it.

Below me I see the rich soil cultivated by strong hands and tired backs. I see the work of nature and humanity with nature. The dark earth beneath the carpet of dead leaves tells as much as the mighty mountains. It teaches me about the people around me, about my neighbors, my family, my ancestors. It teaches me that people can overcome amazing circumstances, and conquer their fears without breaking.

When I was little, I used to imagine that the mountains were the graves of giants. The way the land had formed with rounded off curves and mounds, seemed to me like the huge rounded bodies of Giant Kings laid to rest under green forest shrouds. There they slept in eternal peace, while we scurried around, trying to work and live on their graves, not knowing of their bodies below or the lives they had lived. Why had they died? Was it a war, a plague, the tiny pinpricks of a thousand little swords, or that people just stopped believing

in them and they ceased to exist? The giants living below the mountains may have long since been forgotten, but I hope that the giants, kings and queens living around us everyday shall always be remembered.

You don't have to have royal blood to be a king or queen. You don't have to be rich, famous, or powerful. I see everyday men and women who display more royal attitudes than the highest most media-blitzed star. They live their lives with a purpose, to survive in a land where lives are ruined with a single word. They live down the road from me and up the road from me. They ride in Fords and Chevys not Cadillacs and limousines. They know the meaning of a dollar and the meaning of sacrifice. There are both women and men, Yet, I gain most inspiration from the strong women in my community.

They have come through astounding problems in their lives and survived. They have experienced deaths and injuries. They have educated themselves by experience and hard work. They have given birth to children and tried to teach them the right way to live. They have been in the background and foreground of life. They are mothers, daughters, sisters, and aunts.

I can see my grandmothers hard at work. I see the one making apple butter or lye soap, the other making cornbread and green beans. I see them doing what they can with their lives even when most of their creative energy has been suppressed. My grandma Alderman was a wonderful artist. She could draw and write so beautifully, yet her talents were never cultivated. She was offered a chance to go to college, but she was

getting married and had a family to care for. Instead she put herself into doing the perfect job of sewing, cooking, and crafts. She never had a full-time job until my grandfather died. Then she learned how to drive, got a job, and gave up smoking. She changed her life through her own free will and determination. My grandma Jones had always wanted to be a teacher. She never got a chance to because she was raising a family. She put all of her teaching energy instead to raising six children. She put all of her kids through college. She went down to talk to the dean of the local college to assure that all of her kids got scholarships. She made sure that her kids did not miss the chance she had for an education.

Even though my grandmothers are gone, I have not lost this strength. I have found it in the women around me. I have adopted grandmothers, sisters, and aunts from the women in my community. They are living examples that women can overcome dire situations. They are living examples to me that hard work comes in many forms. They show me what true majesty is. It is not giving orders. It's living your life the way you feel you must to survive. It's not ruling the land. It's appreciating, holding and treasuring your land everyday.

Majesty can be found all around us in the eyes of the caring women, rich and poor, fancy and ragged, simple and profound. It's about looking past the glitter of the gold crowns and into the glitter of a creative mind and hardworking body. Riches won't last forever, but the contributions these women give to the people around them will. The impact they have on the mountains and soil

they live on will inspire us to look at the impact we can have. Their lives are as precious as the outgoing women we pick as our leaders.

Their hearts pump with the rhythm of the mountain rivers that make the mountains and soil so beautiful. They add beauty to everything they touch. They stand as tall as the mountains around us. They stretch higher and higher until they reach the sky and we forget that they are women at all. They have become the giants. They have become all that is around us and all that is before us. They have become queens in their own right, queens of their homes and of their lives. They hold a majesty not championed by the world. The richness of spirit they hold in their own tired hands and aching feet is one that has been passed down over the generations and will be passed down even more. It is sure and true.

- Leanna Alderman Sterste
(written in 1994 when she was 17)

History Lesson

First there is the light.
Then the memory of the light,
then the memory of the shadows.
But always,
always the stories, the porch chairs and cornbread,
and the clouds of black butterflies rising
from the dusty gravel road.

- Maribeth Saleem-Tanner

*Very good things to do when your man
writes love letters to another woman...*

split wood
wash your clothes by hand with a washboard
learn new music
smoke cigarettes and eat chocolate with a very good friend on your porch
get lost in West Virginia and rescued by a stranger
dig rocks out of the ground and make that spot into your garden
reorganize a shelf
throw a fabulous party so you can wear a big hat
spit on him
eat more vegetables
eat more ice cream because it is summer time

- anonymous



photo courtesy of Greer Hughes, edited by Emma Eisenberg



Frisbee

- Emma Eisenberg

En Route

Is there something romantic
about wandering, about taking your time?
You're currently moving across the country.
You can't find any one belonging for the life of you, but
everything you own is packed in your car
parked outside the Super 8. There were no campsites left
in Smokey Mountain National Park.
You probably could've planned better.

The front-desk woman gives you two beds
and there's only one of you. Is it still romantic
when you find blood on your sheets?
You move to the other bed. You feel
a little less mad at the tired woman. You find blood
on the sheets of the second once clean bed.
Holy hell, it's your blood!
Thank God.

- Jamie Poster

Woodpecker Feathers

"Who er you?" they shouted across the
white snowy plane between us.

"Well, I'm your new neighbor," I replied
a little confused and equally amazed as the scene
around us. I had made it to West Virginia and this
was going to be my home now. And then I
bellowed back, "Who are you?"

"Um, I'm S, this is T,"

"Well, what are you guys doing?" I said as
I began crossing the distance between us, leaving
fresh prints in the deep snow.

"Huntin black birds," S said, with all
sincerity.

"No you're not," I said surely, and then sure
enough he pulled up his gun hidden beneath the
snow and held it over his head proving it to me.

We walked over to their dog Sage who was
flipping and twirling his newest toy, a beautiful
little red headed woodpecker.

"We thought it was a blackbird." S said
unconvincingly. Not sure what to do, but
knowing I shouldn't be condoning this, I decided
to pull some of the prettiest feathers out to save.
The boys helped me, pulling chunks and stuffing
them in my pockets. And I was accepted.

"Grab the net," and we were off to our next
adventure of catching minnows. S jabbed holes in
the ice as T swirled the little net searching for life.
Bella, a lady beast of a Rottweiler, tagged along
and we taunted her closer and closer to the edge to
the ice with the lure of snowballs. Then we hunted

for the buried tire, soft white doughnut under all of
the snow. Throwing kind snowballs at each other,
we fought to stand on top of the tire, on top of the
world.

Once we were thoroughly wet and cold,
we ventured back inside. We made chocolate chip
cookies and heated some tomato soup. S and T sat
painting as the cookies baked. They recounted the
history of this old house I live in and who has lived
here before me and then warned me who to stay
away from in town. They left me with a
painting of their school and a confederate flag to
add to my decor. I wasn't sure what to make of it
all, but I knew I had found something good. There
may be misunderstandings between us; where I
see a sad history and racism, they see rebel, and
pride. But I was accepted, not only as some weird
girl from California, but as a fellow adventure,
someone who likes woodpecker feathers and
playing in the snow.

