Quesenberry/Smith Family
Luna Ridge Lane
Still House Hollow
Kerrs Creek
By Sarah Clayton

> "Blue bell. Ecstatic, blue bells burst
> Into the bottomland, rip the top off the world
> There is an acre of blue bells there, radiant,
> Scintillating, cool, blue flames—unreal
> Intrusions here, elevating our expectation."
>
> (from "Expectation in Blue Bells" by Mattie Quesenberry Smith)

The day the New York City World Trade towers fell—September 9, 2001--Mattie Frances Quesenberry Smith, negotiating six lanes of traffic near her home in Virginia Beach, had an epiphany: "I felt overwhelmed with the feeling that all those stores I was passing—Taco Bell, Burger King, the malls—were unsustainable," she says.

It's early spring in Rockbridge County. Bluebell season. And we're sitting in Mattie and husband, Doug's, current home in the hinterlands of Little House Mountain. The bottomland, on either side of the creek, is flooded with bluebells. The sky come to earth. The birds flit, beaks full of twigs and fluff, nesting. The hollow shimmies with renewed life.

"Doug and two of our kids," she continues, "had just gone across into Manhattan when the first plane hit."

They were up there to show Doug and Mattie's first documentary film, *Between Two Fires,* at the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival.

"I didn't hear from them again until 3:30 that afternoon," she says, "so I didn't know where they were or what might have happened. That, combined with this consumer-driven, out of control sensation I'd had with the six lanes of traffic and all those stores, and spend, spend,

spend, made me suggest we move to a more rural area where, if need be, you could rely on your neighbors, and have more freedom from that economic restraint you get when living in an urban and suburban area."

"I remember speaking to a friend, a former police officer at the beach," says Doug, "and he said, 'you know there're only so many ways to get in and out of Virginia Beach. If there was a crisis….'"

Mattie and Doug met in northern Virginia where she was working for a congressman and he, just out of the Army, was returning from Germany.

Mattie comes from the Appalachian mountains outside Blacksburg, Virginia, and teaches rhetoric at Virginia Military Institute, and American literature, composition and developmental writing at Dabney S. Lancaster Community College and Blue Ridge Community College (Now Mountain Gateway Community College). She has published poems and short fiction.

Doug grew up in western Fairfax County, Virginia, back when it was rural farmland, and teaches public speaking and film screenwriting at Dabney.

They collaborate on raising their ten children that includes home-schooling through eighth grade. After their film, "Between Two Fires," won first place in the New York film festival and, feeling flush with success, they took the plunge and moved to Rockbridge County. Doug's father, Frederic Newcomb Smith, retired to the county in 2005, after a pulmonary embolism, and lived in a log cabin he built on the eastern side of Little House Mountain in 1994. The Smiths built another home on the same ridge in 2005. Over the passing years, Mattie and Doug shared caring for Mr. Smith, until he died in 2017.

"I definitely felt we were bringing the children to a better place," says Mattie. "I knew they would be able to go outside and enjoy the natural terrain without worrying about the neighbor who doesn't let her children play with sticks. I also knew they'd be better off because they wouldn't have a negative reaction to things like bugs. So many parents seem to fear the outdoors. I think the experiences of living in a rural area give kids confidence. Hiking this mountain gives them confidence."

Once or twice a year, the whole family climbs the mountain that rises up from the edge of their yard. "We don't get on the mountain as much as you'd think we would," says Mattie. "Not as often as we'd hoped because we thought we'd leave our traits and behaviors behind but we still go to as many or more athletic events, and to this and that with the kids, just like we did in Chesapeake."

"I grab work time," says Doug, "between doing stuff outside, running errands, and taking children to ball practice. Sometimes I'm in the flow when I have to drop everything and help with the children. I also look after my father, so I help him get ready for the day. He's been with us 11 years. You have to compartmentalize. I credit being on active duty with the Army for my ability to multi-task. I'm thankful for that experience." He laughs. "I probably wasn't at the time, though."

"Moving here sort of brought me home," says Mattie. "I grew up in the mountains [of southwest Virginia]. When my father finished up his carpentry work, he would take us fishing and hiking. One time Doug invited me to the Virginia Gold Cup [horse races], and I said, 'I'm sorry. I'm going fishing with Daddy this weekend. It was just more important to me. So House Mountain for me is a place of comfort, a buffer from life's disappointments. We look out and

see the cliffs of Little House. I look to it for the experiences and understanding I can glean from living here. I look to it for revelation. As soon as I leave this yard and get out into the green that's not maintained by me, I feel like I've just slipped into what is my true skin."

"This is the first time I've had an up close and personal relationship with a mountain," says Doug. "It gives you an anchor; when you drive down the interstate or approach home, you always see it in the distance. For me, it's like a point of a compass. It's a landmark that gives me a measure of security. It's like the dog at your side."

