AGNES SCOTT WRITERS' FESTIVAL 1991

Thursday, April 11

2:00-4:30	Demonstration Workshop Gloria Naylor and Sharon Olds With Contest Finalists Moderated by Memye Tucker Alston Center Chapel Lounge
4:30-5:00	Opening Reception Chapel Lounge
8:15	Reading by Sharon Olds Winter Theatre Dana Fine Arts Building

Friday, April 12

10:00-10:30	Coffee and Doughnuts Dana Gallery
10:30	Reading by Gloria Naylor Winter Theatre, Dana Awarding of Contest Prizes to Follow

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

1991

Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

PARTICIPANTS

Gloria Naylor, novelist, screenwriter, and film producer, author of *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, *Mama Day*, and *Bailey's Cafe*. Her honors include the American Book Award and a Guggenheim fellowship. She has taught at New York University, Brandeis, Princeton, and other universities. Her independent film company, One Way Productions, is currently producing a feature length film adapted from *Mama Day*.

Sharon Olds, poet and teacher, author of *Satan Says*, *The Dead and the Living*, and *The Gold Cell*. She has received the National Book Critics' Circle Award, the Lamont Poetry Award, and a Guggenheim fellowship, among others. She has taught at Sarah Lawrence, Columbia, Brandeis, and other places, and she is currently Director of the Creative Writing Program at New York University.

Memye Curtis Tucker, poet and teacher, author of *Holding Patterns*; her poems have also appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Concerning Poetry*, *Anthology of Magazine Verse*, *The Southern Revew*, and other publications. She has received the *Chattahoochie Review* Prize, among others, and was 1990 Georgia Poet on Tour for the Georgia Poetry Circuit. She currently leads poetry workshops at Callenwolde and Kennesaw State.

writers' festival
1991

the thorn in the side of the rose

for anne goode berry
1884-1959

i wonder what it would be like
to talk with you now great grandmother.
i barely knew you before you died.
i remember the smell of rotting flesh
singeing dry wallpaper pulp
and the taste of apple jelly.

i remember your pain riddled face cradling
distant eyes, a pain stained smile. i recall
your kitchen table's smooth wood grain
graced by your veined hand, the brown
potbellied teapot flecked with
reddish leaves, and the smell of your life
burning on the bones.

i imagine what it would be like to talk
with you now great grandmother.
i barely knew you when you died
a secreted death secluded in the upper room
of your daughter's house, the room
great grandchildren would fill
with boisterous lives and raucous laughter
long after you were gone.

you left without my knowing.
you slipped from the crumpled sheets
and cancer wasted body.
you poured through the mortar
never looking back.

i study your sepia edged photograph
the way your whitened tufts lie

straight no curls. quiet dignity rises from
corners of eyes, soft cheeks mound in brown
hues above the slight almost smile
punctuating your face.

i see you Anna Goode Berry,
wife of Andrew, daughter of Caroline and Amos
and imagine what you would say to your
tertiary generation, your late apprentice.

i imagine your body as a melon
that opens to six strong vines
the length of your life. i am your hope,
your wish, your hybrid seed propelled
the full length of your generations.
i whirl out from your viney tendrils
bearing strange fruit of poetic
phrases. i ripen in shadow
of your broad leaves.

like any fruit you yielded
to the husbandman of your life,
the call for sex on demand, the
meals just as regular, and the childfruit
sucking and draining you through the vine.

you wrote what you could of bibled stories
wrapping them in metered verse
collected like rare coins, weigh stations
to gather your life about you.

if prayers answer like
a voiceless wind, then i
imagine that it is you stirring
me to lamplight and pen
in early margin of morning.

--Anjail Ahmad

Coexistence

The old woman sits snapping beans,
their green translucence shedding a mist
on her fingertips. She drops them
into her apron, adding weight
until her thighs guess three quarts.
She listens to the girl from the college,
come to talk about folk medicine
but talking now about communion
with nature, about a bond with the land.

The old woman remembers her father's
communion with the poplar log.
He had been clearing land for a new house
when the cant hook slipped and the log fell,
shattered his cheekbone.
He lay for weeks beneath the half-sunken mask
of his face, blood darkening to a venom
that pierced the fever.
Randall Carey built the casket, solid oak;
Mother had said anything but poplar.

Knowing man's place,
the old woman has tried not to take much.
Her communion is the weight
of tomatoes dragging the vine,
the tap of snap beans falling on her thighs
like raindrops on tin.

--Deborah Browning

Scream

*Here insert, or invent, a quote from painter Francis Bacon (b. 1909) explaining his obsession with the image of Velasquez's *Pope Innocent X* (1650).

His face haunted him.
The eyes, they suspect,
they did not trust the painter.
Though his arm drapes
over the arm of the chair,
his fingers curl inward
like the beginning of a fist.
The closed lips, sealed envelope,
he would make them speak.
The throne became a cage;
the cage, a plate-glass
elevator. Ropes we trusted,
taut lines, all things that held
snapped, and the falling began,
an Empire State Building
and then some.

In the middle of descent,
Bacon seizes him.
As in a photocopy of a photocopy,
details smear, clump
like smoke turned to black
grains in snow. Velvet cowl
now vibrating flecks
of purple. Nose, eyes, top of head
bleed away into a crowded
darkness, and his mouth
tears open from the speed
the falling the horror.

Boy Wordsworth,
how would you fare

in the long, 20th-century
slide through childhood?
Would your father be kind?
I see you in your box of lines,
and now you will truly be haunted.
Now you speak pain.

--Beth Donaldson

dropping into holes of warm, red earth.
By day, this eye surveys mountains, oceans.
This eye sees a deer, a Palestinian
child throwing rocks -- this eye
sees down the barrel of a gun.

--Joy Howard

Passing

And with Sheol we have made a pact. Isaiah 28:15.

I don't know if my father ever quite
Let go of his world of beauty --
Exile though he was, child of nights
Made forever sleepless by those duty
Bound raids to burn out & demoralize
The civilians behind the furor teutonicus.
He kept to misshapen times,
Bent to fit the past logic
And ordeal of sacrificial preparation.
The reality of what he did he called an "ovine death" --
He never had an academic's politic breadth
To bother with the fussier "extreme limit-situation,"
And unlike the Greeks he knew that "how to die"
Was only marginally a philosophical thing,
So for examples he looked to the Scots in the Crimea,
And all his remembered schoolboy Tennyson.
Victorian, but never argumentative
About States & whatever rights they had;
He killed, & was never much attentive
To the post-war ballyhoo about the countless innocent dead.
In the mahogany & velvet dourness of exile bars,
Where the Australians were the loudest
And always stood to drink, other wars
Weren't mentioned much, though the Viets
In those post-colonial days of mostly plenty
Were winning a war with bicycles and grit.
No war had the beauty
Of their other war -- a war of wit
And color, framed with the antics of Punch,
and London awash with the bright clashes
Of Her Empire -- blacked-out with vices
Permitted those about to touch
The splendid thing which would find a veneration
Again in this air-conditioned place where exile authentics
Vowed to be faithful to the aesthetics
And taste of their haggis & kidney pies.

Still the unwelcome permutation of everyday light
Creased this place with every staggering departure.
It was not enough. Tight, my father resisted
The encroachments on his 19th century beauty --
Before sprawling banana plantations were infested
With Panama rot, when the language
Of the peasants was full of submissives,
And before sanguine hope merged with the Totenkoph
And rose in this world like a harvest
Moon. You, father, used to boast
About your tally of the bombed dead -- & the other exiles
Grinned at your 10,000 burned,
And the stories of Hamburgers carrying their shrivelled kin
In suitcases. But the world is still beautiful
Like this -- it holds on to its Victorian
Pubescent fascination with killing & domination.
Father, father, gone into the light,
What far flung vagary brought that SS dagger
To the bar that night, to be passed around with such swaggering
Reverence? It had no saint's bones in the hilt,
Yet its pearl skull is the light
And beauty of my Age -- it pulls our tide like a moon;
Pass, dear father, we await the reddened doom.

--Darius Lecesne

Concerning My Father's Death

My sister Virgo found him
at the bottom of the ravine,
his skull cracked,
eyes open
as if he were watching the uneven patches of sky
caught between the leaves of trees.
At the funeral home,
wearing a navy tafetta dress,
Virgo hid her thumb in her pocket
because it had touched the cold lids,
shut out light
the county coroner confirmed had faded to black
at least five hours before.
No one asked her,
but I think she wanted to tell what he saw --
her daddy bloody,
his skin turning an ashen blue.
The doctor said
she would cry eventually,
but she never did.
Two years passed,
two years of rain and sun,
the wreathed flowers fading, speckled with mildew.
Then one evening
her voice broke over the connections
of silverware and china,
over our chatter like white noise.
"I was out walking Mora,
looking for puff-ball mushrooms,
when we saw him.
Mora started to bark.
Didn't you hear her barking?
She just barked and barked."