- Amelia Swenson

Living History

In the Fall of 1999, I moved back home to Pocahontas County to work as a VISTA at Allegheny Mountain Radio. I had a long history with our local community radio station. My grandmother had hosted a cooking show called "Cook's Corner" when the station first started back in the early 1980s, and produced a fundraiser cookbook, "The Way Pocahontas County Cooks." Since she was my regular babysitter when I was five, I remember the station being on all the time.

One of my particular dreams in returning to volunteer at the station was to revive a show that had been created by several VISTAs back at the beginning of the station. The show was called "The Senior Power Hour" and ran interviews of local senior citizens talking about their lives. Once in high school when we were home for a snow day, my mom and I flipped on WVMR to check the weather. Instead we heard my grandfather's voice ringing over the airwaves, singing one of his favorite hymns and talking about his time fighting in World War II. My grandpa had died when I was 12 years old, and five years later it was especially poignant to hear his voice again.

This experience inspired me to bring back my own version of The Senior Power Hour. I called the show, Living History. I recorded weekly interviews with senior citizens for a year and a half. As I aired the show each week, I would regularly get calls asking for tapes of the show or suggesting other folks that I could interview. I later worked

with other VISTAs and radio station employees to expand three of the interview projects into full-length books: *Above The Smoke: A Family Album of Pocahontas County Fire Towers*, *Roland Sharp: Country Doctor*, and *The Old Man of the Mountain: Eldridge McComb*.

I was able to work on several interesting projects as a VISTA: helping make Appalachian literature accessible to the public with the local library, developing educational curricula on local literature, and helping out at the radio station wherever I could; but all those amazing stories I heard each week on Living History are still what I remember most.

One week I spoke with a woman whose classmate flew the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the Atomic bomb on Japan. Another week, I talked with an African-American barber who had played baseball against Satchel Page and Dominic DiMaggio. For months I interviewed a 92-year-old doctor who still practiced medicine three times a week. A farmer showed me how to predict the weather from the birds and trees and clouds. Woody Simmons, an award-winning old-time fiddler and banjo player told me how his father had made his first banjo out a ground hog hide and a Prince Albert tobacco can. The men who worked in the Fire Towers described to me what it was like to be all alone in a steel tower during a lightning storm, balancing on their beds so they wouldn't be shocked by the lightning bouncing off the glass on all four sides. All of these people were the same senior citizens I saw down at the local senior citizens center, the ones who said, "Oh I haven't done anything interesting. You don't

want to talk to me."

In November of 2000, I was asked to do a presentation on Living History to other Americorps volunteers. I shared with them some of the memorable stories of my first year.

The book, *Above the Smoke: A Family Album of Pocahontas County Fire Towers*, grew out of a suggestion from my boss that I talk with an older man who was in ill health and who he thought was one of the last Fire Tower workers. It turns out that there were about six or seven more workers who I was able to interview. Other VISTAs continued the work after I finished. Neil Horner worked on a state run tower and he told me this story.

Bill Crigger was down here on Beaverlick. I had just finished my dinner and was sitting there not paying much attention and I happened to look down the country. Smoke boiled up. I got on my range finder. Well it said Bill Crigger's tower. Right on it! I couldn't get him on the radio because he had went down in his cabin to fix his lunch. He couldn't cook up in the tower like I did. I had a tower big enough up here with a stove that I cooked in it but he didn't so he was down getting his dinner.

I said, "Buddy what did you do, set your tower on fire before you left?"

Well he said, "I hope not!"

But I said, "It looks to me like it's on fire."

He said, "I'll talk to you in a minute." When he got in the tower he said, "It's right here over the bank." The fire was really just down from the tower and he went on. He said, "Uh oh, there I seen him go running down the ridge. There he set another one!"

I said, "What?"

He said, "He set another fire." He watched him a little more. He said, "There he goes a running again, but I can't tell who it is. He set the third one. Right down the ridge. He'd just stop, set a fire and run again." And he had something over hundred acres burnt before they could get anybody in there. That's the way things worked.

My great-aunt, Agnes Jones, told me about the delivery of her baby sister. I was really struck by the details of her story, especially the tomatoes and cucumber pickles.

When I was 11-years-old, I was helping my mother can tomatoes and cucumber pickles on the old wood cook stove and she pulled the pans to the back of the stove and told me to run get Aunt Ruth, which was my dad's only brother's wife, and when I got back just in a few minutes my baby sister was born. So anyway I let her go ahead with my mother and I went on in to the kitchen and canned the tomatoes and cucumber pickles. Daddy came home. He was working on WPA then. He came home that evening and saw me getting supper and he said, "Where's Mommy?" I said, "Oh Daddy. Mommy's in the bedroom. We got a little baby sister."

Dr. Roland Sharp was 92 and a family doctor when I spoke with him. For years he worked as a coal camp doctor in Mullens, WV. He told me about his most memorable experience as a doctor.

I went down in the deep holler on Barker's Ridge to deliver a young lady, her first baby. And it was so steep going down, it must have been 500 feet to the road and they had dug out

places to walk like steps. This girl was living with her grandmother; her husband was the grandson of the woman we were going to. ... Well I went clear down into that hollow. You couldn't get anything but a horse in there if you had problems. There was no way to get an ambulance in there. She would have had to be carried by people.

I went up there on a Wednesday afternoon, the sun shining like this and Grandma Mills was the lady. Mary Mills was the old grandmother and she lived in a log house with three rooms. You go in this one, the next door, then out the next one, three rooms. The first room was the kitchen. The second room was where this girl was in labor. The third one was where her invalid brother, who was about 70 or 80 years was in bed. I checked the girl in the afternoon.

Wednesday was the only afternoon I could get out of the office so I was glad to be out on that mountain. I said it's going to be several hours for this, but it's so far back to Mullens. It was about 8 or 10 miles out of Mullens. I said it's so far back, I'm just going to stay here.

So I asked Mrs. Mills, "Do you have plenty of light, it may be after dark when this baby comes." She said, "Yes." So I sat down there in the sunshine and talked to the young boy. He was about 19 or something like that, the father. We talked and looked out over the mountains. There was nothing to see but mountains. I talked to Mrs. Mills and we went on and we had supper and she still wasn't ready to deliver.

I said, "It's going to be later than I think. So I want to be sure about the light." They had a cook stove and what the woman was lighting the house with was a woodstove and she'd take the lid off the stove while it was burning and it would light your room about like a candle, you know in your kitchen.

She said, "We'll light the lamp later."

Time went on and it was getting closer to midnight

so I went to Mrs. Mills and I said, "She is pretty well dilated and I think it's going to be time now that we're going to have to get the light, fix it up in the room. All my things were boiled and ready."

About ten minutes later, Mrs. Mills came in wringing her hands like that, and said, "Doctor, the Carbide can's empty."

