THE CALL OF THE WILD
A boy's newfound bond with his grandfather offers a second chance.

A BRUTAL MURDER CRIME and a hiking adventure gone wrong—one event leading to the next—fuel the action in THE SECRET WISDOM OF THE EARTH, the latest work by Scotton. The novel's pulse-quickening debut that has elements of such classics as To Kill a Mockingbird and Deliverance. Set in the hills of the fictional Madger, Kentucky (the town's name is an homage to the civil-rights-era martyr Medgar Evers), the novel examines the antemachista simmering in an impoverished coal-mining community caught between its ingrained traditions and threats from the outside world.

Reading from a personal tragedy, 14-year-old Kevin Gillooly and his mother seek sanctuary with her father, Pops, a shrewd, avuncular veterinarian whom his fellow citizens often turn to for guidance. Kevin finds companionship in Buzzy, a half-wild teenage boy; together they roam the mountains and hollows that surround Madger, exploring caves and canoeing lakes and basking in Pops's jokes and stories. But their idyll is interrupted by the murder of Mr. Paul, a family friend and gay businessman determined to protect the land from strip mining. In the aftermath, Pops decides to take the boys on a "tramp," a days-long wilderness trek that becomes a harrowing descent into Madger's heart of darkness.

Scotton tempers his doleful tale with poignant insights into the crushing weight of loss. In prose as biting as Pops's sour maw whiskeys, THE SECRET WISDOM OF THE EARTH melds beguiling characters with an urgent ecological message.

—HAMILTON CAIN