

Sarah Turmail

The Lesser of Appalachia

When you're here in sugar-water Dixie, the flattop strips of new wheat sway in the sand like planted chorus lines. They hum the Southern battle cry with the cicadas, while closing screen doors keep the rhythm steadied.

On a front porch, red-faced farmers gnaw their after-supper pipes. The stories of lost souls who bend and weep like heavy willows are fed with the dessert pie to their grandkids, garnished with secondhand smoke.

The burnouts eternalized by the farmers' parables are found digging for cigarette butts in the gutters. They rattle their loose brains in coffee can skulls, scrape horseshoes against the wooden street markers.

The poor men can hear the dying snap of a mouse, caught in the stove trap of a skinny hilljack. He itches his ass with bony fingers, sips soup from a barbed mug that goes unwashed until the next rain. In the morning,

grubby beater-lickers will pitter and pat the clotted Black Dirt into baby foothills. They will grind the sandy grains between their teeth as they sit with chubby knuckles wedged between clammy, raw thighs.

They will wait for their life to be validated by a tractor ride on the tire guard, to mind a beer cooler underfoot, to watch the soft soil sift and separate through the blades.