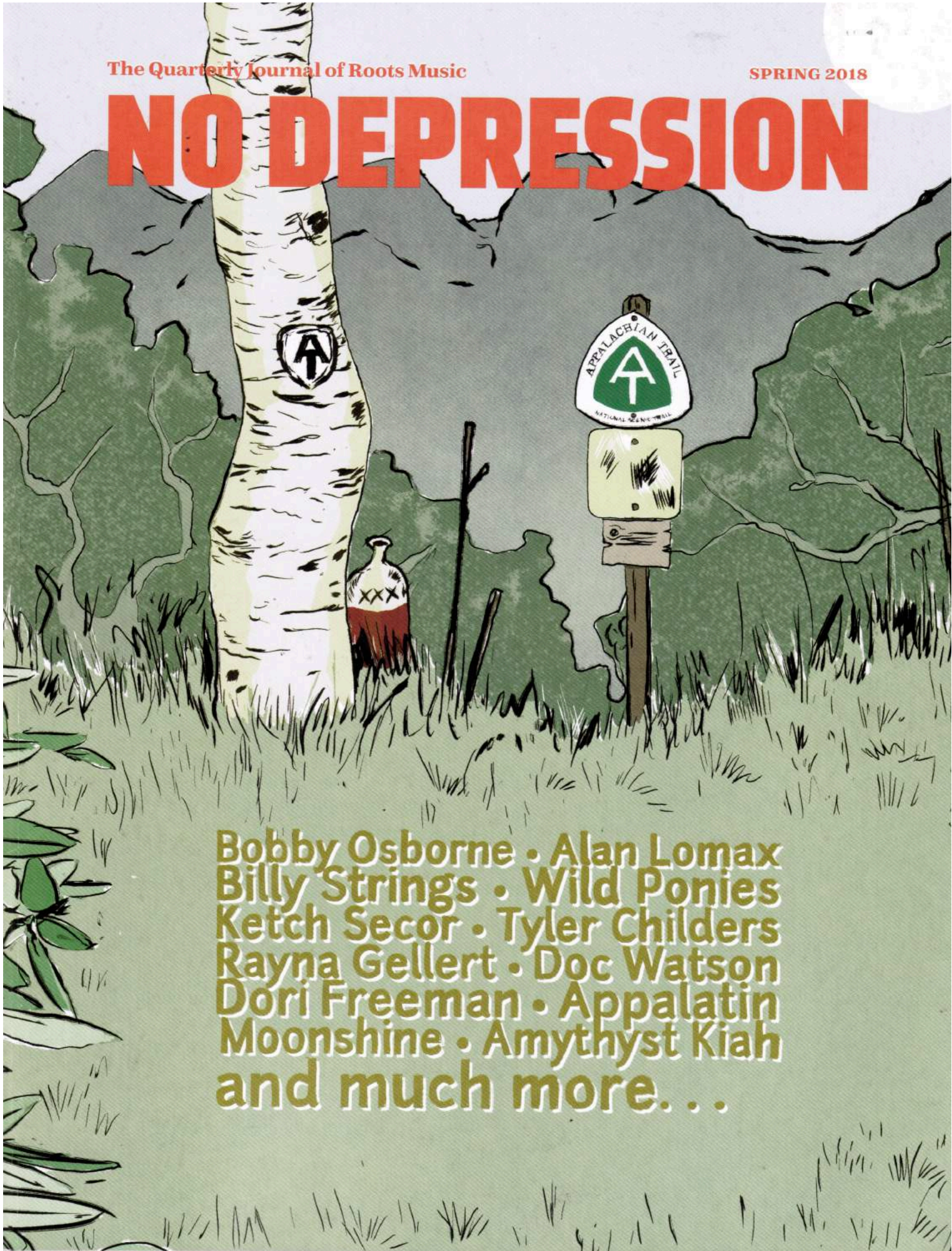


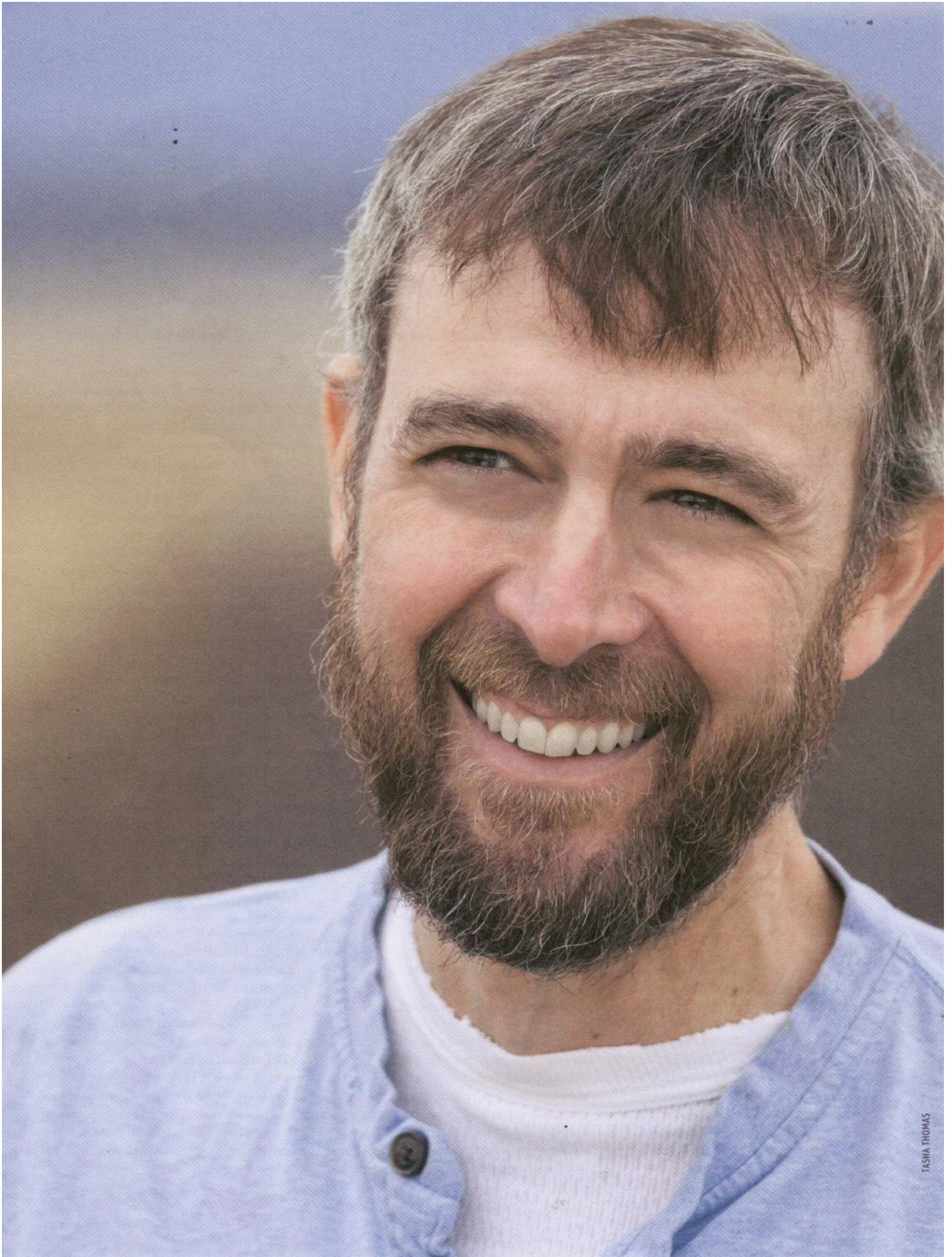
The Quarterly Journal of Roots Music

SPRING 2018

NO DEPRESSION



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TASHA THOMAS

The Flood of Memory

by Scott Miller

"... It's tradition, basically." — Ralph Stanley, when asked to describe his style of music

My brother was hiking on the Appalachian Trail back in the mid-1980s. This was before cell phones, when even meeting friends at a bar required a thing called "planning ahead." You can Google it. It still works and we survived. Anyway, he was going to be a day late for his pickup and wanted to let us know, so he went to a house not far off the trail, knocked on the door, and asked if he could use the phone. The lady who answered said, "Sweetie, we haven't had a phone since the flood."

