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# *Fiddlin' Tongue*

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*"You wanted to say something?"*

*"I did that, sho. But words is like th spots on dice:*
*no matter how y fumbles em,*
*there's times when they jes won't come."*

JEAN TOOMER, *Cane*

When I pull into the field of this campground, the clouds are already splitting apart from jets of sunlight. I feel the chill washing away from the morning air as I roll down my window to pay the man.

"Mornin'," he says.

"G'mornin'."

"Iowa," he halfway asks. He pushes the hat farther back on his head. "'At's a long way."

"Too long," I say, thinking he must've seen the license plate, with the blue silo and flat fields of corn, on the front of my truck. "But I'm from here, from down near Asheville. I just live out there. For now. Out in the cold and flat."

"I hain't never been. Shorely a long way."

I nod.

"Anyhow, welcome to Fiddler's Grove." He hands me a ticket and taps on the top of my vehicle as I pull forward.

After I park and climb out, the first thing I see is a rebel flag and some smoke. Tents and RVs and old vans line the hill and the dirt road, and groups of people are clumped in misshaped circles in all directions, making music around dying campfires, but the

first thing I see as I wander toward the noise is an old rebel flag pillowed by soft, gray smoke. It hangs from a string running from a van to a green tent down in the gap, beneath some oak trees.

The flag feels entirely out of place. Perhaps it shouldn't. This is North Carolina, the South. This is a state that cut itself from the Union, drifting further into cotton and plantations. To the east the land flattens on a long journey toward the coast through old homesteads and mill towns. But to the west, from the direction I've just come, the hills grow softly into the misty Blue Ridge Mountains, guarding their distance. This is Union Grove, a tiny town on the edge of Appalachia, a place that feels like its own place, separate from Mason-Dixon loyalties—something more complicated than southern, something hidden and hazy.

> *The process of collecting the songs common to the mountain section of western North Carolina is a difficult one, for the mountaineers suspiciously evade direct questions, and vanish entirely if too closely pressed. Hence the collector must necessarily be content with the scraps he overhears in passing a cabin, unless he is so fortunate as to be acquainted with the different clans, or so lucky as to be able to attend one of those interesting celebrations known as Fiddler's Conventions.*
>
> LOUISE RAND BASCOM, *"Ballads and Songs of Western North Carolina"*

The town of Union Grove is home to the longest-running fiddlers' convention in North America. During the year nearly two thousand people live here, but every Labor Day weekend the population may triple as people file onto the grounds of Harper Van Hoy's campground for an "Ole-Time Fiddlers' Convention." This is Fiddler's Grove's eighty-fourth year and my first time.

My family's line digs deep into the soil of western North Carolina—in the eighteenth century my ancestors settled in the same county where I would be born 250 years later. My kin still live on our family land, a couple hours west of here, deeper in the mountains. Even though I moved away after high school, I'm





acquainted with the clans and ways of these mountains. They are my mountains and my people.

I've come to Union Grove to collect stories, to observe and take notes for a writing project. But I am also here to make music.

I started playing clawhammer banjo a few years ago because I'm drawn to the music that reaches deep into the history of these old rounded mountains. While evidence of the music's longevity shines clearly from the mere sight of hundreds of people gathered at this campground to play centuries-old tunes, the music is somewhat obscure and overlooked, and perhaps fading away. People still play these old songs back in the mountains, but they are harder and harder to come across, and so I am glad to be here where the music's alive and I can learn from banjo players who have been rapping the strings and singing by heart since they were kids.

I've got an old mesh cap on my head and an open-back banjo swung around my shoulder. The front of the blue-and-white hat reads *Jimmy Rollins Drilling*, a company I've never heard of, but I threw it on this morning because it's the sort of hat my grandfathers would have worn. I knew I'd find men like my granddaddies here at Union Grove, wearing hats meant for necessity, with broad bills and cool backs, the writing or logos inconsequential.

Along a dirt trail leading through a patch of woods, a white-bearded man sells fiddles from a cardboard box on a folding table. The fiddles' necks stand in a row beside a Bojangles to-go bag and the man's van. Handwritten price tags hang loosely from the tuning keys, and the man stands beside them, well over six feet tall, wearing a red cap high on his head—*Advance Auto Parts*—and a flannel shirt and long pants. It's 85 degrees. He looks like a mountain man ought to: tall, thin, with a long and bearded face.