Carbide lights is what they had. I had no light. The lamp just burned around thirty minutes. The Carbide went out and that's all the light we had. At one o'clock the baby was ready to deliver and the only thing we had in that room. The log house was about as long as this room here, but not near as wide. She started up the fire and took a couple of lids off of it, like a woodstove had, and a little light would flicker in there. And I delivered that baby with forceps in the dark! And she got along all right but you couldn't tell whether she was bleeding or hemorrhaging after it. All I could do was rub that rubber glove on the bed and see whether the odor was blood or amniotic fluid that's around the baby. I stayed until daylight, sat with the girl to make sure she was all right. Cut the cord in the dark and cleaned up the baby and sat there in the dark until daylight.

The boy carried everything and took a couple of trips. It took two or three bags; you know an OB bag to the top there. My head ached until I could hardly step on those steps from the stress of that night.

When I got home, I said to my wife, "I'm getting out of this country. I'm never going to deliver another baby."

She just looked at me and I said, "With the headache I had."

I told her what I had done that I had delivered the baby in the dark.

She said, "I think you're probably supposed to be here or God wouldn't have let you. You couldn't have got through last night. Don't talk silly. Just go back to work."

I think that that's one of the most touching things between a patient and me and my wife and me. That was Opal my first wife.

When she said, "You better be glad you just have a headache, don't you know that God had something to do with that or you wouldn't have had a nice big healthy eight pound baby."

And the woman really didn't hemorrhage to amount to anything. But I couldn't tell when the afterbirth was being born or anything. I believe that. I hate to use I but I think I am the only person that I have ever met that delivered a baby with forceps in the solid dark. I told that story in Chicago to three obstetricians in Yale. They were sitting with me in a medical meeting and they asked me what I did and I told them I was a coal company doctor and they wanted to know what you did in a coal camp. I told them the story of delivering that baby in the coal camp and they invited me to dinner with the Yale OB faculty to tell it, paid for my dinner at the Palmer House in Chicago.

That was just one of them, but that was one that I will never forget. I think God has to be with you and I'll always remember that Old Lady coming in, wringing her hands and saying, "Doctor, the Carbide Can is empty." And I'll tell you my heart fell clear down to the seat of my pants. That baby was coming right then I could feel the top of its head but it wasn't going to come by itself but there was nothing to do but put forceps and I did.

Now that many of the folks I interviewed have passed away, I am even more glad that I took the time that year to really listen to the stories of their lives. I hope that someday someone might feel blessed, as I did, to hear their loved one's

voice again on the radio, or maybe someday a new VISTA will come along to record some more Living History.

- Leanna Alderman Sterste

The Ripper Inn, Route 17, Rainelle

By circumstantial evidence we are
convicted. If the bedspreads are this thin,
it follows we come just as cheap. If our
apparel is discarded, obviously then
our ideals have been likewise tossed aside.
The painting's artificial strokes disclose
no skill, its waterfall no bona fide
emotion: What does this then say of those
who seem disposed to imitate its rush,
who rent the room, who like the art, who pull
back covers, curl inside and, yes, who touch?
It says, of course, *You're the wrong kind of girl.*
The town bestowed the label long ago,
And we protect—from them—what they don't know.

- Jolie Lewis



Pick

- Emma Eisenberg

I Was Still Home

I had no career aspirations, I was not sure of my interests, I was unaware of my strengths, and I was graduating from college. I was currently taking a “light” class load, which consisted mostly of women’s studies classes, including the senior capstone class. This class had a service learning component. If it had not been required, I would have avoided it. Although I had volunteered on my own for a few projects and had worked on various community service projects, the service learning aspect of many women’s studies classes intimidated me, and I had purposely avoided other classes with such a requirement. How could volunteering be part of my grade? Thank goodness I was no longer able to avoid it. This project did two important things for me that influenced what I still consider to be the most important decision I have made in my life. This project gave me a real understanding of the importance and necessity of community service and volunteering. It also brought me to Pocahontas County.

The day I graduated from West Virginia University, my entire family travelled to Morgantown to celebrate. I was the third of nine grandchildren to graduate from college, and the only one to graduate who had grown up in West Virginia. When I announced my plans to move to Pocahontas County and work as a VISTA volunteer, I faced questions and confusion. What do you mean you are going to volunteer? How are

you going to pay your bills? You mean you just spent four years earning a college degree, and you aren’t going to get a job? My family didn’t understand, and they were worried. Fortunately, I have parents who were used to supporting me in things they didn’t understand.

That July I travelled south to Pocahontas County. When people asked, I told them I was going to teach teenage girls in rural West Virginia. However, the reality is I learned much more than I ever taught. It was not what I expected. The experiences I had working at High Rocks, had two specific, unexpected effects. I found a community that gave me a new understanding of the word, and I found an appreciation for West Virginia that I thought I already had.

The community of women and girls at High Rocks was pretty much as close to a utopia as I could imagine. I worked with a group of women who I respected and trusted, and with amazing girls who brought their own unique perspectives, experiences, and talents into the mix. We helped girls develop their individual voices and find the value in those voices. We addressed individual needs and problems and taught the girls that it is important to stick together as a group. This group idea was, to me, the most important lesson. It is the idea that women and/or girls should be working together, not tearing down or holding back. As a whole, women face the same issues, and women are stronger united than we are divided. It is the idea of sisterhood.

The girls were learning that women have a different style of leadership that is needed in society and their communities. I was putting my

beliefs into practice and learning how to truly navigate within them. I was being mentored as I was mentoring. It was a special group of people constantly being challenged and figuring out solutions as a team. And I was nurturing friendships with my co-workers, roommate, and the girls that would last a lifetime.

In addition, though I had always been very proud to be born and raised in West Virginia, the appreciation I have for WV grew during my time as a VISTA in Pocahontas county. I took pride in my heritage and roots. Growing up, I spent family vacations visiting state parks, learning WV history, and being taught about the nature all around me. But when I began living and working in Pocahontas County, I was able to see the special perspective growing up in WV can give a person. I was faced with questions that I knew answers to, but had never had to articulate. This helped me realize new things I had taken for granted about the place I lived. For example, I had always thought it was quite ordinary to wave as I passed someone on the road. And I found it comforting to gather around a pick up truck the same way we gathered around a kitchen table. I was still home. I had never left, but I was remembering to appreciate its unique place in the world and its exceptional beauty. I am convinced this process made the experience of leaving West Virginia to continue my education much more difficult and heartbreaking.

