

/RUBY/

by

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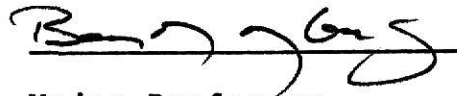
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The haunting click, swish of the respirator and her father's farmer hand, brown and sun diseased, lying against the sterile white of the sheet. The beep of the heart monitor and the almost silent drip of the medicated saline solution hanging in the I.V. bottle above his head. All these noises were silenced from the outside world by the glass cage of the room on the intensive care ward.

Last week seemed a world away. The Carolina spring was just beginning to tempt the earth, still moist from the rainy winter. Ruby and her father, Paul, were out fixing the tobacco plant beds. The tender plants were protected by a white linen sheet. Just underneath the sheet, the green plants were beginning to press cautiously against the white.

Ruby leaned against the fence and wiped her face. God, she loved that smell of dirt, black and clinging under her fingernails. It was a much needed change from the smell of musty books. As she rubbed the dirt between her fingers, she was glad she wasn't fingering the thin pages of some text book.

"Ruby," her father called, his voice beginning to sound tight with air which was inhaled freely but would remain caught, raggedly, somewhere in his chest. "I guess we've done about all we can do for today. Let's get some supper."

"Right, Dad. You sound pretty tired."

"Just a wheeze here and there. Besides, don't want to talk about. It's bad luck." They turned and began the walk to the house. Ruby walked ahead of her father, not wanting to hear his labored breathing.

She wondered what her friends were doing at school now. Maybe they were drinking imported white wine and thinking about what a noble thing Ruby had done by taking a semester off to help her father farm. Bullshit, she thought, They're probably drinking generic beer and talking about the association of death and sex in some novel. But most probably they were talking just about sex. College was a good place to learn to ask questions and a good place to learn unhappiness when you realized those questions had no answers.

"You thinking about school?" Paul asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"Not really," she said. "Besides don't want to talk about it. It's bad luck."

They both laughed.

After supper, Ruby tried to read, but she was too tired and fell asleep. Later in the middle of the night, she heard Billie Holiday's voice drifting up the stairs from the kitchen. She knew, without seeing, what the scene would be. Paul would be sitting at the table, his head against the oil cloth and his ear near the radio, trying to breathe and trying to pretend he wasn't lonely. Her mother had left a year ago, tired and angry because her hands were work worn and she didn't own any silks. Her father now hated books because he blamed his wife's unhappiness on the fact that she read too many Gothic romances. After she had left, the dime store paperbacks were stacked in brown cardboard boxes in the corner of Paul's bedroom. Her mother's clothes were still hanging in the closet. Paul had moved all his things into the chest of drawers.



Ruby decided she would not go and check on her father. It<sup>3</sup> would only make him angry. He despised weakness in anyone, including himself. Ruby drifted back into her dreams.

When she awoke, the sun seemed bright outside the window. With a jolt, she wondered why her father had not awakened her yet.

"Dad," she yelled, jumping from the bed. She ran into the kitchen, afraid for her father, yet knowing this had happened before. Her father was lying on the floor, a bluish tinge to his nails and face. His eyes looked at her with shame and fear. He hadn't the breath to climb the stairs or yell for help.

The radio still murmured in the background, but Billie Holiday was now the weatherman.

She had taken him to the hospital. That was last week. Now Paul was getting better, the doctor said. As Ruby stood by his bed, watching him sleep, the doctor tapped on the window and beckoned her outside.

"Yes, your father's getting better, but he's been given a lot of medication. We're going to take him off the heart monitor and respirator, but he'll be with us for awhile."

Ruby nodded, hating the doctor, the room, the hospital for some reason.

She drove home, knowing the young tobacco sprouts couldn't wait another day before being transplanted into the ground. She drove into the small town and tried to pick out the most likely looking loafers standing on the street corner. She recognised one old man who had helped her father before.

"Jousha," she called from the open truck window. "Do you think you could help me in the field for a few days? Dad's sick

and if I don't get that tobacco in the ground, it's going to be too big."

"Sure, I need a little money. You need Katie, too?"

"Yeah, hop in and we'll go pick her up." Ruby was relieved. Jousha and his wife, Katie, were old but reliable.

They drove to the plant bed, down the bumpy path beside the cow pasture. Reaching the bed, the hollow was cool, surrounded by tall pines. Ruby could hear the branch gurgling through the woods from which Paul had watered the bed. They pulled back the white linen sheet, exposing the infant green plants to their first rays of direct sunshine. The pungent smell of the dank fertilized earth floated up as the sheet billowed in the wind.

The rest of the afternoon, they pulled the young plants from the bed. Crawling on her knees through the black dirt, Ruby nudged the fragile finger-sized plants from the ground. A hundred plants make a bunch. They were then wrapped in small pieces of canvas and secured with a nail.

And the next morning, Jousha drove the ancient John Deere while she and Katie sat on the back of the transplanter. A splash of water and a click and another tobacco plant was in the ground. Splash, click, splash, click and the chug, chug of the tractor. The slots for the plants seemed to endlessly roll back up again, stretching hungrily for another green stem.

Two days later, after working far into the night and equally as early into the morning, the planting was done and Ruby went to visit her father that night.

When she reached her father's room, everything was crazy.

"I'm wired for sound," Paul whispered as he dug and scratched a hole in his chest. "And you'd better go and see Ruby. She's in the basement, cut up in small pieces. I can hear

her screaming and there's blood on the walls."

"But Daddy, I'm right here." Ruby reached across to touch his hand.

He shook it off, saying, "No, no. That's not you. You're not you because Ruby is cut up."

Ruby ran into the hall. "What's going on here? What have you done to my father?" she demanded of the doctor.

"Ruby, just calm down, Let's go in the break room and have a cup of coffee. This has just started and we were getting ready to call you."

"I want to know what's going on. He's flipped out."

"Well, it's complicated, but the medication that we've given your father for his asthma has caused heart palpitations. And in order to regulate his heart, we had to administer another drug."

"And you goofed, right?"

"Not exactly, Ruby. I'm afraid your father has had a severe biochemical reaction to the drug."

"In plain language, please."

