THE REGIONAL POET AND THE WORLD

a review by Karen K. Mason

Robert Morgan. *October Crossing: Poems*. Frankfort, KY: Broadstone Books, Asheville, NC: The Captain's Bookshelf, 2009.

—. *Terroir*. New York: Penguin Poets, 2011.

Scott Owens. *Something Knows the Moment*. Charlotte, NC: Main Street Rag, 2011.

—. *For One Who Knows How to Own Land*. Mineral Bluff, GA: FutureCycle Press, 2012.

KAREN K. MASON earned a BA from Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL; an MA from Bradley University in Peoria, IL; and an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte, NC. She has published poems in various journals and in her chapbook, *Not From Around Here* (Finishing Line Press, 2013). She currently lives in New Hampshire where she moved after living five years in Luxembourg. She also lived in Switzerland for nearly fifteen years. She has taught English in the public school classroom in Peoria, IL, and history in Geneva, Switzerland. For five years she also taught composition online from Luxembourg for Illinois Central College in East Peoria, IL.

One nice thing about poetry collections is that they're usually small enough to fit easily into a bag when you travel. At those odd moments when you find yourself with some down time, you can pull out the volume and read as many poems as time allows. That was my situation and experience reading collections by Robert Morgan and Scott Owens as I traveled in western Europe. Whether in trains watching the passing countryside or reading in a tiny alpine village, I easily imagined the cows and holy cussing in Appalachian North Carolina (Morgan) or upstate South Carolina (Owens).

These collections brought me fresh awareness of the poet's place in helping to identify the intangibles that connect us. Despite the concrete details that are specific to the Carolinas, reading these four volumes of poetry reminded me that people almost everywhere connect through shared experience of life and the natural world. Characteristics that differentiate one region from another serve – intentionally or not – to clarify a subject for the reader, open a window into the lives of real people and actual places. This clarity adds to our understanding of the larger community.

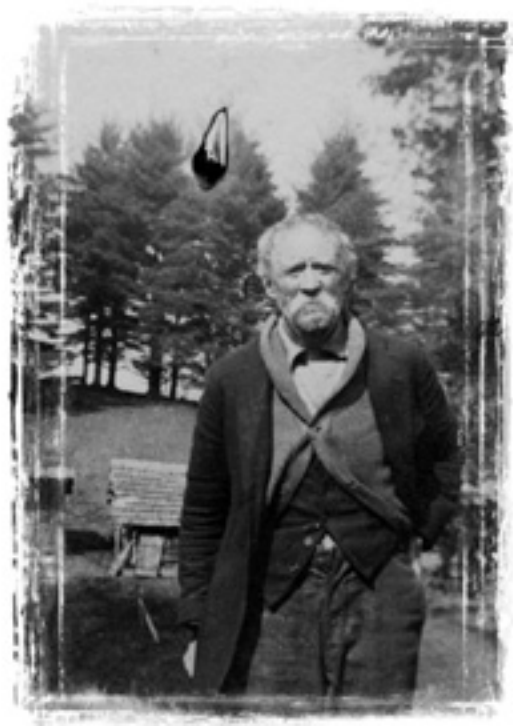
Robert Morgan is such a regional poet. He has lived in upstate New York since the 1970s, but his inspiration remains the Appalachian region of western North Carolina. The region has been a mine of possibility, and his works, whether poetry or prose, have been critically acclaimed.

Most of Scott Owens's creative works to date have been written in North Carolina, but he was born and raised in the Piedmont region of South Carolina, a place he evokes through vivid images and regionalisms. For Owens, place serves as a point of departure to study relationships. In contrast to Morgan, whose standing as a writer and poet is well established, Owens is building his reputation as a poet.

These four books were good company on my journey. While I traveled, the poems took my imagination to other places and spoke to enduring themes, and I want to make some return visits.

