

EVENTS

Wednesday, April 29, 1987

10:25 a.m.

Student Reading
Winter Theatre
Dana Fine Arts

2:10 - 4:00 p.m.

Panel Discussion of Student Work
Tillie Olsen, Memye Curtis Tucker,
and Jane Zanca
Winter Theatre
Dana Fine Arts

8:15 p.m.

Reading, followed by Presentation of Prizes
Tillie Olsen
Winter Theatre
Dana Fine Arts

We wish to thank President Ruth Schmidt and Eleanor Hutchens for their support of the Festival.

AGNES SCOTT WRITERS' FESTIVAL



writers' festival
1987

Spring, 1987

Editors
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Cover
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The Selection Committee reserves the right to perform any necessary editing. **Festival** is prepared by The Printing Store, 240 DeKalb Industrial Way, Decatur, GA 30030.

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**On The Leather Couch,
In Your Warehouse.**

I am blind. The soft palms
of my father's hands guide me
in a circle (this is what it must be like
to drink one of those beers he's always handing me)
Juanita with her shiny braids
shrieks in my ear, Uncle Steel giggles,
sifting the grass, and the smell reminds me
of the brown seeds I love to roll on my tongue
and burst, one by one
between my new molars.
My father's last present to me, Mon Doo,
barks and chews my ankle
that is wet and cool as I move,
beating the air with my stick,
jasmine incense and birthday cake
hot in my nose when I smash the fat grin
and rip the papier-mache skull wide,
my head pelted in a rain of caramels and All Day Suckers.

That's the day I still have dreams about,
though it was the next afternoon we left Mazatlán,
in a hurry. You want to know, as if it matters
and I tell you I think it had something to do with the man

slumped over the side of the tub,
the needle wedged in his vein.
We couldn't wait for a holiday,
when it would be safe to go through Nuevo Laredo,
so we drove the one thousand, one hundred and nineteen miles
to Tecate, the smallest town along the border
and got caught. They found the bags taped
to the rusted belly of our Volkswagen van,
and my mother wound up handcuffed
to a bench in the police station, stale with sleep,
looking out the window at the desert.
I sat on her lap,
licking the white icing
off the Oreos someone handed me,
passing the cookie halves to Mon Doo
curled beneath us.
When they came for me,
my father tried to stop them
and I left him with a foot resting firmly
on the small of his back. (this is the part
you're interested in) They took me
to a room with one table: I crouched underneath nude,
my dress in red folds on top. They didn't find anything.

You lean back, sipping your wine,
studying the impossibly flamboyant breasts
of the blonde painted on the wall across the street,
the red neon that strobes 'Girls Girls Girls'
flushing your face, fleshing out the lines,
and you tell me what my rights would have been. Don't worry.
My fingers will easily curl around the nape of your neck,
my jeans drape to the contours of your couch.
I lean back, up to my elbows in leather, and feel the eyes
of Warhol's MARILYN hung on the warehouse wall.
I part my lips, tilt my chin towards my chest,
give you my best innocent yet knowing look,
and think about the afternoon
I had my first period, about finding
under the sink, in a box of tampons,
my mother's letters—the heroin, the beatings,
the border crossings, the time she used her scissors
to cut her wrists in the bathroom at the salon,
all scribbled to men
who weren't my step-father.
I remember climbing onto the roof,
putting my head in my hands,
and thinking of my father, and where he might be,
my neck bent under the sky,
under the gaze of the crows,
circling.

- Nicole Broadhurst

Jeffrey

we were told to draw a bunny so we drew a bunny but
 Jeffrey
 the one who drew with the wrong hand
 the one who cut with the wrong scissors
 he drew the eyes first
 then the nose
 then the mouth
 then the whiskers
 then the head
 we watched him and we laughed
 that's not how you draw a bunny we said
 you start with the head first and then you draw the face
 so somebody got the big man in the suit and said
 look what Jeffrey did
 it was a good bunny it was the best bunny in the class but
 that's not how you draw a bunny
 Jeffrey
 you start with the head first

we were out in the cold jumping rope and
 somebody came up and said wanna see somethin'
 so we followed her out to a stream in the woods and
 we hid behind a tree and watched Jeffrey pee
 it made wonderful steam
 what should we do we asked
 so somebody got the big man in the suit and said
 guess what Jeffrey did
 and we didn't see Jeffrey for a while

we were eating lunch when
 Jeffrey asked everybody for their mashed potatoes
 so we gave it to him because it didn't taste good anyway
 and he made a huge mashed potato mountain with broccoli trees
 and he rolled down it little green peas
 so somebody got the big man in the suit and said
 look what Jeffrey did
 and Jeffrey stayed after school and scrubbed tables

so we went to high school and Jeffrey didn't do too well
 because he was disorganized
 because he was lazy
 because he had a bad attitude
 so Jeffrey stood outside and smoked and drew dragons on the bricks
 they were wonderful dragons
 so somebody got the man in the big suit and said
 look at what Jeffrey did
 and they made Jeffrey paint over it classroom yellow

"Just try it," said Jeffrey
 so we tried it and i got sick in the mornings
 "Don't worry," said Jeffrey
 "We'll run away where nobody can find us and we'll be happy."

but i didn't know what to do
 so i got the men in the big suits and said
 look what Jeffrey did
 they made us get married and they sent Jeffrey to work
 and i starched his collars for him
 and pulled his ties straight

I rode by your house yesterday.
 The azaleas are ragged;
 Green spears shooting wild pink fingers everywhere.
 The butterfly is free to smell the blossoms;
 The threat of your net is no longer there.
 Except the butterfly doesn't know he is free,
 So what good is it.
 He lights on the white ceramic rabbit,
 A Tiger Swallowtail;
 Black and yellow stripes give his sex away.
 His mate wears brown.
 The brown square sits next to your face now,
 See it?

The quilt needs washing,
 Like your glasses.
 Do you care?
 Like your butterflies, carefully preserved,
 Let me stretch your arms and feet.
 Don't move.
 The pins can't hurt you if you don't know you're not free.
 Here, let me clean your fingernails;
 And slide your feet into the blue slippers
 That match your flannel robe.
 Where is that square?
 What about the cyanide jar.
 You can't buy it anymore,
 except under special conditions.
 You would understand what I mean,
 And tell me where to find the cure if you could.
 Fly away butterfly.
 You are free.
 Drop my answers on the yellow jonquils;
 They bloom every spring.

- Linda Florence

Soup

It takes all day for my mother to make soup—
 Parboils a chicken, skims the fat off the top, chills the
 stock, pulls the skin and the meat off the bones—throws the bones
 away, wishbone and all—gives the skin to the cat—
 makes a little chicken salad for lunch—
 takes the cold fat off the stock with a
 wooden spoon, pours it over the chicken in a
 big stainless steel pot—
 with black stains on the bottom
 where she burned the chili one winter—
 adds water to the broth, a little salt, a little pepper—
 cuts up what she feels like putting in—
 in the summer it's fresh okra, tomatoes, green beans, celery—
 in the winter it's canned English peas, canned tomatoes, carrots
 from the grocery store, celery—
 and lets it all cook slowly all afternoon—
 puts the rice or the noodles in last—
 puts it on high for about
 15 minutes, stirring it every now and then, turns it
 down to medium—
 which is 6 or 7 on the new stove—
 tastes the soup, seasons it if it needs it,
 but usually it's perfect—
 although Daddy puts a lot of salt on his (he
 doesn't really like soup)—
 I put a little if I think it needs it—
 Mother doesn't put any salt on hers—
 she loves a good bowl of soup
 with saltines.

- Amy Jackson

Falling Short of Johnny

1.

Johnny
lived in one room

He had an antique mirror
five feet high
and three feet wide
up on the mantle
resting so you couldn't see
yourself
just where the wall and ceiling meet

He had an old suitcase
full of blank envelopes
all sizes

He had that
Escher of the stairs
taped on the inside of the door

He had a hundred
gallon fish tank
held up by four
beer bottles
one under each corner

A fish you never saw

Johnny
told me not to
touch it not to
bother trying to
find it.

2.

Johnny appeared one day almost fully grown on
the side of the road next to a broken car, no
birthmark, just a coat on his shoulder.
A father and a brother motioned through the
window to hurry up and fix the goddamned thing.
They didn't have all day and it was
pretty fucking cold. Johnny looked at them and thought
These are the kind of people who are going to skip out.
So Johnny skipped out, though he cut it down to a
reckless stroll as he slid on his coat
kicked the car door and went towards the Texaco,
where he picked up an east coast map and sent
a tow truck out. He got the key to the men's room
and sat down on the toilet to check for the
nearest interstate, found it, tried to fold
it flat, couldn't, and flushed the map.

Johnny started walking back to the dirty
white buick with the ripped black top and
he looked down at the road and he didn't remember
all that trash being there before and he crossed
some train tracks and he thought
Would I ever get up if I fell across these rails?
What do they do when they find you in three pieces?
Would they burn me if somehow I could ask?

Then there was the car propped up on the back
of the truck rolling by so Johnny kept his hands in
his pockets and kept on walking until he heard his
father—Get in you little bastard.
And his mind went faster than his mouth
(I went to the bathroom I got a coke at the station)
But he remembered the key, the map, the rails.
Johnny pulled out his hands—
When I go that's the way I'm going to go.

He slammed the truck door closed and
pushed against his father's weight as
they flew down the road.

3.