"In other words, Ruby, drugs can often affect one's emotions and mental balance. Your father has been on steroids for quite some time. . . ." He paused. "And well, that's not all."

"Let's hear the all."

"The inability to breathe can often be caused by an inability to cope, as well as being physiological. Sometimes a person cannot breathe because he or she holds in air just as they often hold other things in. And the medication which we have been forced to administer has created an imbalance, set off some kind of emotional trigger, if you will, resulting in your father's present state."

"What are you going to do? Can't you give him something,<sup>6</sup>  
tell him something?"

"Well, often the administration of another drug would only complicate matters. As you should know, drugs not only alter the body physically, but mentally as well."

"Obviously. But since you're the doctor, what are you going to do?"

"Doctor's don't always have the answers. We are not equipped to deal with this. This is a respiratory hospital, and I think your father needs psychiatric help. We called Dortha Dix, and they are willing to take him tonight."

"Jesus Christ, Dix is a nut house! Can't you call someone in?"

"Calm down. We have no choice. Your father's condition may worsen. Our nurses are not trained for this. We're going to try and sedate him and put him on an ambulance. We may even have to strait jacket him, so don't be upset."

Ruby stared at the doctor's shiny black shoes.

"You'll have to go and sign the commitment papers. I don't think you'll be able to see him again tonight."

The drive to and from the mental hospital became a fog in Ruby's mind. She especially tried to block out the moment when she signed her name on the commitment papers. She had committed her father to a state mental hospital. Ruby looked away as they went through her father's belongings, removing razors, belts, pens. They put them in a bag and handed them to her.

It was done.

Ruby spent the next day in bed. She slept, waking only to hear the birds singing in the late afternoon---or was it early

morning? It must have been the late afternoon because their songs were soft and sad.

And the next morning, she woke remembering the weeds which must be overwhelming the young tobacco plants. So for the next two days, she walked the fields, chopping at the Johnson grass which selfishly robbed the soil of its richness. The dirt moved softly beneath the steel blade of the hoe. She unwound the morning glory vines which threatened to choke the plants, curling around the stalks.

Ruby thoughts centered only on the plants. With each flash of the hoe, she wondered why the dirt nourished both weeds and plants. The weeds could thrive so well, growing even in drought. Why was there a difference?

When she was done, she looked over the fields and decided that now she could go see her father.

Then came the sights and sounds of Dortha Dix Hospital. The long walk down the corridor, hearing the slamming and locking heavy doors behind her, feeling the indifference of the orderly beside her, seeing the speckled floor move underneath her, not going anywhere. And as the floor moved, she thought, "It's speckled so you can't see the dirt, can't see the blood, can't see the blood, see the blood." The words bounced around loudly in her head.

The final door slammed and locked behind her. She faced the haunted eyes of haunted black men, their eyes wide and white with fear of things she could not see. And in the corner, a man sat and whacked his leg with his hand. Someone threw a checkerboard at his head, striking his temple.

"Stop it, you nigger bastard. I'm going out of my fuckin' mind."

Ruby reached Paul's room. He lay quietly on the small bed, staring at the bars on the smudged window. He turned his eyes to her and Ruby remembered when those eyes had been the color of the sky. Now they looked like the cracked, blue porcelain in the trash barrel in the back of the house.

"Ruby," he said. "Please take me home. Take me home."

"You just stay here and get well."

"They don't understand. They just don't understand. Last night, I heard you screaming and I walked down the hall to look for you. They kept pushing me, pushing me. They pushed me back into bed and strapped me down. Then they gave me a shot and I got numb in my feet, in my legs, and then I wet myself. When it got to my neck, I went to sleep. When I woke up, I was cold with piss. Take me home."

Ruby looked at the black and blue marks on his arms and saw a small, square band-aid.

"I'm sure they're doing what they think is right," she said.

"But they laugh." He sat up and hung his legs over the side of the bed.. His feet hung huge and white beneath the green of the too short hospital pajamas.

"Day before yesterday, they took me to the real hospital to see a lung doctor there. While I was waiting, the secretary looked at me and said, "He needs to see the doctor. He just came from the mental hospital." And the nurse smiled. They both smiled, just like I was blind and deaf. Just like I wasn't there. And on my way back, at stop lights, people in cars would

point at the van because it had Dix Hospital written on the side.<sup>9</sup> I tried not to look but. . ." His voice trailed off, tired from the long speech. "Nobody's ever laughed at me like that before."

"Dad, I'm sorry. This is just a difficult time for you. We have to do the best we can until you get straightened out," Ruby said.

"It's bad timing, right at the start of the season. If anything goes wrong, we could be ruined for the year. How does the tobacco look, anyway?"

"Oh, just fine. I plowed and chopped it. It looks real good," she said.

"How big is it?"

"About mid-calf. And its supposed to rain tomorrow. I guess I'll have to do some resetting after that."

"Well, you just watch the sky. If it starts to turn red, you pray. You pray those big hail stones don't tear those plants. It's all I've got. You'll pray, won't you? And you'll do all the worrying, won't you?"

"Yes, Daddy, I will. Nothing's going to happen. You believe me."

He lay back and folded his hands. "I'm kinda tired. Will you be back soon?"

"I'll be back in a few days."

Then the hail storm came. Ruby watched the sky darkened blood red and she prayed. But the stones fell and banged against the screen porch, as big as golf balls. And then came the rain, hard and heavy, and washed the prayers out of her mouth. It rained all night, a harsh downpour on the tin roof.

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The rain ended with the misty morning light. Ruby went into the fields and saw the plants ripped and lying horizontally in the mud. She spent the next two days walking over the fields, pushing the mud to the plants, trying to set them up straight. She didn't wear shoes because the mud sucked them off.

She walked the fields wordlessly, feeling the mud cold and oozing underneath her feet. The plants still leaned, the sun shining through the big holes the hail had made. But the weeds, because they grew so close to the ground, had been protected.

When she finished, she looked over the fields and said aloud, "It hasn't done any good." The sound of her voice shocked her.

She turned and walked to the house, stopping by the pump to rinse her feet. The mud rolled off paper thin between her fingers. She went inside and showered. Now she was ready to see her father.