"When you live near a mountain," says Mattie, "you realize it's not suddenly Spring. You actually see Spring creep up the mountain."

"Threefold tongues tell
It is spring, and they
Announce April's reclamation
Of dead roots and leaf litter.
Here, in the hollow at the foot
Of House Mountain,
The birthroot clasps the cusp
Of this new, warm wave,
And it is the wake-robin,
Roots scarred, triad of petals
Red and stinking
That heralds spring first."

(from "Threefold Tongues Tell It" by Mattie Quesenberry Smith)

"There's a temperament to the mountain," says Mattie. "I'm not saying the mountain is a god or something. But its personality is steadfast and informative. That sounds silly but it provides a lot of wisdom and guidance to me personally.

"For example," she continues. "Doug wanted me to hike above the cloud line with him one day, and I was annoyed because it was wet and we were slipping. So I was really ticked. It

was that husband and wife thing. We got above the cloud line and we saw shadows up there and it was such an amazing revelation, let's call it. I realized if I'd been a little less anxious about getting up there, we could have had a peaceful climb. I learned a lesson. It informed our marriage."

"We were monstrous preternaturals
Who climbed House Mountain
In the fog, fought the cliff face
In clouds and sweat
At the peak, we were Brocken specters,
Big as the Pillars of Creation,
Giant shadows nodding and stirring,
Condescending to clouds,
And we, too, had crowns,
Light backscattered and fractured,
Color-splayed in glory."

(from "Optical Phenomena" by Mattie Quesenberry Smith)

While we're talking, the children are milling about working on various projects, drawing, bent over books. It's like a well-ordered but vibrant classroom. In their 11 years here, they have become tied to the land. Hiking, camping, hunting on the mountain. They search for berries and fossils, and wonder about the people who owned the bits of china they find in the ground or creek. They have a garden but don't grow enough to can or freeze. With ten children, "we eat it as it comes in," says Doug.

"Right here on the ridge, we cannot till three inches
Of topsoil without tipping out dead ends of limestone,
Without uncovering fossilized remnants of time spent
When water washed through the creatures of the earth
And covered House Mountain. They were: cephalopods,
Brachiopods, graptolites, and three-lobed trilobites.
The spackled tracks of these ghost guests
Chalk our garden walls, freckle rock gardens,
Splotch the new bench you built from a slab.
Bursting with veins of silica and skeleton laces.

As I sit on the bench and read,
The cool and branching shades
Murmur to me folds of bifurcated time."

(from "Ghost Guests" by Mattie Quesenberry Smith)

"Could we survive here?" says Mattie. "I wouldn't want to have to find out. It's a tough experience to have to survive in the Appalachians, and there's a lot of negative underbelly. You send your kids out to pick berries and, if they don't bring the pails back full, they're beaten. My family on both sides experienced the ruggedness of trying to live in the mountains.

"One man's dissolution tears down the house,
And the children are running with their mother
For the woods across the creek,
Where the fiddle heads, unwinding spirals,
Arch their necks and scream fractals of fright.

Aunt Manila took the children to the woods
Each time he drank the moonshine, clenched his fists,
Beat his way through Aunt Manila, whipped his way
Into the children, kicked a hole through the door.

(from "One Man's Dissolution" by Mattie Quensenberry Smith)

"We have plenty of game here," she says. "The boys hunt. We have deer, squirrel, turkey. We eat mostly venison. Squirrel from time to time. I wouldn't want to go back to the animals my mother used to eat, for sure. Possum and other things.

"I have an aunt who would get up at the crack of dawn, go out and hunt squirrels and have them fried up with gravy for her husband by the time he woke up," she says, then laughs. "I can't imagine doing that for my husband. But they did that then.

"Some folks in town really have an antagonism toward the locals living in the county, but I don't share that. It's funny, because they will say anything about the locals when they think

they have a friendly audience. With me, for a span of time when we first moved here, I had acquaintances who didn't know they were talking to someone with the exact same Appalachian background as the locals.

"As a writing instructor, I have read wonderful, creative texts from writers born here—their voices are just more authentic—it's because they are not trying to impress someone at the scholarly level. Thank goodness.

"The local farmers and their families are much smarter than the downtown crowd imagines. I feel enriched and more confident living close to someone who knows how to survive well. The agricultural bit. My Dad was like that. They just have so much wisdom and hands-on experience, and often, they can make something work out of nothing.

"For example, a friend of mine from Virginia Beach came to visit me here, and had a hose bust in her car. Two local guys stopped to help us. One guy just got a twig off the ground, whittled it, and shoved it down in there long enough for her to get her car to town. I respect that. I respect the initiative. I respect the ability to take two things, a twig and a busted hose, and put them together long enough to make do. I'll always respect that more than publishing 20 gazillion pieces about whatever in a scholarly journal or literary magazine."