--Melissa Morphew

Father's Mother

I wonder how she planned it out,
first, draining the kerosene from the lamps,
then cutting up the tablecloth,
checking his pants pockets for matches.
She climbed the stairs alone that afternoon.
On the landing she listened to the half-hour
chime, and thought about him finishing lunch
right about then.

I have thought about why
she didn't lock the front door
after carefully removing his suits
from the closet and stepping into that space
just wide and long enough for her body.
Her neighbor walked right in without
knocking, looking for a cup of flour,
but seeing smoke drifting like a ghost
down the stairs.

She imagined her husband would close the store
at six and walk home as usual. He would be shocked
to find the house gutted, his wife gone.
And she would never deliver the news
from the doctor. Maybe he would hear
the sirens or see the red engines pass.
Maybe he would care to look up from his work
to see what was on fire, whose house
was burning down.

There are people who will block the clinic steps.

They are ready to make decisions for strange women.
My grandmother decided -- she tied
her own feet together with strips of linen
soaked in kerosene, so she could not run
when the flames pulled in close to her skin.
I have seen her ankles, her scars.

--Nicole Sarrocco

Mother and Child

For Henry Moore

Fresh from his forays in the hinterland,
where the boys played Tip Cat and Piggie,
(Henry liked to carve the round piece of wood
into the Piggie that jumped
when the boys hit it with sticks),
near dark, running past the colliery,
its giant winding gear stenciled against a graying sky,
where slag heaps looked like mountains,
his clogs clapping the walk,
he made his way home.

There in the tiny room of the house
on Roundhill Road, Henry found his mother
putting away the small wage she earned
as a laundress hanging out
ghost-white sheets to billow in the wind.
The heavy wicker baskets now stacked along the wall,
she sat beside the fire, bent forward
to unbutton her blouse,
and then held it over her breasts.
He noticed the cant of her back,
its roundness like the huge rock overlooking Adel,
as he rubbed a homemade liniment
into her back,
warming it,
kneading hard to soothe her.
Alive in his senses,
the camphor tingling his fingertips,
a pungency spiking his nose.
Through his fingers, finding living form,
hard and soft,
shallow and deep,
skin then flesh,
and bone,

working his hands beyond sweat and oil.
Years later in his studio,
casting a figure in bronze
he's remember the shadow of the fire
outlining her shape.

--Megan Sexton

The Harrowing of Hell

We watch TV as usual
this night. The local anchorwoman
interrupts Nightline to
report a fire in the Kenemer
funeral home.
We go with her
"live on the scene."
Amid the confusion,
the on-site reporter
informs us that
firefighters arrived
just moments ago.
We watch as they rush in,
then out again,
bringing back bodies, stiff,
unable to hold on to their
rescuers.

As fire victims go,
they are excellent.
They do not run back in
to save teddy bears or
antique tea services.
They stay low, inhale no
smoke, and eagerly fall into
the arms of awaiting relatives.
They do not make a scene,
do not make a fuss.
Because of their cooperation
all of the dead survive,
and the firefighters suffer
only minor injuries.

The fire extinguished,
these brave men and women
turn away from the
cameras, almost knocking

"Live Eye" Manny Diaz to the
ground as they beat their hasty
retreats to the station.
There, they mull over feelings
of being used, tricked.
Someone makes a joke about
getting a fruitbasket from the

survivors. Another suggests flowers
might be more apropos. They laugh
at this and soon go back to bed,
feeling all the less heroic,
but all the more human
after saving a few more
souls from hell.

--Robert T. Webb

The Rest

These rooms are full
of her long-limbed easy sleeping,
his viscous, tiny-butt-in-the-air sleeping,
and it seems simple

to understand brief solitudes, the
day's constant interruptions
as a chain that links up generations.
Soon he will wake, and no matter how solidly

in the body's old dream she lies,
she will come to him without thought;
so I shift the china-blue quilt
where he splays on the carpet's gold pile.

To wait a few minutes more
is the hardest giving. I move
gently to the kitchen for another
glass of juice. We're sick, and love

alone isn't enough to cure what comes
invisibly from elsewhere, to pull
the worst from us and wheeze its dull
contentions over whether home

was ever, could ever be if it wasn't,
plainly happy enough to be needed.
But here, breathing the vibrant steam
of sleepers, bright carrots and broth, it doesn't

hurt anyone to be quiet.
Everything said or unsaid has repaired
to the bedroom, the carpet, or this chair.
Just now, sleep is one gift of the present.

--Theodore Worozbyt, Jr.

Ways of Talking

Daylilies need to be dug up a bit, separated. Moved around. Leave them alone too long, they don't want to bloom. Dig up wild ones, next season they look like a catalogue picture. I'm not going to mess with them. Not messing with anything. Can't. Not many times now that I wish I could. I get more now from watching, looking.

Andrea's weeding roses and later she'll water, but she doesn't know about the lime. They need a little lime. Frannie could look at dirt and tell what it needed. I used to tease Frannie, you would have made a good farmer. It's so quick that things get overrun and out of hand. Andrea's grown now. I hardly noticed. Now I'm noticing everything, strong smells, sharp tastes, little details. Her hair streaks blonde in the summer, some parts almost white.

She's getting the lawn mower--she hates it. Conks out and she cusses it bloody murder. Wanted to tell her to buy a new one last week. Got up, crossed the patio onto the brick walk. It's slick, I look down and watch my feet, try to keep my balance, go slow. Whole time I'm inching along she's pulling the starter cord over and over. When I got to her I told her I never could get it to run right either, always a lemon, but she didn't know what I was saying. Nobody knows what I'm saying. That damned lemon from Burton's hardware, I should have junked it years ago. She said she knew I didn't think she was any good at machinery, but she was and she was going to change its spark plugs. I tried to say it's worthless, new plugs never work and let's go buy a new one, but nothing came out right. I was pointing my finger at the mower. She laughed. "Kill," she said back to me

and I knew that's what I'd said about the mower. "Kill," she said again, still laughing, and started rolling the mower back to the basement.

She does what I used to do--borrows Roger's mower next door.

I like to sit on the patio after Andrea's mowed and smell it. Watch the planes from the airbase going overhead--they used to make me mad but now I like trying to figure out what kind each one is.

It's funny I don't get mad the way I used to, furious, red-faced, feeling like I was expanding to fill up the room. I yelled at Frannie and called her names and then was silent. Silent meant angry. Now I'm silent but not angry. Not marking time but must seem that way to some people. People, once they catch on, talk to me like I'm deaf or that my brain is as scrambled as my talking.

We get in Andrea's car--she says we're going to a bookstore--the one with the sofa she tells me. It's all the way in the city, same way I used to drive to work. I miss driving, not the Dodge. That was the practical car. Bought it used--30,000 miles, drove it back and forth to work--I hated those vinyl seats. A couple of years ago we bought the Oldsmobile--now that's a nice car, especially on a trip. Frannie and I took a trip up the East Coast to Boston to see her family. Mine were already all dead.

My best friend Edgar got a Mustang when they first came out. He said to me, why don't you, George, your boys are grown, they're not that expensive. But I couldn't. I didn't even bring it up. Back and forth to work, the car pool wouldn't have fit in it. Edgar didn't have to commute. I've outlasted him by a long shot. No reason.

She's got a sporty Toyota to commute back and forth to college, just got it, 40,000 miles, good buy. She's got one more year left. George Jr. didn't take to college, but all his kids have. Youngest and sometimes I think she's going to turn out the smartest. George Jr. sold the Dodge for me. Said keep the Oldsmobile because it's more comfortable for me to get in and out of. But I ride in Andrea's Toyota--just go to it and get in. Four on the floor, navy blue, fabric seats. On our way to the bookstore I pretend I'm driving a Mustang.

Anthropology, that's what she's studying. Reading a lot and writing a lot of papers. From her desk she stares out onto the patio. Stacks of books and her typewriter. I'll go in late after the doubleheader is over, and she's still typing away or sitting on the sofa writing on a yellow legal pad. I point to her room, "go to bed," and she laughs. I've got another two hours, she says, it's only eleven. It just seems after she's put in six hours she ought to be able to go to bed. I know she doesn't goof off, daydreaming like my younger boy, she's not the kind. Every so often she comes in and checks on the score. She asks and I think I say two to one. She asks "forty-seven to sixty-one?" Then I laugh and say "no, honey," and she waits until they announce it.

She's smart like Frannie. Takes to school like Frannie, never knew anybody so bent on self-improvement. Even when we retired, classes in French, horticulture, contemporary literature. Real drive, always going. Sometimes worried I held her back, but she said I steadied her, anchored her. Frannie, so pretty those glints of red in her hair.