The locking doors behind her seemed to have lost their harshness. And the speckled floor was only something to put her feet on.

"Ruby," Paul said as she entered the room. "I heard on the radio that we had a big hail storm hit near home. Did it. . ."

"No, Daddy. Everything's fine. It missed us. You can come home soon and see."

He nodded and lay back on the bed and folded his hands.

When Ruby reached home, she took the cardboard boxes of Gothic romances and the closet full of her mother's clothes to a church nearby. Then she called on one of Paul's farmer friends in the next county.

"Don, this is Ruby, Paul's daughter."



"How's Paul? I heard he was pretty sick," he asked. Ruby thought he politely avoided any mention of the mental hospital.

"He's getting some better. But we got hit hard by that storm a few nights ago. Pretty much destroyed the tobacco. Do you have any extra plants?"

"Well, Ruby, I got a few. They're just about too big, but you're welcome to them. And I'll see if I can round up a few more."

"Thanks, Don. And promise never to mention this to Daddy."

"Sure, Ruby, but I don't understand. . ." His voice fell off.

As she hung up the phone, Ruby knew they would probably be too big. The plants would stick and break in the transplanter. Maybe she could set them out by hand. And it was going to be a late start; the yield would be small. It was better than nothing. Better than her father coming home to fields full of empty rows.

### A Good Day to Kill Pigs

The wind gusted around the corner, blowing the icy rain up under Ruby's umbrella. The melting snow and rain flowed in the gutters in rivulets of McDonald's cups, broken Budwieser bottles, and used napkins. The sky was beginning to darken, without the benefit of a sunset, and it was only 4:30. Ruby was pushed and shoved and poked from all sides. No one looked up or around; they only wanted to escape another cold, wet Philadelphia day.

Ruby's umbrella blew up as someone pushed her into a nasty puddle of grime. Now her open-toed high heels and stockings were soaked. Ruby looked up to see a neon sign flashing "Bar" on the corner. She bolted for the door.

Once inside, she smelled the odors of stale beer and bodies. The bar was lined with old men nursing various kinds of drinks. The man behind the bar, beefy, bald, and wearing a stained apron around his spreading middle, looked up.

"What'll it be, lady?"

"May I use a towel or something, napkins, anything to dry off?" Ruby asked.

"Yeah, after ya tell me what ya need to drink." The bartender continued wiping down the bar in circular motions.

"A bourbon and water, I guess."

"That'll be three fifty and here's all the napkins ya want."

She paid the bartender, grabbed some napkins, and headed for a door marked "women." Once inside the bathroom, she tried to wipe the mud and grime from her legs and feet. Her hair was plastered against her head and her mascara was running down her

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face. She looked in the mirror, "Oh glorious, glamorous Philly. Oh how I love you," she said aloud to assure herself that she was real.

Today had been her thirtieth day in Philadelphia. Last May, she had graduated from a small Baptist liberal arts college in North Carolina. With a B.A. in English, she had waited tables for a while, then applied for a job at a text book publishing company here. She got the job and moved, away from the South.

At her job, she was mostly a "gopher." The pay had sounded good at first, but everything up here cost too much.

After drying off, Ruby went back to the bar. She got her drink and sat at a table by the window. She didn't want to go home just yet, anyway. Home was a studio apartment with roaches and a fold-out couch. She owned a black and white T.V., but she didn't want to watch the news. It made her afraid of where she lived.

She looked out the smudged window and sipped her drink. The people outside pushed past, hurrying somewhere. Mostly their eyes were hidden, looking down to watch the progress of their feet, but an occasional glimpse revealed hard, cold faces as if constructed of stone.

It was hard to make friends here. Ruby thought it might be because of the weather. But even in the warmth of her office, people rarely looked at her. They were all too busy. Philadelphia had seemed so spectacular in the Chamber of Commerce pictures, but Ruby supposed they must have been taken in spring. She was disappointed and lonely. But she never let that come through in her conversations home.

"Yes, it's beautiful here. No, it is a safe city. There<sup>14</sup> are so many museums and shops. I just don't know what to do with myself."

Ruby smiled as she looked around the bar she sat in. She had wanted to get away from home and she wasn't going to back down now.

Looking out the window again, she saw a group of people huddled together, pushing past, look up at her seated at the table. Their eyes were beady and red from the cold, their faces greedy and uncaring.

The pigs back home on the farm would mindlessly push and crowd their way through the mud for food. Then they would just as mindlessly eat whatever was in the trough. They would eat one another if they smelled blood. Sometimes the mother hog would even eat her own babies. A friend of her grandmothers had had a heart attack and had fallen into the hogs' feeding trough, cutting his head. The hogs smelled blood and had eaten the man, at least part of him. The neighbors collected money, bought the pigs, slaughtered and then buried them. Her grandmother, Louise, said, "A waste of a heap of food for winter, but pride sometimes comes before survival."

It had been winter in North Carolina. Unlike Philadelphia, it lasted only a few weeks but to the sun spoiled Southerner, it seemed an eternity. And pig killing day to Ruby seemed especially long.

The night before, her grandmother, Louise, called to her from the T.V. room. "Well, Ruby, looks like you'll have to miss school tomorrow. Weatherman says clear and cold, temperature in the twenties and those hogs are fat and ready."

"Yeah, I figured," Ruby sighed. Her sadness wasn't because she loved school, but because she hated the job.

But Ruby thought she just might love school the next day as she stood by the pen of squealing pigs. Her uncle, Caleb, raised his rifle to his shoulder and aimed for their heads. The pigs ran to the unyielding walls of the pen as he fired and they fell, one by one. Ruby stood and watched. Sure they were dirty and greedy, but there was an innocence in their stupidity. But they had to be killed, according to Louise, for survival during the next winter.

Ruby knew that it wasn't the killing that bothered her so much then, as it was the slaughtering, the piece by piece utilization of everything.

She stood by the vat as the tractor lowered the split open pig into the scalding water. The air was thick and heavy with the smell of blood and seared hair. Ruby heard the blowing of the school bus horn as it stopped in front of her house, grateful that she was standing behind the shed, shielded from the sleepy peering eyes of the children. Ruby knew they would know what was going on, but she could avoid their teasing for now.

