In which we left Wofford in a daze of sleep and excitement and drove towards the woods, leaving behind books and Burrell and complaining about the necessity of frugal packing.

We stopped at an overlook on our way to Elliott Rock Wilderness and stared down into the valley that cradled Lake Jocassee, wondering about the awkward roadside monument memorializing an "Oscar Wigington," and thinking of Ron Rash’s love of the water. We stopped at a convenience store on Highway 11 beside Gap Creek Road to make peanut butter sandwiches and buy Cheerwine and Cokes. We entered the woods by dirt road and met Butch Clay by a large concrete bridge surrounded by the vehicles of hunters and hikers. He led us deep into the Wilderness, determined to show us something we hadn’t seen before. We hiked for two miles, laughing at discarded tents and toilet paper, wondering at signs of bears and boars, and finally resting beside an abandoned moonshine still, where we sat in awe of our own inability to comprehend the wild. We piled back into the van and the mighty Durango, and most of us quickly fell asleep, exhausted by thoughts and physical activity. We traveled next to Young Harris, Georgia, a town that is, for now, beyond the grasp of Wal-Mart and strip malls. After a game of Frisbee in the parking lot of the Young Harris Motel, we were picked up by Steve Harvey and taken to his comfortable home lodged neatly in the side of the mountain. We played pool and darts and one rousing game of tic-tac-toe in the Harveys’ basement before feasting again on delicious homemade lasagna and Lane oaks in the company of poet Bettie Sellers. Following dinner, she read to us and talked about the mountains, her writing, and Young Harris College. Her love of the South radiated with every word she spoke as she reminded us that we “must love the taste, smell, and feel of words.” Steve Harvey played us a traditional ballad on his guitar about wild hogs and hunting, and we returned to the motel, all full of good food and new ideas and most ready for a deep sleep and another early morning.
The Importance of Place
by Ron Rash

When I was five years old, one of the most remarkable moments of my life occurred: my grandfather read to me. It was a warm, summer evening, and my grandfather, still dressed in his work clothes, was smoking a Camel cigarette as he lingered at the kitchen table after a hard day's work. But when I handed my grandfather the red and blue book and asked him to read to me he didn't offer any excuse, not even the most obvious one. Instead, he laid the open book on the table before us, peering over my shoulder as he turned the pages with his work-and-nicotine stained fingers, and I heard the story of a talking cat and his high, blue-striped hat.

What makes this anecdote so remarkable is that my grandfather could not read or write. He had grown up on a farm in the North Carolina mountains where children spent their mornings in fields instead of classrooms. What he had done was make up a story to fit the pictures that lay on the pages before us. Not surprisingly, I quickly realized that the story he was reading was very different from the one my mother had read from the same book.

The effectiveness of my grandfather's performance was verified by my begging him to read The Cat and the Hat again the following Sunday. His story was different this time, the cat got into more trouble, and out of it less easily. It was as if the words on the page had scrambled around and rearranged themselves. At every opportunity in the following weeks I ambushed my grandfather so I might hear what new events might occur in this cat's ever-changing life. My grandfather dutifully opened the book. His imagination, however, unlike his patience, was limited. After a half dozen variations, what I heard was pretty much repetitious, but there always seemed to be some sudden veering—a new line of dialogue, plot twist, or further description—that made each version unique. How could I not grow up believing words were magical? How could I not want to be a writer?

There were setbacks, of course. One of the great disappointments of my life was in Mrs. Brown's first grade class when I realized the words below the pictures of Dick, Jane, Sally, and Spot were as stubbornly fixed to the page as John Lane and students look up into the trees. bubble gum on shoe soles. No matter how many times I opened and closed my book, the words, unlike my grandfather's, stayed on the same page and in the same order.

Nevertheless, this was only a momentary setback. My grandfather could not teach me how to read, but he had taught me how to use my imagination, and soon I was supplying words of my own to describe each scene. Before too long I was ignoring the drawings in the book as well. I made up Dick and Jane stories of my own. Not surprisingly, my Dick and Jane lived in a small town very similar to my own, and the ways of rural Carolina, became their ways. In my version Dick and Jane said "you all," and "pecan," and "yes'm." They ate fried okra, grits, red-eye gravy and cat-head biscuits and drank sweetened ice tea.
and "co-colas." I changed Jane's name to Sarah Jane and (since my father would not allow me to have one) gave Dick a Marlin .22 rifle so he wouldn't have to play with that sissy blue and yellow beachball anymore.