Johnny
wore a black top hat,
read your mind
for a beer

Johnny
could make
things disappear

He lived
in the only boarding house
in town, the room
at the top of the stairs

He had one window
with blinking lights around it

Johnny said things like
What word is made shorter
when you add one syllable to it?

I never knew the answers.

I tried to buy
Johnny a beer—
he made me
disappear.

- Julie Kalendek

What Love Can Come To, For No Apparent Reason

I put on the skirt, folding and gathering the ocean
of cloth, cinching the pleats at my waist
with butcher's twine.

The blouse,
its pattern opening to your hands
opening like this constant green heat
settles at my feet.

Each day the same—fold, cinch, fall—and I'm left
with thoughts of execution, death by hanging.

The quick leveling snap of a neck
slip of rope
to cut me loose

though here in this country that alters my stride
and overwhelms me with a grace
I do not want to own, death will wheel slow
as the sun wearing into stone.

My hands float, then settle to my lap.

I offer rice cakes round as old moons,
a smile that promises fire in your belly. In silver foil
thin as my breath comes now, I fold a betel nut.
Take it into your mouth. Your lips will bloom
red. You will taste ash.

- Dorothy Sussman

Honey, Stinging

Honey of generation has its stings.
 Think about Yeats, wordgrinding witched saltmill
 salting our sea so tireless all tail-honed
 fin-willowed majack fish of us must gill
 brine of his grinding, egg to shark-picked bone—
 that Yeats who came around to find his son,
 his Michael, much less often than the scones
 of breakfast, having, wordmill, never one—
 dumb in the child's face, feared the rattling plates.
 They'd one real conversation; others, none
 that Michael thought important. Go read Yeats.
 Simple Cuchulain stockstill, numb legs spread,
 trails sword in surf where Conla's fresh blood reds
 sawblade of foam that shears the land and sings
 of Dedalus, who drowned his boy with wings.

- Chloe Nichols

And

I see you strengthening, flexing
 the branches of your budding life,
 pushing through light and dark equally,
 blind as the first root of a bean
 in a clear plastic cup by the radiator,
 convinced into growth by the rich
 bulk of protein, the sheer size of the seed.
 There is a confidence of solitude
 in such a thumbprint in the soil.
 We never trusted the dark
 specks that promised
 Bibb lettuce and petunias, soft
 brilliant petals, leaves
 curled inward like a tender brain.
 Frailty is what we cannot
 forgive; for us it's a choice of bone
 white driftwood in a bucket of sand,
 or gleaming tiles molten with summer tomatoes.
 Waves of bluegrass shatter into blades
 under the steady comb
 of the rake. Forgive me,
 the gold-speckled acuba is veining red
 clay over the driveway, the bank
 eroding. Forgive you,
 the beans aren't producing
 enough to feed anyone. The carrots,
 parsnips, white radishes stretch
 their bulging fingers through
 the sheer dark skin
 of the continent,
 and you, like anyone, knuckle gloved hands
 toward the roots of what is left
 this year in the warm earth.
 And there, in the light, the vegetable.

- Theodore Worozbyt, Jr.

Sticks and Stones

I am ten. It is before the Abbot boys moved into our neighborhood when I was twelve and my life changed so profoundly that my grandmother began saying that I ought not to play with boys who are so rough. The only male I have been around to any extent is Daddy George, my grandmother's second husband. He is a barber and grub-hoe gardener who never had any children of his own.

My father lost his job with the power company in Florida when I was five, and we have long been moved back to Oletree and living with my grandmother. Mama Turk, we call her, because she won't have herself called grand-anything. Turk was her maiden name. Years ago, six months after we moved in with Mama Turk on Clay Street, my father took the lineman's belt and hooks that he used to climb the dangerous poles and the heavy, insulated gloves with the tiny pin-prick hole in them and tramped down the dogtrot hall and out the door down the steps. The gloves had nearly killed him in Florida when he grasped a power line with them on. That accident had scared him so badly that he quit the power company and moved us back to Oletree to live with Mama Turk, my mother's mother, while he looked for safer work. I won't see him again until after I leave the house on Clay Street.

It didn't take me long to learn the hard way that Mama Turk runs things in this house, and on this Christmas morning I don't yet understand why my mother, grown but dependent and barely less of a child than I am, feels uneasily comfortable here at Mama Turk's table. I have long ago learned better than to fight Mama Turk and the women to their faces. Collectively, even individually (with Mama Turk to back them up) they are too considerable. And so I am surprised at the breakfast table this Christmas morning to hear Daddy George, who has lived among them much longer than I have, challenge the entire bunch across the white linen table cloth. It happens because of four words my grandmother speaks to him: "Don't be foolish, George."

I've been torn up enough times to know that a frontal attack is foolhardy. Now I know that words like those have to be answered some way or other. Eight or eighty, there are a couple of things a man can't afford to lose.

"Pass the syrup, please, Daddy," Aunt Emily asks him. She and my mother call him Daddy, but even my little friends sense something missing in this word. "Why don't your granddaddy like to say the blessing?" they ask. He passes Aunt Emily the syrup with exaggerated ceremony. He never seems to be able to quite please them. And though we are not exactly allies, we share their constant dissatisfaction.

The hovering truth that has prevented us from being closer is that Mama Turk is my real grandmother, but Daddy George is not my real grandfather. He's always been treated by us as a sort of necessary stranger obliged to the kindness of his familiars. We have never learned much respect for him. I never know why, exactly, and Mama Turk isn't the kind you ask. All I know is that Daddy George was never in the service, and even some of the men in our town ignore him because of it, and Mama Turk may take a cue from them.

"Squealum-puss," I mutter under my breath when he takes the paw shaped biscuit I wanted. I have heard some of the World War II veterans, including my father, call him this behind his back. Sticks and stones, my grandmother says of this sort of thing, just before she whales me for getting into a scrap with a kid in Sunday School who makes fun of the strong-smelling hair oil they rub all over my head on Sunday mornings. But it's not so. Words can be the worst kind of weapon, especially between a man and a woman. They can break more than bones. And even grown, I have never known a man or woman either who could master that sword as well as Mama Turk.

"George, these children will need a haircut before Sunday," she tells him. He chews and looks at me and Will and Mikey, a couple of my younger male cousins. "Looks all right to me," he says, and I know we'll probably be skint to show her so.

During the Depression, Daddy George spent his younger manhood shaving the bristle from the faces of the veterans of the last war and the fuzz from the heads of those bound for the next. He was caught in the at-ease of two generations who went to war for a living, but since then he has seen enough action under Mama Turk's roof to suit any man. The thing that seems to bother Mama Turk most is the fact that Daddy George never pretends it bothers him he missed out on those wars. Across the table he certainly never looks a soldier.

But his hands, they seem to have a preacher's patience with anything growing, from hedges to hair. Calloused and thorn-bitten, always wounded in the act of caring for some pointed thing in the garden, never quite healed, his hands seem able enough. I often watch them as they grasp a knife or an ax-handle as if I imagine they hold some secret that denies his soft face and pink mouth.

"If we had a car we'd all enjoy a ride in the country, it's such a beautiful day," Mama Turk says, pretending she has forgotten that our breakfast table this Christmas morning includes Mr. Hank Griner, my mother's boyfriend, who runs the Dixie Finance Company and owns a four-door Oldsmobile.

Hank Griner smiles. He is just getting used to her. "I think the grown-ups would probably get the most out of it, Miss Libby," he hedges. He is afraid my cousins, who aren't as well behaved as I am made to be, will get candy on his upholstery.

"Why thank you for offering, Hank," she says. "Penny can mind the younger children."

This means my sister will be left in charge of us. Aunt Emily's eyes slice across the table, but she says nothing. Aunt Emily doesn't live here. Mama Turk accidently drops her knife on the floor.

"Oh, fiddle," she says, "Y'all excuse me."

I chew on a giggle because I know that **shit** is her favorite word when she gets angry and thinks she's alone in the house behind locked doors and heavy venetian blinds. She is also superstitious—my sister sweeps nothing out the back door from the kitchen linoleum past dark—but she doesn't want to anyone to know that either.

Hank Griner looks up at the high ceiling where throughout the house cobwebs tower far beyond the reach of any broom. "I like your house, Miss Libby," he says, "Did y'all build it yourselves?"

"Goodness, no, my first husband built this house," she tells him.

"Oh," he says, a little embarrassed. "I didn't . . ." There is silence which Daddy George fills with noisy mouthfuls of the salty roe.

Mama Turk's first husband, who was many years her senior, she still calls Mr. Collier. I can hardly believe it, but I have heard Aunt Emily tell that he used to call Mama Turk "Pistol" around the house. I know more about this man, dead thirty years, than I do about Daddy George, sitting right there beyond the Wedgewood coffee service. Mr. Collier died when Mama Turk was still young. It was during the Great Depression. He has been our town's Chief of Police. The Chief, like his forebears, who I later learn had each bequeathed less than they had inherited, because of procrastination or vanity, had not made a will. And so some older children by a former marriage and an old maid sister got what little money he had.

Mama Turk was left their two little girls, a Dodge automobile, and what remained of his share of the family property, this rambling, creaking house on Clay Street, in what was in the thirties and forties a fashionable neighborhood of former mayors and retiring city officials. "But Mama hadn't fallen off the rutabaga truck, she could still turn many a head then, and she knew what she had to do," Aunt Emily would say, telling the story.

Mama Turk began eating lunch at the drugstore uptown once a week. Some of the older ladies on Clay Street whispered, but she had made up her mind. Then one day Judge Lytle's wife offered Mama Turk some hand-me-downs for Mother and Aunt Emily. That was salt in her coffee.