Later, it would be echoes of "Hey Ruby, you have ham for breakfast, raw?"

"Hey Ruby, you got pig shit on your foot! Naw, I guess it's always there."

"Hey Ruby, Hey Ruby, Hey Ruby. . ."

Sitting at her table next to the window, Ruby wondered which was worse, pig shit or Philadelphia slime on her feet. But she had always lied to the kids at school. She would tell them she had been sick or had gone into Raleigh shopping. She also lied

in the spring when she had to miss school, staying home to chop tobacco. She would put on her bathing suit and get a tan while the other girls at school were still a sickly pale. She would tell them she had been to the coast.

But she could never lie to the kids on the bus. They knew better; they saw. Heads hanging out of windows, they would yell, "Hey Ruby, having fun?"

"Hey Ruby, you grow it, I smoke it."

Ruby lit another cigarette and wondered if that's why she had started smoking. She looked down at her clothes, the wool blazer and gray skirt, the stockings and heels, all splashed with mud. On pig killing day, she had worn hand-me-down Penney's Big Mac overalls, bulging because of sweaters and sweat shirts worn underneath. And she wore a red stocking hat, jammed down on her head, emphasizing her black horn rimmed glasses and swollen red nose.

Ruby remembered the shame, knowing the kids on the bus had seen her bundled against the cold, looking heavy and cumbersome. The aunts and uncles, some cousins, the hired help, all came to get paid or to take home some country ham or sausage. Ruby had thought that none of them were like the men and women in Seventeen---not even close.

Now Ruby knew that no one looked like magazine men and women, not even themselves. She looked around the bar and saw people blowing on their hands, stamping their feet, wiping their noses on sleeves. Was this the big city? That man at the end of the bar could be her Uncle Caleb, except he didn't have a dip of snuff but a beer. In her month here, she had yet to see the beautiful people.

When she was thirteen, she had hated pork. Cosmopolitan never had pork recipes in it. On the morning before killing pigs, she had passed over the ham biscuits and red-eye gravy, eating instead cantaloupe. Ruby watched the gaping jaws of Louise as she had sopped the gravy with her biscuit. Suddenly, the cantaloupe became overripe. Too soft, too sweet, too wet.

Later the cantaloupe juice rose in her throat as she stepped into the smoke house to help her grandmother, Louise, scrape guts. The long intestines full of half digested corn were lying in a bucket. She and Louise would scrape them clean with a blunt knife, gently pushing out the corn so as not to tear the gut. Then they would blow into the cut end of the cleaned intestine, opening it so they could run warm water through it, the final step in the cleaning process. These guts would be used for stuffing sausage or for Louise's favorite dish, chittlins.

As Ruby stepped into the warmth of the smoke house, Louise said, "Feels good in here, don't it? Always put the youngest and the oldest in the warm to do the easy job." Ruby wasn't so sure about easy as she breathed the air which smelled not quite like feces but not quite like corn either. The closed-in heat from the fire only made the air heavier.

"What's the matter, Ruby? You look like you lost your best friend."

"Nothing, Grandma," she said.

"Yes sir, gonna have fresh chittlins for dinner. And meat to last a year. You're a mighty lucky girl."

Ruby, imagining the house filled with odors of cooking chittlins, almost gagged.

"And fresh sausage for breakfast," Louise added.

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"Grandma, I hate fresh sausage. I'll never eat a chittlin and maybe I'll never eat pork again as long as I live."

"Ruby, I'm ashamed of you. You ought to thank the good Lord you won't be eating no snowballs this winter."

"Grandma, I'm ashamed of this," Ruby said, tears turning cold in her eyes, too cold to escape.

"Ain't no call to be shamed, Sookie Girl," Louise said, her voice softening as she used the nickname Ruby hated. It was some deviated mixture of sugar pie, only less sweet.

"I could tell you about how much harder it was when I was growing up, but I know it won't help none. I can tell you another story though, just to make the time go faster. is that all right with you?"

Ruby nodded her head, blowing into an innard, feeling her lips becoming chapped.

"When I was a girl, about your age I reckon, my papa used to take us into town about every three weeks on the mule and wagon. It was a big adventure, I'll tell you. But two miles out of town, I'd make him stop, and I'd get off the wagon so nobody'd see me riding in the old claptrap. I wouldn't put my shoes on til town was just in sight. Didn't want my shoes to be dusty. Wanted to seem like a town girl. And then I'd do the same thing going home, only the other way around."

Ruby looked over at Louise, the graying hair escaping in wisps from the bun on the back of her head. The face was lined and creased from the sun past any point of prettiness and a small drop of water clung to the end of her nose. Her apron was caked with blood, half digested corn, and salt. And her shoes looked as if they'd never been anything but dusty. Her toothless mouth was pursed to blow into a gut.



"You see Ruby, we all grow out of our shame."

"Grandma, I'm going to help rub the meat down." This wasn't a good job because it would make Ruby's hands red and chapped, showing tell-tale signs from rubbing the coarse salt into the hams and shoulders. But she had to get away.

"And get away I did," Ruby thought as she finished her drink. "All the way to the city." She looked up as a burly man walked over to her table.

"Ain't I seen ya in here before, missy?" he asked.

"No," Ruby said, thinking that they must use that line everywhere.

He leaned over and planted his hands firmly on the table, staring at her with red-rimmed beady eyes. "Need a drink or somebody to drink wid?"

"I'm waiting."

"For what? Girls don't usually come in wid dates. You know, dey come in to mingle."

"Well, I came in to get out of the cold, but suddenly the outdoors seems like it would feel better and smell better, too," Ruby put her coat on and made her way out of the bar, haughtily, she hoped.

It had gotten dark outside and the people had thinned out some, but not much. The rain and sleet had slackened but the cold had increased. The street lights reflected unevenly from the shadows. It was only about seven, so Ruby felt safe walking the remaining seven or eight blocks to her apartment. "Always walk like you have someplace to to," she whispered to herself.

She thought of the man's burly shoulders and remembered the anger with which she had rubbed the coarse salt into the hams

and shoulders on that day. She remembered feeling its fleshy resisting warmth beneath her fingers. No spot could be left uncovered because the first warm day, the flies would come and ruin it.