So it was that in my earliest attempts at creating an imaginative world my stories were set in the place I knew best. They still are, for almost all my work is set in South Carolina or North Carolina, the two places where my family has lived, worked, loved, and died for over two hundred years. "One place understood helps us understand all other places better," Eudora Welty reminds us, and she is right, for one of the most interesting aspects of literature is how the most intensely regional literature is often the most universal. The best regional writers are like farmers drilling for water; if they bore deep and true enough into that particular place, beyond the surface of local color, they tap into universal correspondences, what Jung called the collective unconscious. Thus Faulkner's Mississippi, Munro's Ontario, and Marquez's Columbia are both exotic and familiar.

When I wrote One Foot in Eden, I set the novel in a place, Jocassee Valley, that now is buried beneath a reservoir. Joyce, another great regionalist, once claimed that if Dublin were destroyed, it could be recreated by reading Ulysses. I would make no similar claim for my novel's depiction of the Jocassee Valley, but I have brought all that I know of that place into my story, hoping that I might go deep enough to bring something of that place, and all places, to the surface.

An Interview with Ron Rash

The Cornbread and Sushi project met poet and novelist Ron Rash at his favorite local restaurant, the Riviera, a Turkish place on the outskirts of Clemson, SC. We noticed right away he had fans there—the two dust covers of his first two novels were displayed in a small poster case beside the door. After a buffet lunch of Middle Eastern chicken, beef, rice, and, strangely enough, banana pudding and collard greens, the ten students and two faculty members gathered on the patio out front to talk with Ron about his novel, One Foot in Eden, set in the nearby Jocassee valley before Duke Power flooded it to create a lake in the 1970s. In the fast growing Carolina foothills it was only appropriate that our conversation was punctuated by a bulldozer on the lot next door clearing trees for a commercial development.

Our first questions had to do with the larger issue of regional change and development. We posed these first questions for the author of this award-winning novel of the rural South and the conversation rolled quickly from there.

What happens when a large dam is built? Who wins? Who loses?
RR: Before I wrote One Foot in Eden I thought that the building of a reservoir was one of the most striking images available to a novelist in the New South. Of course they're built to provide energy, control flooding, and create vacation homes, but the image suggests much more than that. Like what?
RR: Human loss, destruction of communities and families. There is a human cost to progress, and it's not always a positive gain. Many families lost property when that dam was built and those stories really connected with me. My family lost land when the Blue Ridge Parkway came through the mountains. Family land was taken by 'eminent domain.' Several thousand people were displaced in the Jocassee Valley as well.

What was the purpose of the dam there?
RR: Lake Jocassee was different than Hartwell [part of the upper Savannah dammed in the 1930s] and Keowee [the lake just below Jocassee dammed in the 1960s]. There was no real reason to do it. The dam for Santee Cooper [in the lower part of South Carolina] provided 40 or 50 thousand people with electricity, but Jocassee provides very little power. They just did it—they knew the people who lived in that valley were poor and
powerless. Most say Jocassee was one of the most beautiful river valleys in the region. The question you need to ask about the South is ‘Are we going to destroy the very things that make it beautiful?’

So it shouldn’t have been built?
RR: You’ll have people argue it was for the ‘greater good.’ There was the idea that these lakes would make South Carolina less backward. They would bring recreation and money. But there’s been a cost in human terms. When I wrote Eden I wanted to write about people you wouldn’t hear about in the power company ads. It’s heartbreaking to talk to people who were in Jocassee Valley. Many of the old folks died within months of leaving the valley. It was the only world they knew.

How did you keep the novel from being a black and white story, a simple battle of right and wrong?
RR: Well, a novel has to have tension and complexity, and you can’t become didactic. You know, the evil power company and the noble riverbottom farmers. I hope my readers don’t have a clear idea of how I really feel. I don’t like black and white answers. Because I’m a novelist it’s the human terms I’m interested in.

But we, today, know little about farming. We lead independent lives. We’re mostly college-educated and middle class.
RR: I try not to sentimentalize the rural life in my fiction. I have an uncle who lost his whole crop one winter when his barn burned. His life was hard. I don’t want that life. At the same time there are important things a farmer gains. Take awareness of weather and land. We’re so far from the land, and we have no connectedness and that breeds a kind of arrogance.

So will we ever get back to that sort of connectedness?
RR: I want to live long enough to see it. There will be a time, I believe, before long when we’ll be living closer to the land than we are now. I might be wrong, but I think we need to keep believing that.

Are we really different from that farming culture or is it simply that the world is, as Thomas Friedman says, becoming ‘flatter’ today and we’re actually all coming back together again? After all, human beings all over the globe are one species — Homo sapiens.
RR: That’s a good point, but when so much change and destruction comes to an isolated rural area like Jocassee Valley—which was utterly destroyed—a whole community is denied a chance to become itself. When communities are destroyed we cut the edges, make it all palatable. It’s like living in a mall all your life.

