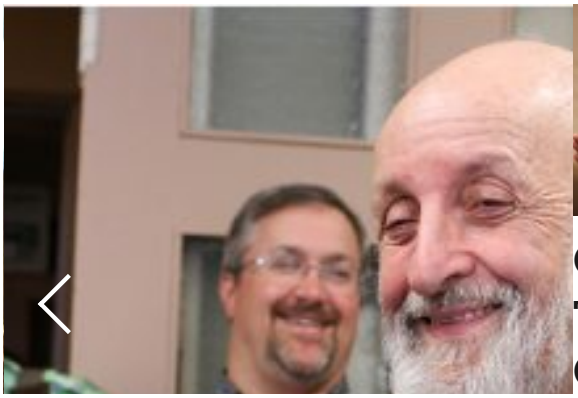
Search...

Wabash MAGAZINE

SEARCH...

A MAN'S LIFE



GATHERING THE ONE GREAT SONG

MY DEAR SON

AN IMPERFECT GENTLEMAN

A MAN'S LIFE: ABOUT IT

PRINT EDITION

FACULTY NEWS

#14 FOREVER

PROFESSOR DAY CONTINUES TEACHING, RESEARCH

"LEARNING TO LAUGH, AND LAUGHING TO LEARN"

TOBEY HERZOG: GETTING TO THE TRUTH

NOT JUST BLACK AND WHITE

WORKS IN PROGRESS

Speaking of Sports

CLASS NOTES

LUCY

MADE IN THE SHADE

WHAT MAKES A FAMILY?

GETTING REAL

ARCHIVES WABASH COLLEGE

The Mountain Man

by Matthew Vollmer

I once knew an old mountain man, a man who had never married, never had a girlfriend, never so much as kissed or danced with or held hands with a woman, or— for that matter—another man.

This mountain man lived in the same white clapboard house where his mother had given birth to him and his brothers and sisters, but unlike his siblings, he'd never left home, had lived his entire life in that very same house. He owned no car, had never been licensed to drive. Had no teeth, little—if any—hair. Wore ball caps and boots and long-sleeve shirts under overalls. His head—bald and egg-shaped— trembled, as did his hands: the result, perhaps, of some kind of undiagnosed palsy. He spoke in gnarled, guttural bursts that often sounded like singsongy gibberish, though if you listened you might learn how to identify bear scat, where to find ginseng, or how to use wasp larvae as fish bait.

The mountain man trusted no financial institution, stuffed his money into Mason jars, which he buried in his backyard, in dank little graves where the bills rotted to slush. Though he'd once worked as a carpenter, the mountain man was now unemployed and spent his days gathering eggs and collecting honey from hives and tossing scoops of feed corn to pigs he was fattening for slaughter. If he'd ever gone to school, he hadn't stayed long and, perhaps as a result, had never

learned to read or write.

He did, however, own a television. What, exactly, he learned from watching its nightly transmissions it's impossible to say, though it was common knowledge among those of us who knew him that he rarely missed an episode of Wheel of Fortune or Jeopardy! Nobody knew why two of his most beloved shows were those whose appeal depended, in part, on an audience's ability to recognize words and letters or read questions as they appeared onscreen, so as to play along at home. Maybe these shows boasted the cleanest receptions. Maybe they were—in the mountain man's estimation—the best of that particular hour's lineup. Or maybe he simply enjoyed watching others decipher with relative ease what would have been, for him, an onslaught of unsolvable mysteries.

THE IMAGE OF THE old mountain man came to me on a day that I boarded a train for Manhattan. I'd been staring out the train's window, at which point a voice in my head began to narrate what I saw. He stared through the train's smudged window, the voice said, at the blurred world outside. This—a voice narrating my observations—was not uncommon; I'd spent the better half of my life attempting to translate the life I'd lived and witnessed into words. This time, though, the voice felt intrusive, like an unwelcome phantom mediating my experience without my permission. I began to wonder whether the impulse to describe my surroundings—to put them, as they say, into words—was preventing me from enjoying a more direct perceptual experience. I was struck by the notion that my entire life could be reduced to a single, absurd enterprise: specifically, the distillation of lived experience to a series of symbols.