Then Ruby thought of Louise, always telling stories. Ruby had never thought of Louise as proud. What did Louise have to be proud of? She repeatedly did the strangest things. Ruby remembered the day her puppy had gotten loose and run under the wheels of a car. It had lain there, bleeding, jerking, dying. Louise smashed its head in with a hammer. Ruby hated her for a long time after that. Of course it was a sort of kindness. But how can kind people smash puppies' brains out?

And then there was the time Ruby had stuck her head in the wasp nest. Louise came hobbling as quickly as she could, spitting out the wad of snuff from her mouth and slapping it wetly on Ruby's head. "Poison of the tobaccer'll draw out the poison of the sting," Louise said. Ruby had cried in pain and humiliation. But Louise had been the first to hear her screams.

As she neared her apartment, Ruby almost wished she could talk to Louise. She remembered watching her kindling the fire underneath the large iron pot embedded in brick. Louise had hoisted herself up from her knees and began to stir the pig skins around with a heavy oar which had been cut off to make an oversized spoon.

"Here, Grandma, I'll do that. You go on in the house and take a rest."

"Now Ruby, you know you can't do it all by yourself. You got to stir them skins all the time so they don't burn and spoil a pot of lard."

"I don't know why we need the stupid lard," Ruby said as<sup>21</sup>  
she stirred the skins rapidly.

"Because we use everything. And girl, you'd better slow down or you'll splash grease and lose the skin off that pretty arm."

"Wouldn't be such a big deal. My lips are chapped and my hands are as red as fire. Everybody at school will know what I've been doing, no matter what I tell them."

"And what you planning on telling them?" Louise asked as she dipped out the cooked skins and put them in the press. She turned the handle, squeezing out the remaining grease. Then she took the cracklins and laid them aside to dry. She waited, saying nothing, for Ruby's answer.

"I don't know."

"Bout time for the school bus. What you gonna tell them?"

"I'm going to hide and hope they forget about it by tomorrow."

"Lord, Ruby you got too much pride. Who you hiding from? Remember that story I told you?"

"Of course I remember it."

"Well, you don't remember the end because I didn't finish it before you ran outta here like fighting fire."

"I'm sorry."

"Anyway, one day after walking those two miles into town, most of it in bare feet, I noticed nobody was watching me. They didn't think I was a town girl. Nobody even looked at me. So the next time, I rode right beside papa on the mule and wagon clean into town. Nobody looked much then neither. My papa helped me off the wagon and bought me a cold drink. I realized then I'd been missing cold drinks all my life.

"Come on, Ruby, let's take a rest. Them cracklins is ready to eat and I got some cold sweet potatoes to go with them."

Ruby and Louise sat on the tree roots outside and began to peel their sweet potatoes. The skin had bubbled out and came off easily. Ruby left the sticky skin on the bottom to use as a handle.

Up the road, she could hear the school bus coming. She stood up and walked back into the smoke house. She could feel Louise watching her.

Inside the smoke house, she scooped up a handful of warm cracklins and walked back out to sit beside Louise just as the school bus drove past. The jeering faces were locked behind closed windows because of the cold. She couldn't hear a word they said, their faces pressed against windows, mouths and eyes open in soundless scorn.

Ruby remembered offering Louise a cracklin, popping one in her own mouth, and taking a bite of the cold sweet potato.

As she unlocked her apartment door, Ruby could almost taste the salty and sweet together.

Louise had bamboozled her that day. Ruby had felt free in her defiance, but the kids had laughed the next day and the next. They had laughed her all the way here, all the way to Philly. Ruby had never mentioned it to Louise.

Ruby pulled off her muddy shoes and stockings. Who were those kids on the bus anyway? They were stupid and dirty and greedy, all too ready to forget their shame. And who were all those people out there, she thought as she stood by the window inside her apartment.

Ruby reached to pick up the phone to call Louise, to tell her she hated the city, she wanted to come home, she missed. . .  
"But no. . .as long as I know," Ruby said to herself.

She sank softly to her fold-out couch.

## Blood on Snow

Ruby looked up from the dishwater as she heard her grandmother call. "Oh Jesus," she thought. "What now?" Her Grandmother, Louise, had recently suffered a heart attack and was confined to bed. Ruby had taken two weeks off from her job with a small Kansas newspaper to help out at home in North Carolina since her older sister was pregnant and her mother had two younger boys to look after plus a full time job. February was a slow time for news in Kansas anyway. Ruby thought people were too cold to rape and steal. Sometimes she thought people were even too cold to die, afraid of the cold ground, afraid of the snow piled too deep on graves, afraid they might thaw with spring and find themselves boxed in, unable to see the crocuses or call for help.

"Ruby, did I take all my medicine at lunch?" her grandmother asked as Ruby walked into the room.

"Yes, you did."

"You look tired. Why don't you come and sit by me and we'll talk awhile."

For a moment, Ruby almost relented. Louise, always an active woman, could not leave her four poster bed. Ruby tried to see the room through Louise's eyes. She saw Guideposts and Reader's Digests, medicine, and a water glass on the bedside table. A picture of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethesemane was on the wall. On the mantle above the fireplace were pictures of the family, herself included. Out the window, Ruby saw the side porch facing the highway. Her old hobby horse, Abby, sat calmly against the post. Someone had moved it out there to get it out of the way and had forgotten it. Now it had become a

permanent fixture. In Ruby's mind, it was all too depressing. She had come home to help, not to become engrossed again in the idea of family.

"Grandma, you know I've got work to do around here," Ruby said as she turned to leave.

"Ruby, I'm sorry I kept you up last night. It must have been all the medicine I'm taking."

"Just forget it." Ruby went back to her dishes, her hands shaking as she washed the glasses. She looked out the window at Louise's backyard and saw the Chinaberry tree silhouetted against the metallic blue sky. At least there was no snow here, only frost-burned brown grass. Further down across the road was the cemetery. A tent was set up in the nearest corner and Ruby could see the plastic roses and ribbons with silver engraving fluttering in the wind.

Louise's best friend had died three days ago and had been buried yesterday. The funeral procession had driven past the road in front of Louise's bedroom. Ruby forgot about the shades being up and Louise watched from her bed as the cars drove past. Ruby walked in just in time to see the last car drive by.