Robert Morgan is a native of western North Carolina who has lived in Ithaca, NY, since 1971 when he joined the faculty of Cornell University. His two most recent poetry collections, ***October Crossing*** and ***Terroir***, explore the distinct qualities of Appalachia, the land and people. *October Crossing* is a cohesive unit of thirty-four poems about Appalachia that is almost (with the exception of four poems) wholly incorporated into *Terroir*. However, the interplay of ideas, tone, and point of view based on what comes before or after a given poem, helps unearth new readings in both collections. Reading familiar poems from *October Crossing* in *Terroir* is similar to seeing the chain of mountains in the Blue Ridge in different lights: each view offers a new vista. The seventy-eight poems of *Terroir* effectively carry on a dialogue according to the theme and arrangement of poems. Regarding content, it's clear from the exacting details that this is poetry written by a consummate authority on the region. Titles alone are telling: "Peepers," "Jar Fly," "Purple Hands," "The Mareslide," "Apple Howling."

October Crossing begins with "Clogging," a poem that sets the stage for a long look into the character of the community



COURTESY OF ROBERT MORGAN

that Morgan brings into focus through the collection. "Now we gather in a circle / turning right and turning leftward, / stamping as though threshing barley, / stomping as if crushing wine grapes" announces to the reader that the community has chosen to engage in a dance of life. The poet recreates the sound in the energetic verbals that introduce each line, and each of these verbals propels the movement: "hammering down the seconds firmly, / trampling on the vines that trip us, / nailing note and nailing heartbeat, / stamping out the fires of petty." This energy appears to be part instinctual and part a learned response to adversity that reveals strong character. It connects human behavior to cycles in nature, to how the seasons dictate planting and harvest, but also to ancient ways, to a mystical conception of how nature and old magic interact: "stepping to the river's shiver, / cooling down the flames of anger, / summoning of ancient spirits / from the deepest wells and caverns."

The last four lines of "Clogging" reveal the resilience of the dancers: "from the secret mystery places, / beating back the blackest shadows / raising dust of healing vapors / to the pulse of clap and laughter." The "clap and laughter" response to life's hardship is one that Morgan captures again and again in various poems. For example, in the poems "Concert" and "Craft" (two of the four poems in *October Crossing* that are not in *Terroir*), the reader finds a stoic response to physical labor and dark moods. In "Concert" the poet's uncle, taking a break from long hours of solitary labor, "wandered to / the edge of the far field" to listen to the "steeple bells spill out the call / to a revival service." These bells were "the only music of his day, / except the keen of whippoorwill." In "Craft," the scene is the dead of night and someone is waking to the sound of wood being planed and sanded by an invisible carpenter. One world collides with another and the individual must choose how to respond:

> **as though already in the next**
> **dimension wood was being smoothed**
> **and sawed and fitted, joined and nailed,**
> **to build a craft, a sleek canoe,**
> **to launch them on the curving veer**
> **of widest, farthest river.**

Two other poems, found in both collections, shine a light on qualities of character. The poem "October Crossing," describing woolly worm caterpillars crossing the road in the fall, reveals the stubborn nature of the land and its people. The caterpillars are "bears" and inexorably determined: "They inch across the lanes in fur / fit for a monarch, fox or star, / as crows descend and yellow leaves / fly out against the twilight breeze." No matter what the caterpillars know about their existence, "they seem intent on crossing this / hard Styx or Jordan to the ditch, / oblivious to the tires' high pitch." The concluding poem of *October Crossing*, "The Years Ahead," suggests the quiet strength of the poet's grandfather who learned how to safely navigate his world. This long poem looks back in time, recalling when Morgan's grandfather routinely "took his produce / down the Winding Stairs to Greenville / to peddle door to door." The poems between "Clogging" and "The Years Ahead" are filled with folklore, oral tradition, family stories, recorded facts, throwing a spotlight on a region and leaving the reader more intimately acquainted with the community.

With the collection *Terroir*, Morgan builds on what he has observed, implied, retold in the 2009 collection, but as the French word of the title promises – and the poet delivers – the 2011 publication

ABOVE **Robert Morgan's great-grandfather Fidele Capps, upon whom Julie's father in Morgan's novel *Gap Creek* is based (See more photographs of the author's ancestors, who have inspired his poetry and fiction, with the Morgan interview in *NCLR* 2001.)**

explores the broader significance that *terroir* suggests. An underlying question to the material could be, "How does the character of a place or of a person develop?" The collection answers the question. Poem after poem adds layer upon layer of delicate nuances in order to capture the qualities that create the smell and feel and character of a place, and by degrees the people who inhabit these places. Given that Morgan's career has moved him out of Appalachia, *Terroir* and *October Crossing* are all the more revealing for the role that memory serves in the recreation of familiar people and places remembered from afar.