According to an online quiz I'd recently taken, my vocabulary likely consisted of more than 32,000 words. As a professor at a university, I spent the majority of every day reading books and writing email and reading and commenting on student papers. I attended meetings where my colleagues and I analyzed course proposals. I drafted promotional materials. I constructed syllabi. I wrote assignments. It was thus safe to say that I spent the majority of my waking life submerged in a world of language, of words, of representation.

I was thinking of that quiz when, for some reason, as I was rocketing north through Virginia's Shenandoah Mountains, my fellow passengers napping or swiping repeatedly at the screens of their phones or sipping coffee they'd retrieved from the Café Car, the illiterate mountain man appeared in my mind. I remembered how he'd never traveled more than 100 miles from his home, venturing no farther than a place called "the bald," a grassy meadow at the top of a ridge on the

Snowbird Mountain range in western North Carolina, where a group of men from my hometown camped for a week in August to pick blueberries and lounge around campfires telling stories, and where, during one particular campout, one of the men had slipped a *Playboy* magazine into the paper sack that housed the mountain man's personal items, and how this mischievous camper had elbowed other men and snickered as the mountain man unfolded the centerfold and stared at it—head wobbling, jaw slackened.

What had passed through the mind of the mountain man as he eyeballed this airbrushed beauty?

I had no way of knowing, but it was a surefire guarantee that he hadn't heard a third-person voice in his head narrating what he saw. The mountain man did not stand—as one must when contemplating how best to depict the human heart in conflict with itself—at a remove. Thus, I couldn't help but assume that the mountain man's experience of being alive was somehow more immediate than my own, and that as he peeled an apple—the green rind ribboning away as the blade of his pocketknife slipped under its skin, winding around and around until he'd produced a pale, naked orb—his perception of the act was not mediated by symbols, whereas mine was and, I supposed, always would be.

Had I somehow imprisoned myself by the very thing—the study and refinement of words—that I had supposed, all these years, would enlighten and thus liberate me?

What if Lao-Tzu, the ancient Chinese philosopher, had been right, and only that which was unnameable was the eternally real?

I didn't know.

I only wanted to know what it would be like—for a day, even an hour—to live in a world where I couldn't recognize words by sight, where the alphabet constituted a sequence of untranslatable ciphers, and where my perceptions—unencumbered by the anxiety of how best they might be represented—would anchor me fast to the world. I wanted to live— like the mountain man—simply.

I wanted to simply live.

I imagined returning to my hometown to visit the mountain man, to stroll beside the babbling

creek that ran by his house, to trudge through his molehill-rutted yard, and to swing open the screen door of his back porch, where I might find him preparing a slaw by mashing a toothy instrument into a bowl of cabbage.

But it was too late.

The mountain man no longer lived in the clapboard house. He no longer peeled apples or smoked bees or inspected owl pellets or crushed his kitchen's cockroaches with the backsides of cast-iron skillets. He had grown old and—for a time—went to live in a nursing home, where, before he withered and died, he could be found wandering from room to room, visiting with other residents, and lying down in a bed if it was empty, even if it belonged to someone else. Which meant that the mountain man had taken the secrets of his inner life—as we all someday will—to the grave.

And so we are left with the mystery of his existence, and I with the memory of his speech, of language that must have existed for the mountain man as pure sound, a vocabulary that he had acquired by paying attention—by listening carefully—so that, like a song he had taught himself how to play by ear, he, too, could express himself, with words he knew not by sight but by heart.

MATTHEW VOLLMER is the author of the short story collections Gateway to Paradise *and* Future Missionaries of America*, as well as* inscriptions for headstones, *a collection of essays. He directs the undergraduate creative writing program at Virginia Tech University and worked with Wabash students in 2014 as a visiting writer.*

CATEGORIES A MAN'S LIFE

STEVE CHARLES

PREVIOUS ARTICLE
MILES SULLIVAN '41—FATHER OF INVENTIONS
NEXT ARTICLE
"GOING FOR THE WALL"

BACK TO TOP

WABASH MAGAZINE
ONLINE

Wabash College Crawfordsville, IN