She emptied her old purses, fished between the cracks in the good sofa, scraped together her coins, and marched herself down to the New York Store. She bought an outfit that she had told Dolly Lytle earlier she thought was a bit immodest. Then she cut and bobbed her hair and began attending Elk's Club socials. Six months later she was married to Daddy George. And even though he still ate country food with his fingers and had to his name the second chair in Floyd's Barber Shop, she let him nail his name above the front door, George Washington Boggs, in tin letters for the neighbors to see.

"Daddy George is dribbling again," little Will announces to the table. Daddy George glares at him.

"Wipe your mouth, George," Mama Turk says to him in a low voice.

That's not the trouble, though. Daddy George just ignores this. You see, he eats like a three year old, with both hands. He sticks out his big tongue for a bite that's always too big and dribbles the rest on a napkin stuffed into his shirt collar like a bib. Nobody likes to sit across from him, so us boys have

been placed there. Being small, outnumbered, and mean, we make more of his bad manners than necessary and cause the women to take notice.

But he looks at Mama Turk when she fusses at him. "Yes, darling." You can't mistake the sarcasm in his voice. But that's all he has ever said up to now. Being indoors, on hostile turf, he tamps his mouth the way he does the last centimeters of his cigar, about the only masculine thing he's allowed inside the house, and only in the TV room.

Only Marylee, our maid, shows him any rank at all. "Mister George," Marylee says to him where he sits out on the buckling porch, before she leaves evenings, her voice sorrowful and respectful but, even so, with the slightest trace of that tone he lacks, "You mind if I take these scraps home to my cats?"

My mother is jammed up against the refrigerator by the elbows of Mama Turk and Hank Griner. "Daddy, these fig preserves are mighty good," she offers from the butt-end of the table. The figs come from Daddy George's garden. His chest swells with a full breath between bites. "Thank you, Ruth."

The yards and the garden are obedient; they are his, and he is a wonder there. The older and plainer the house gets and the more renters move into the neighborhood, the harder he works outside and the prettier the yards become; the more Mama Turk's friends who have moved to more fashionable suburbs remark, "Our yards aren't nearly as pretty as yours." Out there he isn't just a short, fat, balding old man who never faced an enemy.

Before Daddy George, when the Chief was alive, the yards were little more than a few wildly overgrown shrubs and some stubborn patches of grass. The Chief was too busy keeping order in town to worry with the yard, and Mama Turk had no patience with the sun, the bugs, and the weeds, which didn't answer to a shout.

Daddy George is out there in this little wilderness nearly everyday battling the creeping crabgrass and wandering magnolia roots, the voice of his grubbing-hoe or ax rising and falling again. Sometimes he works just on his hands and knees. The failing porch is surrounded by lances of holly shrubs kept trimmed just so. Only he is able to see where they need trimming. He knows the seasons like an Indian, and spring and summer and fall rally to him like re-inforcements. The drive is lined with black-eyed susans on either side. (The old Dodge has been gone ever since Mama Turk failed her eye examination.) There are magnolias and dogwood, but beneath them grass grows even in the shadiest spots. Sometimes I think Daddy George wore a shirt and tie to the barber shop every day out of respect for the yard as he passed through it, watering and tending every morning and evening in the cool quiet, bowed over his tender blooms like a preacher over a child at a christening.

His roses are his favorite, cribbed in neat plots at the corners of the front walk with a picket fence around them to keep out the dogs and me. They call our town "The City of Roses," but folks have walked down our street, veterans of rose gardens from across the county, just to stand and admire his. They are fed, bedded, watered, and indulged as much as any spoiled child.

Yes, he is master outside except for a single tree, an old pecan in the back. Mama Turk planted it the year she and the Chief married; it sprawls big and ugly over the back yard. But it bears pounds and pounds of nuts each year, and selling them has helped him build his tool shed and reckon with his old age with things like a self-propelled power mower and a wheelbarrow for the magnolia leaves instead of the bushel hampers from the farmer's market. So he never cut it down.

"Wipe your mouth, Libby," Daddy George crows suddenly over at Mama Turk. His spirits this morning are most unexpected. Hank Griner hides behind a napkin. I laugh out loud despite a look from my mother that tells me I'll pay later.

"Oh my, do I have food on my mouth? Y'all excuse me," she says. She takes a sip of coffee a little too quickly and burns her mouth but doesn't bat an eye.

His brass is a little disturbing. He certainly didn't have it yesterday, and I have been guiltily sopping at the memory of my part in why he should not be in any sort of spirits at all.

It happened three weeks ago, with the approach of the Holiday Season, the best time of year for me, at ten, usually the worst time of year for him. The approaching winter began killing back most things in the yard. His grass was the color of a dull blade. Only the big pecan tree seemed to have any life in it. Pecans were bringing a better price than anyone could remember.

Just after Thanksgiving, while Daddy George was at the barber shop, Mama Turk had chased me out back with a rake, a long cane pole, and some of Daddy George's burlap sacks to collect the nuts. Like all good war criminals, I was just following orders. I knew those nuts would buy a red stingray bicycle for me for Christmas. Mama Turk learned from the ladies in her bridge club that all the grandsons would be getting them that year; the only difference was my mother couldn't afford one for me. I had still been a little surprised at her, though, as I tried to balance the cane pole on my shoulder and carry everything at once.

She came out to supervise and to fuss at me for trying to carry the ladder, pole, and sacks all together, instead of making trips. "Daddy George ain't gone like us messing with his nuts," I told her.

She looked askance at me for a long moment standing there under that tree. She had on a house dress that day with an apron and a big ring of keys, including one to Daddy George's shed, tucked in the pocket. "Isn't going to like," she corrected. "And what Daddy George doesn't know can't hurt him, can it?" She smiled down at me. "This is my house," she said, giving a little jangle to her apron. "And one day, when you return from college with a proper degree and marry a sensible girl, it will be yours."

I hadn't said another word. I knew better if I wanted the bicycle. So all that morning I climbed the pecan tree and shook down the almost willing nuts while she directed. Later that afternoon I carried our spoil to town in Daddy George's blue wheelbarrow. I thought briefly about giving him the money, taking it to him at the barber shop. But those sacks full of nuts, smelling already like something used to grease bicycle chains, had me drunk with Christmas. I avoided the section of Jefferson Street the barber shop was

on by cutting through an alley of overflowing dumpsters. I brought the money home to Mama Turk, and she stored it away deep inside an old purse, under some unmentionables, inside the big chester-drawers, next to her own bed.

That evening, just before supper, Daddy George went out and finished his final pre-winter rite, wrapping the water spigots in the yard and checking the pine straw in the flower beds. He saw what we had done. He came inside just as she was ready for us all to sit down. "Somebody's been in my tools today," he said to her in a stretched voice. She paid him no mind. She fixed his place at the table, closest to the door. "Say Grace, George, would you please?" He looked at his food and ate very slowly.

He didn't come into the TV room to watch *Gunsmoke* that night. I was sent to bed early for making too much noise and for kicking my sister underneath the supper table. From the open window of the front bedroom where I sleep I heard Mama Turk step out on the front porch and kiss him goodnight. "Come to bed soon, won't you George? You know I don't sleep well when you're up and about, and I'd like to attend early services in the morning." He mumbled something about not having much use for services. She left the hall lamp on. Not for him, but for my mother, who had her first date with Hank Griner that evening. It was the next week that Aunt Emily came with her kids but without her husband to visit during the Christmas Holidays.

Up to this morning Daddy George has been staying mostly out on the porch, staring out at his dying yard, rocking slowly, marking the casualties of winter. Once in a while he would raise up and yell at us kids to stay off his dead grass.

I sop my plate with another biscuit. This is his favorite kind of food, but it's not this that has brought back his appetite this morning and caused him to sit up straight across the table from me. It has turned unseasonably warm the past couple of days, and just this Christmas morning as we were ripping into presents and I was trying to sneak a pedal around the living room, Daddy George came inside happy as a born-again believer. Outside, in the front yard, pointing like a bright spear out of the winter blanket of pine straw he had raked and laid down, was a single ragged rose blossom. When he saw me sitting in my pajamas on the red stingray bicycle, he frowned a moment, nodding. He knew where the money had to come from. For a moment he spoiled it for me looking at me like that. But it was Christmas, and hard to think long on anything sinful. I rubbed harder on the red paint with my spit-wetted sleeve.

Mine, of course, wasn't the only present this morning. The women held up secret silk things from tissue-lined boxes. "Would you look at that, it must have cost --" "Hush, child." They keep things secret from him that way but never hidden. He sat down among all the squealing and squabbling with his traditional box of King Edward cigars unopened in his lap and watched with a private contentment. After a while he began to grumble at us to stop all the hullabaloo. What about the fishroe and cheese grits he paid plenty to have for breakfast this morning? The women filtered whispering into the kitchen. Hank Griner arrived. Finally Mama Turk, who believes everyone ought

to be civil enough to sit down to the table at the same time, convinced me to stop rubbing at the stingray and come to the breakfast table or she would take the thing away.

I can tell by the way Aunt Emily is having to fence with Daddy George's elbow that he has still forgotten about the pecans, for the time, anyway. Next to me, my little cousins beg me for rides on the new bike. Happy again and filling my belly, I begin to feel cocky at all the attention.

"Can I go for a ride on your new bike, Rusty?" Mikey asks. "Me first, Rusty, I asked you first," Will says.

"Maybe," I say. "But not for a while. I want to ride down the big hill first."

