**THE MIDWIFE**

Allen Nelson Peltier

She had fire-and-ice blue eyes,

flecked with the dappled gray

one remembers in Southwest Virginia’s

limestone outcroppings.

Deep-set they were, piercing,

and, above all, confident.

The eyes alone made

Laura Martin seem

a tower of strength.

When word of the first strong

contractions reached the

Rye Valley womenfolk,

four or five; including the

nearby blood kin and closest

neighbor, gathered for the event.

While the young women

and teenaged girls bustled about

the kitchen, heating water on the

wood fired stove, making coffee or

feeding and pacifying the men folk,

the older, experienced ones, some

mothers eight or ten times over,

settled into the mechanics of

attending the birth.

All the while, Doctor Boatwright,

who ministered to most valley ills,

slept soundly in his white-washed

frame house on the northeast side

of Marion mountain. After all,

in the remote Appalachian valleys,

birthing was a matter for the women,

and no one knew birthing better

than Laura Martin.

Kin or not, Laura was accorded

the cane-bottomed chair next to

the high-posted bedstead. Her voice,

flavored with a soft, lilting

hill country accent, seemed to

cleave away the confusion and pain.

Folks said it conveyed a certain

healing quality.

There wasn’t much fuss and

drama about a Laura Keesling (Matin?) birthing.

Experience had tuned her to a

biological sequence unchanged

since Eve’s exodus from Eden.

She watched each event play out, and,

if, if an admonition was needed here,

or a word of encouragement was

required there, she dispensed them

with exquisite timing. Laura had

great faith in the maternal instinct,

and that faith was seldom challenged.

Once the cord was severed, the

baby was washed, and the male

of the species was allowed in

the inner sanctum, Laura wrapped

her shawl around her shoulders

and headed home.

Come the first day of the week,

Laura sat on the family’s pew

halfway down the center aisle

at the Wharf Hill Methodist church.

When the second hymn played out,

and the children were herded toward

their little classroom to the left of the

pulpit, she watched the dawdling

procession with a certain pride.

Later, as the congregation

began to mumble its way through

the first verse of “Amazing Grace”

or “The Old Rugged Cross,”

it often occurred to Laura that she was

truly blessed. Although She and her neighbors

were born too late to meet the risen Lazarus

or see water to turned wine, Laura Martin

had personally seen the manifold works

of the Almighty. She had watched

the miracle of life unfold in

dozens of mountain-side cabins

and whitewashed farm houses

all across Rye Valley.