Terroir is divided into three parts. The cumulative effect of the collection – of reading poems about the land, the atmosphere that feeds it, the people that populate it – is that Morgan is writing about what it feels like to live outside of an Eden. Many of the poems result from observation over many seasons, yet there's immediacy in the depiction. Perhaps the poem that introduces the collection proper to *Terroir*, "In Memory of William Matthews," holds a key to the selection process in the collected work: "Even awake, the rest of us / were never as awake as you. / . . . Tradition meant / a lot to you. You were a connoisseur." Reading the collection from beginning to end brings Appalachia to life by an authority who finds significance in detail and knows what to present for best effect. The poet in these two collections is a human seismograph, someone who notes the "endless picture / of rest and jolt and magnifies / the shivers we don't recognize" ("Seismograph"). The poems in the collections, if not actually recollected in tranquility, are intriguing for the way they show how memory serves composition.

Part One of *Terroir* explores the natural world of Appalachia. Trees, boulders, animals, develop a mythic quality as the poems accumulate with the turning pages. The natural world maintains its proper qualities, its "thing-ness," and is neither anthropomorphized nor sentimentalized. For example, "Nurse Log" reflects on the role of downed trees in regeneration of a forest; a dead deer in "Loaves and Fishes" is road kill, a link in the food chain; "Dew" is "minute rain . . . / you don't know when it came except / at dusk the grass is suddenly wet"; air currents from and around caves are "Inspired": "The mouths of giant caves are known / to breathe in during winter months, / then slowly start to sigh out air / as spring slows into summer heat." In some poems, such as "Soft Mountains," metaphor suggests the human predicament and the strong association of place and character:

> **But underneath the thicket swirls**
> **and fallen leaves and stingy soil**
> **they're granite at the core and hard**
> **as any hill in Cappadocia,**
> **the softness only in the face,**
> **deceptive to the look as steel**
> **encased in velvet, hardness at**
> **the heart, while flanks are petal-smooth**
> **and quaint and blue as old-time music.**

Part Two of *Terroir* is about the poet's personal recollections of family and friends and acquaintances. This is the shortest of the volume's three sections, but the poems root the poet to the place. The reader meets Aunt Tharmuthias and, in "The Years Ahead," learns about his grandfather. In "Purple Hands," classmates try, without success, to hide the stain from potatoes, evidence of their work "dropping taters." Sometimes people are saved from certain disaster, as in "Brink," but all are made memorable through the poet's careful selection of detail that brings the place alive for the reader. The concrete images and dispassionate description are the flint that lights the image, and the use of rhyme echoes speech, as in "The Mareslide": "The long flat rock that drops so steep / down the mountainside above the creek / with winter ice locked on its face / seems some vast cameo encased."

Poems in the third and final section of *Terroir* relate stories told by the collective community, past and present. The story behind the tragic, historical event in "Confederate Graves at Elmira" illuminates the role of "a black custodian here / who dedicated twenty years / to finding out the name for each / Confederate grave." Or, as in "Singing to Make Butter Come," a story demonstrates how people make the best of adversity. Sometimes people are the object of good-humored fun, sly and dry, as in "Kudzu Cousins," which raises a question about Appalachians: "What if the family tree was not / a tree but more a wilderness / of vines that curled and interlaced / across the hill of time far back." People use their ingenuity, like the Reverend Duffy Peyton Corn and his umbrella in "Shield," to survive.