"Little One" is what come out when I call her. She likes it unless her friends are over. 'Hello" and "how are you" work pretty well. I say those to her friends, then "yes," and nod, and that takes care of most things. Phone messages are hard, sometimes I just let it ring. Andrea's good at figuring clues out though. Her friend from Ohio called and I couldn't say anything to make her understand. "Show me something," she said. She read while I thought. Then I brought her my good luck buck-eye from the bowl on my dresser. I hadn't handled it in years. "Ohio," she smiled. "Yes, honey," I said. "Caroline called." "Yes." Charades she started calling it. Sometimes I come out with new words. The other day, "Pay it." But I couldn't get out insurance so I went out to the car and got the insurance card out of the glove box and showed it to her. She tells me Uncle Jack is taking care of paying all the bills. That worries me. Jack's scattered, has two little ones, wife works all the time. "Why," I wanted to know. She said she didn't know, but I bet George and Ruth told him he had to help out. "You," I told her, "you." I can't pay the bills; it'd make Uncle Jack mad, and they think I'm too stupid to keep up with it. "Kill," I said. "I know," she said, "it's a pisser."

Going on a camping trip with her college friends. They all came over for a cookout before the trip. She says the patio and the yard are great for parties and no one else has such a neat place. The only hard part, she says, is the drive. An hour. Same as my commute all those years. People come pretty regular though. I heard them figuring out how many tents to rent from the outdoor center and realized girls and boys would be sharing tents for the weekend. Not sure what I think about that. When the kids left I said something about it to her. "You and Joe," I said. "Joe?" Andrea asked. Joe isn't the boy's name but she knew what I meant; I could tell by her face so I went on. "No way," I said. She told me not to be silly they weren't a thing. Now what does that mean? The boy, Charles is his name, seems to like her but he never comes to take her on a date. If they go anyplace, they go with a group. But they're staying in a tent together.

Hated Andrea going, even for a weekend--it meant her mother stayed with me. Never like Ruth. I tried. George Jr. seemed so taken with her, but she's too childish--precious. The whole time Ruth's here she speaks in a kindergarten tone. She talks that way to everyone, I shouldn't be offended. How do you feel, she asks me every five minutes. I try to tell her I'm not sick, but my trying to talk to her makes her nervous. Are you warm enough Dad, she keeps asking. And she sucks her teeth after she finishes eating or when she's just sitting. Don't remember ever noticing before. But now I'm noticing all these things.

George Jr. drove me to see Frannie in the hospital that last time. I had brought a broiled hamburg wrapped in tin foil that Frannie said on the phone she was dreaming about. Hard to cook it. No one staying with me. I was afraid of the stove. Afraid my hand wouldn't do the knobs right, that I'd burn up the house. Re-learning the OT said. Have to do it over and over to re-learn. But it's not the same alone. George Jr. was surprised about the hamburg. Done perfectly Frannie said. Ate it during our visit. Always Frannie told me about protein, nutrition, the importance of the different colors. Frannie wanted to come home. Made the doctor discharge her early.

Talked to me about graduate school in anthropology. Told me she wants to teach college--all the time chain-smoking cigarettes. Paying for grad school is a problem. Maybe a fellowship or loans, she says. I think we could sell my house and have more money than she could use--This, I say and look up at the ceiling and point to the walls. She shakes her head. You need the money for yourself.

She smokes too much, wish she'd quit. I tried to tell her I quit before her father was born. I shake my finger at her and she put it out in a huff and stomped out of the room. It's the money worrying her. But she knows I don't like the smell.

Nurses thought of poker. I worked on dealing the cards. We played in the room where all the kitchen appliances were. Tried to tell them I liked bridge much better, but it would have been hard to bid. All everyone knew was five card stud. Second time we played Evelyn had bought a pack of chips. My OT tried to bluff Evelyn and got caught. The way they squealed you would have thought it was real money. I didn't do badly, the numbers on the cards were huge, only I never got the right number of chips counted out. They set up a game every Friday, said it helped me get my bearings, plus I thought, it was a good way to waste an hour on Friday afternoon. Still I wished it were bridge, I try to think through as many hands of bridge as I can and see how far I get.

All different colors of orange really. Like the roses I grew, colors merging and blending on one petal. Never knew it about the lilies and them right outside the window. Always had marigolds bordering that bed. Thought about a few more iris. I'll get her to cut the althaeas. She's still scared to cut things way back.

I was shaving, just had put the razor under the water--was looking at my face in the mirror. Everything went colors and my hand with the razor shook. I called Frannie and she came and I looked at her in the mirror and could tell that everything was really wrong. She wasn't as sick then. Now, if I hold my right hand by my side, it doesn't fly off doing things I'm not telling it to do.

Frannie was napping, still weak, just home from the hospital. She slept a long time. I called to her, "Dear." Didn't think anything. Then noticed it was dusk. Went to our bedroom. She was so small. Sat on the bed. Wondered how long. Tried to dial George Jr. Couldn't. Went outside in the dark, stumbled on the bad leg. Made it next door, got Roger. He didn't know what I meant until I led him in there. Frannie was so small.

I had wanted to say more to Frannie. She kept up both ends for me. Air full of words. Reassuring. Her all the time getting weaker.

Andrea watches "Entertainment Tonight" and cuts my pork chop up and then her own, and I'm trying to get the butter on my cornbread. She stops looking at the TV and looks at me. I don't know what you like to eat, I don't know what you want to eat. I pick up a brussel sprout with my fingers and shake my head, no. She laughs. Up and down every aisle now, I point to what I want.

In the mornings go to the mailbox and get the newspaper and, if she's watching walk to the stop signs and back. She says I drag my right leg less if I walk more, but I don't think so. I worry that it will all freeze up--my body--and I'll be left in here thinking.

Going to live with George Jr. and Ruth after she graduates. Can't figure another way unless the home. Might be better than Kindergarten asking me if I'm warm enough. My son married a numbskull. They've got a lot of room and like she said, I may need the money from this house. Still. She said if the school had a graduate program in anthropology, she'd stay. I'm glad.

It scared me that night. Was late, I had to pee. When I'm in that bathroom, same damn mirror, it hurt like hell. She's even asleep, it's so late. Wake her up. Feels like a kidney infection--I've had the signs but didn't say--wanted it to go away--used to have them so often. In her car, she's

called my doctor before we leave, feel like I have to pee so bad. She stops the car, lets me get out, it's freezing outside. I try to pee on someone's lawn but can't. Five days in the hospital that time and they ran a catheter up me.

Dogwoods are bursting and my azaleas. In the mornings feel good enough to walk around and see them. She didn't know where the moneyplant was and the stump where the rabbit leaves his pellets. That devil eats my rose bushes.

Finished now, put my bowl in the sink, run water in it, watch the milk and the flakes of cereal overflow. If she doesn't come out soon, I'll knock so she'll make the coffee. Then I'll sit with my cup on the brick patio that those chipmunks are undermining. Plenty of daylilies blooming. Their thick green spikey stalks reaching up and the orange blooms popped all around. Hardy things. I get warm with the sun. She says I've gotten a tan on my face. When I'm good and warm I'll come into the nice air conditioning. Worth it, central air. It's Saturday. We go to the pub downtown and sit in the window. I get the pattymelt with onions, and she reads the paper and gets different things to eat every time. She'll eat some of my fires even if she says she doesn't want any. Some of the paper she reads out loud, the baseball box scores, things about women and poor people. She gets so mad--she wants everyone to think the way she does. I listen to her and drink my beer on draft and the taste of it is like nothing it ever used to be--it's so good now. The doctor and her mother say I shouldn't drink beer, but she says what in the world could be wrong with a beer every Saturday, especially if you love it so much.

--Amanda C. Gable

Telling Time at the Tick Tock

Marlene was right, of course. When I asked her, Mrs. Kemp shook her head and said, "I tell you, I don't know what's happening in this country. I don't know what's going to happen to young people like you." Like she hadn't decided on her own to sell that motel and move to Savannah. Knowing damn well what was going to happen to me.

I walked out of the office and sat on the sidewalk near the ice machine. There was a moth with its wings spread on the wall warming itself under the lights. The top wings were gray-brown like your common moth, but the bottom wings had spots on them like animal's eyes. It was raining hard and trucks were going by fast with their radios loud. All I could do was smell that cold tarry smell of the rain bouncing off the wet asphalt. The windows were down on my Trans Am, which I hadn't finished paying for. Water was probably pooling up in the vinyl bucket seats, but I couldn't make myself walk back into the rain to roll up the windows.

I could have told Mrs. Kemp what's going to happen to people like me. The same thing that always happens to people like me. Nothing. Nothing. All we can do is sit here and wait.

