

# Appalachian Fall album lyrics

*(All lyrics from poems by Michael Martin, as edited and set to music by Alex Martin, New World Jazz/BMI, 2024)*

## 1. Into the Desert

What passes for speech is mostly inertia: coasting downhill  
smoothly  
after having mounted on others' steam.

But what moves, and persists, from the heart, drives the rest of us also,  
and those others, whose supply lines may be stretched too far

because They labor in remotest fields: in the most improbable reaches  
of outlying Life  
where once They were transported from what They were; and cannot  
return.

But maybe They'll slake their thirst, for a moment, when They need it  
most,  
and be restored; together with the powers which conveyed Them there.

Maybe once only, and far from here—or very near.

But we must find the reservoirs, the collecting points,  
to pool those powers, and preserve them

for when the long Trains pass through  
on their way into the desert.

I dream of being severed,  
cut loose, & floating

down into the dark like a maple wing  
spiraling out of the sun.

But the core, the seed inside,  
wants out of its husk.

It's like working on a stone bridge  
made of stalactites

condensing, drop by drop,

out of dreams, out of the work done,

out of the tears of those  
I've caused to suffer.

There is no stopping place, no turning point, no return.  
I'm way out over it now, and the fall is endless.

But maybe, the Trains will pass over, with all their transports  
through link on link, word on word,

that bear the vibrations, the massive connections, the recollections, in  
chains—  
the long supply lines trickling out of dreams into the desert—

that will not stop for me.

## 2. Second Letter to Marlea

There's been a lot of rain here.

I was gathering firewood yesterday  
with Hannah, my new-old collie  
who's about 15, and snores

& we poked first my walkingstick  
and then our heads down  
through the brown dead leaf floor

into a tiny cave, and heard  
far beneath, the flow of water  
rushing on

down to the Tennessee  
the Mississippi  
& the Gulf

& on.

## 3. Twang

My words,

they'd practice your heart,  
pluck every string.

Then they'd wait  
for the far off twang

in the dark space, upstairs—  
after the keyboard's closed,

the music put away,  
stowed under the seat—

through bedroom and den,  
the whole house & garden.

Not to forget...

the small klang  
trembling, shut

in the quiet cabinets,  
in the pegs & quills.

Whatever's held over  
will be mine, also,

my lover.

#### 4. Philo Meets the Machine

“An awful lot of peddlers roamed around back then.  
Mammy'd put 'em up for days at a time.  
Them and them hellfire and brimstone preachers.  
They set up a commissary over at the Quarry,  
I had my first paying job, over thar,  
    running the steam horse.  
I hung around the store  
    during lunch hour...

“Seemed like everybody in the world'd come in 'nar,  
    and they'd all be a-talking.  
I don't know how I got along before that.  
Yessir. That was my roundup of the daily news.

“Hunting, fishing, crops, jokes, gossip, tall tales.  
I'd set on the steps and listen.

“But oh, the sharpest, sweetest smells come out that door...  
Soap, leather, liquorice, cheese, ham, apples, varnish...

“I was just a boy and I didn’t know much,  
but they was more things in that one place  
than ever I suspected.

“And all of it *new*...

“Mmmmmm... And I’d take it all in—  
with my slice of cheese, my nickel’s worth of crackers—  
(*break*) and a bottle of pop!

“They even had a machine, back again’ the back wall,  
that would take your *measure*.  
And I don’t mean height or weight.  
It wasn’t your strength even ’xactly.  
Ye’d drop in your penny and *squeeze*  
And it’d *test* ye.

“It’d tell you how much *juice* ye could take...”

*He drops in his imaginary penny, he lifts his arms, and grips the handles.  
They’re spaced wide apart, for a boy,  
and trembling with the juice, the current...*

*The shock of childhood, with no insulation:  
on a raw mountain: with a demented father:  
in poverty past imagining.*

“Yessir. That machine was like lie-f...

“The harder you worked it, the more it’d get ye!

“Well. I could stand right much—more’n most I reckon—  
but I had to let go, at lay-st...”