ROBERT MORGAN is the author of numerous books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. See an interview with him in *NCLR* 2001 and an essay on his work in the 2010 Appalachian issue. For samples of his writing in various genres, see *NCLR*'s author index.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN WESTMORELAND; COURTESY OF NC STATE ARCHIVES

From poem to poem, there is an inviting regularity in structure. The overall effect, reading poem after poem in the collection, is reading poetry with the feel of emotional bedrock. Each poem carefully fits into and is a necessary part of the whole. Whereas poems in Parts One and Two share a common connection (nature in One, family and friends in Two), the poems in Part Three are not as simply characterized. The sheer variety of material may serve the purpose of bringing the reader to understand what it means to be "Appalachian." As the collection's title poem suggests, character is formed from disparate sources:

Terroir

That quality that seems unique,
as thriving from a special spot
of soil, air flow and light specific,
and also frost and winter sleep,
conditions of particular year,
as every instance comes just once
with mix of mineral and grease,
what Hopkins chose to call inscape,
or individuation, sounds
so close to terror you'd confuse
the two, as if the finest and
the rarest blend would come with just
a hint of fear or pain, the sting
and shiver of revulsion with
the savor of the earth and sun,
of this once, not returning, sung
for this one ear, on this one tongue.

The collection's concluding poem, "Mound Builders," leaves the reader with the thought that Morgan is reassembling natural elements and vestiges of the past in *Terroir*. The collection itself is similar to what the mounds were for the Creek Indians, their "sanctuaries during floods." Whatever people hold on to is a source of strength:

. . . the sacred dirt
and relics of their clan, the signs
and symbols of their hearth, beliefs
and arts and holy bundles too,
as all of us rely, and must,
on our traditions and the deep
ancestral memories and ways
to bear us up and get us through
the deadly and uncertain days,
sustaining breath and sight and hope
on residue and legacy
of those beloved who came before
and watch us from the glittering stars.

Scott Owens grew up on farms and in mill villages around Greenwood, SC. Most of his creative works have been written in North Carolina, and currently he lives in Hickory, NC, where he teaches at Catawba Valley Community College. ***Something Knows the Moment***, Owens's seventh poetry collection, is an engaging and intellectually stimulating reframing of biblical and hagiographical stories. His other recent volume, ***For One Who Knows How to Own Land***, is a powerful extended reflection on family and relationships, occasioned by the loss of the poet's grandfather. Both volumes basically examine the same questions: Who are we? How did we get here? If people do bad things, does that mean they're bad? The principal poetic technique common to both is the dramatic monologue. In *Something Knows*, this technique brings a contemporary tone to age-old questions of faith and doubt, whereas in *For One Who Knows*, it lends a timeless quality to a twentieth-century family story.

In *Something Knows the Moment*, dramatic monologue allows the narrator to get inside the heads of Biblical characters to explore motivations and behavior. In this work, Owens probes lack of certainty about basic tenets of faith and religious belief. The collection is neither a rant nor a polemic, but at eighty-nine poems, it is long and sometimes wanders. I want to like *Something Knows* because there is much to like, but it would have benefitted from more ruthless editing to enhance the novel reframing

ABOVE **Robert Morgan signing books after his keynote address to the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, Asheville, 10 Nov. 2007**

of old stories. For example, while the section called "The Lives of the Saints and Others" contains many strong poems, it lacks sharp definition. The result is that this second section of the collection seems to shift the focus and therefore diffuses the powerful effect of this ambitious undertaking.

Owens sets conventional teaching to one side as he inventively revisits the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Lot and his wife, Saint Veronica and Saint Francis, and he thoughtfully reconsiders the snake's role in Eden as well as the serpent's possible role in "Why Angels Are Always Fat." *Something Knows* is an unrelenting search for answers, with results that are sometimes humorous and sometimes hard-edged, but always thought-provoking. In addition to explicit allusions to scripture and doctrine, *Something Knows* includes oblique references to those thinkers and artists through the ages who have wrestled with the same questions of existence and faith.

Something Knows has five sections. The volume begins with creation stories, gives way to life after The Fall, and digresses to angels before turning to a long section on faith. The introductory poem to the collection is "Having His Hands Before Him." A note referencing William Blake follows the poem's title. The God in *Something Knows* is accessible in human terms, reminiscent of the gods of Greek mythology:

> **Still, having his hands before him**
> **his forehead shining**
> **his hair hanging about his face**
> **having his ears and nose and high cheekbones**
> **he wanted more**
> **so with his white teeth**
> **he chewed up bits of earth**
> **and molded tiger and lamb**
> **dove and whale, serpent and flea.**

Blake's influence is evident not only in the mention of a tiger and lamb but also in the depiction of God, which recalls Blake's illustrations for *The Book of Job* or *The Divine Comedy*.