"Where I grew up," says Doug, "there was much the same tie to the people, lots of old Virginia names, people living simple lives. Moving here I found a number of the same type of people, and I've always gotten along with them. They mind their business, and I mind mine and I think that's the way it should be."

"It's nice to be up here in the wintertime," says Mattie, "we're snowed in and David Chittum comes up on his tractor to see if we're okay."

"He's driven up before to offer us vegetables," says Doug. "Something from his garden and it's simple, heart-felt generosity. I suspect a lot of folks who work and live downtown

Lexington don't come from that background. They're probably good people on an individual basis but they just don't come from a culture of friendliness."

The Chittums live on their family farm on Union School Road right around the corner from the Smiths, who were walking by one day when Mr. Clyde Chittum, David's father, engaged them in conversation.

"He told us about his days in World War II, when he and his Army unit came upon a German small arms factory with rifles," says Doug. "He and his buddies took them apart, and shipped them back to the United States. Said he still had one.

"He'd probably never traveled in his life," says Doug. "Goes to Europe. To war. And then comes back to the place where he grew up. That had to be weird."

"We're trying to make it work," says Mattie.

"We hope to be here forever," says Doug.

"But it's hard to sustain," says Mattie. "You move to a rural area and guess what—there're no jobs. It's not something we anticipated as clearly as we should have."

Between Two Fires had won Best Documentary Film in Lamar University's Spindletop Film Festival, and a Bronze Oscar for best student documentary from the Academy for Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. In 2002, another screenplay, "Once to Every Man," about the dislocation of the mountain people from their land in the 1930s to make way for the Shenandoah National Park, was a finalist in the Virginia Governor's Screenwriting Competition. And another, "Eagle in the Snow," adapted from Wallace Breem's historical novel, was optioned by Mel Gibson's agent, but eventually turned down by Gibson himself. A German

filmmaking company got interested for a while, and now Mattie and Doug have turned it into a graphic novel that's being distributed by comixology.com. And on it goes.

"It's all about finding the right person, who's going to open their wallet or pocketbook," says Mattie.

"They [the children] complain there's nothing to do here," she says. "It's definitely not the smooth transition I thought it would be. I grew up in a rural area doing rural things—canning, fishing—but we're trying to bridge two worlds here."

Son, William, 16, heading off for Centre College outside Lexington, Kentucky, says he felt isolated at first, but was reassured when they continued going into town and being involved in sports.

"I think one of the main differences," says William, "was the quiet. Virginia Beach always has something going on--traffic, people, lights. Here, all you can hear are the crickets. The Birds. But I don't have any negative views on it. There's definitely benefits to the way we've been raised. We can be really creative doing what we want to do. Go down to the creek, fishing, hiking. We just follow the ridgeline up from the house. There's a trail for a while but then you're hiking straight up to the peak. Once you get on top you get a full circular view of the entire county and it's so uplifting. I've really enjoyed my childhood. I don't think living here will affect my choice of career but it will definitely affect my life. What I do for fun."

"The edge of the cliff stepped to
Yields a moment of ecstasy
Where one could jump
And turn somersaults in air, drop
On a final descent from House Mountain,
Shenandoah snaking in the distance,
Hogback Mountain, rearing back
From the spectacle, oak trees reaching

To break the fall, break it into branches."

(from "The End of Things" by Mattie Quesenberry Smith)

"The main negative thing is that the power goes out so easily," says William. "Last Spring there was a huge storm and it knocked about 50 trees down. Maybe getting a generator would help."

"I think it's humbling [being one of ten children]," he says. "You, yourself, are not focused on as much because there are so many, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. I think we all share a lot of the same truths as a family. We're all pretty well behaved and disciplined. We always had rules. It was never a mad house or anything like that."

Things did get a little tense, though, the day the copperhead bit him.

"I was ten years old," he says, "it was the day after Thanksgiving. A warm day. My brothers, sisters and I were playing with those soft pellet guns. I ducked behind a tree root and felt a sting on my leg. I thought it was a bee sting. Later I was playing X-Box with my brothers and looked down at my leg that was stinging really badly and it was swollen and black so I told my Dad. He went down to where I'd first felt the sting and, sure enough, right by the tree was a copperhead tanning in the sun. Dad drove me to Stonewall [hospital]. Once I got there, they gave me some pain killers. My whole leg was completely swollen. I couldn't see the outlines of my bones. It was in the lower part of my calf. I was really, really worried that I might die but once I got talking with the doctors, they eased my mind. They told me where I'd been bitten was one of the best places in terms of how dangerous it was. It hasn't given me a fear of snakes. But I definitely don't want to mess with copperheads."