"The **big** hill?" they say. It is pretty big. Full of potholes Mama Turk has been trying to get the city to do something about ever since she's had to begin walking the three blocks to town. She is terrified that she might fall and break her hip because of one of them. "You aren't going to try the big hill right away?"

"Sure I am."

"Oh no you're not, either." That's a sister for you. All morning she has been hovering about my conservation to try and get control of this latest thing, and now she swoops down. In no time she is backed up by the older women and finally by Mama Turk.

"Rusty will ride his new bicycle on the street directly in front of the house only," she announces, lighting her Pall Mall.

"Just a hill," Daddy George snorts. "Boys round here do it all the time: Ain't nothing to it."

"Yeah," I launch at them, kicking the leg of the table for emphasis and sending Mama Turk's perfectly brimming cup of coffee sloshing over into the sump of its saucer. "Ain't nothing to it—even Daddy **George** can do it."

Everyone at the table stops eating at once and looks in spite of themselves at Daddy George, chewing with his mouth open. I look, too, because I have spoken without thinking. Hank Griner coughs politely; my sister giggles; Aunt Emily hides her face in her napkin; the refrigerator kicks on and my mother jumps; Mama Turk smiles a tiny little straight-razor smile.

"Ain't nothing to it," Daddy George insists with his mouth full. He seems to be having a little trouble swallowing that bite, though, and that's when she tells him:

"Don't be foolish, George." I'll never forget the look that comes across his face at those words. They cannot be rolled off. They nick a vital spot. He stops chewing a moment. Something tense in his jaw snaps and quivers. I look at him expectantly. His reply will be in signs, now, which I must not miss.

His reply is simple and direct, but it is enough so that I recognize the Abbot boys, my saviors, by it later when I see them carrying that worn ball towards me, their unashamed, scabbed knees poking through impossible holes in their jeans. Daddy George slowly puts down his fork. One rough hand reaches up and removes the white linen napkin from this shirt front. He drops it into his plate in a wad and looks at her ignoring him. The muscles in his jaw remain tensed. It's a little bit frightening; one of his eyes is not quite right. Then I see it, an actual clamp-jawed smile turning up the corners of his

pink mouth. No one sees but me. He almost chuckles. Almost, I say. It's a little more than a grunt. But I know, or rather my mute, skinned arms and legs underneath the table know, that this has to be an answer of some kind.

I finish eating as fast as I dare and ask to be excused. I run outside and begin to angrily ride the bike around and around in the street in front of Mama Turk's house, watching for my sister to come poking her nose out the screen. Closer and closer I edge to the boundary of the next yard. One by one, the younger kids come out to watch me get into trouble. Soon Daddy George comes out to the yard and cranks the hose. He turns it gently on the little blossom, but he keeps watching me. I chicken out and roll up short into the yard. I fling the bike down in the grass. I expect him to fuss at me, but he doesn't.

"Come here, Rusty," Daddy George says, winking craftily at me.

"What do **you** want?" I grumble.

He looks furtively at the screen and leans closer. "How about letting Daddy George ride your bike?" He winks again.

"No," I say, kicking the dead ground. "You might break it and Mama Turk said not to let anyone." I'm stalling. Inside, for some wild reason, we had stuck together and now he was calling me on it.

He drops the little stream of water and looks me right the eye. "Come on, Rusty, let Daddy George. They don't want us to just cause they're scared to. Daddy George won't hurt it, promise." And he reaches deep inside his old trouser pocket and brings out a thumb-worn half stick of chewing gum. "How about it?" His eyes chase down mine and hold them a moment.

"All right," I say, taking his bitten-off offering, "but just this once, and you better not break it."

"I won't," he says. He takes it carefully down to the curb, leaning on it a little as he pushes it. I can see his hands are shaking, because he is nearly seventy, and he really doesn't know. It takes him a couple of tries to swing his leg over the saddle. Then he pushes off in a quiver. He manages to get his feet pedaling, and away he goes up the street. At the end of the block he tips his hat to Mrs. Thompson, Mama Turk's most formidable bridge adversary, and turns around. As he regains his composure, he begins to smile. This time there is no mistaking it; he is smiling to bust wide open. I just stand there like Mrs. Thompson, with my mouth hanging open as he passes by headed for the hill. Just then my sister comes out and spies what is going on. From the high step of the front porch she declares she's telling, and runs back inside. That's when my skint up arms and legs become articulate, and I realize the buzzing in my ears is words. "Go, Daddy George, go." In the houses up and down the street, old people lean off their porches and step out into their yards to watch.

When Mama Turk comes running out the screen door with her napkin still clutched in her hand like prayer beads, Daddy George is partways up the hill, clinging himself to a balance frail as memory, wobbling, but pushing on toward the leering holes. Mama Turk raises her hand to her face in an ancient gesture of fear and despair. "He's going to kill himself right in front of the whole neighborhood," she hollers, and covers her eyes.

But the old man doesn't buckle yet. The old potential of his arms and legs

comes to him, and like an aged horseman on an unwilling mount, he twists that front tire this way and that across the road between the holes. Then strafing down at us he comes, weaving through those holes with just a slight dip of his shoulder. When he sees my grandmother and the others huddled together in the front yard, he lets go both hands and laughs as we gasp after him. Then, still holding on with some vital part of himself we can't see, he doffs his hat and bows as low as he dares passing by. Once more he turns by us before giving the bike up to me. I take it with both hands. When he dismounts, huffing triumphantly, the women stand back, but we children cheer around him. Even Mr. Griner, a veteran of Midway, steps down from the porch to shake his hand. Nobody has ever seen him look as he does now, returning fiercely to his hose, lighting an Invincible.

- Rick Barnett

Sport

During the last hour Barney Rodgers had managed to chew the end of his Roi-Tan into a tasteless pulp. The weatherman predicted no immediate end to the drought in south Georgia and once again warned listeners that the fire hazard remained very high. Barney, however, was no longer a listener as he had been when another meteorologist cautioned about the same danger during the Noonday News Hour; at 12:20 Barney had told himself that he didn't care if every damn pine tree in Georgia burnt. But the television no longer interested him because a little over an hour ago his wife, Harriet, had walked into their living room during the *Leave It To Beaver* credits and informed him that she planned on leaving.

"Barney," Harriet had said very matter-of-factly, "I can't take it anymore, I'm going now."

At first Barney had assumed that his wife was talking about the ham and potato salad she was preparing for tomorrow's Easter dinner. He wouldn't even have bothered looking up from the set, but he heard a noise that sounded as if someone were shaking a large maraca. Harriet had been clutching the sewing basket she always grabbed anytime something unnerved her, and the violent trembling of her arms had sent the needles, spools, and scissors banging against the sides of the wicker box. Barney had never seen her display such a powerful shaking of emotion. She left the room immediately after delivering the words, and Barney's eyes returned to the color T.V. as he chewed over the situation.

Barney suddenly sprang up from his easy chair; his button eyes sparkled mischievously. An onlooker would have been amazed at how stealthily the five-foot-eight-inch, two-hundred-and-sixty pound man stole toward the bedroom. Harriet had her back to the doorway. Coming up behind her, the silent teddy bear caught her completely by surprise when he reached out with both paws and grabbed her bottom.

"Grrr . . . Ol' Sport done snuck in and got ya where ya weren't lookin!" Barney laughed.

Harriet screamed in fright; then turning around she melted into her husband's arms and sobbed, "Oh Barney, I love you."

The film strip froze just before "Happily Ever After" and rewound itself several dozen frames. Again Barney stared at the back of his unsuspecting wife; again he came up quietly behind her; again he reached out with both hands . . . only this time he grabbed her neck.

"So goddamn you, now that things are a little rough you wanna leave! Well, let old Barney just help you on your way, you ungrateful bitch!" Growling triumphantly when the contents of Harriet's sewing basket spilled onto the floor, Barney watched as his wife's eyes ballooned out and her tongue turned purple.

The projector finally quit rolling, and poor Barney just sank a little lower into the recliner. "If only Harriet were a man," he mused. Barney immediately reddened and began to chew the soggy brown mass even faster. He considered earlier, easier times.

All the boys at the mill had loved old fat Barney or "big'un," because everyday he would walk down the line giving everybody shit, patting some guys on the back, encouraging others when they were forced to work overtime, and occasionally goosing some poor bastard in the ass when he got that distant look in his eye, watching the huge roll of brown paper come off the machine, that look that seemed to be saying, "I see my whole goddamn life written on that blank paper." Each worker was cruelly aware that his was a job where a man's seniority could be reckoned by simply counting the number of fingers he had left. When Barney would walk away, one of the men would shout, "That old Big'un's a Sport, now ain't he!"

Harriet, even in her most reckless mood, would never call Barney "Sport." Though Barney had spent the last twenty years trying to teach her, she could never seem to appreciate the importance of joking. Time after time, he would patiently repeat a punch line several times only to hear her small nervous laugh followed by "I don't understand," and when he finally broke down and explained the damn thing, she would usually just say "Oh," smile, and go right back to her needlepoint. Once, soon after they had gotten married, Harriet tried to tell him a joke that he didn't let on he already knew. But when she botched the ending she broke down and cried. Barney put his arms around her and laughed, "Hey come on, it ain't nothing but a silly old joke!" even though he knew that that wasn't why she was crying. No, Harriet would never call him "Sport." But then nobody had called him that lately.