Owens revisits traditional stories by getting inside the characters' skin. For example, in "Eve Descending," Owens re-imagines Eve as a fount of tenderness and sensitivity: "Eve descending saw how the willow / wept, the cherry blazed, the apple / kept its heart hidden, heard / the dove's cry and called it mourning." And in "Leaving Eden," Eve is "under

COURTESY OF SCOTT OWENS

the sky and stars / She rolled over, she said the trees / Bore heaven in their arms, / She said the weight was sometimes too much." Again, the poetic treatment yields an accessible being, and Eve is especially sympathetic. Another intriguing treatment of a well-known biblical character is Owens's version of the Tempter, a character that appears as Snake in sections one and two, and simply as He in section three. In the first poem of section three, "Why Angels Are Always Fat," God states that it is the Tempter's fault: "He took all my pretty ones with him / . . . He never clapped at all, just made his body / like silver, a mirror they'd follow anywhere." Owens's representation of familiar characters is fresh; however, their stories remain disconnected and lack a certain depth because the reader doesn't know enough about the universe the characters inhabit.

Section four, "The Persistence of Faith," contains the poem "Common Ground," which gives the collection its title: "But something / knows the moment of sunflower, / the time of crow's open wing, / the span of moss growing on rock." The poem seems to suggest that the only certainty is what people make of the present moment. Owens builds on this idea in the final section, "What to Make of a Ruined Thing," which begins with the introductory note, "who spoke of him / have died / making him extinct," and ends with reaffirmation of the power that rests in the moment: "in the presence of / not there but here / what could be greater." The dramatic monologue pulls the reader into intriguing puzzles of logic and emotional ambiguities.

ABOVE **Scott Owens reading from *Something Knows the Moment* at Lazy Lion Bookstore in Fuquay-Varina, NC, 22 Sept. 2011**

In *For One Who Knows How to Own Land*, Owens has produced a record of the life and death of his maternal grandfather, to whose memory this volume is dedicated. The book is an historical record that does not attempt to analyze or interpret but simply to present a family's experience of being poor and white in red clay farming country of upstate South Carolina. Ultimately, through vignettes of the grandfather working on the farm, later at the quarry, he is shown to be a complicated and central presence in the life of the narrator. These are bleak pastoral poems rendered without a shred of self-pity. The volume is divided into three sections and begins with events that happened during the grandfather's lifetime, in "Leaning Through Darkness"; followed by what transpires just after he dies, in "The Undiscovered Country"; and moves on to a clear-eyed appraisal of existence, in "To Resist Fading."

A recurring theme in the collection is the need to escape uncertain but dire circumstances. At the conclusion of "Between the Rails," the collection's introductory poem, it is not clear which boy is being returned to angry parents, but "He found God between two cars / of the line from Greenwood to Clinton" and was rendered speechless by the experience. Was the boy of the poem the grandfather? It doesn't seem to matter because the characters in this collection have the shared reality of a harsh life. Experience for them contains harsh lessons and sends a shock to the system. In the poem "Americana," the voice is an innocent, and again the situation is anxious:

We arrive again, at night,
nearly as hot as it is in the day.
Candle bats swarm the yellow
porch light. The old woman,
wrapped in flowered gowns,
smelling of Vicks, helps us in.
You wouldn't call her crazy yet,
though we've all seen the signs.

The predominant voices in *For One Who Knows* match the emotional age of the poem's narrator. Some poems are in a voice that registers surprise, wonder, and the helplessness of innocence. More often, a somewhat flat voice reflects a world-weary adult who can no longer feel – or no longer wants to feel. Seldom is there hope. The poem "The Event Rightfully Remembered" provides a sample of getting the voice – and the story – just right. This poem, from the first section of the collection, is about how the grandfather clears away the carcass of a dead horse:

The redness in the old
man's hands as he dragged
the skin to the pit
of wood and ash
could have been
flakes of rust
from an old wheel,
tree sap bleeding
from the wounded branch,
blood stains clinging
to wrinkled palms,
or just the color
of an old man's
furrowed hands
that handled life
and death like two ends
of the same season.
Anything else
would have been
too weak to survive
all these years
in the mind of a boy
too young to understand.