"Grandma, let me draw these shades. You should take a nap."

"Ain't no call to hide it from me. I been laying here listening to the grave digger all day. Seventy-six-year-old women die sometimes. And seventy-nine-year-old women who've had heart attacks sometimes can't go to their funerals."

Yesterday, Ruby had thought Louise was accepting, but the night had turned into a series of nightmares. As she dried the plates, Ruby remembered Louise's calls in the night.

"Ruby, my chest hurts." Ruby rushed into the room with the nitroglycerine tablets in her hands. "I've been hearing that

mechanical grave digger all night. It's stopped now but did you hear it? Is it cause it rained yesterday and the dirt kept piling in? Ain't she in the ground yet? It's too cold and too dark for her to be laying out there."

"Grandma, you know you must have been dreaming. They buried Agnes in the afternoon. Just take your pills and see if your chest eases up any."

"Well, I thought I was awake. When I was a girl working on the farm, sometimes I'd hear the tractor motor chugging all night. And when I was working in the sewing factory, sometimes I'd hear them sewing machines run all night. Do you reckon it's like that?"

"Yes, Grandma, I do."

Ruby had sat by Louise's bed and waited for her to return to sleep. Just as Ruby herself drifted into sleep in the chair, Louise bolted up in bed, yelling for Mr. Earlie.

"Grandma, you know Granddaddy has been dead for fifteen years." Ruby said. "You're just upset and been having nightmares. Let me get you a sleeping pill."

"Ruby, I saw him as clear as a bell. He was standing on the front porch, looking just like he did when he was thirty. He was straight and tall and dressed in that stiff white collar. He knocked on the front porch screen and said he was going away. He wanted me to go with him, but I couldn't get the screen unlocked. Ruby, it's all got to mean something."

"Grandma, forget all that superstition. You're just upset. Try to get some sleep."



Ruby thought sleep would be a nice thing as she dried the last of the dishes. Today, Louise seemed much calmer. Ruby hoped she would have no more morbid spells.

Ruby heard a knock on the front door and glancing at the clock, saw it was 2:30. Louise was supposed to be taking a nap. There was a sign on the front door requesting visitors to stay only thirty minutes. Ruby hoped it was someone willing to play by doctor's rules.

As she opened the door, her hopes were dashed. It was the preacher and his right-hand woman whom Ruby had always silently referred to as the wailer.

"Reverend Brown, Miss Clatterbuck, nice to see you. Grandma's asleep and can only have visitors for thirty minutes at a time."

"Well Ruby, we just wanted to have a word of prayer with Sister Louise. I'm sure it will help her sleep," the reverend said.

"And we wanted to share some words from the Scripture," Miss Clatterbuck added, thumping her Bible.

"Ruby, who is it?" Louise called from her room.

"Sister Louise, Miss Clatterbuck and me thought we would share a word of comfort with you," the Reverend said as he brushed past Ruby.

"Praise the Lord," Miss Clatterbuck said, entering the room. "You're looking better every day."

"Thank you, Sister," Louise said, sitting up in bed.

"We sure have missed you in church. On Saturday night, the Reverend here delivered a sermon that would have broke your heart. And Sister Jeannie, you know that young woman who just joined the church," Miss Clatterbuck said, rolling her eyes at

Ruby in a pointed glance, "well, she got filled with the Holy Ghost and spoke in tongues. It was truly an uplifting experience."

Ruby discreetly slipped out of the room, afraid they would suddenly turn on her, inquiring about her church in Kansas. Ruby hadn't been to church since she was seventeen, ten years ago. She remembered herself as a thirteen year old, walking to the pulpit while "Rock of Ages" rolled off the tongues of the brothers and sisters.

In the hell fire and damnation church of her grandmother, life and death were fearful. No one could be sure of their salvation. Everyone was sinful. To Ruby's young mind, her whole life was a sin. Every thought she had was bad. The covert glances at that red-headed boy who sat next to her in home room which gave her such a tingling in her stomach, they must be sinful. Sometimes, Ruby would lie awake all night, fearful that the sun would not rise and the moon would turn to blood. When the sun finally rose and Ruby knew the red of the sky was the sun's rays, she would creep back to bed and sleep for a couple of hours before school. When she turned seventeen, she discovered the wine of Boone's Farm and the joy of boys' hands in pick-up trucks.

But Ruby wasn't sure she could ever escape her guilt or her background. At twenty one, she had run as hard as she could to the heartland, to Kansas. There was no one there to remind her of her sin; they didn't know her. There was no one there to tell her to throw kisses at red birds for a wish, to talk the warts off her feet, to talk the fire out of a burn on her hand. People in other places knew it was all foolishness.

"Ruby," Reverend Brown called from the next room. "We'd like for you to share in a word from the Scriptures and prayer."

"Oh, God," she breathed, "did I come home for this?"

"I want to share some words from 'First Corinthians' with you for Sister Louise. 'But by the grace of God I am what I am; and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. . . .Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen; And if Christ be not risen then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.'

"I hope these are comforting words, Sister Louise. Now let's join hands in a word of prayer. . . ."

As Louise grabbed Ruby's hand, Ruby felt the flesh warm and trembling. "Excuse me, but I think something is burning on the stove," Ruby blurted, desperate to escape the talk of death and resurrection, faith and falling.

Once in the kitchen, Ruby thought to herself, "It was probably my soul I smelled," and smiled.

That night, Ruby sat in front of the fireplace, grateful Louise had drifted off to sleep easily. Ruby had been anxious about the preacher's visit. She was afraid all his talk would upset Louise. Louise, however, seemed to have been greatly comforted by the visit. Ruby smiled to herself as she realized she had been the one upset.

Looking into the fire, Ruby knew that even though she had left home, home had never left her. Louise's heart attack and

her sister's pregnancy had been excuses to test her freedom. Ruby wondered if she had failed.

Ruby sniffed the air, smelling the scent of collards which she has cooked for Louise's supper. She wondered if that smell would always be in her clothes, her nose, her mind. Did other people smell it on her as strongly as she herself did?