What about the world your children are growing up in?
RR: There is a positive side to it as well. If things work out, you all will be able to live where you want to live. You might be able to live in the country and do your work by computer. In my own family so many could not find jobs in the mountains. They wanted to stay, but they had to leave.

So the children of those who lived in Jocassee might be better off?
RR: We want to believe it will work out.

But the ‘Eden’ you describe in your novel is gone. There’s nothing there but a lake now.
RR: A world disappeared under Jocassee and nobody on the outside noticed. People lived there for generations. Families lived there. That world is worth remembering. Art refuses to allow things to be forgotten.
An Excerpt from One Foot In Eden
by Ron Rash

The water barely covered my boots at first. I was still in the field, or what until a few days ago had been a field. It was like slogging through a black-water swamp, for the mud hid the limbs and trees the loggers had left. I stumbled twice before I'd even got out of the field. I could feel the others behind me, the rope tightening and tugging each time they stumbled or paused. I glanced back and it was a sorry-looking sight. The rain had drenched their clothes, and they hung onto the rope like shipwreck survivors. They'll never make it, I thought. I'll end up crossing this river alone.

Beyond the field the going got easier despite the current. The river ran dingy from the days ago had been a field. It was like slogging through a black-water swamp, for the mud hid the limbs and trees the loggers had left. I stumbled twice before I'd even got out of the field. I could feel the others behind me, the rope tightening and tugging each time they stumbled or paused. I glanced back and it was a sorry-looking sight. The rain had drenched their clothes, and they hung onto the rope like shipwreck survivors. They'll never make it, I thought. I'll end up crossing this river alone.

The rain suddenly came harder, like a big knife had slit the sky open. I couldn't see beyond the field. I pulled the others up the bank. I half-stepped and half-crawled to where the water got swampy and still again, but not before I'd slipped and slid back down the bank a couple of times. It was a hard thing to do without dropping the shovel or cabbage sack.

I pulled the others up the bank.

"That river's rising," Sheriff Anderson said.

"This needs to be done fast."

Sheriff Anderson handed the shovel to him.

"This way," he said, not waiting for Sheriff Anderson to finish looping the rope. He led us through the shallow water, using the shovel like a cane to keep his balance when he stumbled.

We started up Licklog. The rain came harder now, a cold rain, the kind that soaked to your bones. We were all shivering and miserable, not a stitch of dry clothing among us. The clouds looked low enough to touch.

Ron Rash speaks to class
We sloshed back through the woods, my mind still tangled as memories grabbed hold of me like briars. I remembered him sitting on the bed, waiting for me to fall back asleep after a nightmare.

“You get that from me,” he said. “I had bad dreams when I was a kid, too.” He’d patted me on the shoulder. “Don’t fret, son. You’ll soon outgrow it same as I did.”

Then another memory tore into me, a night years later at the county fair when I’d raised a pellet gun and hit the bull’s eye. “You’re a good aim, just like your daddy,” Momma had said. His eyes had met hers and Momma’s face had lost its smile and the teddy bear I gave her couldn’t bring that smile back.

And the memory that tore deepest of all, because it was one that asked a question I had to answer.

“You’re a Winchester, aren’t you?” Mr. Pipkin had asked.

When we got to the bank the water was higher but that wasn’t the worst of it. The river was muddy now. There’d be no way to tell where we stepped.

Sheriff Anderson unraveled his rope.

“You best leave those shovels,” he told us. His teeth chattered as he spoke. “You’re going to have enough trouble getting yourself across.”

He nodded at the sack in my hand.

“You could leave that too. You could save us all a lot of trouble if you did. My deputy’s on the way up here. Once he sees what’s in that sack this is a murder case.”

I looked at Momma and the man who’d raised me. Beg me to do what he says, I thought. Make this somehow easier. But they didn’t say a word.

I knew at that moment I had to make a choice between the man who’d raised me or the sack of bones and dirt in my hand, and that choice had to be made on this side of the river. It wasn’t near that simple, of course. It wasn’t a matter of what was the right or the wrong thing to do or what I owed the men who claimed me as a son or to Momma or Mrs. Winchester. The only thing that mattered was what I could live with.

I stepped into the river and didn’t stop until the water got to my knees. I turned, my eyes on Momma and Daddy. The current pushed hard against my legs but I stood firm.

I grabbed the Gold Star from my pocket and dropped it in the sack. I raised the sack in my right hand and held it between us for a moment before I let it slip through my fingers.