Somehow, grocers had decided that the food of the eighties belonged in plastic bags, and so the giant mill had, fighting the inevitable, shut down one machine at a time, like an old elephant struggling as it watches each of its legs crumble in turn. For a while everybody told themselves that things would get better. Attendance at the local churches had nearly doubled in the first two weeks after the last paper roller had quit turning. But six months had now passed, and all the Chamber of Commerce promises and Jaycee community spirit rallies hadn't generated so much as even the rumor of a "new industry" coming to the town. The long summer drought seemed to have evaporated the last hope since the townspeople didn't even care enough to get mad anymore. No, nobody had called him "Sport" in a long, long time.

Harriet stayed hidden in the bedroom. A small bit of the shredded cigar suddenly lodged in his throat, causing him to cough uncontrollably. For a moment he thought that he was going to choke to death, and still his wife didn't come back into the front room. Just as he finally managed to free the tobacco from his windpipe, he remembered another time when, soon after the marriage, Harriet had hidden from him.

It had been during their house warming, and he had been entertaining all their guests with a story about how he and Junior Bates had sneaked into the strip-tease show at the county fair when they were thirteen, and how they had both been forced to hide underneath their seats when they suddenly

realized that Junior's father was seated two rows behind them. He had gone into the kitchen to get another beer before telling his audience about what had happened when one of the strippers had jumped off the stage, grabbed Junior by his ear, and pulled him from his hiding place.

There he discovered Harriet standing by the stove crying; Barney asked her what was wrong. She told him that when he walked in a room he had a way of just swallowing up everything in sight and how on her best days she herself was only barely sure that she was a visible person, and if he was going to make what little there was of her disappear, wouldn't he at least occasionally pause long enough in his concern for being in the spotlight to let the tiny ghost left behind know that it was loved.

Setting the mutilated butt aside, Barney levered himself out of the recliner and walked sheepishly into the bedroom. Harriet was on the phone to her brother in Jacksonville; an unfinished needlepoint of a kitten lay beside her on the bed. When Barney approached, she pressed the sewing basket into her lap with her free hand. "I was thinking about—uh . . . Tommy, listen could I call you back in a minute?"

"It's okay," Barney heard himself mumble as he dug through the bottom dresser drawer. He quickly uncovered the twenty and stared at it for a moment before stuffing the bill in his pocket. "Going out awhile, reckon you'll still be here for a few more hours?" She nodded, and Barney scurried away without saying anymore.

"Just need a few drinks to loosen up," he said to himself. "This old house ain't had a good bellylaugh since the mill went down, and maybe that's what's wrong with her. I reckon I always had to do the laughing for the both of us, and lately I just cain't seem to summon it."

He walked uptown to Slim's. Only one other person sat at the bar, a sailor. "Probably took the wrong turn headed back to the air station at Brunswick," Barney figured. A new sign over the register said "Cash Only."

"Hey Big'un! Ain't seen you around in a while. What ya been up to Sport?"

The familiar words didn't cheer him; Slim just sounded desperate. Barney supposed that the town had finally gotten too poor even to finish celebrating its own funeral. Usually, on a Saturday night the place would have already begun filling up. "Shot a Black Ja- . . . no, just make it bar bourbon . . . with a beer back."

Some of his old buddies did finally drag in, but all of them called him Barney and most retreated to the privacy of the back tables. Nevertheless, after a couple of hours Barney managed to drink himself back into the good times, and soon he was slapping backs and getting a grin every now and then in return. Once, about ten-thirty, he even raised a long-forgotten laugh from the crowd when he told the story of how he and Buck Johnson had caught Ed Smith asleep on graveyard shift two nights before Ed was supposed to get married, tied him up, and painted his balls with mercurochrome. Barney completely forgot who he'd come here to impress in the first place, and the hours just swam by. Before he knew it, Slim had announced last call.

"Alright folks, Lord knows I hate to break up the only party this place has seen in months, but it is officially Sunday morning, and this is Georgia, and I don't want to have Sheriff Drury serving my Easter dinner in the county jail."

Everyone then gathered around the bar and drank a final toast to Barney, who fell on the floor when he tried to take a bow.

"Big'un, now you ought to let me drive you home," Slim offered. "You're knee-walkin drunk, Sport."

Barney agreed, but insisted that he should walk home in order to try and sober himself up. He hooked his thumbs in his belt; "I godda very portunt emmishion," he announced to some invisible confidant, evidently standing about three feet to the right of Slim. Barney then begged the ghost to spot him another beer, saying he would be first thing Monday to square the debt. Slim handed him a Budweiser. "This is on me, Big'un," he laughed, shaking his head. "You brought more life into this place tonight than I've seen since the lay-off." Barney thanked him and stumbled out into the moonless night, certain of only one thing—he was drunker than he'd ever remembered.

Barney finally reached his house, or so he thought. The building was white and it was wood, and those two facts satisfied all of Barney's then available criteria for the concept of "home"; the front door, however, was locked. In twenty years of marriage, he and Harriet had never locked their front door. Barney pounded and pounded, "Hairyet! Hairyet Honey! Please Oh God Please Open Up! Ya Jus Godda Hear!" he kept calling out. "Hairyet Ya Jus Godda Hear NOW!" Despite his pleading, Harriet never came to the door. Figuring that she had lied to him and left without even saying good-bye, he finally gave up. Barney sat down in front of the door and sobbed, knowing that if she would have only waited she would have heard everything she wanted to hear.

After a while he started to feel cold and decided to go around and try to crawl through a window. He stumbled along a sidewalk that bordered one side of the house; "Funny," Barney thought "I never noticed that walkway before." He suspiciously eyed a large window that he didn't remember being quite so big and certainly not that damn high off the ground. Pausing for a moment and concentrating very hard on a small area of the concrete between his feet, Barney then, with almost surgical deliberation, lowered his nearly empty bottle down to the sidewalk. He told the Budweiser to stay, and walked slowly over to the window; stretching his full length, he still couldn't reach the sill.

Barney took a long breath and, thanks to the alcohol's imagination, thought himself all the way back to high school when he was eighty pounds lighter and played full-back. He retreated ten yards, got a running start and in a heroic leap of ten inches managed to curl his fingertips over the sill just long enough to feel a brief tickle of elation before he lost his grip.

Barney reached out with his right hand to try to break his fall. Nevertheless, he landed hard. There was a loud splintering of glass. "No, No, No, No, No, No," he cried, "Not My Lazz Beer." At that moment, noticing that his right hand felt strange, he held it up against the streetlight; his wrist was bleeding badly from a long gash. Fascinated, he gaped at the wound for several minutes before wailing again, "No, No, No, Not My Lazz Beer!"

Barney collapsed on the lawn and wept. He cried about Harriet, about being cold, and, most of all, about being locked out on a black Easter morning with no more beer. But then he remembered Florida. Across the state line bars were still serving. Barney sat up suddenly. "Oh hell yeah. I got my credit card," he hissed through a conspiratorial smile. "I'll just hop in the car and scoot over to the line." After wiping his nose with his bloody hand, he pulled out the card and kissed it under the streetlight. Barney then fished all of his pockets three times before it dawned on him that he'd walked to Slim's that afternoon and that his car keys would be inside the locked house. He fell back over in the grass and stared at the useless plastic card while the tears rolled down his fat cheeks.

Barney was just about to the point of digging his own grave with his own hands right there on what he thought was his own lawn when he remembered a trick that Slim once showed him on how to break into a house with a credit card. He shook the card and laughed to himself, "Good to know I can still use my VISA for something." Before going back around to the front door, however, Barney picked up the biggest pieces of glass and carefully threw them toward the street, convinced he was just being a good citizen.

He probably wouldn't have been so patient with the door, but that lock had turned into everything that was now wrong with his life. That lock stood between Barney and more beer. About twenty minutes later, he somehow accidentally opened the front door. Barney stumbled into the dark building. After a moment he decided that Harriet must have moved the light switches before she left. "Why Hairyet?" he moaned. He then groped his way cautiously down a long unfamiliar hallway toward what he thought was the bedroom. "Yep ol' Big'un, just like a cat in the dark," Barney chuckled just before he fell across some steps that he was sure weren't in his house, but by that time he was simply too tired and too drunk to give a damn about Florida.

Several very real cats, in what sounded like the feline tag-team championship of the world, woke him up sometime later. It was still dark and he was only slightly more sober, but Barney was convinced that wherever he lay was most certainly **not** inside his own house. He tiptoed back to the front-door so as not to wake the owner should he happen to be a light sleeper. Carefully locking the door behind himself, Barney set off in search of his rightful home.

Dawn had barely announced the Easter morning when Barney finally crawled up onto his own front porch. A light was on in the living room, and the weary pilgrim peered into the window. Harriet was sitting very erect on the couch with her sewing basket still in her lap. She was working on her needle-point. He noticed that she pulled on the thread as if she secretly hoped it would break. Barney scratched feebly at the screen, and Harriet caught a brief look at her husband's pitiful face just before he fell over. She ran to the door and there was Barney on his knees across the welcome mat.

He looked up at Harriet and suddenly thought about Sylvester Stallone. Rocky was Barney's favorite movie; he had seen it a dozen times, and he always cried at the ending when the battered fighter called out desperately to the crowd, "A-A-A-D-R-I-I-U-N! A-A-A-D-R-I-I-U-N!" Barney sighed, shook his big head, and slobbered, "Hairyet, Hairyet." Then he rolled over on his back and passed out across the mat. Harriet stared at the ragged gash on his wrist.