She stood, staring out the window, almost daring a star to fall or the sky to light up with some unexplained phenomenon. A falling star or signs in the sky were not to be wished on. As a child she had dreaded meteorite showers and would hide her head under a pillow. A falling star was a portent of death. Ruby stood by the window until the coals in the grate died and a chill settled in the room.

"Well, it looks like neither God nor the devil has got anything to say to me," she murmured. "Grandma would say visions lies in the eyes of the believer. Since I don't believe, I won't see."

She crawled between the cold sheets, waiting for her body to warm them up. As they warmed, she smelled the wood smoke in them. She grew still and fell asleep.

Sometime in the night she was awakened by a fierce shrieking outside her window. It sounded at first like a woman crying and screaming, then like a baby does when frightened. Afraid, Ruby pushed herself down into the covers, waiting for it to stop. Suppose it is a dream, she thought. She flucuated between the shame of discovering nothing and the fear of finding something real, alive. Then she remembered Louise.

She ran into the room and found her awake and listening. "Did you hear it, Ruby?"

"I think so. What is it?" Ruby said, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Just a screech owl. Don't hear them much in the winter or anytime for that matter. Have a right scary sound, don't they?"

"Yes, it does. If it's bothering you, I'll go out and shoo it away."

"No, child. My grandma used to say was a sign of death."

"No, an owl is just an owl," Ruby said, rushing out the door to throw rocks at the bird. By the time she reached the door, the noise had ceased. She tried to calm the fear she felt in her gut. She remembered the story of the omen too.

Going back to Louise's room, she asked, "Grandma, are you O.K.? Do you need some medicine?"

"Girl, do you need some? You're as pale as a ghost. Ain't no call to be afraid. Haunts and ghosts and screech owls can't hurt us. They only make us hurt ourselves. I'm not afraid."

"You don't think you're going to . . ."

"No, child. I reckon I did last night. But, Lord, that owl don't bother me. I suppose somebody's going to die, but somebody's always going to die. Now turn off the light and get some sleep."

Ruby made her way back to bed and after finally falling asleep, she dreamed of corpses, death, the end of the world. After only a couple of hours of fitful sleep, she awoke to see the sun beginning to rise, its winter rays of red spreading across the sky.

"Thank God," she murmured. "Do people ever grow up? Maybe it's just here, here that all the mumbo jumbo of haunts and Holy Ghost are real enough to be frightening."

As she rubbed her eyes, the phone rang shrilly across the cold room.

"Hello."

"Well, you sound awake. How's mama?" It was Ruby's mother.

"We've had a couple of bad nights, but the worst is over."

"You're right, it is. Liz had a little girl during the night!"

"What? She wasn't supposed to deliver for two weeks. Is she all right? The baby, is it O.K.? Why didn't you call before?"

"Yes. Everybody's fine. The baby was just a little premature, but she's fine. I guess she got tired of waiting. Liz is fine but all wore out. I didn't call til it was over so not to upset Mama. Tell her everything's fine and Liz named the baby Ruth Louise. I got to go now. I love you. Bye."

"Bye."

"Ruby," Louise called. "Who was on the phone? What's wrong?"

"Grandma, Liz had a healthy girl. You are now a great grandma, not that you weren't before," Ruby joked.

"Praise the Lord. Life just goes right on. I reckon that screech owl was a stork in disguise." Louise leaned back against her pillows. "What's she name it?"

"Ruth Louise."

"Well I'll be." Ruby saw the tears rise to Louise's eyes. "Ruby, go look in the last drawer of the wardrobe behind the clean linen. I think I got some homemade Scuppernong left. Pour us a little bit."

"Grandma! It's too early in the morning and you're too sick. . ."

"Girl, do like I tell you. It's wine I made for the church and I reckon Communion wine never hurt nobody, even if it ain't drunk in church. Now go!"

Ruby went and got the wine, amazed both at her grandmother's vehemence and at the fact that she kept alcohol in the house. She poured a little into two of Louise's finest ice cream glasses.

"Here and be careful. This stuff is strong."

"I reckon I know. Maybe this'll be just the thing. Here's to a new life and to a new Louise."

They both drank and sat quietly, looking out the window.

"Ruby, go get the Bible and read to me out of Solomon. The work can wait today."

"But Grandma. . ."

"Child, I know it's been a long time since you picked up a Bible, much less read one. But Solomon don't compromise nobody."

Ruby got the Bible and began to read. She had forgotten the beauty of the language, the intensity of the love expressed. There was no death, no judgement, only joy. As she paused to catch her breath before beginning a new chapter, she looked up to see Louise gazing out the window. Ruby looked out and saw a red bird resting on the bush near the porch. As it took flight, Louise held her pale, veined, age spotted hand tenderly to her lips. She kissed her fingertips lightly and blew. Ruby could almost see the kiss fly through the air, through the glass of the window, across the porch, past the painted hobby horse. She thought she saw the cardinal pause in its flight, just for a half second.

Louise sat still in her bed, not breathing, not turning her head, not unpursing her lips. Ruby watched a glow rise to her cheeks, then fade. For a moment, Louise had looked young, pretty, healthy.

"Grandma," Ruby said softly. "What did you wish for?"

Louise turned her head slowly and smiled. "Now if I tell you, it might not come true. But let's just say it was for me, for you, and for that new little baby who's got a long row to hoe."

Ruby smiled back and reached across to hold Louise's hand.

Later that afternoon, Ruby visited Liz in the hospital. Standing by the door to leave, she had turned to look at Liz and the baby. The room was dark, except for the soft light by the bed. Liz was looking at the baby in her arms as she nursed her. Liz was very pale but the baby was red-faced and squirming against her chest. Ruby knew that in almost every room in the maternity ward the scene was the same. She had always thought it stupid and sentimental, but this was hers.

A week later, Ruby stood in her own kitchen back in Kansas. She had hated to leave, but her home was in a different place. She was drinking tea at her kitchen table, watching the birds eat at the feeder. The snow was still deep on the ground so they flocked to the feeder every morning and evening, unable to find food elsewhere. As she watched, a red bird flew low across the white ground. Automatically, Ruby threw it a kiss and made a wish, thinking how much the cardinal looked like blood on the snow.