If you're from Appalachia, when someone talks about "The Flood," you know exactly to what and to when they are referring.

In August of 1969, Hurricane Camille, a Category 5 storm, made landfall in Mississippi and then turned northeast. When it got over Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia, that bitch parked and dumped as much as 40 inches of rain in four hours. Before Hurricane Harvey in 2017, it was the second most intense storm to strike the United States. It caused \$9.27 billion (in 2016 dollars) in damage. In Nelson County, Virginia, alone, 153 people died. They didn't get washed away; they were buried alive when the oldest mountains in the world gave way after all that rain. There were people and houses and entire communities that were never found. Never.

I was not yet two years old, and even though I had no verbal skills, I had developed enough object permanence to know that stuff that was there the day before was not there anymore, like bridges, houses, and a sense of safety. I'm like a wire without the insulation

that most people have, and I've always been way too sensitive, so it was easy to tell that something was very wrong as we were trapped at my grandparents' house on the Cowpasture River in Bath County, Virginia.

Their house sat high on a bluff, with 29 stone steps rising from the river's edge to a path that rose another 30 feet to the house. I remember my cousin fishing from the steps about halfway up. I remember my aunt sitting on the porch steps and washing her hair in rain that was coming down so hard it was said that people caught out in the downpour had to cup their hands over their mouths just to breathe. I remember the cattle bawling all night as their calves and eventually they themselves drowned when the water rose around them. I remember my grandfather sitting with binoculars and watching as cars that had been moved to safety — at least by previous standards of flooding — went underwater. And I remember that we were luckier than most. Or maybe I heard those stories so much I just think I remember. I do remember one thing for sure: Whenever anyone brought up Hurricane Camille and the 1969 flood, my grandfather would say, "It'll never be that river again."

Fast-forward almost 50 years to June of 2016, and a smaller portion of West Virginia and western Virginia experienced another flood on such a scale. Estimates ranged from a 100-year flood to a 500-year flood; I saw one estimate that labeled it the "150-year flood" which seemed so specific that it must have originated with some insurance company trying to weasel out of claims (as they do). This flood was mainly along the Greenbrier River and

its surrounding counties. It made the national news, and there was a video that went viral of a house being washed down an angry river while also on fire, which at first glance would seem doubly tragic, but upon reflection may have been set ablaze by an ingenious hillbilly who said, "Damn it to hell! We ain't got flood insurance but by God we got fire insurance. Somebody get me a match and take a picture!" It was also not lost on many of us from that part of the world as being the same day that our Ralph Stanley died — June 23, 2016. It was as if Appalachia was crying.

Much of Appalachia was and still is settled by the Scotch-Irish. To get a grip on what that really means is akin to understanding being an alcoholic: You have to be one to truly grasp it. There is no 12-step program to cure what ails us. We are quick tempered. We have knee-jerk negative reactions to rich people and authority. We place a high value on loyalty and legitimacy. We believe in hard work and meritocracy. We are clannish. We are stubborn. And as Woodrow Wilson said (and he was one), "The Scots-Irish don't think they're right; they *know* they're right." There is a great book by James Webb called *Born Fighting* that explains this better than I ever could.

See, in Appalachia, we tell stories. Those stories and songs become a part of us as if we were there. Maybe that's why some of the great ballads have survived, having been handed down through a tradition that is so ingrained in our DNA. Maybe that's why so many great writers of poetry, prose, and song are sons and daughters of Appalachia. From hardest freeze to the hottest kiss to the biggest flood, we never forget our stories. Never. It's tradition. ■