Deciding to become a VISTA volunteer changed my life. It has made volunteering automatic. It made the community I live in and the community I create for myself high priorities in my

standards of living. It solidified the idea that it is more important to enjoy what one does, to make a difference, than it is to make money. It has made budgeting money effortless. It has made me a better, more efficient leader. It has made me more proactive. Working as a VISTA at my specific site was very important. I will always return to Pocahontas County and to High Rocks. High Rocks did as much for me as I did for it. Most importantly, it helped me create a wonderful network of friendships and support of women, and it has made me the teacher I am today. I never had any formal teaching training, yet the work I did at High Rocks prepared me to walk into a classroom and succeed. I believe it made me a better teacher than any degree or student-teaching ever could. And it helps me to continually find new ways to connect with teenagers and support them to reach their goals. The friendships I have made there are lifelong—they are women I can count on to always support and accept me, give advice, and listen, even when I don’t ask. If I am ever feeling lost, I know where to go to find myself again.

- Kendra Vincent

The Weather Has Done This to Us

1. The wind across the pines sounds like cars on the interstate that runs all along the other side of the world.
2. I can hear ten different bird calls from my porch this morning. Nine of them:
 1. twee-oo, twee-oo, twee-oo
 2. caw, caw
 3. swee-oh, oh, oh
 4. tee tee tee tee tee tee tee tee tee tee
 5. grrrreeeeee
 6. chep. chep.
 7. kya, kya, kay
 8. ee ee, weeoo weeoo, ch ch ch ch ch ch ch
 9. peep, peep-peep
3. An old white building with a yellow door, and a sign "Come in We're Open" duct taped to it. This building is solid and faintly humming.
4. The grass makes several sounds. One is a large group of robins all taking off at once. Another is the creak and groan of the stalks rising out of the soil. The soil is dark and wet and it makes only one sound, which is similar to a car backfiring, but infinitely softer.
5. The frogs in the swamp chirrup in unison all day out the window.

- Rebecca Elliott

*I could never love a man
the way I love the moon*

I could never love a man the way I love the moon
because men have monkey balls for brains

- Emily Newton

When you think the world sucks

When you think the world sucks, you should know that
a garlic will do a cartwheel in the earth to grow right side up even if it is planted upside down,
honey bees communicate entirely through dance,
and there is a particular species of crawfish that lives in the mountains of West Virginia
that does not live in the water and is electric blue.

- Emily Newton

Untitled

wet drips collect on my window as i force myself to try to make something of the outside world, beyond my foggy morning existence. the sun blinds me with its strength through the disclairity-windows blurriness and in this moment i commit to making something of it, enjoying that freakin cold.

kate and i, russel and boon all load into her little old honda and up the mountain roads we climb. the snow started falling all around in soft and sweet flutters. but they got thicker and greater as we climbed. kate made the turn off towards the hike bashfully, entering unploughed territory. curving and winding gently along we eventually did not curve with the bend of the road and instead made a new path. I was shocked. ive never been stuck in a ditch before. i saw a glimmer of panic in kate's face before her ever baring-ruling calmness once again took hold.

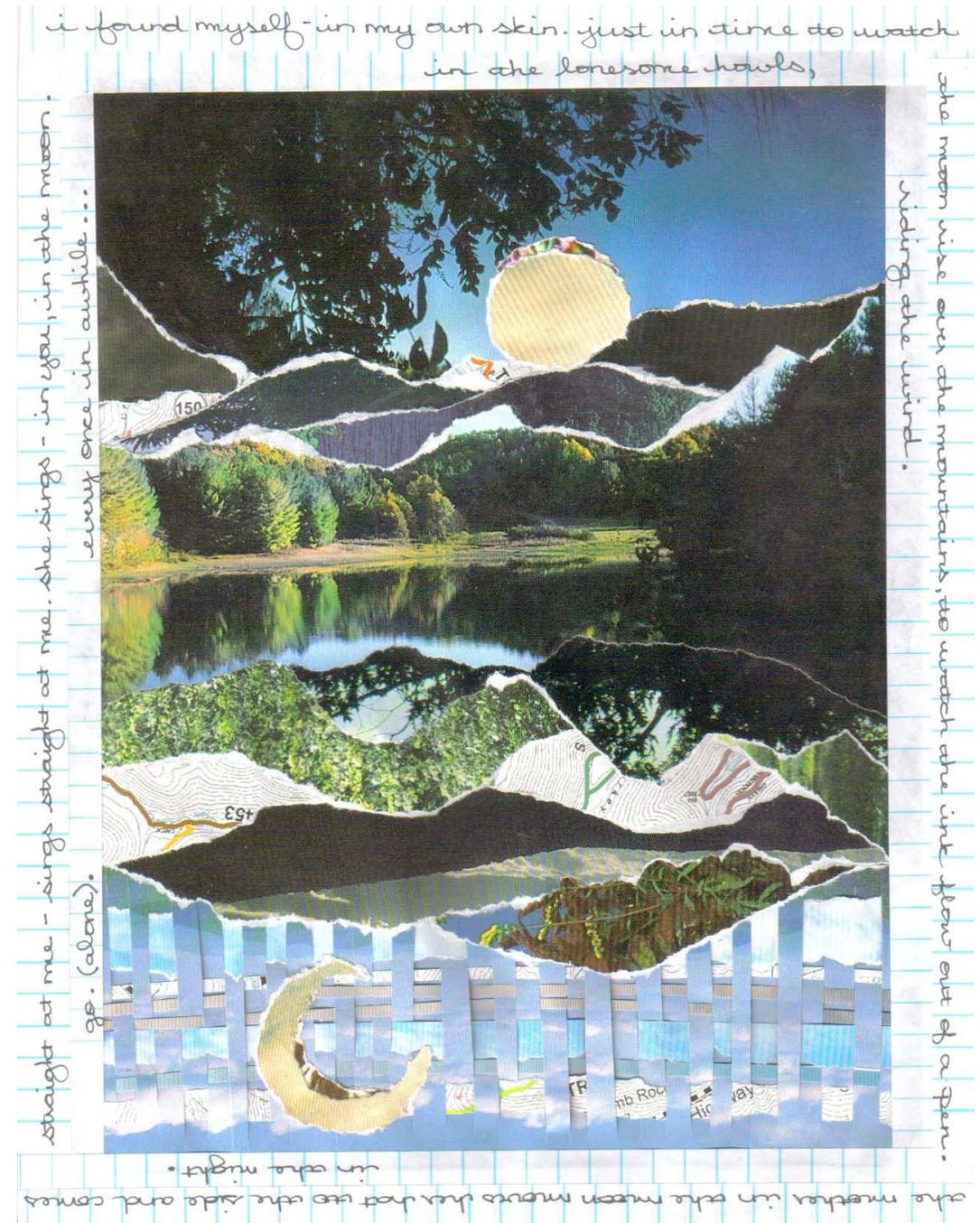
'okay, lets just try', yeah kate, like we can just push our way out of here... but then we did try. we dug out under the wheels, shoved towels and boxers and mats underneath, anything we could find, wet cold baring down through my thin gloves and determination suddenly budding. i shoved, kate revved, and we moved a foot. i was thrilled. then we dug and shoved and revved some more. after a few feet worth of work i saw the light. i paused and saw how delighted our pups were with this excuse to be running wild all around. and the snow

continued fluttering peacefully. we walked down the road just to see, we took silly photos as evidence.

when you see the light its a lot easier to pause, to take a moment to appreciate all that is good around. we resumed pushing and revving and got out! slowly we made the trip out of this forbidden road and back onto plowed ground.

this place is hard and daunting, but i feel empowered. the world is sweet and wonderful. but its sweets are overbearing. and i have a new dear friend.