"Oh My God! Oh My God!" she cried, throwing the sewing basket across the porch

Barney didn't wake up until late afternoon. About all that he could remember of his adventure was that he had gone to Slim's, gotten drunk, and that somehow things were now okay between him and Harriet. He noticed that he had on his white silk pajamas and that there was a long gauze bandage around his right wrist.

Harriet was washing carrots in the kitchen sink. She stopped to fix him a cup of coffee, and Barney made a joke about the carrots. Harriet looked at him with her usual bland expression, but then glancing at his wound, she just laughed and laughed. He walked over to the sink and kissed her.

Hoping that fresh air would ventilate his hangover, Barney took his cup and went out onto the back porch. Junior Bates, his old high school buddy and now next-door neighbor, was grilling hot dogs across the way. He had been laid off too. Though once maybe Barney's greatest fan, Junior had kept to himself since the mill's closing; however, when he saw Barney on the stoop, he set his fork down and came running over to the fence.

"Big'un you look like pure hell! Say what do you reckon it was?"

He looked at his friend in confusion. "What what was?"

"Barney!" Junior exclaimed. "You ain't heard about what happened at the First Baptist Church this morning? They opened the front doors and there was a trail of blood leading all the way to the altar, but the door was locked up tight as could be and nothing was missing. I'm telling you son; it's the damndest thing you've ever seen. Me and Betty drove over and looked for ourself. These drops of blood right between the pews, and there on the altar was all these bloody handprints. Strange business, Barney."

All the missing time came flooding back into Barney Rodger's memory. His fat cheeks quivered as they fought to contain the laughter; in contrast, Junior's face grew very sober.

"Barney, you know I ain't the religious type, but I tell you even I felt somethin there on that altar." Junior looked up into the cloudless blue sky. "Folks are saying it's a Easter miracle, like maybe it was Jesus come to show us that our town was gonna be resurrected! There's even a news team from Jacksonville filming and going around interviewing people!"

Barney threw back his head and howled.

"What's so funny Barney?" Junior asked, looking very offended.

Barney was right on the verge of sharing all of the details of his wild night with Junior when Harriet ran out onto the stoop. Barney looked up at her, the laughter squeezing tears out of the corners of his eyes.

"My goodness, I thought you'd hurt yourself," chided Harriet. She quickly turned and reentered the house. Barney gazed after her for a long while.

"Alright Big'un, fess up," shouted Junior. "What's so funny?"

Barney pulled his right sleeve down low over his wrist. "Ole Sport comes, and Ole Sport goes, and where Sport goes, nobody knows, cept Jesus, ain't that strange Junior?!"

Barney got up and followed Harriet into the house without saying another word. Junior just shook his head and went back to grilling hotdogs and speculating on the Resurrections.

- John Davis

Souvenir

Agnes is sharing a row near the back of the bus with Becky, next to the emergency door. Outside, the sun is climbing over the gas stations and shopping plazas. It makes a shadow of Becky huddled against the window, and the glare reveals millions of tiny curlicues of lint swirling around like feathers. Agnes is thinking how there must be billions more that are invisible, a very handy thing to be.

She is wearing blue jeans, a plain blue cotton blouse, and her sister Norma's old navy windbreaker. Her mother had been busy this morning, helping her father pack for a trip and getting herself ready to go show houses, and she had not mentioned Agnes's anonymous clothing. She always notices when Agnes wears the denim jacket which she had sandpapered for a worn effect. Her mother makes a big deal out of dressing "so you remember who you are and what you stand for." What Agnes wears today is what her father would call "functional." Agnes is hoping to attract as little attention as possible, because she and Becky are going to get off at an unauthorized stop so they can cut school, a first for Agnes. Dressing neatly and unsurprisingly can only help in fooling the bus driver, Mrs. Thigpen.

Agnes considers her mother's reaction a good sign. Lining up good signs is Agnes's way of cancelling the thought that she is fooling herself. She worries that she is making good grades out of luck, but an A on a pop quiz is a good sign. Or, she worries that she is an imposter in the partying crowd with Becky and her other friends, but has drunk wine at least a dozen times without getting sick—a good sign. Good signs work like charms against the day her luck could run out, a day like today when she and Becky could get caught and it would go down on Agnes's permanent record forever.

Her parents would raise the roof if they knew she were cutting school with Becky, whom Agnes's mother calls an "instigator." Becky makes C's in Spanish and gets detention for smoking in the girls' bathroom, things Agnes thinks are a little careless but not criminal. She resents the way her parents put so much emphasis on her Beta Club membership and her position on the student council. Agnes suspects it is because neither Norma nor Marie could make the grades Agnes does, though both went to college and have good jobs now. They are her half-sisters from her mother's first marriage. That is why there is such an age difference and why Agnes does not have dark, exotic hair like they do. She has her father's fine, dirty blonde hair, which she wears long and considers her best feature, if a pain to wash. She also has his height, which she would trade for Norma's breasts or her mother's dainty hands.

There is a joke Agnes tells about getting her 4.0 average from her father, the vice-principal in charge of counseling for the junior high. "I didn't get all of Daddy's brain cells, but he keeps the answers in his desk drawer," is what she says to show that grades don't mean everything. After today, she won't have to make as many excuses. She won't have to hang back when Becky and the others talk about cutting school. It's a bridge Agnes needs to cross, and her parents wouldn't understand.

The bus is getting close to the Sing Food Mart, and Agnes swings her legs into the aisle. There are some hilarious haircuts and bizarre hats in her way, but she can see the oval sign up the road on the right. Becky is sitting forward. She gives Agnes a conspirator's smirk, which she returns. The bus starts slowing down for a traffic signal, and Agnes is up, hitching her book bag onto her shoulder and leaving room for Becky to slide out behind her. The bus is still rolling, and it's like walking the wrong way on a moving sidewalk. Agnes's hair is tangled in her collar and sticks out like scarecrow stuffing. The brakes catch too quickly and she stumbles and whacks into a seat, jostling a boy in a ROTC uniform. Becky runs into her, and they teeter together a second. Becky is clutching Agnes's shoulders like she's going to ride her piggyback, and Agnes is rubbing her hip. She expects she'll have an ugly purple souvenir there.

Up front, Mrs. Thigpen is sitting with her fat arms draped over the steering wheel, watching them in the mirror like the mighty Oz. Agnes comes up the aisle, one hand out for balance and the other stubbornly holding her shoulder strap, resisting the backpack's weight. Becky uses both hands to steady herself between the seats. She's wearing a string purse over a bomber jacket and has no books to fool with.

Agnes looks out the windshield as she speaks to Mrs. Thigpen: "Could you please let us out here, ma'am? At the store. We'll walk the rest of the way."

Beneath the dash is a new trash bag with the plastic sides still stuck together, holding a crumpled Kleenex that seems to move. Agnes worries her face gives her away. But Mrs. Thigpen says nothing as she reaches over, wraps her dried-out knuckles around the handle, and jerks the lever, opening the door. Agnes's feet find their way down the steps and out on the sidewalk.

She shifts her weight from one leg to the other, waiting for Becky. The morning air frisks her cheeks. Engine sounds combine and roll over one another. The asphalt parking lot looks rough and cold in the bus shadow, but the front to the store is shining with a warm glare. Becky nudges her elbow and they start walking across the lot.

Becky turns around and walks backward, looking right back at the bus. Agnes shortens her steps so they stay even with one another. Becky is running through the names of her enemies on the bus, people who might report them out of spite. Agnes asks if she doesn't think Mrs. Thigpen is more likely to turn them in.

"She's okay now. I think she got tired of being a policeman."

"She still throws Kim Adams off the bus every other week."

"He's such a shit, though. Calling her 'Mister T' and provoking her, he expects to get thrown off. It's like a game to him."

"I would have thought she'd say something."

"Don't worry about it. We'll be at the gate after school and she's not going to play private investigator to make sure we've been good girls and gone to class. It's only three blocks to the school, anyway. People walk down here all the time before school. She couldn't care less. Watch."

Before Agnes can stop good, Becky has taken off her purse, which she pushes into Agnes's arms before turning a cartwheel in the parking lot. Agnes cringes and turns her head toward the street. The bus is already down the street, moving slowly, carefully, as if the cars bunched around it were carrying it gently, trying not to upset the heads balanced atop the wide back seat.

Becky is standing outside the front door, straightening her jacket and combing her hair out with her fingers. She's grinning like the cat that swallowed the canary. Agnes loops the purse around her neck and acts like she's going to pull Becky into the store by it. "You need a leash, girl," she says, smiling.

It is a few minutes after eight. Steve Kelleher and Heather Penn are supposed to meet them at the store before eight-thirty. Heather was one of Agnes's best friends in junior high, but she went to Edgewood Academy this year so she could play basketball for a contender. She met Steve, who is a senior there, and they've been dating since November. It was Steve's idea that the four of them cut school and go to the river today, the last day before spring holidays start. Agnes thinks Steve acts too much like a good ol' boy around his baseball buddies, but he is quiet and sweet the rest of the time. She no longer thinks of Heather and Steve as separate people, but as "Heather and Steve." The Heather she knew before seems to have disappeared.

She and Becky hang around the magazine rack, flipping through glamour magazines. Agnes picks up a custard-colored astrology booklet. In a low voice, she reads their horoscopes. Becky decides they should swap for good luck. Agnes agrees to be a Libra and let Becky be a Moon Child. She tells Becky that she prefers to say she is a Cancer, mainly because her parents have shortened Moon Child to "Moon," a nickname that embarrasses Agnes.

"Cancer is a disease," Becky says. "And crab is seafood."