There isn't much of any kind of a job around here for anybody anymore. When I was in high school there looked like there might be by now. It was like somebody was holding up thousands of strands and loops of jewels that sparked the sun gold and green and black and red and silver. All we had to do was ask and we could have anything we wanted. The trailer plant opened up and brought in steady jobs and the textile plant was doing good. Nobody around Samaritan County believed in unions; everyone was used to depending on whatever cut-glass the Janeses and the Talmans and the

Presterfields handed out like they was diamonds. As much as everybody said they resented that, none of us had reason to expect more than that same treatment from the plant owners. We expected that what the plant would give them that worked there was what they deserved. None of us had reason to expect more. But the problem with somebody's giving you something you want real bad, you've got to wait until they're ready to turn their grubby hands loose of it, or you've got to figure out what it is they want you to do, and do it like they want. Either they got the jewels, or they got you.

About the same time a bunch of stores got built out on the highway, and the restaurant-lounge across from the Tick Tock where people who spent all day riveting double-wides and operating dye-presses could spend their money in some nice place. The new places were designed so modern. Like California (not that anybody from here ever went to California and came back)--yellow fieldstone on the front and flat redwood sides. We thought they were something. Some historical group fixed up the stores around the square so nice, I believed all of it might sprout turrets and turn into a beautiful painted palace.

None of it came to nothing. Nobody but trash hung around the last two places that opened up across the road, raising hell up and down 319. The sign out front now says The Continental, but i bet you a six-pack the fool who shot it up with a .22 thought the place was named for a car. It didn't take long for that new paint to peel off and leave us in worse shape than when we started. Because we'd seen all that other.

Anyway that was how things were when I started cleaning rooms at the Tick Tock. The money was better than some jobs that sounded nicer, like selling sweaters and scarf pins at Woody's and Dolores's (although Woody did offer me a job, believe it or not) or Paige's Red and White or the Piggly Wiggly. We sort of thought even 24-hour grocery stores could happen in Squiresboro. Now Piggly Wiggly is open 24 hours, but nobody can figure out why. Unless it's that nobody has to be at work any particular time, they might as well buy dried beans at 4:00 a.m.

I don't mean you to think being a maid at the Tick Tock was that great a job, even here, but I was needing to work for more than pocket change. My brother gave me the Trans Am new when I turned sixteen, and said he'd make the

payments on it. Then he got caught by lightning in a metal bass boat and everything in my life got tore all to flinders.

Mr. Janes down at the bank called me in about a week after the funeral to discuss my situation. Burr hadn't bought credit insurance on my car loan, and he'd put the car in my name, thinking to build me a credit rating for the future. If I didn't make the monthly payments, the bank would be forced to repossess the car and I would have a bad credit report trailing me forever.

It would look especially bad, Mr. Janes said, since the loan was on a hot car. That's what he called it, a hot car. To tell you the truth, he made it sound like everyone I met would think I was a tramp for owning a Trans Am, and worse for getting it repossessed.

The more he talked, the more it started feeling like his son had told him stories about me, which wouldn't surprise me. All I could think about was my brother holding out that big bass, blood smeared on his hands from taking the hook out of the fish's lip and blue light crackling all around his body. His fishing buddies told me about it so it's clear in my own mind's eye. While Mr. Janes told me Mrs. Kemp was looking for somebody to clean rooms over at the Tick Tock, I was remembering the red and black plaid shirt my brother wore fishing, and his white baseball cap with an embroidered picture of a hooked fish on the front. His hair stuck out behind his ears. He had pretty hair when he didn't wear a hat. His fishing jeans worn so smooth, his legs looked like they were carved out of stone.

It never was like I had high-flown plans for my future. I never believed I was going to college, even though around that time the guidance counselors at the school had every dirt farmer's kid, every line worker's kid convinced they could go to college on athletic scholarship or credit union loans, and get a good job in an office in Augusta or Valdosta after that.

I never thought that. I wasn't about to go off looking for more people to treat me like the kids did who didn't work, or didn't have to, who were sure to go the Georgia Southern, or Valdosta State, or even leaving sand spur country for the University of Georgia, treated me now. But I did feel like something was going to happen. My future stopped looking like canyon walls rising straight up on all sides, with a turn up ahead that from where I stood looked like a dead end.

For a while I believed that around that dead-end was a curve where the walls would slope down into a shore line where I could climb out of the river and sit under green trees.

I'd wipe the ice bucket on the vanity by the sink and never look in the mirror, because I didn't want to know what I looked like in that place. For a while those walls were beautiful, protection, not prison. Even though by this morning, that curve looked a long way off, I went room to room with my loop of numbered keys, scrubbing toilets, cleaning ashtrays and vacuuming under beds, changing sheets, and wrapping plastic cups in the sanitized bags Mrs. Kemp ordered from the hotel/motel supply.

The last thing I did in 119 (you got to have you a routine in this kind of work, or you find yourself standing in the middle of a room not knowing what you've done) was set out the wrapped soap. Those bars are too small for anybody staying more than one night. The soap scraps never go away; the milky shell of soap melts off and leaves a pink core like translucent plastic. I drop the ovals melting the the sink into a plastic bag for Mrs. Kemp to use to wash dishes in the restaurant. There's not a woman in Squiresboro cheaper than that one, even if she does tool around in that mint green Lincoln.

The couple who'd been staying in 120 had trashed the room with beer cans and the Sunday Atlanta paper. I moved through it like a jeep through the river shallows. I could almost see the water spluming up on either side of me when I cut through the room, hefting empties onto the trash barrel on the cart behind me and heaving half-drunk ones into the sink to empty without hardly slowing down. There's something about a motel room that makes a newspaper open up section by section, and spread itself across the room, shuffling pages like a deck of Bicycle playing cards. It's like the man and woman didn't want to touch the carpet. Not that the carpet was all that nice, but you didn't have to worry about dirtying the precious wing tips on it.

The salesmen who come through regular bring real bars of soap, which looks too big and clumsy to hold in your hand after you've gotten used to Camay. They don't bring real towels, though; they'd mildew before they'd dry in the trunk of a car. Some of them use the sheets from the spare bed to dry off on. At first I thought there was some wild partying

at the Tick Tock from all the stripped-off sheets I found. The ones who work in their rooms at night, bring their own bulbs to use while they're here. There's only two lamps in the rooms with about fifteen-watt bulbs in them, so what light they do put out hardly penetrates the cheap shades. I don't think there's two lamps that match in the whole motel. You'd have thought they'd have bought them all the same time, but Mrs. Kemp told me, when she took over running this place after her husband died, she had some idea about all the rooms being individual, like a country inn. Like somebody that had to stay in a motel in Squiresboro was going to notice. She's just too cheap to buy anything but endlots.

When Ted Kemp died in that plane crash, now that was something. Everybody knew he was basically sorry, but he had that little Cessna that he used to dust crops now and again to justify keeping it, or so everybody said. Anyway, the story that went around was that he and his buddies were drinking around the liquor store out by Grinning's Pond when Ted and one other of them got a mind to drive to Baxley. The other two said they were too drunk to drive, which wouldn't have been unusual. So Ted said, "Let's go get the plane," and the two of them went off.

Before long, the plane came just over the tops of the trees, heading for the store like Ted was going to buzz his friends; those boys haven't ever had to do anything but keep themselves entertained. But this time, being drink and all, Ted come in too low and the plane crashed wind-deep through the steep roof of the store, which used to be a gas station before the county voted in package sales, and stuck there burning.

A whole bunch of different stories went around. One, that Ted and his friend died instantly. Another one, that when the rescuers got to them, they were trying to get out of the cockpit, but the roof rafters kept the doors from opening, so they burned to death before they could get them out. Stories grow up like weeds around any kind of unusual death.

When Burr died, it got around that the lightning had singled him out, which I guess in a way it had, since he was the only one in the bass boat to die. But you'd be surprised at the people who got it in their minds that the lightning bolt was flung down by God himself to punish Burr for Lisa Jane Nardy. It was the same with Ted Kemp. People who called

themselves decent acted like they knew all along that both of them would come to no good end. I guess it makes people think nothing like that could happen to them, like death was a judgment from God.

When I went on break a little while ago, Marlene at the Dairy Queen told me Mrs. Kemp had sold the motel to some Indians, a whole tribe of them from India, who were going to live in one of the rooms and run the motel themselves. I didn't believe her. Who would? Then it was like somebody flipped me upside down the way I'd been flipping mattresses. Just then, while everything was upside down, I remembered what Burr used to tell me when he first got home from the Air Force to go to work at the trailer plant. He said if you're going to stay in Squiresboro, you can't let what happens to you on the street, your "outer life," he called it, determine the quality of your life. You have to keep your head down inside yourself like you're snorkling through clear water, and you have to keep your face in the water, because nothing that happens to you out of the water is going to be anything but bad if you stay. He told me one time that if I didn't play keep my face in the water, which was how he referred to the inner life, I'd be walking along thinking everything was under control, and look down and see something had crawled out of the inside of me and was showing on the outside, like a big orange crab hanging onto the laces of my tennis shoe. He said I had to keep watching those fish swim by, watching the coral reefs form. I was never sure what he meant while he was alive, but he never talked about the trailer plant, or how good he was doing there; I heard that from his friends. All Burr talked about was the woods around the Ohoopee, and the dark water of Grinning's and Talman's Lake, and fishing and deer hunting.

