

Appalachian Journal



A REGIONAL STUDIES REVIEW

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turn, fill them. They seem to be rising to crescendos, but instead taper off into sober trails of thought—attempting to make sense of what is senseless. In this collection, as in life, death and addiction are not dramas to be recited, but unending questions.

The book's ending is a waypoint, a pause, not a full stop. In the aftermath of the death of his son, White writes, "If friends came to visit me, I'm certain they were relieved by how well I seemed to be holding up. How else could I act? It was merely the beginning of what is a lifelong sentence" (151). Although so much of the family White writes about so beautifully and loves so completely with such complexity has passed on, he asserts that he has no desire to join them and is braced to spend an eternity answering why. It is a work of renewal. Instead of "how I got here," this book softly states, "here I am."

Sammy Osmond

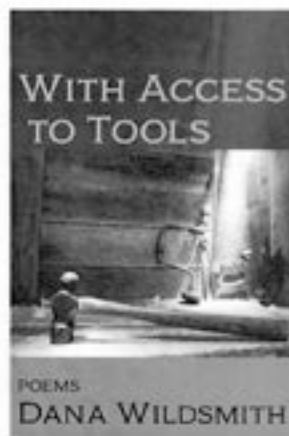
Sammy Osmond is a documentary filmmaker and graduate student in the Appalachian Studies program at Appalachian State University, where some of his documentary work is supported by South Arts. His research focuses on Appalachian identity and the lived experiences of individuals.

With Access to Tools: Poems

By Dana Wildsmith (Lake Dallas, TX: Madville Publishing, 2023)
\$17.95, paper. ISBN 9781956440379, 48 pp.

"Plant your story / on a page. It's yours / but not until you earn it," writes Dana Wildsmith, and indeed she has earned it in her latest poetry collection. *With Access to Tools* is part *ars poetica*, part survival guide, part self-care manual, and every bit a master class in form. These poems are divided into three thematic sections, Tools for Home and Garden, Office Supplies, and Tools for Mind and Body, and while the apparent subject matter may be practical tools, each poem provides the reader with the spiritual tools to "[plant] hope" amid the "morass" of daily living and the "fathomless sorrow" of the pandemic.

Much like Robert Morgan's diction elevates the mundane to the sublime, Wildsmith's carefully crafted sonnets in Section I transform the necessary labor of gardening, farming, and domesticity—hoeing, sowing seeds, cooking—to metrically precise meditation, prayer, and song. Broccoli seeds become both sprout in a pot and hope planted. A swing blade "whack[s] a swath / through knee-high [literal and metaphorical] weeds ..." and reveals that "the other side" of what was once overwhelming and unclear "is worth the getting there" (10). Besides the metrical precision and seamless transitions from the physical to the psychic, these poems honor, again and again, a principle firmly established in my Appalachian upbringing—that work should be valued not only for its



product, but also for its process—work for work's sake. Dana Wildsmith's sonnets should be valued likewise.

In Section II, Wildsmith's subject matter shifts from the traditional to the contemporary, but her master craftswoman status is fixed as she delivers a series of subtly rhymed poems titled for the tools of contemporary survival. While Wildsmith's speaker finds strength and sustenance (for body and soul) in the tools of home and garden, the virtual tools meant, in part, to ameliorate the isolation of the pandemic, prove insufficient. "Zoom" highlights the inadequacies of "teach[ing] online / during a pandemic" by acknowledging

I don't want to see their dogs, their beds,
the close-ups of the tops of their heads
as they adjust their video. We can't
adjust such depthless space. I want to
damn the danger, call them in, sit tight
together through this horizonless night. (23)

And "Emoji" makes clear that virtuality cannot bridge the physical or emotional gap of social distance when our instinct is to "hug so naturally" yet we are left to "raise / our forgetful arms to touchless space. / the safe air between our flapping hands / a meme for what we want to give but can't" (24). No doubt, readers will find themselves transported to the dire days of quarantine, but Wildsmith "bring[s] them out when the long / night ends and it's time for a song." These songs of devastation and deliverance will bear witness for generations to come.

If *With Access to Tools* is indeed a survival guide, then the short series of persona poems—each attributed to a different speaker—in Section III are Wildsmith's most essential instructions. These poems aren't simply lessons in "Patience," "Courage," "Comfort," and "Prayer," they are a workshop for the poet—for all poets. In "Storytelling," both the inspiration for and mastery of writing is survival for the speaker who "write[s] to feed [her] family" and notes that "Nothing is more / inspiring than four bellies to fill" (36). The speaker of "Sight" observes,

"... Sweetheart, I think
every time you write

a poem you're finding a home for grief
stitching it like squares
for a quilt ..." (45)

Again, the intellectual act of poetry is bound in physical labor—each a necessary component of survival, particularly when grief and time to fill were all we had. In the final poem of this sage collection, "Prayer" (which Wildsmith attributes to herself—"Dana Wildsmith, also"), the poet offers:

I am persuaded that when

I die, the best of me will drone
eternally in tune
with gratitude for every song
I've ever sung. (48)

I, too, am persuaded. *With Access to Tools* will stand as a testament to the value of self-sustenance, the trauma of a pandemic, and the resiliency of those who arrived, singing, on the other side.

Catherine Pritchard Childress

Catherine Childress lives in the shadow of Roan Mountain in East Tennessee. She teaches writing and literature at Lees McRae College, where she serves as director of the Stephenson Center for Appalachia. Her poems have appeared in *North American Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Connecticut Review*, *The Cape Rock*, *Appalachian Review*, *Still: The Journal*, and *Stoneboat* among others, and have been anthologized in *The Southern Poetry Anthology, Volumes VI and VII: Tennessee and North Carolina* and *Women Speak, Volumes VII and VIII*. She is the author of the poetry collections *Other* (Finishing Line Press, 2015) and *Outside the Frame* (Eastover Press, 2023).

Said-Songs: Essays on Poetry and Place

By Jesse Graves (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2021)
\$20.00, paper. ISBN 9780881467987, 217 pp.

Said-Songs is a book of journeys by one of our most noted Appalachian poets. Foremost among these are the intellectual, personal, creative, and geographical journeys Jesse Graves travels as a young poet, which he refers to in his Preface as "travels through the vast territory of language," often "idiosyncratic and quixotic even" (ix). The book is a compilation of essays, interviews, and reviews which represent Graves's broad and varied experiences and his inquisitive mind and imagination as he seeks to learn the "mysteries and designs of poetry" and incorporate that learning into his own poetry (ix). It is an exploration, Graves asserts, into "the poetry and places that have mattered most to me" (x). As he relates, the title of his book is derived from two poems about the music of speech by A.R. Ammons, "First Carolina Said-Song" and "Second Carolina Said-Song," in which characters speak in dialect. In Part I, Graves explores the idea of "said-song" in depth in his essay "Tennessee Said-Song: Dialect in Appalachian Poetry." He undertakes to understand the voices which have helped shape his own, and the value of embracing and employing his unique voice, his vocal signature, in his poetry and appreciating how other poets, past and present, have done so.

In one of the interviews in *Said-Songs* (from Spring 2007), poet and editor William Wright asks Graves to comment on literary influences on his work,