Claire Smith was two years old when she moved to Rockbridge County and "adjusted very easily" to country life. "Cities are fine," she says, "but it's peaceful here. It's more fun than being in the city. I like looking for fossils and pottery down in the creek. I like going to the creek after a storm and seeing what's washed up. Once I was looking into the creek and saw glass. I picked it up and washed it off and my brother Philip told me it was part of an old apothecary jar for medicine."

Her sister, Emma, is four years older. "We'd go out in the woods and name valleys just for fun," she says. "One was Sun Valley. We carved its name on a tree and it's still there. I like the wildlife. Like turkey. Deer with fawns. I've seen bears. One time one came down to the house and ate all the grapes. We watched him from the window.

"We make jam and jelly from the blackberries, wine berries, raspberries," says Claire, "but there aren't enough huckleberries to make jam. We make muffins with them."

Bonny was five when they arrived on Luna Lane. "It's humid at the beach but in the mountains, it cools off. Fall is probably my favorite season because you can really see the mountain when the leaves are gone. In the winter, the storms bring trees down on the road so we all get together and clear the road. Chain saws. The children pull the branches away. Kind of brings the neighbors together. Then we go to someone's house and have hot chocolate.

"I found a teacup in the creek. It's kind of sad. We find pottery all in one place. There must have been a home down there.

"The lifestyle is isolated. You really have to adapt. When the electricity goes out, you can't take a shower and then all those trees down in the road. You just have to survive. For two weeks. Maybe a week."

14-year-old Asa leaps in. “We went to someone’s house twice to take a shower.”

“And Asa,” says Bonny, “went down to the creek and filled up buckets with water to put in the back of the toilet so we could flush.”

“I like living on the big mountain,” says Asa. “It’s nice and peaceful.”

Emma shows me a piece of iron she found in the creek. “I think it’s from a kind of iron pot. Or something. You can see how it’s shaped.”

“I found a gate piece,” says Claire, “Then I found half of one of those burners on woodstoves. Sometimes we go up the mountain and there’s a beautiful view up there. We actually go up my grandpa’s driveway and then there’s a trail.”

Ten-year-old Lucy clings to her older brother, Phillip, 24, as they tell their story.

“We built a fort,” she says. “Well…they were building a fort. I was building a home. I was thinking I was a little girl living back then.”

“When we first moved up here,” says Phillip, who attended private high school in Orange County, VA, before going on to Hampden Sydney College, “my brothers and I were running around in the woods playing settlers, Indians, army guys. Our houses were basically teepees. We took fallen wood and stacked them up. They were forts. Usually we divided up into teams. Hal and Henry would end up on one team, and I’d end up with William. The girls were more the free agents.”

“We had our own little forts and we tried to attack you,” says Lucy. Phillip puts his arm around her, and pulls her in close.

“In the early days when we were younger, it was a lot of running around with sticks,” Phillip says. “It could get pretty vicious. Then we had those Airsoft guns. Paintball guns. We were well-armed.

“Hal and I got into serious hunting before the others. I had a small .22 caliber rifle without any scope or sight. I made my best shot ever with that gun. On a squirrel over a hundred yards away. I believe we fried it. Squirrel was interesting to have for the first time but I think it’s better put into soup.

“I didn’t do a lot of deer hunting because I was in boarding school during hunting season. But on breaks I’d always try to get back on the mountains. I can call turkeys in but I’m not very good at killing them.

“I’ve camped on the mountain,” he says. “Waking up on top of the mountain is, well, just one of those great things. I don’t really know how to put it. You wake up and the world’s down below you. The way we go up, you don’t get to see much until you actually make it to the peak. But once you get there, you see what you’ve been working for.

“I’ve been on the top of Little House Mountain,” pipes up Lucy. “I thought it was very awesome and cool.”

After college, Phillip moved to New York City, and joined the endless ebb and flow of young people in the financial market. “I’m glad I got to see it,” he says. “I’m glad I’ve had that experience but, once you’ve developed a taste for mountain freedom, it’s very hard to go do something so restrictive. You don’t realize it, until you go there from a place like here, how much influence other people have on your daily life, and how you can’t do the things you’d really like to. I didn’t even know the people who lived right next door to me in New York. Of

course, the plusses are great. I hiked all of it. Got to see all the sights. Closed down a few bars. Met a lot of good people. Met a lot of crazy people, too. Glad I got to see it but I just can't live like that. Right now I'm thinking of going back to school for forestry. And here [at home on Luna Lane] is a good base. It's always nice to come back to, come back to the younger kids and do fun things."

Lucy tucks in closer to his side and hangs as if she'll never let him go.

2024: Mattie Quensenberry Smith is made Poet Laureate of Virginia