*He smiles, and the great hands float between us, like falling leaves.  
Like wide wings, drifting down—flattening, to rest, on his knees:  
like a pair of ancient raptors, gliding home to roost,  
on familiar limbs, across a holler.*

## 5. Mr Plummer, Preacher Dan, and the Moonshiners (Philo Speaks)

Sherwood Anderson should ‘a come down here. This mountain was full of unusual types.

### I.

They’s a feller Plummer, lived in Plum Creek, years ago.  
A colored man, an inventor. Thought he could fly a bicycle off a hill up at Greever’s.

Said it was too dangerous and he quit.

Then he took a motorcycle, made the prettiest little car that you ever saw.  
A three-wheel car for his two boys: they drove it down town, everywhere.

Ira Barker had a A-model Ford, wadn't airy soul could fix it.  
Ira towed it from here to Bristol. Plummer took one long look and said,

"Well, Mr Barker, I don't know..."

They was an old rotten wire fence 'air; he just broke a piece off it,  
crawled under that A-model, in two, three minutes crawled back out and said,  
"Well... That might do, Mr Barker. See if it'll run."

It never give Ira a bit of trouble after that...

A feller Spicer, lived up on Greever's place:  
he was cutting hay, bundling it with a wheat binder, binder broke down.  
He was a pretty good mechanic hisself; worked on it off and on, for about a week.  
Finally he give up and called in Mr Plummer; Plummer come up and set down on the  
fence.

Said, "Mr Spicer, pull it up a bit." And he studied it a while...  
Then he got down under it and worked at it a few minutes.

Well, he got up and put his cap back on. He didn't say nothing: just tipped his cap  
and nodded behind him, to the fields, and walked away...  
He musta been a wizard.

## II.

Sherwood Anderson should a went down to hear old Dan Graham.  
Dan preached at revivals, but he got his start picking dandelions,  
Just picking dandelions... You know how their roots grow deep.  
He'd dig 'em out and dust the holes with salt; and that killed 'em.  
He done that 'til he got through seminary.

He bought him a team of mules, and hauled lumber to Bristol,  
all the way from Konnarock, all the way into Tennessee.

He was a great big man, and boy he'd step on your toes: big shots and little shots.  
A feller started a fight with him once and ol' Dan knocked 'im down.  
Said, "Well, even if I was a preacher... the Bible says  
if somebody hits you on the cheek turn the other.  
It didn't say turn the other *cheek*, so I turned *him!*"

He'd preach about pride and stuck-up people. He'd talk about a wheat field, ripening,  
when the heads of wheat get heavy...

Said, "If it's good and ripe, the head'll droop over..."

Said, "If it's *really* loaded, it'll even bow down..."

But if it ain't got no grain in it a tall... it'll shoot straight up, of course!

"Think about it, folks, next time  
you all see a good Christian going along  
with his head straight up, and looking down at ye...

"You'll *know* there ain't *nothing* up there!"

### III.

Rob Henegar and I was hauling liquor, one night,  
just over the state line, when the lights went out.

Rob had a little Ford roadster. We picked up fifty gallons for B.B. down in North Carolina.

Trap Hill.

It was late in the evening when we started back. We got as far as Independence.  
Independence, Virginia.

It was dark as dungeons. Vehicle's packed full, bumper's dragging the road.  
No lights.

"Oh God," I said, "let's unload this stuff": the Law'd be a coming. One look, and they'd know.

We covered it with brush, found us some old stumps and set 'em afire.

And you know, Jack, it turned out alright. The troopers never suspected.  
They'd cruise by and we'd wave.  
They'd wave right back and cruise on.  
Rob and I'd swap a few stories and sleep awhile,  
wake up, and swap a few more.

Rob got to feeling so good, he said, "Let's invite them troopers in here.  
They been working all night, out protecting the people: they deserve a little reward."

I guess they's been 25 or 30 Quarry men caught hauling liquor outta North Carolina.  
We had to keep on. We didn't have airy choice, back then.  
A man had to take his *chain-ces*.

That, or go thirsty.

Ol' Sherwood should a come down here.

## 6. A Lightfoot Death

So many times I remember him  
going back into the mountains,

for a cure, for himself,

for Flora, Wanda, Bear, Luke.

For the herbs, the mountain air,  
just being there, breathing it in.

He knew where the healing plants were,  
what each could do. And now...