When Marlene told me about the Indians, all of a sudden I thought about driving the Trans Am real fast, with the fields of soybeans blurring past me, the purple swatches of wild verbena along the shoulder of the road. About going over a hill. About seeing a yellow road machine stopped dead in the middle of the road.

I kept trying to believe that if it was true, Mrs. Kemp thought more of me than to let me hear it in the Dairy Queen. But if I believed that, why did I change my usual order for a diet ice tea to a large chocolate-dipped cone? I sat in the

booth with my feet up and sucked all the ice cream out of the chocolate shell shaped like the soft-serve ice cream. When the shell was empty, I shoved the whole thing in my mouth and felt the sweetness collapse and melt, sticking to the roof of my mouth back where I couldn't reach it with my tongue.

The plane stuck there for four days, until after the funerals, waiting for the investigator to come up from Savannah. Traffic backed up and down that road until they finally came with a crane to pull it out and haul it away on a flatbed truck.

--Leigh Kirkland

Cousin Lucy Is Home From the Peace Corps

Cousin Lucy is home from the Peace Corps and the little cousins crowd around her, touching the gauze of her skirt and breathing in the strangeness. Lucy's always been a little different and her mama, my mama tells me, has just despaired of her. Says she won't talk, wants to eat with her hands, is always swallowing malaria pills. Lucy says they're for malaria.

Lucy is named for Lucille Ball because her mama watched so much "I Love Lucy" when she was pregnant and then Cousin Lucy was born redheaded. So she was christened and watched carefully for signs of comic genius. But Lucy's hair bleached out to blonde and she was a faraway child and most people forgot about the Lucille Ball part until Lucille Ball died and my Aunt Olivia cried so hard. My mama is Mildred except people call her Milly like they call Olivia Livvy and Lucille Lucy because we shorten things here.

Lucy did major in drama in college and Aunt Livvy perked up some, but Lucy took gloomy parts like Ophelia and Blanche DuBois and we were all sort of relieved when she graduated and came home to work in her daddy's flower shop.

Some people think it's funny that Uncle Jim owns a flower shop, but they buy flowers and plants an sometimes seeds from him anyway because anything he touched blooms. A green thumb, they say, which confused me some as a child. Uncle Jim is a big man, not fat except in the middle, and in his eyes you can see white all around the color. He helped Lucy be Ophelia by reading Hamlet's lines to her for eighteen days and then he took her a bouquet of lilies when the play opened up at college, which Aunt Livvy said wasn't appropriate. Lucy took a flower out of that bouquet right up

on stage and handed it back to Uncle Jim and he acted for a while like he was carrying a dagger or wanted to talk to skulls or something. Aunt Livvy and my mama said he'd get over it and he did.

So we had all expected something from Lucy, but even when she brought home the application to the Peace Corps, we didn't expect that. That application sat on her desk for months and Aunt Livvy would move it once a week to dust and then put it back. One time she read most of it, just to see if Lucy was eligible. She told my mama that the Peace Corps wanted to know if Lucy used illegal drugs or had ever committed a felony and she didn't think Lucy would have anything to do with an application like that. I mean, we don't even buy cough syrup with codeine in it. Aunt Livvy thought Lucy was keeping that application just to be perverse. Like a threat, kind of. But on the day Lucy tried to make Oysters Rockefeller in the kitchen, Grandmama, who lives with Livvy and Jim, got upset about the mess and lectured Lucy some. So Lucy stayed up all night and mailed the application in the morning and then went to the flower shop and made this strange arrangement of spiky plants and orance flowers for Mrs. Livingston which had to be dismantled it upset Mrs. Livingston so much. She got carnations with ferns and baby's breath instead.

The summer was pretty normal, really, except that Lucy started planning for a trip to California because she didn't hear from the Peace Corps. Aunt Livvy told us that Lucy had been making calls to the city to find out about her application, but nobody called back.

So we made it all the way to Thanksgiving before they called to tell Lucy she had been accepted as a Peace Corps volunteer. My cousin Emily doesn't understand why it's spelled "corpse" when it's pronounced "core." She's only six and mama says she's a very curious child. We had just sat down to dinner when the phone rang and we all looked at each other because surely someone was dead for anybody to call around dinner time on Thanksgiving Day. But, of course, everyone we knew was right around the table so we looked at each other some more and little Emily ran to the phone. She turned around with big eyes and whispered real loud to Lucy, "It's the Peace Corpse." Lucy got up without excusing herself and Aunt Livvy told Uncle Jim to ask the blessing which he

did, too fast. We passed the food around and I tried not to listen to Lucy's voice murmur in the kitchen where she had dragged the phone but I felt the Peace Corps moving in all around us. So did Aunt Livvy because she took a small serving of sweet potatoes, which is her favorite, and she didn't even eat the marshmallows. All of a sudden, there were little brown children in the room, hungry children with skinny arms and fat stomachs-- another thing I don't understand--and the turkey was too dry. I asked for the cranberry sauce and Uncle Jim was passing me the butter instead when Lucy came back to the table and said she was in. Cousin Emily clapped for Lucy and the Peace Corps until she turned over her milk glass.

Lucy had to go to the city for her Placement Interview and to pass her physical and to get some shots. When she got back, she told us that one man fainted when they started the shots because there were so many needles. They had all sat in school desks, and trained volunteers gave them shot after shot and this man went white and toppled right out of his desk. Lucy found out later that he had been in the Navy. She said there were lots of ex-military joining the Peace Corps and I think that's strange. It doesn't seem as if you could switch.

They wanted to make Lucy a fish farmer and she had to write a paper on why she wanted to farm fish, so she went off to her room and we all had a good laugh over it until Lucy came out and told us that of course they didn't put fish in the ground and expect them to grow. They would make a fish pond in the village and put baby fish in it and take them out when they were big enough to eat and let the new baby fish grow up and so on. It sounded kind of funny to me and I teach biology at the high school, but Uncle Jim said that thing about giving a man a fish and he eats for a day, and teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime. Lucy smiled at him--she has a real pretty smile when she wants to--and went back to her room.

Another couple of weeks went by and the Peace Corps called to tell Lucy they had received her fish farming paper, but that because she made a *C* and a *D* in her college biology courses, they thought they'd try her in agriculture and did she know how to make a compost heap. That sounded a lot more reasonable to all of us and my mama thought she'd have a

Farewell Lucy Party and she started making streamers with that peace symbol all over them like in the sixties. But the Peace Corps outsmarted us and inside of two weeks had sent Lucy to Puerto Rico for training. She sent us one sort of general postcard saying that she hadn't gotten to see much of Puerto Rico because they were digging in the rainforests. She wrote a longer letter to Livvy and Jim telling about the livestock rotation where she learned to take care of pigs, goats, and cows, and how to kill a rabbit. Aunt Livvy couldn't believe that Lucy killed a rabbit, becuase Lucy didn't even used to want to cut up frozen chickens. Aunt Livvy had to buy the pieces if she wanted Lucy to help fry.

Lucy didn't even get to come home after Puerto Rico, but she called from the airport in Washington to tell us goodbye, that she was going to Ghana right away and couldn't call for a while and that she loved us and would write. I don't remember now when Lucy started writing me direct instead of including me in the general sign off to Livvy and Jim--love to Mama and Daddy and Grandmama and Teddy and Arthur and Milly and Becky and Emily. I'm Becky and I was supposed to be named for my father Robert who died when I was three. My middle name is Roberta, but mama didn't want to risk it as a first name for fear I'd be called Robbie or Bobbie. Some people called me Becky Bob when I was little but they've mostly stopped now. Anyway, as soon as I started getting that thin red white and blue mail from Lucy, it seemed like we'd always been good friends, which just isn't the case at all. Even though we are the same age, we were mostly just cousins except for one day when we were both seven. We were in the petting farm which is what our town has instead of a zoo. The first and second grades had gone on a field trip and I had red ribbons in my hair sort of in honor of the occasion. Lucy had blue ribbons which were nice but I thought mine were prettier and I seem to recall remarking on the fact. Lucy and I were preparing for an argument when there was some excitement over by the rabbits. Tommy Brickell had been told never to pick up a rabbit by the ears (in fact, we'd all been told never to pick up a rabbit by the ears), so he had taken hold of one sort of around the neck. It was a big rabbit and Tommy Brickell was a small boy, even for six, and he was trying to lift the rabbit over the wire fence and the rabbit was struggling some and had managed to

scratch Tommy who was by then still trying to lift the rabbit over the fence but crying too. So Mrs. Abbey, our teacher, went over to sort out the rabbit and Tommy and to comfort the other first graders who had begun to cry to keep Tommy company. Well, I guess the goat saw his chance. Lucy and I were watching Tommy from a distance when I felt a tug on my right pigtail. I figured it was Lucy and I turned to pull on her pigtail too. But the goat that we had just given an apple core to had taken one of my red ribbons out almost as gently as my mama did at night. I could see my red ribbon hanging out of his mouth against his little gray beard, and the ribbon was getting shorter and shorter until it was gone. We all three stood there looking at each other--Lucy at me, me at the goat, and the goat at my other red ribbon. Then Lucy pulled her left blue ribbon off the end of her pigtail and offered it to the goat who took it. I had thought about crying, but there didn't seem to be any point--we still had two ribbons between us. We shared an ice cream cone that day, too, but we didn't play together any more than was usual after that, and we had real different friends in high school. So as I was saying, it surprised me when Lucy started writing me from Africa and it surprised me more how much she seemed to want to tell me.