- Amelia Swenson



- Lynnmarie Knight

The Greenbrier River Watershed

I wasn't going to miss a karst convention.
So I gave up a day's work at the college library.
The boss didn't mind. It sounded like I was going to learn something.
I got the day wrong, and walked from Fairlea to Lewisburg with a blister.
And tried again on the next day.
I had a blast
bumped into this girl who was looking for her future replacement (plus mom found the ad in the paper)
and she had her boss there
and we chatted.
Later I realized she was the same person I met in a Friar's Hill party x years ago.
She insisted she saw whooping cranes after a storm and I remembered that storm because cormorants
were bobbing in the Greenbrier River.
So of course I took her side because there were also some honking huge birds that didn't look like any
heron I'd ever seen.
I went through the application process, talked too much at a meeting with the DEP and somehow got
the job anyway.
Spent three and a half years in a love affair with the river,
my river. My first playground was the Greenbrier.
Discovered by a madman on a fit or prickle-stranded surveyors, take your pick.
I knew every inch of two miles.
Where the agatized gemstone coral emerges from the edge of a bend and people sell it on Ebay at so
many dollars a pound.
And a large smooth sand dune shapes the drift where you can find turtle shells and purple mussels.
And when the floodwaters rose, I could hear the stones rolling and tumbling and grinding their way
along the bottom, just like the buhrls at Reed's Mill.
We would swim in that river.
Even in those floods.
And when it didn't flood we joked that the Durbin Tannery was the magic ingredient to soft hair.
At the edge rested the state's largest spring, the Davis
too cold to let you breathe and full of sculpin, wayward trout and herons.
I would look for the herons in the fall.

Because the Blue Hag follows the Herons into the land, and I'd imagine her blue-skinned face stamping
up the migratory route, wrapped in a plaid woven of frost-killed field stubble.
Her breath was as white as her hair, and where she struck down with her walking-stick frost sprouted.
I wanted to see her, but I never did.
Just the tracks she left behind, in brittle-glass-spun grasses.
And there she stayed, until spring.
She'd get mad at spring and throw her stick under a holly tree
(that's why nothing grows under the holly) and shrink into a stone to wait out summer.
We had a holly tree in the front yard.
Grandma brought it from Stuart Draft in the 1930's
"She had two but one died" and a fern from Powell's Beach
and strange wild violets, large and white with lilac sneers painted over the petals.
Those were from the old Homestead, where Cornstalk walked.
Dad would talk of the turkey drives and the railroad glory days
of people who had everything in the C & O cars with china and crystal and silver.
And at the back end of the same train he would see people wrapped against the cold
with nothing to eat.
"Fight Poverty with Passion" says the t-shirt.
Always wear an inarguable t-shirt.
I liked showing people the treasures of their own home
because the world is a fine place and worth fighting for.
Most people just need to be shown that once in a while.
Because the Greenbrier is the longest untamed river left in the East
and 30% of the New River's drainage.
With fish that survived the continental collision that split us from Teays Valley.
It's frail, though.
The River is a vertebral column
connecting the nerve clusters of railroad towns, old quarries, towns.
Green ghost towns where the trees once stopped
on their float-down to the Ronceverte Mills.
And tracking the old batteau channels
where men in spiked boots rode down in 8-foot muddy floodwater.
Caves and streams but no lakes.
I walked at the headwaters.
And played at the bottom.

The very bottom.
Because if you're called to go underground
no one questions you for answering that call
where all is still
and silent
but for the sound of the rushing faraway waters (clean or nitrate-laden).
Or maybe that's the blood singing in your ears.
Tuning in to Inner Space
while time proves it isn't fleeting after all
and fossilizes itself in its passing.
Drops of water into aragonite and
gypsum against Calcite, the Mineral With the Most Forms.
When you find the imprint of a brachiopod
still soft in the matrix of limestone
you realize you're doing the right thing
thinking in terms of "watershed"
because the watershed is a piece in a large puzzle.
A 3-D puzzle that turns into the Globe when you put all the pieces together.
Take it out just one piece
with pollution
or greed
or resource exploitation
or the death of love.
And a way of life
a culture
a language
employment and PRIDE collapses into that black hole
dragging the rest of the puzzle apart as well.
I climbed out of the earth
and stared at trees who settled into their niche during the last Ice Age
and wondered if the honey locust still waits for the mastodon
to rip the sweet bark off its trunk
and does the pawpaw miss Jefferson's Sloth
whom, I'm told
may not have been born here,

but it died in Second Creek
and the pieces of it not being used to prop up a saltpeter vat were mailed to Thomas Jefferson.
So his death made the birth of Paleontology in America.
The Osage Orange has the horse back, so I feel it doesn't grieve for its propagator.
But so many other trees are missing their living links
and we humans have to do the best we can
treating our watershed the way it should be treated:
like a food pantry, garden, way of life
(three points of contact...doesn't just work in a cave)
and when we mention intelligent design we mean urban sprawl
and protective ordinances.
and encourage people to visit us and come back again
(not just because we like their money, but because we get tired of people asking us what's the big deal
about living here).
I had family up in Durbin
and I was married to the people at the Hinton Confluence.
I tromped in algae
studied fecal coliform
went to schools
talked ears off
and had too much fun.
VISTA was the reverse of college.
I was paid to learn and it was wonderful.
At a VISTA convention you know you're already part of the solution.
The part of the problem is why you're having the convention.
I met a governor
Bobby Kennedy
the DEP
the Mountain Institute at the top of Spruce Knob
the NRCS, the USDA, and F&W, and the CCC.
And the Appalachian Coal Country Watershed Team
(That's ACCWT on the alphabet soup list).
(Eight states of massive brainpower
sitting around in jeans and Brahma Bull hiking boots)
And I heard of people raving about Gibbs' VISTAs from MacDowell County

(Marshall U: "Heather? She was my best student ever")
or about Gibbs himself
("He's PROTECTIVE of his VISTAS!")
and the area in question
(See this part of the state? Here's where he goes!).
Or someone stabbing a finger into a map of the country's light pollution at night
(we're at the black spot)
announcing: "Here there be Gibbs."
And for three solid years
I went from being the relative at Christmas:
(So what is it Marcy does again?)
To: (She works for the environment).
And I know why VISTAS can only work 3 years tops
because being a VISTA is long and hard
with lousy pay but great insurance
and greater people
and Cecil B DeMille great situations
and the chance to be part of something bigger than yourself.
Who wouldn't choose to live on a positive high even if they were poor?
The term is over now
but at times I feel like I'm still there.
And it's still unreal in a way
like coming down from a roller-coaster rush
and I know now why a health board official in California
mailed me a box of outreach materials
even though I'm in West Virginia and far out of their usual region to help.
Because his mother had been a VISTA
and she had loved it.
I was married sixteen years, you know.
It ended in my last year.
But Time being a funny thing
fleeting and yet solid at the same time
the marriage was the fleeting part
already melting like mist.
And my VISTA years were the part truly set in stone.

