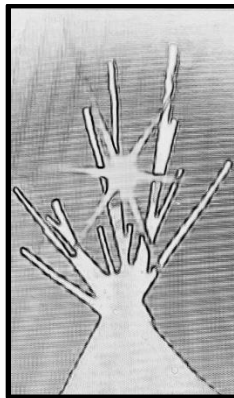


# **about Mountain Living: Finding a Way**

**by  
Robert Nichols**

**Footlocker Series: Book Two**



## **PHASE ONE: In Quest of Wow**

### **A Thought to Begin With**

*Each of us is a convoluted whirl of unique perceptions, actions and reactions all a-wrap within a mortal being with our face painted on it. To be known—thoroughly defined, fathomable—would make us a real disappointment to the mystery that created us.*

Excerpt from Tipi Days: Identity

## In Quest of Wow

There is a progression to this collection of poems and stories—though order means nothing to the individual works, they stand alone. I'll explain.

It's kind of like prayer. Whether religious or not, there are times when we beseech the Gods for release, relief, help. That's the way it starts. You know, "Oh God, what am I doing with my life?"—stages of despair and panic when the way out seems impossible. And, hopefully, if we are persistent and, of course fortunate, eventually we may know some degree of release, relief, and help—times, a-flow and as natural as laughter, as honest as tears, "prayer" becomes as easy as a good deep breath exhaled to the Universe.

It's a journey. A trek through the phases of our lives. There are many journeys—some intellectual, some emotional—all in some way are spiritual. For me it was all the above enacted within a framework of an actual physical journey. Somewhere in this book I'll take you on a photo tour of dwellings I inhabited in a succession of steps generally taking me farther and farther into the wilds and further and further away from the fetters of convenience. It was my way to wander from the crowd of cities and suburbs to the solitude of high mountains and stellar reaches.

But don't worry. I'm not saying you have to build a tipi, sleep in an arctic sleeping bag with a 12-gauge shotgun beside you, and bathe in a glacial stream to find your better self in this lifetime. It's all poetry to me, you know. All symbolic, metaphoric, allegorical—depicting specific actions but telling universal truths. The portion of my good long story expressed by these poetic utterances involved mountains and forests, raging waters and mighty storms. Find your own mountains, your own turning paths, your own regions of fear, reverence and, hoot-to-the-Heavens celebration. Find yourself. Perhaps my journey will encourage yours.

The impetus of my unconventional journey commenced when I was fifteen and, instead of envisioning a life given to commerce, science, skilled craft or other more practical pursuits of secure existence, in a moment yet resonating through my decades, I decided my life's purpose was to be a poet.

So, in the process of actually making a living and doing my part for family food and shelter, though I had a many jobs, in fact I was always at heart a poet. I was a poet-ditch digger, a poet-railroad worker, a poet-Maytag Man, a poet-truck driver, a poet-English teacher. Many vocations; one identity: Robert Nichols, Poet.

My journey into the mountains was a journey of self-actualization.

It began when I was struck with a big "WOW."



It started with an imperfect haiku.

Well, not really. It started before the fateful day of the haiku. Mike Nolan sat behind me in Miss Henneke's Ancient History class at Webster Groves High School. It was the spring of 1960 and while all the world was exuding the fertile essence of the lusting season in bud and blossom and "short shorts," we were choking on the chalk dust of Miss Henneke's ever-expanding outline of the Ancient World arrayed about us upon three walls of blackboard. She was amazing. She lectured unfalteringly while, with precise clicking strokes upon the slate, she scribed the eons in a semester-long flow of data for us to copy frantically into our notebooks—getting boards #1, #2, and #3 down before her rapid return to board #1 with an eraser. And, at the same time, with an uncanny awareness of the most minor infractions, she maintained a classroom of utter silence save the scratching sound of frantic pencil lead and an occasional dismal sigh as the less ardent collapsed face first upon desktops to be forever left in the chalk dust of the passing of the Ages.

