

2015 ALEX ALBRIGHT CREATIVE NONFICTION PRIZE WINNER

Boone Summer: Adventures of a Bad Environmentalist

by Zackary Vernon

all photographs courtesy of the author

As we're doing our first walkthrough of the house I rented in Boone, North Carolina, my wife freezes in her tracks, staring wild-eyed out the kitchen window. "Is that a coyote?" she whispers. I scramble to the back door, and indeed ten yards away, there is a coyote standing on a rock, tall and proud like it's the star of its own nature documentary. My wife and I huddle at the threshold, the door cracked just enough for us both to see. The coyote retreats several feet farther into the yard, and then at the edge of a creek that borders our property, he turns back and stares at us, nonplussed and defiant.

After the coyote, we realize that the front porch is tattooed with active hornets' nests. Then come the ants in the recycling bin and the rabbits in the garden and the snakes in the grass and the mice in the kitchen.

Locals say that last year two black bears were seen on our mountain, one found dead by a hiker

right behind our house and one found alive, munching on our neighbor's chickens. A couple of years before the bears, we learn, the construction of a large apartment complex down the street

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drove dozens of rattlesnakes down off the mountain. Passing cars flattened the rattlers, and the blacktop ended up looking like a tattered snake-skin purse.

I now dream of black bears, and walking my property, I step high and light-footed, always imagining rattles going off and fangs coming out.



ZACKARY VERNON is an Assistant Professor of English at Appalachian State University, specializing in American literature and film. This essay is the first chapter of a creative nonfiction project about environmental and agricultural activism in the South, particularly southern Appalachia. His research has been published in *Appalachian Journal*, *Mississippi Quarterly*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *Fifty Years after Faulkner* (University Press of Mississippi, 2016), and *The Bohemian South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016). Read his essay on Allan Gurganus and his interview with Ron Rash and Terry Roberts in *NCLR* 2014.

The photographs within this essay were taken in 2015 by the author (except of course those he appears in, which were taken by his wife, Jessica Martell) at his new Boone home and at the Turtle Island Reserve run by Eustace Conway, the other man appearing in some of these photographs.

Alex Albright, *NCLR*'s founding editor, said of the first recipient of the prize named in his honor, "Zackary Vernon's narrative stood out as the best of the submissions not just because it's so well written, but also because it is about so much more than the author's experience. Through the lens of personal experience, he explores cultural, environmental, and regional subjects that make it an important addition to our state's tradition of excellence in nonfiction writing. His Boston-to-Boone nexus is a terrific hook, and I look forward to reading the book that this chapter introduces."