*Ye come from Gert's, didn't ye?*

No, I've been to see my sister, in Washington: she was singing in the cathedral.

*You on your way to Gert's?*

No, I was in Washington, since I saw you last.

*You goin' to Washington?*

Thoughts, words scatter blurred and dim  
wheeling about his head in twilight.

He raises his great hand;  
it floats in dark'ning air.

He cannot find them.  
Yet he's searching still.

Once he could take a hundred stitches,  
in his scalp, without sedation.

But this pain, this cancer—  
in stomach, liver, bones...

A stranger, on the edge of his country,  
he crosses

into this nomansland  
of dark floating figures and shades.

*The good ones. They're out there too, Jack.*

*Out there with the demons...*

*There'll be a war, Jack.*

*I won't live to see it; but maybe you will.*

There are Powers in the air:  
invisible Forces, light and dark,

inaccessible to me,  
a campsite of ancestors

Cherokee or Celtic. It's Milton's world,  
raised to another power.

In the sigh of white pines  
heavy with snow

I hear the tread of Lightfoots  
in the light world.

All the labor unacknowledged,  
the secret toil, the secret craft—

his pappy's fiddling, his mammy's dancing,  
his brother's visions, his sister's songs—

chamb'ring the great wind  
in the base of the voice.

[Wanda]: *Do you remember daddy, when you took me on your knee?*

[Philo]: *We don't care, do we?*

Thoughts, words scatter blurred and dim  
wheeling about his head in twilight.

He raises his great hand;  
it floats in dark'ning air.

He cannot find them.  
Yet he's searching still.

*We don't care now do we?*  
*We don't care now do we?*  
*We don't care now do we?*  
*We don't care now do we?*

## 7. Echoes in the Jamison Gap

I used to go deeper into the mountain  
to cut wood above the Price graves.

I remember the sharp thud on the opposite ridge  
from the Luster Field, where the Lightfoot cabin was,

as if someone were there, working beside me,  
driving an axe into a dead log,

as if no one were there, no one else.



I'd clap my hands, and listen

to the stillness, and emptiness, of the mountain,  
and to the echo

which scored the stillness.

for it was the sound of stillness,  
as the stillness was of absence.

absence of the hootowl and the screechowl,  
woodpecker and woodthrush,  
wildcat and bobcat,  
panther and whippoorwill.  
And Philo said:

memory of Lou Brown—  
nobody knowed where she come from, or why she come there—

of Rube Woods, her murderer,

of Ellen Walden who built up fires,  
and slept by the road (with her 36 Colt)

of eight black brothers, poisoned, and buried in a common grave,  
where a poplar'd blowed o'er,

of one brother, who was sick and hadn't eaten,  
who went and hanged himself out by the Tin Bridge

of Romy, bee man from Naples,  
calligrapher, grafter of fruit trees,

of Private Riffey, who shot Stonewall (or so he believed),  
he hoed corn, reflected

of Laurie Welborne, the mayor's daughter  
(who hoed corn also, and took in washing),

of Laurie's daughter, Clio Lightfoot, flower of the mountain,

and of the Lightfoots, of the Lightfoot holler.

I used to go deeper into the mountain  
to cut wood above the Price graves.

## 8. Planing the Ragged Twilights

Jackie, coal miner's son  
all elbows, rough crude profane,

a John Birch man, you can hear whisper  
three fields away.

Jackie helped Rob & Daisy  
make it through their last years.

& other folks on the Creek: getting up at five  
stumbling around the hill to feed Rick's steers,

then again, after dark - year after year  
between ten-hour shifts in West Virginia,

eighty miles over the mountains.  
"Done it for nothing," he said.

Thus we keep rounding the days  
planing the ragged twilights

fleeing and feeding  
finishing the fences

currying the current droves  
and driving them on

driven with them  
& letting them go

as we go with them  
with the flow.

As I climb a low mountain  
into the open, into the evening

high upon its pebbly spine, I hear  
the yapping of chained guard dogs

around a hundred kitchens  
quoting their property rights:

encircling domestic circles  
snarling with fortress fear

innocent of the fearful  
wonder of Creation

wide sown, flung far  
in everyone.