My high school students were dissecting frogs the week that I got Lucy's letters about the chicken project. Her letters would come all in a bunch, although she says she mailed them one at a time. It was like she used to talk, though, all at one rush and then a long silence. I had to sort out the letters, put them in the right order to read, except that sometimes I'd get it wrong because Lucy never dates her letters and I just had to skim them for context. I must say that Lucy seemed as busy with her chickens as I was with my frogs. Dissecting week is a trying time for the whole high school because frog parts keep turning up in lockers and wastebaskets and once in the meatloaf in the cafeteria. We dissect frogs in the same room that I have my home room in. The kids that sit in the back (and it's alphabetical, they don't have a choice) have to sit near the cabinets where we keep the fetal pig and the cow's heart in bottles. Those students look pale green all year and I admit that the formaldehyde gives me a headache some days. The day I got Lucy's letters, we had distributed the frogs and they were laid open, flaps of skin pinned back, and

everyone seemed to be observing the internal organs with more than usual self-restraint. But Margaret Webster and Carl Gooding, who I never should have let be lab partners, were leaning in over their frog, flirting and trying to get close to each other and with all the elbows and hands on the counter, they pushed the tin tray with their wide open frog in it right off the lab table. It took a while to get internal organs collected and accounted for and when we had the frog put back together, I had one of those formaldehyde headaches. I dismissed them early which I am never ever supposed to do, and went home to read Lucy's chicken project letters.

She was all excited that her village--she called it that, her village--had just gotten money from the government to buy chickens to raise and all they had to do was build the chicken house. The construction was progressing slowly, so when the chickens arrived by truck, they were housed temporarily in some unfinished classrooms in the secondary school. The chickens were chicks still, fuzzy and yellow, and Lucy said that school days had pretty much degenerated into small dark children standing and kneeling and squatting on the dirt floor in the classroom where the chickens were, watching the fuzzy yellow activity behind the chicken wire. And after a while, the chicks were freed to totter around the dirt floor among the brown legs and arms and they would make chirping noises that the children would imitate until the whole room chirped and the air was dusty with tiny yellow feathers. But the village had spent the government money on building materials that they hadn't used yet and not on food for the chickens who began to spend more time sitting still and less time tottering and chirping. Lucy rode the motorcycle the Peace Corps had given her to the next village to try to find chicken food, but the next village didn't have any chicken food and Lucy had to come back to the yellow-feathered room and face disappointed dark eyes. It was one of the children, Lucy says, who suggested a bug hunt. The bugs had stopped coming into the chicken room voluntarily, and the chicks were thought to be too fragile to be moved outside, so clearly the alternative was a bug hunt of immense and unprecedented proportions. And my cousin Lucy, who once cried for three hours when a bee flew into her hair and she wasn't even stung, went out with her dark children and their dark parents and collected bugs until every container

they could press into service was filled and squirming with chicken food. And they took the chicken food, which after a while became resigned to its fate, and fed it to the chickens who began to totter and chirp again almost immediately. Two or three of those chicks walked into Lucy's hands when she laid her hands flat, palms up, on the dirt floor. Lucy said she could feel their small bones under the feathers and under the bones, their blood moving.

I wrote Lucy back after I had laid down for a bit and told her that I was glad her chickens were going to pull through, and how did Africans cook chicken, and my class was going to start on fetal pigs tomorrow.

Three weeks went by without a word from Lucy, and then a solitary envelope arrived. The letter began "Oh Rebecca" and I had to sit down to read it. After I had read a few lines, I got up to close my bedroom door and I pulled a string to let the venetian blinds drop from where they were crowded up at the top of the window frame straight down to the windowsill with a thud. Because Lucy's letter was about a black man who says he loves her and who she says she doesn't love but who she let into the cabin the Peace Corps showed her how to build. And she says she can't stop letting him in now. She says there's an ache in her joints and a tremor in her hands as if from a high fever. That her lips are rubbed raw from his teeth or her own, that her face is scratched and burning from contact with his and with him. He puts his hands in her hair, she says, and beneath her shoulder blades and in the small of her back, lifting and clutching. And she hears a voice in her head (maybe several voices, maybe mine), but the voices are quiet and then whispering and then she can't hear them at all over her own breathing and his warmth. She didn't tell me his name and she didn't ask me what to do. And now I see all day long black skin on white and white skin on black, Lucy's pale freckled skin touching his darkness. I especially see hands, her wrists with thin blue pulsing veins and slender raised tendons, his black fingers, caramel brown in the palms, closing around her wrists, up her arms to her shoulders, her small white hand in the center of his dark back, moving up and down the valley of his spine. In a dark room, his skin wouldn't even be visible and hers would light

and fall through to the yawning, never-ending pit of hellfire below. I look under the porch, but the soft brown dirt lies safe. The house was painted white a few years back when we had crops in the fields, a tractor, and a bright red pickup truck. Now red clay dust settles in every pore of the wood. I liked it better when it was just an honest, brownish-gray. The curtains at the windows shredded long ago, and there is no money for curtains or pretty things. The flowers still come up year after year, but no one loves them now that my sister, Faith, is gone. I think the house looks like a big, dirty white ghost with staring black eyes, except when the house is lit up at night. Then it's even more a garish fright--the bright orange pours out of the windows and doors like a jack-o-lantern on Halloween night. So here sits Uncle Pete too close to the door to get around safely, outlined by my jack-o lantern house. For a second, I believe that they are one and the same fright.

Uncle Pete is smaller than the average man, and his voice comes out with a broken, chucklely sound. His face and hands are a deep brown from working like a mule in the sun all day. He seems like a mule; though, personally, I like most mules much better. Something tells me that he is only half a man--only dangerous if I fail to keep that in mind.

He offers me a piece of Wrigley Spearmint gum, and since I haven't had a nickel to buy a pack of gum in I don't know when, I take his gum, knowing that it will taste more nasty than sweet. He tells me to sit on his lap first, and I do, knowing that I can get away as soon as I get the gum. He fumbles around in his shirt pocket and then hands me a piece of gum. I grab the gum and start to spring up, but he says, no, wait, he thinks he has a nickel to give me so that I can buy a whole pack of gum. He fumbles around in his pants pockets, and then says, Now hold out your hand in back of you. There, you got. But what I got ain't no nickel--though it's bout as big around as a nickel.

I unhand this awful thing and run to the edge of the porch. My heart is in my ears and my breath gets away from me. My stomach wretches, but nothing comes out except a piece of Wrigley Spearmint gum. So I spit to get rid of the taste--spitting, spitting, spitting just as hard as I can, but I can't spit enough. My tongue is dry and wants to stick to the roof of my mouth, but I work hard at gathering spit. Hard

work is worthwhile--if it means getting something that you truly want. At last my cheeks are full of a raging pool of spit, and I walk back to Uncle Pete, him still sitting there chuckling softly to himself like an old hen when she settles back down after laying her egg. My spit comes out louder than a lima-bean fart, and right away his whole face, including his shiny little glasses, is covered with spit. The smile runs away as soon as my spit hits his face. He takes off his glasses, wipes them with his dirty linen handkerchief, and leaves in a huff. Suddenly my house looks warm and inviting, the way that it can look when nothing is wrong inside.

I walk into the house to warm my red, little-old-woman hands over the woodstove. My hands look wrinkled and rough even if I am just seven. Mama has built a great crackly fire, and I feel good enough to love anyone, maybe even Jenny. My crazy pa lies in a rusty iron bed over in the corner of the oversized kitchen, with rough woolen army blankets piled high atop his body. He says that he can never get warm enough, so he lies in bed all day, never saying much unless he gets riled up and starts saying things that people hear but act like they don't understand.