It was long before classrooms became beehives of interactive and committee-oriented activity. Back in the days when formal education mostly followed the lesson plan: sit down, shut up, learn, or hit the road.

It was in Miss Henneke's class that I became a poet.

Likely out of well-disguised exhaustion from the sheer volume of information she endeavored to impart, there were occasions when she would abruptly drop her stick of chalk into the tray, briskly make her way to her desk, and declare the remainder of the period a time for individual review of our notes. Mike and I took full advantage of such respites to pass poems back and forth. He was an aspiring beatnik and wrote wonderfully indecipherable jumbles of disjointed thought and image. My first attempts were not nearly so noble nor avant-garde as his—usually commencing with such literate lines as:

Here I sit all constipated.  
I've sat and sat and waited and waited...

Mike would react appropriately to my bathroom-wall verse with a jab in the shoulder and a clandestine grin, but he was a more serious sort and, rather than answering in like fashion, continued to turn out free verse lines about such matters as the:

*. . . obliquity of waterless mind rivers  
and the scowling matrons of mud.*

And then there was the day of the haiku that changed my life.

Instead of matching Mike's Muse with adolescent crudity, out of a place I can't begin to explain, there came these words:

Still pond in the woods.  
Flawless surface spoiled  
by the rain that feeds it.

Heeding the steadfast scrutiny of our teacher's kind but steely gaze, I passed my words across my leeward shoulder. There was a pause as Mike read them. And then, in a clear and deep voice resounding off the blackboards and down through all these years, shattering that realm of antiquity and stillness—he said, "WOW!"

Oh, bless you, Miss Henneke. Bless you and the stifling silence of that classroom, the crisp and airless void into which gushed the life blood of my art—the WOW of art connected.

And in all my efforts since that day, it is instances of such resounding connection to which my work aspires.

I write each day in quest of WOW!

Thus, writing became my life's mission over fifty years ago—aside from commitment to my family, it's the only clearly identified direction my life has taken. All the rest has pretty much been a matter of happenstance and good fortune mixed in with a great deal of empty time waiting around for the Fates to come up with the next leg of my journey. But never in the random wander of my days has my dedication to the Muse lessened.

The demands of life cannot be denied, but sometimes they really can get in the way of the poetry. Don't get me wrong, though. It's all part of the poem I write today—all the yesterdays are the stuff of now.

Those decades are important because they are part of my life's journey from city to mountain; from strangling in necktie noose to bare-assed jumping into a good-morning mountain stream; from days in a "Bob" shirt heading out to fix appliances to a life of singing mountain-mystic songs and experiencing the miracle of words and phrases cascading into artful array.

## **PHASE TWO: Early Years of Discontent**

*Following are a few samples of writing I did during a couple of decades of misplaced identity—or perhaps just days of embryonic identity. Some grasp of where I was coming from may help in understanding where I wandered to.*

*These are the 'time-clock' years, the contract years, the necktie and good pants years.*

## Early Letters

**February 9, 1964**

**Letter written from Woodbridge, Virginia, to Carol at Southeast Missouri State College, Cape Girardeau, Missouri**

Lots of action—swirling action... I'd sing you a song right now.

Monday morning I go to work for a railroad place in their freight yard for \$2.36/hour. Be proud I'm a rich man soon.

You don't write anymore. Why?

Come now slumber soon—

Carol, don't close your beautiful eyes

for then

the night is a broken-twig nightmare

waking for me.

Love,  
Robert

**February 15, 1964**

**Excerpt from a letter written from Robert to Carol**

I hope you really dig big strong muscular men because that is what I am becoming. All day long I work out in the cold, cold freight yard doing things like unloading box cars. Thursday night I went to bed at 6:30.

**February 23, 1964**

I'm getting strong and muscular and my back isn't hurting as much this week as it did last. Today I unloaded 12,700 pounds of stuff off of a box car—pretty good, huh?

