

# Appalachian Song Cycle

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

*In the Garden of Stone*, by Susan Tekulve,  
Hub City Press, 2013.



Susan Tekulve's strong debut novel (winner of the 2012 South Carolina First Novel Prize) puts me in mind of an orchestral *suite*, symphonic in length but not a symphony. I think of Grieg, of Copeland's work for ballet and film, or a Mahler song cycle. The individual chapters of *In the Garden of Stone* can stand alone—just as sections of Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite* are often performed singly—while also contributing to a larger story. So, to call Tekulve's book "a novel" puts it in a strange position, as though literature's vocabulary were neither as elastic nor as inclusive as that of music, as though a literary song cycle is not as presentable as that stalwart symphony in words, the novel.

For this reason, her novel is impossible to summarize. Each chapter has its own integrity. That said, the Sypher family rests at the heart of the book; this is a family study, covering four generations and 50 years, 1924–1973, where the West Virginia coal fields, hollows, and the mountains of neighboring Virginia play an integral part. The country is depressed, its people poor and their lives bleak. The mother of the novel's first narrator, Emma, was once a school teacher until she married an Italian immigrant miner. Embittered by hard work, the mother has turned Emma into a dogsbody, denying her a full education. Emma escapes by marrying a railroad man of otherworldly kindness, Caleb Sypher. The garden of the title is Caleb's attempt to recreate, on Virginia soil, one of the Italian gardens he so admires, where stream beds are paved and statuary abounds.

The Sypher men seem to marry as much from opportunity as love, although we sense love's presence. Caleb and Emma's son

Dean marries Sadie, Emma's maid and nurse. She is also the daughter of the passionate Jane, who grieves the death of Sadie's sister. What strikes us about Emma and Sadie is how they cope with obvious neglect; for running like a *leitmotif* through the novel is the fate of children treated as second best. Another such child, Bambino (who, as an adult, will alter the Sypher family forever), is the less-loved son of a Sicilian mother who sends him abroad with the favored brother's illicit funds. Indeed, the chapter devoted to the starving tramp, Bambino ("La Mèrica") may be the most affecting.

Dean will spend his early teenage years with his Palmisano grandparents, where his grandmother will eventually scorn the grandson as she did the daughter. Later, Dean's remarkable wife, Sadie, will rise up out of her Cherokee mother's disregard, and that of her husband's, to claim herself. (The chapter "Ostriches," chronicling Sadie's final gesture of reconciliation toward her mother, appeared in *New Letters*, fall 2006.) In the novel's quiet conclusion, the widowed Dean will achieve a rapprochement with another estranged child, his daughter Hannah.

Tekulve's understanding of her characters is compassionate and deep. We never doubt these people. Even at a time when a 13-year-old Polish immigrant girl can be married off to a miner of 40, or when discarded railroad workers can shoot at unsuspecting Italian "scabs," or when only a bee sting can relieve acute arthritis, Tekulve does not flinch. She neither sensationalizes nor denies the harshness of her characters' lives, their complexity, or their capacity to see the beauty around them, where the "foothills [sink] like flightless birds into the dusk."

This brings me to the underrated skill of writing dialogue. Hers is arresting in its exact phrasing and natural rhythms. We hear her characters' distinctive voices.

Tekulve's final strength is a sensitivity to landscape, to the specific contours and light of southwestern Virginia, as well as its flora and fauna—from the wild horses living in the woods to the snails and blue gill that nourish a destitute Bambino: All are rendered in a thoughtful and exquisite prose. As an aging Dean tells a neighbor, "The closer we remain to this place, the more we know who we are."