Behind him, under a tarp, people sit in a circle playing the song "Cherokee Shuffle." I stand on the trail, listening to the music, my banjo slung silently over my shoulder. The song thumps along quickly above the rhythm of the stand-up bass and the guitar, a fiddle and banjo carving out notes. I move in closer to look over the box of fiddles and finally speak to the man.

"Reckon the rain's gon holt off?"

"How's that?" He leans in, away from the music at his back.

"I say, reckon the rain'll hol off?"

He does. He speaks slowly and thoughtfully, calling me "friend" in the way an old preacher addresses his congregation. He tells me he found all the fiddles in the box and repaired them himself—replaced busted bridges, re-glued necks. Been picking them up for years, he says, from flea markets and trash cans and yard sales, and he keeps them all over his house. He figures he's had a hundred of them at any given time, hanging on the walls, hiding under the bed, resting on the dinner table. Today, twelve stand silently in a box, for sale.

"I knowed this one feller that come on a fiddle at a flea mart once, and when he took hit to see hit's worth, this man give him $65,000 fur it."

"Sixty-five *thousand?*" I ask.

He nods long and slow, "I hain't never been 'at lucky."

The most expensive revived fiddle in his cardboard box is marked $500. He pulls it from the box to show a woman who is browsing his collection. Behind him the folks under the tarp clip steadily into the second break of "Sally Ann," the banjo hammering quickly. No one sings, but I imagine the words in my head—*ride the buggy, yes I am. Ride the buggy to Sally Ann.* The man tunes the fiddle with a flick of the wrist and sweeps the bow surely across strings. He sets in, playing effortlessly, instinctively.

He holds the fiddle low, against his chest rather than under his chin, and long-bows—pulls the bow in broad movements up and over the strings—bringing "Sally Ann" to a resonating close. There's a smattering of applause from folks standing by the fiddle table, while the man introduces me to his wife, who has been playing bass, and his daughter, who has been playing banjo. They open up their circle, hand me a folding chair, and I sit.

Late in the Civil War, Union scouts donned Confederate uniforms to slide through enemy lines seamlessly, ghosting through the woods, hidden in Southern loyalty, trying to gather information. Most Southern soldiers were dressed raggedly by that point in the war, so these scouts would often intentionally destroy and dirty the uniforms to make their appearance more believable.

But looking the part was only half the battle. The scouts also worked at perfecting a Southern drawl. It was part espionage—





they believed that they'd be able to infiltrate enemy camps much more easily with the right amount of twang and regional lexicon—but it was also part self-preservation—they figured that a Southern accent would invite much more sympathy if they were captured creeping through the woods and slipping into Confederate camps.

I imagine these men practicing their new accents, looking into rivers and lakes as their companies rest from their marches toward battle. I can see them as they work out the kinks, watching their rippling reflections adopt a foreign-sounding tongue, opening their mouths wider to soften their long *i*'s and slowing the rhythm of their sentences. I wonder if some became so invested in this character, so enamored with the sound of their new voice, that they began speaking, eventually by instinct, to Union comrades with a Southern tongue.

As I sit with Richard Bowman, the man selling the fiddles, and his family, I occasionally swing my banjo around and try to pick along. They play songs like "John Henry" and "John Hardy," "Cousin Sally Brown" and "Sally Goodin," "Cripple Creek," and "Cotton-Eyed Joe." The music rises and falls, the guitar flat-picks bass lines to fill empty space between verses, and Richard works the fiddle so that it seems it could never produce an imprecise note. People watching have trouble standing still—they tap their toes or pat their thighs right along with the banjo's raking and the stand-up bass's pulsing. My right hand takes the shape of a claw, the fingers bent and my thumb sticking sturdily out to catch the banjo's fifth string. I hammer the strings as my left hand frets notes and chords, trying to keep up with the Bowman family.

But instead of thinking about rhythm and chord progressions and murder ballads and waltzes, I'm thinking of language.