**March 3 1964**

At work they moved me into the office where I do the most damned boring, horrible type of nothing there is—all I need is a pair of 24-carat gold-rimmed glasses and an eye shade and you could call me Clarence Clerk—If things don't improve within the week I'm going to tell my boss I want to go back out to the yard. I was really happy in the yard. Maybe I shouldn't have made fun of Casey Jones.

**April 8, 1964**

I'm working in the yard again. It's great to almost look forward to going to work—(of course, the only reason I'm anxious to go is so that I can come home and read the letters you don't write).

I'm saving money at a pretty good rate (\$50 /week) and it shouldn't be long now until, zoom, and the unknown is mine. I wish so much that you were here—I really need someone who can listen and maybe know better what I'm trying to say—or at least give a damn—you in particular I hope. Right now—I want you to know why I'm going to do whatever I do—there're so many talkers and so damn few listeners—and even if I could tell a million people I guess it's you who I'd really want to know more than any other.



1965  
Home from a day of digging holes.

**Excerpt from letters written from Woodbridge, Virginia, to Carol in Missouri in July 1965.**

So I went out and got a job—two week variety 2.07/hr. ditch digging. My hands are sore, my back is sore, but I'm getting strong again (8 hours of swinging a pick at rock today). I'm coming to see you in a couple of weeks and you better be just bubbling with love, Baby, because I sure am—don't be surprised if I swallow you.

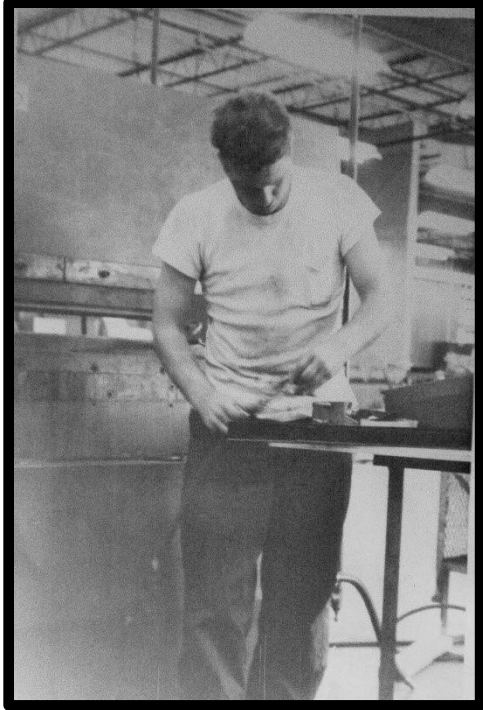
\*\*\*\*

This will have to be another short letter—I get sleepy—I've been working 10 hours a day (sometimes 11) and tomorrow I'm going to work a Saturday. I dig big holes in the bottom of little round holes and when I get down underground I think of you and go crazy wanting to be with you (on top of the ground, too).

Today I stood on my head so all that the boys up on the ground could see was the bottoms of my feet. I've been running a hundred-pound jack hammer so I'll be able to hold you real tight. I love you.

(We married in St. Louis five months after this letter was written.)





Robert: Metal Department, Signet Graphics  
1967

### **Factory Visitor**

Through the dusty window  
a small bird—  
muted by the roaring machines—  
gazed nervously for an instant  
And darted away forever.

### **'Midst All the Rattle**

'Midst all the rattle  
and hiss of the factory,  
shaded and kept deep,  
secreted within an apathetic  
frame,  
dwells a spirit  
alive and wild with  
expectation.

### **Window Hopeless**

Window hopeless,  
I think I'd better quit.  
I hurt  
I bleed  
in dark-stained mornings  
I am emptied.  
I'd better find another way.

3/12/74



## **When I Bought Today**

When I bought today  
for simple change,  
it was empty and no matter  
how hard I shook it  
nothing rattled.

10/7/71