It built my foundation
and reminded me that my bones are solid limestone
and as far as Time goes,
The VISTA years will still be a bedrock.
Long after the courts and restraining orders and judicial verdicts have passed
ending with jail or death.
You can outlive sixteen years by three years just by the quality of those three years.
Oh, I still have my T-shirts.
I'm one of those former VISTAs who buy up the ENERGY EXPRESS T-shirts at the thrift stores at
summer's end
because only VISTAs should honor the VISTA shirt.
We just can't stand to see someone else with them.
If I had to create for myself a suit of armor for this world
it would be as a caver
With Brahma Bull hiking boots
the laces shut with duct tape
and pads about the knees and elbows.
A caver's helmet (or a helmet for a girl whose dad worked the quarry in Fort Spring).
I'd have a Great Blue Heron for the River painted on
and a VISTA T-shirt for my breastplate.

- Marcia Wilson-Cales



Ghost

Since absence defines death, I'm not wrong though the hallway wall is obscured by empty nails and the paint is stained with the outlines of frames. I often stare and imagine the photographs of waterfalls, or was it miniature prints of Picassos. Filled with fantasy, he is like that wall and while I haven't been practicing, I'm yet to discover how to resurrect the dead.

- Jamie Poster

Birth

It was two weeks past Stephanie's due date when I had to fly back to Minnesota for five days. For nearly nine months I had watched both her tummy and excitement grow, getting to know her and her baby, and now I would miss the culmination of their journey together.

The days passed, and the baby didn't come. Just after 5:00 a.m. on the day of my scheduled return to West Virginia, as I was gathering my things for the airport, Stephanie's contractions began to come closer and stronger. My disappointment that I would probably miss the birth was overshadowed by excitement for Stephanie. She had been waiting for this since the cesarean birth of her first child. This was to be more than a labor and delivery – it was her chance to prove that her body could do what it was designed to do; that she was powerful, not broken. On the way to the airport my excitement bubbled over into song for Stephanie. I sang quietly to myself a song learned from a midwife, "I'm opening up in sweet surrender to the luminous love light of the one. I'm opening, I'm opening..."

Two layovers and a delayed flight later, I finally boarded a West Virginia-bound plane. "We regret to inform you that we have overbooked this flight and have exceeded our weight capacity," the flight attendant announced. "We need two volunteers to wait for the flight out tomorrow; you will be compensated with a \$500 travel voucher." I was tempted to take the deal and convinced I would

miss the birth anyway, but I hesitated, and missed the chance.

It was 8:00 PM when I finally arrived home. I immediately called the midwife to see how the birth went. "Get some sleep. I'll call you when you should come, its going to be awhile," she reported. Surprised, I slept restlessly until I was awoken by a midnight call. It was time to go. The exhaustion of the day of traveling disappeared as I threw my things in a bag, kissed my boyfriend goodbye, and flew out the door. I wanted a coffee badly, but it was a two hour drive and I didn't want to miss a second of the birth. "I'll probably make it just in time," I thought. A near full moon suspended over the mountains, and I drove those windy roads like I've lived here all my life, singing as I drove, "I'm opening up in sweet surrender..."

When I arrived, the student midwife greeted me outside and explained that Stephanie was beginning to become irritable and tired – all you could expect from a laboring woman at 2:00 AM. Not knowing what to expect, I braced myself and walked inside. I was stunned. I have never seen a woman so beautiful and softly sexual as Stephanie laboring in the birth pool. Eyes closed, she swayed back and forth. Uninhibited, she moaned in anticipation for what was to come. She was breathtaking.

Hours passed, and her labor continued. She cried, she yelled softly. "Come out baby, I want to hold you, I need to hold you, please come out, please," she pleaded with her baby and to herself she begged, "Open now, open up." Discouragingly, the sun rose and a look of defeat crept in. "I can't do this another day," she said. "Please come

out, you're killing me baby."

The midwife, having been before to the hard and lonely place that labor can take you, offered her hand and her wisdom. It was all there was to give.

Squatting on a birth stool in her bedroom, the final stage began. Her husband was steady beside her, as he always was. The midwives knelt in front of her, and she reached for my hand at her side. I was honored to be a part of her circle. I watched as Stephanie transformed, and pushed with primal groans and screams. I found myself pushing with her, wanting to take away some of her pain.

With all her being she pushed, "I can't do this!" She cried, "It hurts, it hurts so bad." She leaned into the midwife for strength.

"I know it hurts," the midwife comforted, "Dig deeper."

This was her fight, and her right as woman and mother. So she fought and screamed and pushed. The head crowned, and with another push it was out. She grabbed tight onto her husband and to my hand, and with one last push her son was born. She reached out to grab him, and finally held her son.

Two weeks later I visited Stephanie. She shared with me how empowered she felt by her birth, that now she felt she could do anything. She didn't remember the pain of her labor, but only the euphoric feelings of her accomplishment. She had never felt stronger as a woman. Her birth experience wasn't just the moments throughout the labor and birth; it was the transformation into a new mother. This transformation that birth

brings, a coming into being, is a power deep in the hearts and minds of women. I believe this power is innate in all women – mothers or not – and can be realized in countless ways. It is far-reaching and healing. It opens and changes us.

- Kate Miley



Fishing

- Amelia Swenson

When I Got Lost

“There is no better place to live than right here.”

We sat and watched NASCAR on the TV in the garage.

Then there was a pause that filled the space of the damp garage and the time of laps 169, 170, 171.

“There is no better place, but the thing is I got kids and...”

I listened to him as I sat on his floor. We had only just met. And we only met because I got lost in the woods and he found me in his cow pasture.

We were waiting out the storm in his garage.

Laps 176, 177, 178, 179, 180.

“I got young kids and...you don't want to hold them, hold them back. You want them to have opportunities.

You think it's not fair that we can't give it to them living here. School and stuff. You...”

Laps 183, 184, commercial break.

The commercial is for motor oil and it has Danica Patrick in it, a very attractive female NASCAR driver.

“You give up a lot living here.”

Lap 190.

“But there is no better place.”

- Emily Newton

Mountains To Cross and Mountains To Bring Me Home Again

Two years ago I volunteered as an English teacher in Cap Haitien in northern Haiti. I went expecting it to be hot, dirty, and poor. I had heard that lack of security and political unrest were always lurking there. I expected to instruct twenty advanced English students, teach for a few months, and then come home and go on with my life. Instead, I had fifty-five English students of all experience levels and prepared several for the TOEFL test. In exchange, several of my students helped me to explore the countryside and its small villages, and we talked at length about their aspirations and what Haiti as a nation needed. And that was just the beginning.