I thought. Make this somehow easier. But they didn’t say a word.

I kept my eyes locked on the Winchester. The only thing that mattered was what I could live with.

I stepped into the river and didn’t stop until the water got to my knees. I turned, my eyes on Momma and Daddy. The current pushed hard against my legs but I stood firm.

I grabbed the Gold Star from my pocket and dropped it in the sack. I raised the sack in my right hand and held it between us for a moment before I let it slip through my fingers.

I turned and saw the back of Momma’s head. She turned her face upstream toward where Daddy had gone under.

I took a step toward him, then another. I kept my eyes locked on his, almost like they were another rope to keep him up. He must have felt the same way for he didn’t so much as blink. For a moment the river and rain weren’t there. It was just me and him.

Then the current bent him like it would a reed and he went under. Momma went under too, jerking the rope from my hand and the Sheriff’s. I lost my balance, the current carrying me into deep water where cold ran up my spine like electricity. When I came up I didn’t see anyone but Momma, who was downstream.

I tried to swim back to where Daddy had gone under but the current shoved me farther downstream with every stroke. I turned and saw the back of Momma’s head bobbing as the water pushed her into an eddy.

I let the water tug me downstream but the current swept me past Momma. When the current slowed I was ten yards below her. I managed to get out of the main current and into the eddy. I swam toward Momma and yelled at her to swim toward me. But the cold had numbed her brain. She looked my way but it was like she didn’t even recognize me.

She turned her face upstream toward where Daddy had gone under. She raised her arms out of the water and started splashing, trying to swim toward him. Then she raised her arms above her head like she was surrendering. Her head went under and her arms and finally her hands.

“Momma!” I shouted.

I swam to where she’d gone under. I took a deep breath and dove but the current had taken her away. I dove four times, the current pushing me farther downstream until the water was no more than hip-high again. I bumped up against a big log and that gave me the leverage to stand up to the current. My teeth rattled and my mind was groggy.

Then it was like I forgot who I was looking for or even where I was. It suddenly seemed stupid to be fighting the current when I could just lay down and let it cover me like a warm blanket. I leaned back the same way I’d lean back in a bed. I felt the water cover me and for a few moments everything became dark and peaceful.

Then I felt hands on me, strong hands, pulling me back to the surface, dragging me toward shore.

“You could have let me sleep a while longer, Daddy,” I said, then everything went dark again.
Gypsies and Water Moccasins
by Bettie Sellers

Two things we feared! snakes to strike bare feet, and the gypsies camped in ragged caravans at Double Sewers where Shoal Creek ran deep under Highway 16. A moccasin bit Eula Dragg (she did my mama’s washing, brought it home tied in a sheet balanced on her head). For twenty years, the misery in her leg had told of rain long before the thunder spoke. “I shoulda took that ol’ snake to ol’ Ida, she woulda conjured the pain away.” From our porch we could see the lights criss-crossing the leaning cabin where Old Ida cast her spells. Folks came in big cars, big cars from Griffin and Barnesville—Mag said they came to get spells for enemies, and love potions—but Old Ida had the evil eye, too. She cursed Mag’s man, and he was gone. Come dawn, the devil flapping at her window, heavy like a Yellow Hammer nailing on the rooftree. The gypsies came with dog days in July, roaming Highway 16 for unguarded horses and unwary children. Mama said they sold you into white slavery (whatever that was) and their black iron cooking pots bubbled greasy with stews of somebody’s chickens charmed from the henhouse on a moonless night. I killed my first snake, slithering in our swimming hole dammed up at Double Sewers, one July day when the gypsies had gone.

In a Dark Wood
—for Barth

by Bettie Sellers

That it may be a sun-lit mountainside with laurel edging the creekbank pink like Grandmother’s petticoat lace, with peace so tangible I could pick a bouquet and decorate my table where only shadows sit to watch me eat.

The wood, then, is not place or time but like a cave so convoluted that no light bends to find its deep recess.

In our valley, a man lies on the ground. For touching our sons with lust, he is the evil dragon, and we, self-righteous Beowulf, have torn off his arm and watched his blood down the ridge to darken the stream.

That same self-righteous grease oozed to shine on the upturned face of a father once kneeling on my office floor. “Your class has persecuted my son,” he said, and prayed Almighty God to strike me dead for all my sins.

Forgive me, for all my sins.

For owing Mary Ann Nash a nickel borrowed to see a Tarzan movie forty years ago. Interest compounds, those years of childish guilt bound up with shrill cries of whippoorwills, reminder that Satan waits in darkness outside the thin-walled house.
Mag told me so. With instinct, black wisdom, she knew, her witch doctors a world away compounding here a puritanical ointment of her forefathers and mine.