I'm thinking about the word *reckon* that I used when I first met Richard. I rarely use the word in my daily speech, especially living in Iowa, but it appeared in my mouth when I stepped up to him. I hadn't consciously decided to use the word, but as we spoke, I felt my tongue shifting. And I've felt it moving about—changing shapes—ever since the man collecting money assumed me to be Iowan this morning. It's as though my tongue needs to convince those around me that I'm a mountaineer, a local. As I ask the family about its musical history, my tongue drops *g*'s and

morphs my long *i*'s into the distinctive *ah* of these mountains—something more like "far" for *fire*.

Richard's daughter, Marsha, is my age, twenty-five. She plays the banjo (among other instruments), and her speech is thoroughly Appalachian, unaffected and organic: "I first learnt to play on a bass. Daddy fixt up an ol' celler and so I stood it up and commenced to playin' right along."

They pull a picture of young Marsha from the van to show me—a bony, pale five-year-old, standing bashfully behind a cello.

My speech is something different from Marsha's, something more like a changeling. Words like *reckon* and *ain't* are no longer daily parts of speech, but my tongue grabs hold of them anyway because of the music and world spinning around me. Lyrics from myriad songs float through the air from all directions, *fly around my pretty miss—I could hyear the whistle blow a hundurd miles—I hain't never gone see you anymore*. Many of these changes happen naturally, but as I now become more aware of them, I feel fraudulent. I see myself: the Union scout dressed up in a drawl and mesh cap, trying to uncover stories and music tips. Trying to fit in.

When I was in high school, an older friend who had left our town returned home with college classes under his belt.

"What are you doing tomorrow night?" he asked me one afternoon.

"I have a soccer match at Poke."

"At *PoLk?*" he asked, emphasizing the *l* I'd disregarded.

*Poke,* I repeated softly inside my mouth. I'd never thought of the *l* before. It didn't exist: I'd always said what everyone else said, what seemed right.

But after that day I made a conscious choice to always pronounce the word phonetically. I had inside information from the outside world, and I began to feel a hint of superiority in saying it correctly when those around me were saying "Poke." I even teased my mom when she said "Poke County."

I started questioning the pronunciation of other words that came instinctually from my mouth: "ar-renge" for *orange* and "da-awg" for *dog*.

After high school I received scholarships to attend a private,





liberal arts college in the flat piedmont of North Carolina. Many of the university's students were northern—from Maryland and the District of Columbia—and from private and prestigious high schools. My first year, a young woman from Philadelphia who was living across the hall asked me why I said *mash* when I meant *press*.

"*Mash* the button?" she echoed as we played Nintendo. "And why do you keep saying *used to could?* That sounds funny."

What she meant was that it sounded stupid. I agreed. I stepped outside myself and quickly decided I sounded like a hillbilly: a long, buck-toothed dunce from a movie. I blushed but was secretly glad for her pointing out my language's quirks. I searched out any other words that might cast me as ignorant and tried to remove them. Before speaking I took extra moments to review and dust off the words on their way to my tongue. I made sure I didn't invert the *er* of *interesting* and say something like "innerstin." I made sure to use *those* when I might've used *them*. ~~*Them*~~ *Those books are heavy.*

I'd always been a good student; I knew the parts of speech and their roles, but I had mostly applied that knowledge to writing and academic work. Spoken language was something else, something overheard and taken on. But in college I began to think through my daily and colloquial speech as well, always using an adverb to modify an adjective: "Really cold in here" instead of "real." My speech became more grammatically correct than that of many of the private-schooled northerners around me, and I liked it.

This new consciousness straightened up not only the phonetics of my speech but also thinned out much of my home accent. I'd been loosening my Appalachian accent since middle school—from classes and attempts at popularity—but in college I made an extra, concerted effort to dampen it into nothingness.

I took grammar classes and double-majored and made A's and won awards and graduated college on my way to somewhere else, away from my mountains and former tongue.

As we sit, I wonder if Richard and his family know that I've taken on a voice for them. I wonder if they see beneath my espionage and think me an outsider dropped in from another place to peer into their world.

It warms me as I stand to leave that Richard's wife calls behind me, "Come back die-rectly."