Afterwards, by a round-about path, I came back to my home in West Virginia to work as an Americorps VISTA for High Rocks and got to teach and learn from hopeful young West Virginia women. I thought I would do it for a year, meet some people, and have time to plan for the next step of my life. But it turned out that this was the next step. I learned about administrating a nonprofit and I also made some deep friendships with other West Virginia women who shared my dreams for this community and their own futures.

When the earthquake hit Port au Prince, Haiti in January 2010, High Rocks opened a fund to support my student group that was banding together and mobilizing their forces on the ground in Haiti even as their friends and family were dead,

missing, and hurt all around them. Many of the High Rocks girls and members of the West Virginia community helped to fundraise and gather supplies. They also learned about the situation so that they could tell others what was needed.

From there, the project has grown into a long term and multifaceted partnership between Haiti and West Virginia. I have led teams of West Virginia professionals to Haiti to teach, provide medical care, and give advice in planning for the future. The Haitian team has also been active in working with schools and youth projects in West Virginia. It is a constantly evolving partnership that now includes many, many people. And I have never been happier than I am by being right in the middle of it all.

West Virginia is my home. I feel comforted by the mountains, the mud and coal dust from the industry here, and the traditions and pride of the people. In Haiti, I will never fit in there with my sawdust-colored hair and moon-toned skin. But, I do feel deeply part of the community there after having sat in a retired school bus built for forty-four school kids in Fayette County (just like the county in West Virginia) as it carried over seventy sugarcane-chewing-happily-gossiping Haitians cross-country over the mountains and through the plantain and mango groves of Haiti.

Many of my dreams and concerns for the futures of West Virginia and Haiti are the same.

Poverty, traditions, and the mountains create the beauty, pride, and strength of the people as well as much of the injustice, stereotyping, and pain in both places.

I believe that the best thing I can do in both of these mountainous places where I belong is to participate in, and support, local communities to stand up and start doing what they believe is the right thing. From there, I can then spread their influence to others. Pride is local. I have seen the struggle to organize and sustain these kinds of projects, but I have also seen the deeply-rooted and powerful success that this approach can bring.

I think that the people of West Virginia and Haiti deserve to be listened to—we are the ones who live here every day and who understand our culture, values, and needs better than anyone else can. It is a long road that has little to do with fame, quick fixes, or profit. What it does have to do with is hope, love, pride for what we can accomplish together, and a sense that we are doing something that makes the future possible. We can bring about the changes that we believe will really help us and the generations that will come after us, if we give ourselves the chance.

- Meike Schleiff



Haiti

- Meike Schleiff



- Marcia Wilson-Cales

Chock-full

In the heart, time is less linear and these days, it is my heart that's leading.

Memories connected by the feelings inspired:

Natural women and men in skirts.

Maypole, contra and improv dancing.

Turning, weaving, spinning, spinning, spinning.

Pouring love into 100 gypsy eyes.

The more I pour out, the deeper I'm filled.

Community spirit and communal bathrooms.

Drumming and bonfires, songs, prayers and warm, moist, restorative winds.

Breathing through our hearts.

Lives unraveled, and yet, still lacing anew.

Embraces held longer than we ever allow ourselves.

Then the rain.

An opus on the metal roof, louder and Louder and LOUDER until sleep pulls us away.

Morning comes quietly with the fog.

Bare feet walk the wet ground.

The deepest feelings of gratitude.

The reminder of our impermanence, a gift.

- Taylor Alef



photograph courtesy of Greer Hughes, edited by Emma Eisenberg

I Learned

I learned a lot.

I learned how to make a sound like a slide by tuning your pegs up and then down with your left hand while still fingering with your right hand.

I learned that more is always better: in bluegrass and in life; more volume, liquor, words, stories, people at a party.

I learned that you can give yourself a tattoo with nothing but a ballpoint pen.

I learned that getting drunk can sometimes be more like a job than it is like fun.

I learned that wanting really bad for a place to feel like home is not exactly the same thing as feeling at home and that love for a landscape can sometimes go unrequited. That it is possible to have a soul dream of home that tells itself true. That being at home has more to do with body than soul. That we are animals and can smell home.

I learned that two people with good hearts and an ear for understanding can stand on a plain of earth and speak. That two people with good hearts and an ear for understanding can stand on two plains of earth one million miles apart and fail. That what is between them is more than music, four years, a way of talking. That those miles can be unbridgeable. How many? Count them.

I learned there is a river left in this world you can swim in. That the left side of it is the deep luscious side and the right side is the rocky side that will hurt your feet.

I learned that a woman and a girl can become a family. That a girl can teach you your life. That girls can sing a song of wanna do right and the sound of that wanting is the only prayer I believe in.

I learned how to successfully put on and remove snow chains by myself. How to dig myself out of a ditch with nothing but my hands.

I learned about joy.

I learned that when a man says to another man, you are my friend, that means something. I learned that learning how to be a man is the stuff some lives are made of.

I learned that most of us do not touch with our lives in any significant way anything that can truly be called America. Anyone I went to high school with, for example. Anyone I ever knew until today.

I learned that a mountain is a life and that each one has its own name. That on the top of each mountain there is a barn and an empty field and two trees that touch and grow into each other and a dream of being free.

- Emma Eisenberg

Hearing Home

"Where are you from?" The woman was gazing at me with a look of concentration on her face, her head slightly tilted to one side. "It's your accent. I can't quite place it. Talk for me—say something else."

"Ah....," I said, thinking, *What accent? I'm from Michigan. We don't have accents.*

"Okay...Northern Ohio," she guessed. Northern Ohio. This woman is serious about her Accent Placement Skills. What gave me away? Perhaps when I said, "Holy Toledo!" It's a phrase no one else in West Virginia seems to use. And in spite of all my efforts, it's just not catching on.

"Well, you're close. I'm from Michigan. Southern Michigan." This seemed to please her. Maybe she didn't nail my origins, but she knew one thing: I was from away.

But the thing is, even though I may be "from away," I don't have an accent. In fact, I believe Midwesterners, and Michiganians in particular, are famous for being accentless. News outlets comb Michigan looking for newscasters for this very reason. Seriously.

I mean, I *know* accents. My family lived in Scott County, Tennessee for generations, until my grandparents moved to Michigan in the early 40's in search of work and the financial security which only Northern factories could provide. My father, being five years old, lost his accent, but my grandparents never did. There was a rhythm and a cadence to their speech that always soothed me,

and made me feel at ease. They sounded different, but it was familiar. It was home. Several months ago, I was watching a documentary on television. A woman was being interviewed, and when she began speaking, I knew instantly that she was from Tennessee. Her accent was so familiar! It jolted me to realize how long it had been since I'd heard that lilt. I sat on my couch, amazed that something so unexpected and so simple could bring tears to my eyes and make my throat close up. I miss my grandparents, of course, but I didn't know until that moment how much I missed the music of their speech.

