

No One Gets Out of There Alive

By Tom Lombardo

Book Review:

Wake Wake Wake, by Valerie Nieman. Press53, 2006.

If you haven't seen much poetry about West Virginia, there's a good reason. The canon of West Virginia poetry comprises only a few poets, most notably James Wright. A handful of contemporary poets includes Louise McNeill, Irene McKinney, Maggie Anderson, and James Harms.

It's time to add another name near the top of that list—Valerie Nieman. Nieman's poetry has none of the celebration of Appalachia that characterizes much of the other contemporary poetry about West Virginia. Yes, there are characteristic landscapes, flora, and fauna, and, of course, coal miners. But her poems make no attempt to romanticize the reality of life in West Virginia. Her gaze does not avert from bleeding feet or hissing lungs.

Nieman's poetry bears the taste of wild game, like the deer, rabbit, and small mammals that mark her pages, and the recipe makes her poetry a pleasure to consume.

Some people cannot abide wild
meat, the resinous aroma,
the color
like knife-openings
in the palms of their hands

. . . Still, those of us who eat
have a duty to know—to hunker down
and smell fresh droppings gleaming
like berries on the path,
hear the snort of the lead doe
warning into flight
a band of yearlings.

For Nieman, the land is a living element, at times revered, at times hostile. People and animals cross paths often, eat each other or each other's parts or waste products, sometimes merge identities. In "Expedition," the narrator roams across the land, eventually becoming the land itself, but along the way,

she ate lethargic ants
 and grubs with useless fat-man's legs,
 peeled the bark from cherry trees
 and chewed the green lining, like the frayed
 lining of her coat.

In "The Increase of the Earth," a narrator eats the soil itself, despite the death and decay that creates it.

A body's gonna eat a peck a dirt,
 anyways

dirt draws itself up out of the places where men spat,
 from the feathers of wild birds shot over fields
 . . . from the slops of dishwater thrown,
 bones of mice and legs of cows
 that the dogs carry about after the slaughtering,
 all into the red clay

. . .

I put the spoon in my mouth
 and chew the dirt like it was gristle to my teeth.

Nieman's characters take what they can get from the land, and sometimes they give back to the land. In "Farm Wife," the gift is blood.

. . . see the lines
 at the backs of her bare heels
 like cracks parched in clay,
 . . . the blood of her weariness
 drips from her broken feet
 and sows itself among the ripened corn.

In "Pissing in the Woods," the narrator, during the act in the title, adds back to the soil as

[my] spray veers
 runs down my leg
 twisting a path
 to earth
 wetting leaves
 and soil
 fragrance on its way
 to ammonia

As her urine becomes part of the landscape, she becomes a doe.

I leave a marker
 like the doe
 by the pond
 that pauses
 urinates
 moves on
 restless
 for the buck that follows
 tastes her need.

You can't write about West Virginia without writing about its coal mines and its miners. In "A Moment's Peace," a miner lies dying in bed: "A miner's life goes on / as long as he feels / the shift of the earth around him." The title refers to the peace a dying miner seeks from his hovering wife who is

urging my own shallow
 sucking at the bottled oxygen
 the labor of thirty dark years
 waged all over again
 in my tunneled lungs

Nieman's dying miner recalls his rescue from a roof collapse that buried him up to his waist. In the ensuing years, the very land

the miner dug into became a part of his body, and this miner knows death doesn't like being cheated.

It's been here
waiting a long time now,
in the useless hollows of my lungs:
black lung, they say, and emphysema,
the word like air hissing out
a punctured chest.

When the day's mail arrives, delivered by "a friend like any man whose cap light / shines on you in a close place," the miner's wife discovers an errant letter, and in the neighborly West Virginia way, she must run the letter over to its proper recipient, fretting all the way. The miner seizes the opportunity for a moment's peace.

I've been portioning out
my breath, waiting.
The house's quiet, absolutely
quiet; it eases like a church
when the parishioners have gone . . .
I see a bird's shadow move across
the window glass.
I see the shadows of the trees
across the floor . . .
I see my breath move across
the bits of dust
and then they swim undisturbed.

Just like that Nieman will take your breath away, and you will see that *Wake Wake Wake* has nothing to do with sleeping.