Barth's grandmother came from Latvia with a ticket tied around her neck; mine was a lady and wore a diamond ring under her milk-white gloves to the Methodist church on Sundays to sit in the second pew between the Good Shepherd and "Suffer the Little Children." I have forgotten the sermons but red and blue robes flowing down the Savior's limbs are glazed behind my eyes.

Forgive me for not being the woman my mother was. When she died, I gave away her things in a plastic garbage bag, brought home the Raggedy Ann she rocked up and down the corridors of Shady Rest. Brought it home to sit at my table and eat my food. Mother never wrote a check or drove a car, but baked sugar cookies for all the neighbors' kids while I write words and weep because she lived five years so far inside the cave she could not find my name.

I didn't believe him when he said "wilderness." I asked myself how much of the South could possibly still be wild, untouched, and alone. I knew wild. I'd lived out West among it, where it was real and unending. They told me this wilderness consisted of a couple thousand acres, surrounded by states with drawling names like Georgia and Tennessee, not wild names like Wyoming, Montana, and Utah. I have friends who hunted on preserves bigger than a few thousand acres. I prepared myself for disappointment.

I've always had a love-hate relationship with travel. I want to see, see, see, but I also like the comfort of security and support. I like knowing where I am because, as Wendell Berry said, you can only know who you are when you know where you are. I often tell myself I know who I am, but I've never really accepted that I only tell myself this when I'm somewhere far from home. Home usually forces me to question my identity more than any other place.

We jumped out of the vans, hungry and disillusioned by the peanut-butter sandwiches we'd eaten in the parking lot of a convenience store on Highway 11. I love to hike, but I also love to eat, so I wondered if I could manage a hike of several miles with just a peanut butter sandwiched on my stomach. I suppose I didn't really have a choice.

Butch spoke to us quietly, reserved, and comforted by the extent of his comfort in this wild land of Ellicott Rock Wilderness. It didn't look wild to me, with the large concrete bridge and several torn up Chevy trucks lining the edge of the road. I listened skeptically. I watched my fellow students watch the man who watched the sky, wondering at the possibility of rain. We started the hike, encouraged to look and think as we walked. We played games instead, shouting back and forth, comparing every actor, animal, musician, and element in improbable battles of doom.

"Chuck Norris versus a Giant Squid!"
"Chuck Norris definitely, have you seen his roundhouse?"
"Chris Martin versus Ben Gibbard!"
"Ben Gibbard, dammit!"
"Nature versus Nurture!"
Low groans of sarcasm. "Way to be literary, Jason."

I wondered to myself if the man in the navy blue, skipping easily over the fallen trees and ducking the low-slung branches, could hear us and was disappointed. We paid no attention to the ground that groaned silently as we trudged about. We barely noticed the heavy fog that seeped between the high tree limbs, settling around us quietly, waiting to be taken in. We didn’t. We even disregarded the stumpy wild hog shortly after watching him root about in the ground for whatever it is that hogs look for in the ground. He appeared black and coarse, even from across the ravine, and his thick tusks soon inspired another round of play.

"A Wild Hog versus a Giant Squid!"
"That’s a tough one, man."
I could almost feel the man’s heart sink. It just wasn’t hitting us like it should. I wondered what I was doing wrong and realized I just wasn’t looking or thinking. But I honestly didn’t know how to start.

I assume he finally got fed up with our incessant talking, laughter, and scuttling about. He made us circle up, like a mismatched basketball team, and he looked at us intently. He asked us to take ten steps backwards and turn around. He asked us to ignore one another, to not say a word, to sit and think and most importantly, listen. I was skeptical that it would help, but I sat and began to watch the leaves, waiting for something to happen.

On our walk through the woods, I had thought them silent and still in comparison to our shouting voices. As we sat, together and simultaneously alone, I began to realize that the ground, the trees, and the sky were constantly moving. I smelled the dampness, and it felt real against my skin, like the familiar breath of a lover. The leaves were thick and undisturbed...
There's a Wild Boar in the Woods
A Folk Song taught to Steve Harvey by locals at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, Georgia

There's a wild boar in the woods
La-de-do and la-de-day.
There's a wild boar in the woods
Do-di-diddle-di-day.

There's a wild boar in the woods
He'll eat your meat and drink your blood.
I'll chir the kitty along
The kitty along tonight.

Bangum Wood to his doom does ride,
Sword and pistol by his side.
He went on into the lion's den,
And found the bones of thirty men.

There's a wild boar in the woods
La-de-do and la-de-day.
There's a wild boar in the woods
Do-di-diddle-di-day.