

Growing up, I was lucky enough to live next door to my grandparents. I spent nearly every day with them. We'd take walks, build snow igloos, steal field corn. My grandfather would take out his guitar and sing. Some days, I'd "help" him work on his pickup by climbing inside—under the hood, not in the driver's seat. As a reward for my hard work, I'd beg my grandparents to take me for a ride. We'd drive around on the back roads and they'd tell me stories about people they'd known, places they'd lived, pointing out landmarks that to me looked just like a tree or an old foundation, but to them were the signposts of a life passed. Even though I certainly didn't realize it at the time, these days and the many I spent after with them shaped me as a writer. I learned the art of telling stories, the importance of listening when someone wanted to tell me about a great uncle who never made it home from the army, or about that woman who sang when her husband beat her. This is a picture of me (circa 1983) and my pappy, who never said no when I'd ask him to tell me a story.

—*Natalie Sympolt*