The clerk is a young man with a lime-green tunic that he appears to have slept in. He acts like he is reading the newspaper, but Agnes notices that he doesn't turn the pages. She walks down the candy aisle, picking up some Reese's Cups and then putting them back. She used to steal cigarettes from the grocery store by putting a pack in her coat pocket as she fumbled with an armload of items in the checkout line. If anyone saw her, she could lie and say that she intended to buy them, but she only had two hands. When a man with a nametag saw her pocketing a pack of Salems one day, it had scared her so badly that she hadn't stolen anything since.

Agnes gets a cup of coffee and a Chapstick and ends up splitting the cost of a pack of Salems with Becky. The clerk has an earring in his left earlobe. Behind him are racks of magazines wrapped in brown paper. When Agnes gives him her money, he slides a nickel back across the counter to her and reaches in a margarine dish marked "Pennies for our Pals."

Outside, around the side of the store, she and Becky sit by the pay

telephone and drink their coffee. Agnes smokes and watches the cars lining up to turn onto the main road. A blonde woman in a Camaro is frantically looking back and forth between her windshield and rear view mirror while she puts on lipstick. Agnes says, "It's a wonder anybody ever keeps up with anybody with everybody moving in so many directions at once." Becky points out three maids in pistachio uniforms standing at the city bus stop, each straddling a stuffed department store bag. They are talking to each other but looking straight ahead instead of at one another. "Like they couldn't care less," Becky says.

As Steve turns onto the airport road, a song called "Don't Cross the River" comes on the car radio and cracks them up. It is the first time Agnes has been to the river by way of the old city cemetery, though she's been to the cemetery before, when she was in Girl Scouts. They are going this way, which takes them to the side of the river away from town, because Steve says the normal gathering places are watched by the county sheriffs. He says that last summer's drownings—one was a boy on Steve's baseball team—scared the sheriff. "Election year," he says. Now a patrol car goes by all the ferry crossings, three times a day. "Too cold to swim, anyhow," he adds. It occurs to Agnes that Steve and boys in general have a way of counting their opinions as facts. "You don't know, boy," Heather says. "We might want to get nekkid and party, with or without you." Agnes says Becky's secret desire is to be sculpted like Barbara Dennis, the wife of one of the town's richest men. In back of the Dennis mansion there is a statue of Barbara Dennis in a bikini, running with three Cocker Spaniels. Agnes's mother calls it "Barbara and the Other Bitches." Agnes asks Steve what to do if Becky gets drunk and climbs the Confederate monument. Becky chimes in with, "How's the law going to look at you running around a cemetery with three intoxicated minors, Steven?" The white stone arches narrowly miss the door handles as Steve drives into the graveyard muttering, "Y'all are all crazy."

Steve parks the Cutlass off the side of the pavement at the midpoint of a little turnaround. They are surrounded by weather-stained grave monuments, ones that look like tiny temples and miniature Washington Monuments. An enormous cedar stands by a family plot where the four of them end up sitting on a low wall. Just beyond them the ground drops off sharply. Agnes goes over to the edge and leans over and sees that the drop is about twenty feet straight down, though there are steps cut into the side off to her right. Down there is another road, then the railroad tracks, then a line of sweetgums and pines. The river is about thirty yards through the trees, Steve says.

Becky hands out the styrofoam cups, and Steve fills one of them full of orange juice from the Tropicana bottle, replacing what is gone with vodka. He shakes the jar hard and pours each of them a cup that he will refill when they get around to going to the river's bank. Sunlight sparkles on the rippling, rust-colored water that crawls past on its way across the state to the ocean, more than a hundred miles from the pinestraw-covered space where they finally sit down.

Becky tops off everyone's cups. The bottle is three-quarters empty already. Heather and Steve stretch out together against the side of a log.

Agnes feels restless down here and would rather be back up in the cemetery. She tells the others about the time she came here with her scout troop to put poppies on veterans' graves. Everybody got a basket of cloth poppies that they were told had been made by disabled veterans, and they were dropped off in groups of threes scattered around the cemetery. They were told to put poppies on every grave with a military headstone and meet back at the main gate in three hours. But after about two hours of walking up and down hills, Agnes's group decided to call it a day. "Leanna Zimmerman found a crypt where the gate wasn't locked, and we went inside and spent that hour smoking a bunch of nasty half-smoked cigarettes Leanna had collected from her parents' ashtrays. We must've smelled like a barbecue pit when it was time to go . . ."

"Speaking of smells," says Becky, standing and brushing the pine straw from her backside. "Does it smell of piss around here to y'all?"

"Wouldn't surprise me," says Steve. He has finished his cup and his hand rests on the curve of Heather's waist.

"Why wouldn't it?" Agnes holds the bottle toward Heather, who waves it away, and divides the rest into her cup and Becky's. "Who else comes down here?"

"People float all the way from the ferry to the Seventh Street bridge on inner tubes, camping out if they feel like it. And there are tramps that get off the trains coming through. And people like us just down to party."

Agnes says, "Norma told me all the hippies used to hang out down here in the sixties."

Heather's eyes are getting droopy. She opens them as wide as they'll go, giving them air. "I need to take a walk," she says. Steve stands and helps her up. Agnes suddenly remembers Norma telling her about a cemetery in Macon, where Norma went to college. There was a grave there that overlooked the river, and supposedly one of the Allman Brothers made love to his girlfriend on the grave and wrote a song about it. Agnes hates the Allman Brothers, but the idea of making love in a graveyard strikes her as wildly romantic. She is still a virgin and wonders if Heather still is.

Becky wants to see the Civil War graves, but Heather says she doesn't feel like climbing the steps back to the car. She is pacing back and forth, picking out trees and trying to walk toward them without weaving. Steve says Soldiers Square is off to the left of where he parked the car. "Why don't we meet you there, or at the car, in a few minutes?"

Agnes carries the empty jar back up to the car. She and Becky follow a fork that winds down a hill and back up a side covered with crypts, stone entrances that lead back into the earth. Soldiers Square seems simple and unadorned in comparison. A gentle slope dotted with maybe fifty curving rows of little white markers standing at attention. There is a flagpole but no flag, just a rope that rings against the metal surface in the breeze. Stooping over to read the inscriptions, Agnes finds most of the men came from other towns and states. She wonders why they were buried here and not back home. Becky complains of dizziness, and they start back to the car. Before reaching the fork in the road, Becky is sick. She drops to her knees beside a stone vase and Agnes stoops beside her, holding Becky's hair as she vomits.

They lie down across the car seats to wait for Steve and Heather. Becky falls asleep in the back, curled up like a shrimp. When Agnes closes her eyes everything starts to spin. Her head feels like baby food and she has to pee. She takes some tissue from Heather's purse and a wad of yellow napkins from the glove compartment, then gets out. There is a grave with several bunches of plastic flowers on it and a headstone big enough to hide her. She drops her jeans and squats uncomfortably with her spine grinding against the back of the tombstone.

As she stands, pulling her jeans up and buttoning, the dizziness comes suddenly and it's like a flashbulb popping in front of her face. She leans against the stone, doubled over, throwing up and spitting and coughing. The orange vomit seems ridiculous to her as she wipes her face with one of the napkins. She opens her eyes wide and starts walking, letting the breeze dry the sweat on her forehead.

She takes a different path, heading away from the car. She follows a narrow cement drive up over a ridge crowded with tall, thin spires and twisted cedars. Everything seems much more sharply defined now, as if the stones had been branded against their backgrounds or outlined in charcoal. Agnes finds herself wondering what it is like to be a gravedigger or somebody who is responsible for keeping the lawn mowed and the weeds pulled here. Stopping to light a cigarette, she closes her eyes and imagines having a summer job as a cemetery guide, working for the historical society. She sees herself dressed in a dignified outfit, a black dress with pearls, gesturing with her palm as she tells a group a story about a family feud, or surprises them with a secret passage. She imagines herself locking the gate behind them and taking a walk alone, watching the sunset spread shadows across the view slowly like news of an assassination.

As she starts to return to the car, her knees are aching and she decides to sit for a second before climbing another hill. The wall along the road seems a good place to sit and take a last look around. A half-dozen brick steps lead her up behind the wall to the ground level of a family plot. As she starts to cross over into the plot, she suddenly stops. On the grass behind the road-side lip of the wall is a man curled on his side, motionless.

Agnes's first thought is that he is dead. Yet, she remembers what Steve has said about tramps. She steps away from the plot and watches the man closely. He lies in the position of someone who has had the bed covers pulled off of him. He is wearing an army jacket and brown pants and has black, scruffy hair. Agnes cannot see his face or hands.

Keeping her eye on the figure, she reaches down and picks up a liquor bottle with a faded label. Gently, she flips it at his feet. It bounces lightly on the grass and rolls away, but the man does not move. Agnes moves around the outside of the plot to where she can stand on the wall away from the road. The thought of getting the others to come see crosses her mind, but something tells her to stay. She feels very necessary and strangely safe in her own alertness.

She picks some pebbles loose from the base of the wall and jiggles them in her hands. First one, then another, then several stones at the same time hit his jacket, leaving dents in the material. But no response. Agnes moves

closer, tossing what she has left at the man. His hair is littered with pieces of rock. She stops a yard away, close enough to touch, and she pokes his shoulder quickly with her shoe. She jerks it back, knowing from the feel that he is dead.