I scratch lyrics and pieces of our conversation into my small notebook as I walk toward the main stage. I'm taken with the ease with which Richard and his family moved through these old tunes. They'd nod or wink or tap a toe and then together come to a close or take it around again. I'm trying to make notes to remember this intuitiveness, their effortlessness.

I'm also thinking of doing something drastic. I pass clumps of fiddlers and guitarists, banjo and dobro players lining the path. I'm swarmed by English ballads and speedy bluegrass, music rising and falling, mixing dissonantly—the sounds of two hundred years spinning through the breeze and trees, and it has me thinking of reclamation.

I'm considering deciding, right now—once and for all—who I will be this weekend in Union Grove. Should I throw both feet into the language of my region in the hope of seamlessly falling into the world around me? Or must I 'fess up to my changed, "colleged" tongue and drop the *reckons* and *fahrs*?

For the past year or so I've been thinking of sending my tongue into a time machine so that it'll emerge with the language of my boyhood, the language of my family. Union Grove—with music older than America resonating off the rising hills and Appalachian speech lacing every interaction—seems as good a place as any for a reinvention, as good a place as any for a wayback machine.

Usually I'm glad to have a chameleon for a tongue. It's agile and incisive. After I graduated college, I moved to the mountains of Honduras, where I taught elementary school. There, my tongue's shiftiness served me well; it learned Spanish hungrily and quickly.

But my tongue is also needy. It wants to fit in, to be local, and I can't control it. I suppose this comes from the shame attached to my native Appalachian voice. Since middle school, when it began tweaking and chasing after popularity, my tongue has continued to color itself to the sounds falling on my ears in the hope of passing smoothly in the context surrounding me.

In Honduras it took on a new accent to speak Spanish. It began shortening words—*va* for *verdad*. It started ending sentences with the quick rise of *va* as people did when talking about





weather or pigs or money in the cobblestone streets of western Honduras—the quick sound of a question softening a statement. *¿Ayer me vio, va?* Yesterday you saw me, right? *Verdad* literally means truth, but my tongue freely chopped it up.

It dropped letters from common words—*más* (more) becoming *má*; *usted* (you) becoming *uste'*. This Central American accent and rhetoric obviously did not find its way into my mouth from my genes, but my tongue invented it from the world around me. I passed my days tapering words, speaking in a voice recently invented.

When I traveled to other countries, my tongue again reacted. In Costa Rica I stopped rolling my *r*'s and spoke more clearly because that was the world around me—*otro* (other) sounding like "ochro." In Ecuador and Mexico I found new words and tempered the formality of Honduran Spanish, freely using the informal second-person *tú*.

These shiftings mostly happened of my tongue's volition. But while it spent the evenings and weekends pulling in bits of Honduran slang and dropping letters, from 8:00 to 3:00, I became English in the flesh. During the day I had to represent an entire language for the Honduran fourth graders sitting at wooden desks in my classroom. In the bilingual school, I felt ethically bound to give my students a standardized, wide-reaching English. I shaped up my tongue.

But when the bell rang and I walked into the street to buy homemade bread, my tongue loosened again.

Now, when I come home to the Blue Ridge Mountains, my tongue sometimes becomes stilled. It does not know what to do because I feel uncomfortable allowing it to reshape as it would in Central America. It seems that the speech of home should be my backbone, my baseline, my mother tongue, not an affectation to adopt—this language should be the sound house on which every other way of speaking is founded.

At home I question the way my language settles down into Appalachia because it never feels pure or complete. It feels like a mishmash of book grammar and colloquialism, and it leaves me feeling confused about my actual voice. I get lost among the many sounds and codes and wonder how I truly speak, beneath my layers.

When I moved to Iowa, I began teaching rhetoric at the University of Iowa. On the first day I remember thinking specifically about my first words to the students in front of me. I'd been teaching elementary school for a few years, but standing in front of college students, I felt that I needed to quickly gain authority and respect in order to start the semester well. I didn't want to sound like a character from *Hee-Haw* or a Jeff Foxworthy joke.

But as I've spent more time living in the Midwest, surrounded by students saying "clee-ass" (class) and "your guyses" (you guys'), I've started thinking about the beauty and history of the speech I worked so hard to lose. I spend time listening to CDs of fiddle music of the like surrounding me here at Union Grove. I read about southern Appalachia's history and geology and folklore. Now that I've left, I want to find a connection back.