My brother, Sammy, comes inside to warm his hands too, and he gives me a sweet smile, his lips cherry-red from the cold. He is the prettiest boy I've ever seen. His teacher, Old Lady Barks, says that it's a shame the way my brother never gets a decent haircut and his hair hangs down below his collar like a girl's. The woman must not see the thick, shiny waves of black hair the same way that I do. He's got great bright black eyes with two-inch eyelashes, a dimple in his chin, and round, rosy cheeks. I have the same black eyes, but hardly a lash to be seen. My hair is brown, but not a pretty brown; people call it mousy brown. People also say that my skin is sallow and that I'm plain as a dishrag. Maybe I'll grow out of being ugly. Maybe I'll grow out of what people say.

Sometimes when I look at Sammy, I feel crazy--like I want to kiss his eyes, or bite his chin, or squeeze his cheeks, but I know they'd put me away if I acted that crazy, so we wrestle instead. I am big for my age, long-legged and bony, but stronger than I look. I soon get the best of Sammy, and Bobby-Jack, another one of my brothers, calls Sammy a sissy.

I pull away, ashamed of my bigness, ashamed of my strength. Sammy was never any match for me.

Sammy starts laying out the plates and forks and spoons without Mama even asking or threatening to hit him with a piece of stove wood or to send him to a reform school. Jenny comes strolling in from down the road a piece where she meets her boyfriend, Junebug--we call him; she calls him Charles Macabee, Jr. Mama's beginning to worry that Jenny stays on the road too much, but she never does anything about it. Jenny hates me because I was born. She was the baby girl until I cam along and ruined everything. I hate her back, and people says it's because she's so much prettier than me, but I really hate her because she's mean. She ain't that pretty anyhow--not like my sister, Faith. I'm just plain, the old ladies say when they are trying to be nice. Tonight, Jenny has got something on me, and I know by the look on her face that she'll have it out before the sun goes down, and the sun's sliding fast over the horizon now. She knows she's won when she announces to Mama, God, and everybody that she just saw Uncle Pete walking to his house and that he said Jilly spit in his face.

Mama looks ready to spit or scream herself, and she takes up a piece of stovewood and starts shaking it at me, wanting to know why I had to go and do such a fool thing as that. I way I don't know, that it just seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Jilly, she says, go apologize, and I say I got nothing to apologize for, and she says that I'm the most stubborn, hard-headed child ever born and to go sit on my bed until I change my mind or I'll not get any supper tonight, so I go sit on my bed, willing enough to starve that night rather than to apologize.

Mama calls everyone but me to supper, and it smells real good--fried chickens, collards, and cornbread all cooked just right. Pa gets up from his bed and takes his place at the head of the table. No one has ever told him that it's no longer his place, so he sits there like it's where he belongs. I have three brothers and one sister left at home, and they all take their places at the table as well. My Pa looks around and asks where is Sister Gal; she's not sitting in her place, and Mama says that that is the problem with Jilly; she never stays in her place. This afternoon she spit in her Uncle Pete's face. Pa looks far, far away, and then says, Let Jilly come eat; she

plays hard and no youngun of mine has to go to bed hungry--not yet anyway. Mama wrinkles up like she is going to say no, but then she calls me to supper; she knows her place.

I am sitting there thinking that as a matter of principles, I should refuse to eat, but as Jesus said in my Sunday School book, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak, so I say, Goddamn, and get up and eat.

Pa sits at the table--tall, thin, and ghostly. I wonder what eats his food after it goes down. He has learned the principles of economy; that much is clear. He uses a tablespoon to shovel food into his mouth; his table manners have been pared down to the general principle of getting it all in. For all that food, his ribs still show through his shirt and his skull can be seen clearly through his skin. Maybe something eats him. His eyes look like scared, jittery bluebirds locked in a cage, and I wonder what would happen if ever those bluebirds were set free. What kind of tales would they bring back to me?

I bit into the chicken and find the first pieces hard going down my throat though it tastes good, so I wash it down with sweet ice tea. There is a lot of jabbering going around the table, so when I feel safe I ask Mama why are we having fried chicken when it's only Friday night, and she says, Oh, don't you remember the chicken that got run over by the school bus today, and I say, yes, remembering the blood and guts stuck in the chicken feathers. The collards and cornbread were good that night.

The meal is soon over, and Pa leans back in his chair, while I finish up because I got a late start, and Bobby-Jack finishes up late because he's a pure-ol-t pig. Pa says, Sister Gal, why don't you sing me a song?

Bobby-Jack, who is mostly pretty slow unless he is thinking of something mean to say, snorts and tosses his head. Jilly can't sing, he says, and stuffs a fig biscuit in his mouth. Then with biscuit crumbs flying every which a way, he says, She can't carry a tune with a pitchfork, as if he were the one to make up that saying. I hate him, but he's right. My tunes always fall through the wrong lines.

Pa says he likes the way that Sister Gal sings--so full of heart, so he tells me to sing and I do: "Jesus Loves Me," "The Itsy Bitsy Spider," and "The Five Little Ducks." Only I change the ending of the song about the five little ducks.

When the last little duck goes out to play, over the hills, and far away, the Mama duck says, quack, quack, quack, but the last little duck never comes back. Pa laughs and says, Now what is that little duck goin' to do out in the big, bad world all by herself?

Jenny strolls by looking like a hussy in red lipstick and says, Ugly Ducklings turn into beautiful swans, but only in fairytales, and sticks out her tongue at me. I start to say that beauty is only skin-deep, but then I remember that ugly is to the bone, so I say nothing. I hate her.

Mama's not finished with me yet, even if she did let me eat. It's not a matter of love for Uncle Pete. I've heard her call him a mealy-mouthed fool and a drunk-to-boot, but he will run errands or bring things back from town if she asks him. The matter is taken personally; I disobeyed, and I persisted in my disobedience. I am an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. She will have to find a way to break my stubbornness while I'm still young. The rest of my brothers and sisters have been turned over to the hands of God. It's out of my hands, she cries, throwing her empty hands into the air when thirteen year old Jenny gets caught skipping school with a group of boys. Let God take care of her. I finish singing to Pa, and Pa goes out for his after supper ramble. Wash the dishes, Jilly. This pot isn't clean. Wash it again. Don't talk back. Dry all the dishes -- not just the ones on top of the stack. Sweep the floors. You left crumbs under the table. Yes, you do see those crumbs--biscuit crumbs. And there's figs smeared on the side of the tablecloth. Clean it up. You're not finished yet. There's a load of clothes to fold. Those towels aren't folded right. Fold them in thirds. Then in halves. Not in quarters. No, don't read that trash. Read your Bible.

I read a chapter in Job. He's having a hard time of it. Job was smote by the hand of God, so he prays like a song; people hear him, but cannot understand his words, though his words seem clear enough to me. I read one chapter out of my Bible because that's what the Sunday School teacher says I should do; it's called devotion. She says that members of the family should take turns reading chapters of the Bible and praying out loud; she must be talking about somebody else's family. In three years, three months, and four days, I will have read the Bible from cover to cover. It isn't so bad if you

can ever get through the thou shalt nots in the first five books. Pa read the Bible thrugh twice; now he only reads the books of wisdom and prophecy. The prophets scare me and I'm not sure what wisdom means.

Mama order the lights out at nine o'clock--it's the one thing she can be sure of--and the house quietly waits. Soon the cry comes:

Morpheme, give me morpheme, my Pa whines like an animal caught in a steel trap. Morpheme is the drug that he gets at the mental hospital--a painkiller, if pain can be killed. You're home now, Lawrence, Mama says. Just lie still and be quiet; you'll be okay. But Pa can't lie quiet when the pain is on him. He sings instead:

> Just a closer walk with thee
> Grant it Jesus if you please.

He sounds so pretty, his voice so mournful and low, his songs so full of sad stories. Up and down his voice flies and round and round as if it's looking for a way to get the misery out, but his misery is heavy and sits upon his heart all day. The spirit starts to move me, and I find myself singing along softly:

> Through the days of toil that's near
> If I fall dear Lord, who cares?
> Who with me my burden shares?
> None but Thee, dear Lord--

But I'm stopped short by a violent jab in my back, and Jenny hisses, Shut up, you little fool; one crazy person singing in the house is enough.

Pa's song soon comes back to him, and he tries to get the misery out in some other way. Now he starts to pray:

> Dear God,
> Give me a sign.

I hear the bedstead creak violently. That must be God's sign.

May the day perish on which I was born, and the night in which it was said, A male child is conceived. May that day be darkness; May God above not seek it, nor the light shine upon it. May darkness and the shadow of death claim it.

The curse is upon me and the curse was upon my father before me and his father, but why my children, Oh Lord? Soften the heavy blow that smites them now. Is there not one among them that you will save?

You gave me a daughter and I named her Faith, but my Faith was taken away by a drunken brute.

My son Samuel was born a man, but You made his heart a woman's. He'll never survive.

You gave Jilly a heart full of song, but You put her in a world that does not love a song.

You gave Jenny a beautiful face, but the beauty has left her soul.

You gave me a son, Bailey, whose heart is simple and trusting but broken already.

You gave me a boy, Bobby-Jack, who can't be no son of mine. He must be the son of another man.