She has seen a dead person before this. Grandfather Morris, looking polished and not wearing his glasses like he always did. Marie had stayed outside the room in the funeral home and said that what was in the casket wasn't her grandfather and it wasn't going to be what she remembered. Looking at the dead man on the ground before her, Agnes wonders how different he is now from what his family will remember. Nothing but a shell. She pushes him hard with her foot, rolling him over like a doll.

His eyes are closed. He looks younger than Agnes expected, and not as big. The collars of several shirts stick out above the zipper of his jacket. She looks over the pocket for the nametag like the one on her father's army jacket, but there is none on this one. His right hand lies across his stomach, and on his little finger is an interesting ring.

Deep, glossy black, like the Apache Tears that Agnes's aunt put on a birthday cake from New Mexico. There's no setting; just this band that looks like a piece of dark quartz, somehow carved in the shape of a ring. Agnes is bending down to get a better look when she hears the car horn, then Becky's voice calling Agnes's name.

Agnes wants the ring as a souvenir. She yells, "Coming," and goes to one knee, anxious but uncertain about touching the hand. She pulls her jacket sleeve down over her hand like a mitten. With her hand wrapped in the lining, she seizes the ring and tries to wiggle it off his finger. It's on tight. His hand must be swollen. The car horn is honking again.

"Agggg-ness, we're going. Come on." This time it's Heather. Sweat begins to catch in the corner of Agnes's eyes. She covers her other hand with her sleeve and takes hold of the dead man's wrist, but the nylon slips back. Her fingers touch his wrist and it feels like ice running up her arm. She grabs hold of his sleeve with her uncovered hand and works at the ring with her other hand. No use. She reaches into her jacket pocket for a napkin to wipe the sweat with, and then she gets an idea. She reaches in her pants pocket and takes out the Chapstick. With her left hand on his sleeve, she holds his hand up and smears the finger with the lip balm. Then she wraps the napkin around the ring and halfway stands. Squeezing the napkin as hard as she can, she pulls. The dead man's fingers jiggle and brush against her thumb. She steps over the body and strains to grab the top of a headstone with her left hand, her right still holding the finger with the ring. His arm is almost straight out, like a child waving because he knows the answer. Agnes's pulse is pounding in her temples. She catches hold of the headstone and pulls with all her might when suddenly something gives and she and the dead man are apart, falling in different directions.

Agnes pushes herself up off the ground and squeezes the napkin, feeling the hard circle of the ring. Without unwrapping it, she puts it in her pocket. She slaps the grass off her jacket and leaves the plot without looking back. As she climbs the hill to meet the others, she notices a soreness on her right hip. A bruise to match the other, she thinks. A delightfully ugly souvenir.

It is only a little after one when they go by Heather's house. There is time

to fix sandwiches and watch TV before Agnes and Becky need to be back at school to catch the homebound bus. They watch *One Life to Live* and part of some movie. Agnes is impatient and considers showing them the ring, saying she found it when she went off to pee. She is in Heather's bathroom, using somebody's blue toothbrush to cleanse her mouth of any lingering trace of the liquor. No, she decides; she won't tell them about it. The dead man and his ring are her secret. She looks at herself in the mirror. There are things about her that no one can tell by looking at her face. Some things never go down on a person's permanent record. She goes back to the living room and tries to get interested in the movie. Edward G. Robinson is the star, and he is trying to pin a murder on Orson Welles. The murder occurred while they were watching the soap opera. Agnes finds it hard to get interested without knowing what happened at the beginning.

As Steve drives into the Power Fuel station near where the buses line up, Heather asks Agnes, "When do you want to do it again? How about right after the holidays?"

"Let's not make any plans right yet," Agnes says. She is trying to stuff the windbreaker into her book bag. "Who knows? If we've been caught I may have to move to the cemetery for good."

"You can move in with me," says Becky. "We can strangle my little turd of a brother." Becky's brother is ten and thinks he's Rambo.

When the bell rings, Agnes and Becky join the kids coming from the gym. Allison Trimble says Agnes's and Becky's names were on the verified absence list. A good sign. Dust rises from the bank as people scramble down to get in line for the bus. School is out for five days. Spring holidays have started. Agnes is practically the only person with books. Mrs. Thigpen is smiling when Agnes and Becky come up the bus steps. She is wearing sunglasses, and Agnes cannot see her eyes. Agnes starts to smile back, then bites her lip. Let it be a secret, she thinks. From the back of the bus somebody yells, "I pity the fool," as the bus moves carefully into traffic.

It is only when Agnes has gotten off the bus and is walking alone down her own driveway that she takes out the ring. The breeze catches the yellow napkin and spins it away like an autumn leaf. Agnes rubs the ring on her shirt tail to remove the waxy residue. She tries to think of a wish, then decides to save it for later. She puts the ring on her ring finger, which it fits perfectly. It was too small for a man's hand to begin with. Maybe he was wearing it like the boys who wear girls' senior rings on their little fingers. Or maybe he stole it.

On the dining room table is a note from her mother: "Agnes-Pickup papers in the den-Empty ashtrays-Pull us some TV dinners or call if you want something picked up-Be sweet-Love, Mom," Agnes puts her books down and goes to turn down the radio. A local minister is delivering an inspirational minute full blast from the top of the refrigerator. Her mother always leaves it playing to fool burglars.

Agnes walks down the hall to the den where she picks up two dirty ashtrays and gathers the papers from the floor by her father's chair. Usually he is home soon after Agnes, but this morning he has flown to Houston for a three-day convention of high school counselors. A guilty shudder passes

through her. She grabs his smelly slippers and drops them inside her parents' bedroom door on her way up the hall. It will be different the next couple of days, just she and her mother.

In the kitchen she empties the ashtrays into the garbage can, then leaves them to soak in the sink. She takes three turkey breast dinners from the freezer, then puts one back. The dinners go in the refrigerator and she takes out a diet cola. From the radio comes the tone at the top of the hour. Agnes chuckles, remembering how her mother has mistaken the tone for the microwave oven bell.

Through the kitchen window Agnes can see that the black birds are beginning to gather in the trees just beyond the backyard fence. The sun is shining on the deck, and she decides to take her drink outside and sit. On her way through the carport she stops to get a chair cushion from the utility room shelf. She is tall enough now that she doesn't have to climb up on the washing machine to reach the cushions. She gets her fingers on a corner, and after a couple of yanks the cushion comes down, bringing with it a very crumpled paper bag that hits the cement with a whack.

Inside are sand dollars, or what is left of what were sand dollars. Most had been broken on the way back from the beach, Agnes remembers. She was eight or nine, and she put the bag in the trunk of the Oldsmobile as they were leaving Daytona. When they got home she found that most had been crushed by their suitcases. The same thing had happened to a bag of locust shells she had collected at camp. She had thrown away the sack of claws and sandy-colored dust, but for some reason she had kept the bag of sand dollars.

Fishing around in the bag, she finds a couple that have only been chipped. She puts the rest back on the shelf and takes the two with her out on the deck. When she has gotten the chair adjusted the way she likes it, she sits down with her drink in her lap and the sand dollars placed on the arm rest. The birds, starlings and blackbirds mostly, are nearly covering the trees. They make an incredible racket, croaking and squawking to high heaven, and to Agnes it looks like the trees have shed their leaves and sprouted wet cinders instead. What a difference between them and the white and pink dogwoods beside the deck, she thinks.

Then Agnes remembers that same summer in Daytona and her father telling her that the holes in the sand dollar, like the cuts in a dogwood bloom, are Nature's reminders of Christ's wounds. Agnes had been upset upon learning that there were live creatures inside the sand dollars, to the point she had wanted her father to put them back in the ocean so they could live. She can remember him holding her, telling her that everything would be okay, that if she left the sand dollars out on the porch overnight the little animals would sneak out when no one was looking and go back to where they came from. Like souls.

Agnes is crying. She wrings her hands and trembles when she feels the cold, sharp edges of her ring. The screaming of the bird is unbearable. She sends them scuffling into the air with a hard clap of her hands. Seen against the sky she could be catching a bouquet.

- Keith Hulett

PARTICIPANTS

Tillie Olsen, writer, editor, and teacher. Her works include *Yonondio: From the Thirties* (written in the 1930s but published in 1974), *Tell Me a Riddle* (1962), *Silences* (1978), *Mother to Daughter/Daughter to Mother* (1985), and an edition of Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* (1971). She has received numerous honors, including the O. Henry Prize and a Guggenheim Fellowship, and she has taught at Amherst, Stanford, M.I.T., U. Mass Boston, U.C. San Diego, the Universities of Trondheim, Bergen, Oslo, and Tromso in Norway, and the University of Minnesota. She returned to school and to writing in the 1950s after twenty years spent raising and supporting a family. She has been active in the labor and feminist movements since her youth, and during her own years of success she has devoted considerable energy to the rescue of neglected writings by others. She lives in San Francisco, where May 18, 1981, was officially proclaimed Tillie Olsen Day.

Memye Curtis Tucker, poet and teacher. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *Southern Poetry Review*, *Negative Capability*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Saint Andrews Review*, *Concerning Poetry*, and *The Chattahoochee Review*. She has taught at Adelphi University, Emory University, and Agnes Scott College. She is the recipient of *The Chattahoochee Review's* Prize for Poetry.

Jane Zanca, fiction writer, teacher, and editor. A winner of the Agnes Scott Writer's Festival Fiction Prize (1982), she has recently published stories in *review*, *The Allegheny Review*, and *The Crescent Review*. Last year she was nominated for a Pushcart and for a General Electric Prize. She teaches the writing of fiction for the continuing education programs at Emory University and DeKalb College.