Planing the ragged twilights...  
Planing the ragged twilights...

## 9. Sparklers

*Evening, on Beulah's porch  
out with the first stars,  
talking, star-gazing.*

*I mention the radio-astronomers,  
how they listen, to the faintest signals  
from the earliest moment: Creation itself*

*a tremor, still rippling through us,  
echoing, from behind the vault,  
tolling, from our tallest belfry:*

*slow waves, from the beginning of time,  
red shifts; discs in the desert; Cosmos on TV...  
pulsars; red giants; black holes...*

*how the sky may be all riddled...  
time punctured, like a mountainside  
with these dark tunnels, and caves through...*

*wells down: to other skies, times, universes...  
universes within universes...  
If—say—you could only go far enough...*

*Mesons, mosquitoes, red giants...  
lightning bugs, supernovas...  
poets talking to potters on a doorstep...*

*Beulah's hunkered down  
on the porch, above me: her face clouded over  
brooding, thoughtful...*

*Time passes. The clouds disperse.  
Thoughts animate her face.*

*Then, with one continuous motion*

*she's on her feet: up-lifted by an image:*

“Yes, when I think of *God*, just standing there, at the first,  
in the dark: scattering stars out from him, for his own delight:  
spraying them... sprinkling them... pitching 'em  
out, from Himself, like... *sparklers*...”

“Not catching 'em back, see: letting 'em go,  
releasing 'em, tossing 'em out... and out—  
watching 'em go—far and wide...  
before ever *anything* was...”

*Raising one callused hand, she describes a circle  
with a spraying, scattered motion,  
and rubs it on the air, repeating it  
reaching farther, with the words: and wide...*

*ineffably—like a timid wave, a child's eraser over slate—  
effacing, as she makes, her mark:  
in deference to this awesome Motion  
which hers must shadow.*

“It's this black hole ...may be how the spirits leave  
this life: maybe that's their way back, to the world they knew,  
once before, and forgot; and yet, they're *aimed* back there...  
though the memory's burned out of them, before they're born...”

“When my mother died: I seemed to see this cloud of vapor,  
just overhead: I tried to paint it once; and this... *sweat* on her forehead,  
like the start of the vapor *trail*.... This *death-sweat*: this *death-dew*  
on her face: I touched with my lips...

“Her fingers'd press mine, and let go, press, and let go...  
but each time, weaker... She was going slowly...”

“Then they felt like there was nothing in them.  
“But it wasn't painful: it was a... release, see,  
the clay opening out  
and the spirit going up through that path of vapor,  
through that black hole, maybe.

“I wouldn't mind leaving: I wouldn't mind at all,  
if it wasn't for my family.

“It wouldn't be hard:  
it'd be like a little bird...”

*Beulah cups her hands, her fingertips pointed up  
toward the thickening stars.*

*She makes a crack in them, widens it slowly:*

“It’d be like a bird: a little chick  
cracking out of her shell.”

## 10. Appalachian Fall

Way up in the Henegars’ tree just now picking the last apples  
and the wind over the hill coming on.

Swaying I reached and it blew them past me  
swaying again reached and it blew them down.

Again reached and it blew us together  
me and the branch, the branch and the breeze

whispering together: bending almost breaking.

And on the near ridge crest on the slate gray sky  
I saw Flo’s steers feeding on Beulah’s new roof

and Gerald and Clyde hamm’ring at their feet  
and thought: bowed to the hammers for their bread

as they to the grass: hammering on: ruminating on...  
the wind blowing on and on:

I to the apples, apples to the branch: branch to the roots  
to the field to the beef and the workmen:

Where my brothers is the altar?  
and whose is the sacrifice?

and for whom bow the apples blows the wind...  
as I reached for the apples was I reaching for the wind?

I to the apples, apples to the branch: branch to the roots  
to the field to the beef and the workmen:

Where my brothers is the altar?  
and whose is the sacrifice?

and for whom bow the apples blows the wind...  
as I reached for the apples was I reaching for the wind?

In the top of the tree the branches swayed  
and I too swayed and sang—

Where is the altar?  
Whose is the sacrifice? (3x)



*Martin and Martin, 2013.* Photo by Leslie Brice Bustamante.