You gave me a wife who produced many fruits of the vine. I cannot feed them and they may not be mine.

His praying song ends and comes out again in a different way:

Now, courtin's a pleasure, parting is grief;
But a falsehearted lover is worse than a thief.
A thief he will rob you and take all you have,

But a falsehearted lover will lead you to the grave.
The grave will decay you and turn you to dust;
There ain't one in a million a poor soul can trust.

And on he sings til he's back on Old Smoky, Old Smoky so high/ Where the wild birds and the turtle doves can hear my sad cry. I lie very quiet as Mama says to do, but I still take all the sadness in. It's such a big sadness that soon I can't breathe, and I've learned not to cry. Soon, soon, I will lay down and die.

Pa lies quiet for a few minutes, and the house waits. He screams out, Son-of-a-bitch, Stop messing with Jilly! No one is hurting Jilly, my mama says. That child is lying in there in her bed, probably sleeping by now. It's all in your mind, Lawrence. Just lie back down. There now, just lie quiet and be still. It'll be all right in the morning. My Pa is quiet and I think everything is all right because he starts to sing again:

Tempted and tried, we're oft made to wonder
Why it should be thus all the day long.
While there are others living about us,
Never molested though in the wrong.

Farther along we'll know all about it;
Farther along we'll understand shy.
Cheer up my brothers, live in the sunshine,
We'll understand it all by and by.

I lie waiting for When death has come and taken our loved ones, and Often I wonder why I must journey/ Over a road so rugged and steep, and Soon with the Lord, our wonderful Savior,/ We'll be at home beyond the blue sky; but instead, I hear a terrible metallic click-click that I know too well. I frantically try to disconnect my mind from Pa's. If I lie very still and breathe only as I must, he'll not know where I am. I can't run away because he runs faster. I can't climb a tree because he can climb better. I can't hide because he'll find me wherever I go. I can't fly because he has the gift of

flying too, and he's behind me all the way, even when I fly. I disconnect by counting forward to ten and back again: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and now, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.

Mama screams, Put the gun away; Oh Lord Jesus, have mercy. I count: two, four, six, eight . . . . The only bad thing about having a crazy Pa is that I never know what he will do when he takes down his gun. I count: five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five . . . . He's never hurt one of us. He only shoots at the evil spirits that gather outside of our house. I cound: ten, twenty, thirty . . . . The screen door slams. I count: seven, fourteen, twenty-one, twenty-eight . . . which is harder to do. My body lets my mind go and I sleep.

All is black for a long while, but then in my sleep I see a small man and hear his chucklely voice. He is wearing only his long johns, and his feet are bare. He runs through the stubbly remains of a cornpatch and the frost lies thick upon the ground. He runs because a large man with a voice I'd know anywhere is chasing him with a loaded shotgun in his hands. I am the small, chucklely man, and it feels so bad to be who I am--I have a tiny wee-wee that men laugh at and women never see. The man with the gun scares me, and I pee all over myself, making two lines of yellow water down my legs and across my front side. But I run. My knees feel like water because he's gaining on me, and I fall. Get up, motherfucker, the voice says. Or is it, babyfucker? Is that what makes you feel like a man? Fucking babies? Run, babyfucker, run.

Suddenly, I am the man with the gun, and I'm going to blast that chuckling babyfucker out of his grave. My finger is on the trigger, but he is blood, damn't blood. How can you blast your own kin without giving him a chance to speak, to redeem himself somehow? I squeeze the trigger, and the trees roar back their approval. A sharp smell that bites the inside of my nostrils fills the air, and I taste the bitterness in my mouth. The chucklely man lies stone still.

But I am not the man with the gun, and the chucklely man isn't dead yet. The man with the gun says, Get up. You ain't dead. You just shit and puked all over yourself. Now crawl. The chucklely man crawls, his backside covered with greenish-brown, the black dirt clinging to the yellow water which stains his long johns. A trail of brown and pink vomit

is left in the center of the furrowed rows of cornstalks. About ten feet off, he tries to rise up so that he can run again, but he falls flat on his face, breaking his shiny, little glasses. The man with the gun stands still. The small, chucklely man crawls further and tries to rise again, but his knees won't hold him up. At last, he falls on his knees and screams, What do you want from me, what is it you want from me? And I scream, What do you want from me, what is it you want from me? The man with the gun says, Go back to your house. Look at your face in the mirror. Claim yourself. Tell the world who you are.

The chucklely man crawls through the corn stubble. I crawl through the corn stubble. My face is bruised and bleeding. My hands are cut from ripping through splintery cornstalks, trying to find my way home. The small, chucklely man crawls up his steps and into his house, but he doesn't go near the mirror. I crawl, step, run, fly to my house. I look into the mirror and I see the dim outline of a grown girl's face; she's wearing a broad brim white hat and a white, virgin dress; I try to make out the face but the harder I try, the dimmer it becomes until it fades into nothing. I blink my eyes and look again. The dress is getting whiter than snow and it shines like the sun reflected by a chrome bumper. I squint into the glass, but see nothing beyond the white light. The terror starts me awake.

I am cold with pee, and Jenny's hogged the covers the way she always does.

Somewhere near dawn, I hear the chucklely voice again--close as if it's right outside my window. Mama says something to the chucklely voice; she's calm at first, then angry. The screen door slams. Mama stomps across the floor and throws wood into the woodstove and then dumps kerosene on the firewood. I could end this misery right now, she mutters, but gets out a boiler to make oatmeal instead.

I remember that I peed on the bed during the night, so I wad the bed clothes up in the middle, hoping no one will notice it. Jenny will sleep until ten if she's given half a chance, and maybe it'll be dry by then. I quickly change my underwear and hide the dirty ones. I am seven, and it makes me ashamed that I keep peeing on the bed.

As soon as I'm dressed, I go stand by the fire. Sammy's up early, and he's sitting at the table, stirring his oatmeal.

Stir, stir, stir. His beautiful black eyes stare into the oatmeal. Stir, stir, stir. I say, What's the matter, Sammy, see a nasty old fly in your oatmeal? Sammy says, No, but doesn't look up. Stir, stir, stir.

Mama's standing at the stove, stirring oatmeal though the oatmeal is already cooked. Stir, stir, stir. I ask Mama what is wrong, and she says, My life is shit. I want to die. Stir, stir, stir. I hold up my bowl, and she dumps a big glob into it. Stir, stir, stir. Is there any butter or cream, I ask. She says, No. Stir, stir, stir.

I sit at my place and open the sugar jar, and then I heap two tablespoons of sugar into my oatmeal. I stir in the sugar and taste a great globby glob; it's like flour paste mixed too think with sugar put in by accident. Maybe stirring is the thing to do. So I stir, stir, stir.

Where's Pa? I ask.

He's not back home, Mama says. Stir, stir, stir.

Why not?

He may be gone for awhile again.

Are the sheriff's men coming? I ask. Mama and Sammy stir, but I don't. I see men in dark brown pants and khaki-colored shirts wrestling Pa to the ground. One is trying to put a white jacket on him that twists his arms around to his back. Pa sinks his teeth into the man's arm, and the man hits him to make him let go, and Pa does. The man hits him again and again and again. Blood pours from his nose and mouth. He spits, and I see a glint of gold in the early morning sun. I never see his gold tooth or the two next to it again. He spits blood and dirt. I spit blood and dirt. I hurt. Sharp and terrible is my Pa smote by the hands of man. Pa is dragged away cursing, screaming and kicking the dust around him. This happened when he preached the gospel on the roof top of our house. People laughed until he started naming names and naming sins. Pa's punishments never matched his crimes.

I don't know, Mama says. Stir, stir, stir. Your Uncle Pete came by this morning. She stops stirring. Says your Pa chased him round and round the cornpatch last night. Says your Pa shot at him, but that's a damn lie. Your Pa hits whatever he shoots at. Kills what he has to so that we can eat, but he is always quick and clean about it. The only way

he would kill a man would be if he messed with one of his younguns. Stir, stir, stir.

Sammy stops stirring and his tears slide into his oatmeal. I want to make Sammy laugh, so I say, Hey Sammy, you know what I'd do if I had the gun in my hand? He looks up at me, sucking back his tears and snot. I'd shoot him dead, and then I'd tap-dance on his grave. Sammy giggles a little and I giggle a little, and then we both giggle a lot, but the sound we make has a high, keen edge somewhere between screaming and crying.

Mama raps her spoon sharp against the side of the pot she is stirring oatmeal in. Hush up that foolishness, do you hear? Hush up. Don't either one of you go broadcasting what happened last night. If we stay quiet and lay low, maybe the whole thing will blow over. Besides, what happens inside this family is family business, you understand, Jilly? Nobody has to know about anything that goes on. It's between us, between us and God. You listening, Jilly?

Yes, Mama, I say.

--Nancy Ellen Sherrod