The second section of *For One Who Knows*, "The Undiscovered Country," creates an elegiac mood and evokes grief by building on images from the natural world. The fourteen poems are about how life continues after the grandfather dies. The only comfort seems to be that, over time, grief diminishes to a cold fact. The concluding poem in this group is the emotionally stark poem "Buzzard."

Buzzard

Always
when you look up
at white clouds, blue sky

you see
that hyphen of a bird,
not flying but floating,

silently
keeping two worlds
you imagine apart, together.

SCOTT OWENS has an MFA from UNC-Greensboro. See a review of an earlier volume of his poetry in *NCLR* 2010 and his poetry blog "Musings." He serves as Vice President of both the Poetry Council of North Carolina and the North Carolina Poetry Society and is regional representative for the North Carolina Writers' Network and facilitator for Writers' Night Out in Hickory.

The final section of the collection presents many poems that prompt the reader to reflect on memory and the purposes of memory. Why bother remembering, as Owens does, murder and abuse in "Brock" and "Kendall"? Why remember a home, "a place I lived only between / other homes, once a year, / a month at a time at least till 12"? The poet of *For One Who Knows* writes about these events for the same reason Walker Evans photographed the impoverished cotton sharecropper Bud Field and family: to leave a record.

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"To Resist Fading," a poem with the same title as the section, references the now-famous photograph, taken by Walker Evans in 1936, of an Alabama cotton sharecropper and his family with their meager possessions. The family sits on a bed and chairs. The mother holds a sleeping toddler; a young girl with a crutch stands next to these two; the crutch seems forgotten as the girl looks squarely into the camera. The father holds a little boy, and next to them sits an older woman, most likely Field's mother or mother-in-law. The poem asks, "Who can keep them from fading / into walls, floors, their bare feet, / bare shoulders as unwashed / as where they move." The poem is just as bleak a rendering of family life as the photograph, but the poet finds hope in the straightforward look of "this one":

with eyes like caverns, a face
round as a question, legs
already scraped and scratched
but standing like none of the others,
a pillar between the walls,
between the doors and windows,
holding all that falls, apart.
There is only this one
I need to believe will make it.

In all of the poems, the mask of the dramatic monologue provides distance and facilitates retelling of family stories. The poet's use of concrete details, flat tone, and lines of verse that appear truncated at times strengthen the authenticity of the narrative poems of this collection. Short lines and short stanzas are a semiotic typography depicting the spare existence and often brutal behavior described in the poems. Most of the poems in *For One Who Knows* convey the pain of people learning to endure the circumstances of their life. However, the collection is a frank look backward in time in an attempt to understand the past through the loss of the patriarch of the family – and also through the act of writing itself.

For One Who Knows is a chronicle of a family, although not all poems in the collection are explicitly about one family. The woman in "Dowry," for example, could be the grandmother or mother of the young narrator, or an anonymous woman. The context is unclear, which makes the relationship uncertain. The exact connection doesn't matter, though, since the point could very well be that each generation has the same hard-luck story as the previous, that some cycles are perpetuated through generations. *For One Who Knows* is a courageous act of remembering and attests to the fact that the narrator, having left the people and the region, hasn't shaken the pull they have on him or his art. In "Homeplace," he states about place that "one [is] as good or bad as the other. / It's the people you care for, / or hate, who keep you / coming back, or never let you go."

For both Morgan and Owens, sense of place pervades an exploration of human epistemology. These volumes distill the essential from experience and capture the universal thread in the human story. Reading these collections is to be given insights into communities the poets know well and to be invited into the intimacy of persons and places so evocatively rendered. ■

ABOVE **Sharecropper Bud Fields and his family at home, Hale County, AL, 1936, by Walker Evans (1903–1975)**