My grandparents learned this speech in school because the mountains were still rather secluded. Both within and outside school, my granddaddy learned to say "agin" for *against* and "betwixt" for *between* and "racket" for *fight* and "you'uns" for the third-person plural. But as trains and interstates and mountaintop views have brought more and more people into western North Carolina, schools and businesses generally serve to subdue this speech.

My mom likes to comment on my dad's "professional voice" when he gets a call from work or is asked to pray in church. He pronounces words fully and clearly, mostly wiping away his accent. Mom and Dad can both mostly cross into a professional voice because they know that the voice of their parents, and the voice of our history, does not lend itself to perceptions of intellect and competence. It sounds of the Beverly Hillbillies and Ma and Pa Kettle—slow, backward people with moments of innate commonsensical wisdom.

The linguist Michael Montgomery claims that Appalachian people are schizophrenic about our speech because "it's the most heavily stigmatized regional speech in the country." The first few words from our mouths "will completely affect another person's evaluation of [our] intelligence, [our] reliability, [our] truthfulness, and [our] ability to handle complex tasks" (Drye).

Even our cousins from Augusta, Georgia, who speak in the drawn-out style familiar to anyone who has seen *Gone with the*





*Wind*, softening their *r*'s and pouring their words like maple syrup, like to make fun of our accent when they visit the mountains. Our speech isn't explicitly southern (if such a broad generality can define anything), which is why the Confederate flag felt strangely out of place; our speech is something mixed and brewed in the long-time frontier world of the Blue Ridge, adjacent to North and South, and when these cousins impersonate our speech, they speak with a frog in the throat, like Gomer from *The Andy Griffith Show*—"howdy yuns."

Because of my parents' language-switching and our now much-less-isolated region, I was able to cross over entirely into a professional voice, my former speech fading and burying itself deep in my gray matter.

And now that I live in the flatland of Iowa and long for my mythical homeland like a third-generation immigrant, I begin to worry about this generational progression. I worry about the children I don't yet have. I worry that they'll have no natural access to the language. And I sometimes worry, with Gomer Pyle and Jed Clampett floating in my head, that their lack of access would not actually be so bad.

I've found a spot in view of the stage; I'm sitting in the grass, beneath an old oak tree. I'm jotting down the names of new songs I've heard so far today—"Lorena," "Old Molly Hare," "Willie Moore"—while the Junior Fiddle Competition begins on stage. A young girl, no older than ten, fiddles "Old Joe Clark," and I laugh at myself for worrying about the speech of my hypothetical children. She smiles as she sets in to the chorus. *Fare thee well Old Joe Clark / Fare thee well I say / Fare thee well Old Joe Clark / I'm bound to go away.*

I've likely heard fifty songs today, and I'm suddenly struck that several are about leaving and longing, about getting back home. I start tallying them, feeling joined by their desire to return.

*She's a flyin'*, I think, as the girl's arm blurs on stage. When I begin to write "she is flying" in the margins of my notebook, I stop myself and think about my wayback machine and the words in my head. *A'flyin'*, I decide to write and keep on with my list.

In "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell argues that lazy speech makes for lazy thinking—that using prefabricated

and empty phrasings causes us to think less and settle. If, during our human development, thought comes first—the egg before the chicken—and words come second, then the rest of our lives is made of a back and forth, a constant live-wired hand-holding between speech and thought. Our thoughts lead to the words we speak, but our words help us find and form our thoughts. The egg and chicken in tandem.

The color of my thoughts isn't wholly Appalachian. I do think things like "she's a'flyin'" or "'at rain was a gullywasher," but because I've left the mountains, I find thoughts coming into my brain in many shapes—in Costa Rican or Honduran Spanish, in stylized remembered poetry, or an academic register.

The multiple personalities of my tongue have put many voices in my head.

And while my thoughts may often be lazy, it seems that I've been working hard to translate them into the "standard" language that I began adopting in college so as not to appear backward. Rather than smoothly and immediately moving the words from brain to tongue, I've been sending them through a filter.