Maybe because of the different speech patterns that have always surrounded me, I have always been aware of accents. As a child, I would unconsciously mimic the speech of others, to the point that I was sometimes accused of making fun of people. But it was never that. I could hear a tempo, an inflection that fascinated me and I would fall into the rhythm. This unusual talent of mine was quite often remarked upon by others, and even addressed at parent/teacher conferences. My third-grade teacher, who was a kind woman, said, "I suppose it's just the Parrot Gene."

As an adult, moving to West Virginia was quite a challenge. Accents abound here, different from the Tennessee accents I already knew, but just as lovely. I spent an entire day trying to say "bank" the way my husband (a native West Virginian) says it. He finally became offended, so I had to explain my questionable genetics. And I soon realized that I would have to be on my guard, or my new community would assume I was making fun of them.

Working as a VISTA volunteer in the local public library gave me a chance to hear many accents, and also to become acquainted with certain phrasing that I've never heard before. "Has she not?" and "Did he not?" instead of "Hasn't she?" or "Didn't he?" charmed me. Even saying hello was different. I would greet people with "Hi! How are you?" or sometimes "How ya doin'?" but my co-workers and our patrons said "Howeryew" in a smooth, honeyed, slow way that I longed to adopt, but couldn't. (See Parrot Gene anecdote, above).

Soon after the Northern Ohio incident, a little boy asked me why I talked so fast. *Do I? Really?*

"Well, I'm from up North, and it's very cold there. We talk fast to help us keep warm." He liked the answer, so I stuck with it. And tried to slow down. But I was curious. So that evening, I asked my husband if he thought I had an accent.

"I don't notice it too much anymore," he replied. *Anymore?* "But when you get on the phone with your mom, it really comes on strong." I was speechless. "And you know, when we watched ' Fargo ' the other night, I thought you would have fit right in with those people."

"Fargo? Those people are from Minnesota! I don't sound like I'm from Minnesota!" I protested. "I mean, maybe if I was from the U.P. I could see it, but..."

"You say 'Eh' a lot," he pointed out. ("Eh" is pronounced like the letter A. Just in case you are not from away.)

I let the discussion drop, but kept pondering this mystery. After my time as a VISTA expired, I remained in these beautiful mountains,

my new adopted home. And after living here almost four years, I made a trip back to Michigan. I was curious to see if anyone noticed a new, Southern accent. Would they think I sounded different? I pictured people saying, "Vicky! You have an accent!" My brothers would surely tease me for being away too long, and sounding Southern.

Not one person thought I sounded different. No one thought I had picked up on West Virginian speech patterns. I was still a Michiganian in speech, and probably always will be. I'm not complaining, of course. It just, well, it still fascinates me, how different accents sound, and appear and disappear and linger.

I stopped in a rest area on the drive home, somewhere on the Ohio Turnpike. I was walking back to my car, and had my hand on the door handle when a young man shouted at me. He came running up to me, with a smile.

"I saw your license plates! You're from West Virginia? Me too! I'm in the army now," and he gestured at a convoy of military trucks that had pulled into the parking lot. "I reckon it's been ages since I saw someone from home!" One of his buddies shouted for him to hurry up. "I was just wonderin', could you talk for me? Just say..something?"

He was so young. Why do we send boys to war? I smiled, thought, *remember, slow now*, and said,

"Well...Howeryew?"

- Vicky Terry



Allegheny Echoes

Not my papa, nobody's papa he told me, but
"the redder the better," he also told pointing

to the lamb pulled fresh from the grill. My teeth
as dull as the string players' nails, though they

could shred their instruments with smile and song
that only made the talent-envious bystanders
forget so many years of practice. And the game
bled, caught so long between gum and cheek

I could remember how young it was plucked
from summer pasture. At least it heard bluegrass.

- Jamie Poster

(Some Very Small Things about March)

first:

The church grass is a small pond. The pastor's children wade through, waist-deep, toward the old shoe factory. Twisted hunks of metal, soggy boards. Their mother is waiting in a long red skirt.

second:

Something happens. I am not waiting for it. The lights flicker on and off and my shelves are full of unread books.

third:

Have I told you I am in love with the way the pine needles light up orange for a few minutes before the sun goes behind the hills? There are flies on the window and crows in the trees. A fence, a ridge, a field of clouds.

- Rebecca Elliott



End. Begin, again.

About the Contributors

Taylor Alef: currently serving with Trillium Performing Arts Center, and living in Lewisburg, WV.

Leanna Alderman-Sterste: served with Alleghany Mountain Radio from 1999-2001. Now lives in Massachusetts and works as a freelance writer and radio producer.

Emma Eisenberg: served with High Rocks Educational Corporation from 2009-2010. Now lives in Philadelphia and writes fiction and freelance journalism. www.emma-eisenberg.com

Rebecca Elliott: served with Pocahontas Woods from 2007-2008. Now lives in Chicago, where she attends the Art Institute of Chicago.

Lynnmarie Knight: served with the Water Resources Task Force from 2010-2011. Currently working as the assistant project director for the PCC VISTA project and living in Hillsboro, WV.

Jolie Lewis: served with High Rocks Educational Corporation from 2000-2002. Currently teaching in Marlinton, WV, living in Richwood, WV, and writing everywhere.

Kate Miley: currently serving with the Midwives

Alliance of West Virginia and living in Marlinton, WV.

Emily Newton: served with Parks and Recreation from 2009-2010. Currently WOOFing in Australia.

Jamie Poster: currently serving with the Pocahontas County Opera House and living in Marlinton, WV.

Maribeth Saleem-Tanner: served with High Rocks Educational Corporation from 2002-2004. Currently living in Beaver Creek, WV and teaching, writing, and parenting.

Meike Schleiff: served with High Rocks Educational Corporation from 2009-2010. Currently living in Renick, WV and working on the Haiti Project (GROW) and planning on graduate school in Public Health.

Amelia Swenson: served with the Pocahontas Local Foods project from 2010-2011. Now lives in Oakland, California.

Jennie Terman: served with the Pocahontas Opera House from 2009-2010. Now lives and works in Huntington, West Virginia and plans on graduate school in Ethnomusicology.

Vicky Terry: served with the Pocahontas County Public Libraries in 2003-2004. Currently living near Mingo, WV and working as the head librarian at McClintic Library.

Kendra Vincent: served with High Rocks Educational Corporation from 2002-2004. Currently teaching high school English in Florida.

Marcia Wilson-Cales: served with the Greenbrier River Watershed Association from 2006-2009. Currently back in college studying complementary treatments with a cancer focus.

Ideas/inspiration also contributed by: **Margaret Thornton, Sam Petsonk, Eleanor Mahoney, Kevin Chesser.**

For more information about the Mountain VISTAs project, to get involved, or to purchase a printed copy, email Emma Eisenberg at: eisenberg.emma@gmail.com.