Instead of imagining that dark lines separate my different ways of speaking, I ought to picture the free-flowing, freely emerging manner in which my thoughts appear in my head. Up there, they show themselves in the language in which they're conceived—there are no walls separating them, no regional boundaries, but they surface and collide and mesh on their way from gray matter to speech.

I should let them arrive at my tongue in this way, without filter. This doesn't mean that I should forget audience and speak in Spanish gibberish to my rhetoric students in Iowa, but rather than thinning my head's many codes for the sake of perception, I should pile them in my mouth and then choose what my audience will understand and what best conveys my meaning. Many of my code-switching worries are about how I'd like to be seen, or how I imagine I'm being perceived, rather than purposeful communication. Like a Union scout, my tongue wants to fit in smoothly, without question or second glance. But espionage and self-preservation aren't sound enough reasons to entirely lose language and rhetorical tics. To lose bits of me.





If I were to completely adopt the language of my boyhood here at Union Grove, it would likely feel a bit like an affect, like a British accent tried on at a party. But I can allow my natural mountain rhetoric to find its way into my daily speech without a time machine or tried-on accent, simply by speaking my mind, by dissolving the walls that I have constructed along the chute from brain to tongue.

Even though the mountains backing the stage at Fiddler's Grove were isolated for centuries, their language is not pure or static. It's a hodgepodge of crossing paths and passing time. Just like the songs whistling off the young girl's fiddle strings, mountain speech is an ever-changing hybrid, not distilled but constantly brewed. The clawhammer style that I play on my banjo often feels like a clean connection from me to my place—from the present to the past—but the banjo's history leads from West Africa to slavery to minstrel shows to rabble-rousers and explorers working their way through the mountains.

The instrument around my shoulder arrived in the region in different pieces and forms; its music is far-reaching but always malleable. Like our language, it survives through change, not in spite of it. The banjo styles here, like the fiddle styles, share traits and traditions, but the most genuine and refined sounds are personalized and distinctive, connected by the blurring of history.

Richard's daughter, Marsha, won the clawhammer competition this morning, and her style is all her own, shaped by tradition but fit to her hand's quick movements.

Perhaps there is no mother tongue to uncover, only a filter to loosen, only rhetorical bits that I should release from the corners into which I've shamefully shoved them. If I don't like the stereotypes willingly and pervasively spread about us hillbillies, then I reckon I ought to allow the mountains in my head back onto my tongue, right alongside the other pieces of my life.

A band of young musicians on stage plays "My Home's across the Blue Ridge Mountains," and I take off my hat and accept the tree's shade, glad the rain held off. My banjo silent, I close my notebook and watch the spectators spectate and the fiddlers fiddle, while I lean farther into the tree and imagine Richard Bowman gently laying a neglected fiddle on his work table and tinkering with scraps and mismatched pieces until the thing sings like new.

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# *Polyliterate Orientations: Mapping Meshings of Textual Practice*

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Scholarly interest in code-meshing, or the blending together of diverse communicative resources in rhetorically strategic ways, has emerged in the last decade from what Canagarajah describes as "the continuing tradition of contact zone textualities" (601) aimed at helping learners "to develop . . . a multilingual and poly-literate orientation to writing" (587). Emphasizing multilingual orientations, scholarship devoted to code-meshing has tended to understand codes as types of oral language and thus has focused its attention on the weaving together of diverse linguistic forms, particularly various national languages (Anzaldúa; Canagarajah; Barajas; Lam) and various dialects of English (Campbell; Gilyard; McCrary; Smitherman; Young). Yet discussions of code-meshing have been slower to attend to the "polyliterate orientation to writing" that Canagarajah mentions. As Pratt's key examples—her son's engagement with baseball cards and Guama Poma's letter—attest, the "literate arts of the contact zone" (524) reach beyond blending linguistic types to include weaving together diverse texts and textual practices, linking text into constellations of other representational media, and repurposing and remediating (Prior, Hengst, Roozen, and Shipka) textual tools and practices across multiple activities.

Including in the inquiry the diverse texts and textual practices that people bring to bear on their literate engagements can contribute to scholars' understanding of code-meshing in a number of ways. First, rather than focusing analyses solely on the ways people "speak themselves into their writing" (Campbell 69),