### Critical Apparatus

I believe one writes because she feels a compulsion to do so, and this involves evoking the baggage of previous experiences, sometimes fearful, which we all carry with us. A writer is no more aware, no more sensitive, no more responsive to the world around her than the nonwriter; she is only a filter, a recorder, or an interpreter of this environment. The writer may be a bit braver in that she must face and attempt to categorize this baggage. In exposing the jumble of experiences, the writer must often expose herself. I do not necessarily believe the narrator is the author; however, in short, writing is a dangerous business.

My three stories, "Institutions," "A Good Day to Kill Pigs," and "Blood on Snow," all involve the South. These stories focus on Ruby, a girl growing up in and attempting to grow out of the South. Ruby tries to reconcile the shame and pride involved in this maturation in the South, a land rich in both. I hope upon reading these stories collectively, one will discover a certain common theme, one which involves a girl/woman coming to realize that simply by growing up she need not, or cannot, grow away. The life and people she experiences are so much a part of her that if she tries to deny or alter them, she destroys an important part of herself.

The first story, "Institutions," takes place in the South, in North Carolina and involves Ruby's relationship with her father. The second story, "A Good Day to Kill Pigs," is set in Philadelphia. This deals with Ruby's first attempt to escape her home. It involves a series of flashbacks to a day back home when Ruby and her grandmother, Louise, killed pigs. The third story,

"Blood on Snow," is set in Kansas and North Carolina. Louise has had a heart attack and Ruby was flown home to help with her recovery. By the end of this final story, Ruby's reconciliation with her past has occurred. All three stories are told in the third person limited point of view through the character of Ruby.

My writing often involves the South. Growing up in the South imbues one with an obsession for land, tradition, and family. And perhaps due to a long-ago defeat, the Southerner is also extremely aware of the failings of these. The South is a land of ready-made symbols. Even the Southerner who is unaware of the meaning of symbols resorts to them frequently. A dead black snake hung in a tree will make it rain. A kiss thrown at a red bird will fulfill a wish. This does not necessarily imply belief; it simply must be done. In fact, this is not wholly unlike the act of writing itself.

And what is the Southern tradition? This is as difficult to define as the limits of the South itself. A Georgian would most likely call me, a North Carolinian, an "almost Yankee." I, myself, have trouble thinking of Baltimore or any place in Oklahoma as South. And I am sure any Southerner would refuse to refer to Florida as the South. But to the question at hand. I am mostly concerned with the Modern Southern Renaissance, beginning about 1918. Randall Stewart theorizes that this rebirth of Southern writing coincided with a rapid industrial growth.<sup>1</sup> This growth affected the whole of the United States, but the South was largely and still is an agrarian society. We have our Atlantas and our Charlottes, but many areas of the South are still isolated. Even in my lifetime since 1959, I saw my father's tobacco farm move from total manual work to the

automated tobacco picker. The Southern writer has dealt with the<sup>37</sup> effects of "disintegration of the old under the impact, the dislocations and deracinations, the gains in science and democracy, the losses in stability and tone."<sup>2</sup> My stories tend to reflect these notions. Ruby must reconcile the supposedly advanced outside world with her internal world of "haunts and Holy Ghosts," of land and its destruction, of religion and superstition.

Stewart also feels:

the genuinely Southern writer is usually recognizable as such. He almost necessarily grew up in the South. He shows an awareness of Southern ties and cannot throw them off if he would. Consciously or unconsciously, he is likely to exhibit Southern 'prejudices'. . . . Although he may live to in later years outside the South, he will continue to draw upon a fund of Southern materials for his writing.<sup>3</sup>

The Southern writer recognizes the imperfections of the region but remains loyal to the South in some sense. I believe my stories reflect these qualities in that they depict a faulty world in which the characters often place their faith in unstable objects, but they have faith nonetheless. And this faith helps them to transcend their troubles.

In my first story, "Institutions," Ruby is a young woman who has left college to return home to help her father farm. Paul, her father, goes mad--for a variety of reasons, since madness is never simple. Ruby must continue to nourish the farm while she

also nourishes her father. The battle must be waged on two fronts. And once the crops are destroyed, Ruby must decide what to do. Her will to survive is a point of honor.

William Faulkner's short story, "Odor of Verbena," seems to be quite similar to "Institutions." Bayard Sartoris must leave school and go home to avenge his father who been killed in a duel which is a remnant of the war. Bayard decides there is to be no more killing. This, to him, is a point of honor.

In both stories, the failure of traditional institutions plays an essential role. In my story, the family unit has failed; the mother has disappeared. The medical institution has failed; the doctor is unable to cure her father. Even the land has failed to a certain degree. The hail destroys the crops, yet the weeds continue to thrive. In Faulkner's story, the old institution of honor has failed, and it must be replaced by a new honor of unarmed bravery. The family has failed to a certain degree since by the end of the story, Drusilla, the stepmother, has abandoned the home. The old institutions created and sustained by the father-figure must be replaced by the new institutions of youth, by Ruby and Bayard.

A certain sense of presentiment exists in both stories, a sort of "I knew but I didn't want to know I knew." This notion is a strong one in Southern literature. The South is a land of signs and omens and engages the idea that one must reenact the lives of the fathers, that the cycle must be repeated until perfected or changed. In "Institutions," Ruby knows what she will find downstairs. And she should realize that a hail storm will come because Paul has spoken of it and that, we are told, is bad luck. In "Odor of Verbena," Bayard says to himself about the news of his father's death, "I should have known; I should

have been prepared. Or maybe I was prepared because I remember how I closed the book carefully, even marking the place, before I rose."<sup>4</sup>

Another similarity is the notion of the youth becoming the father-figure. Paul tells Ruby, "You'll pray, won't you? And you'll do all the worrying, won't you?" Ruby accepts the responsibilities of the failed older generation. And she most likely acts differently from how her father would have. She empties the home of the mother's books and clothing, symbols of a failed institution which her father has refused to abandon. Bayard also takes his father's place. Drusilla gives him the father's duelling pistols. As she kisses his hand, she realizes that he will not act as his father would have. Bayard also refuses the symbols of a failed institution.

And finally, there is the similarity of both Bayard and Ruby growing into the strength which neither is sure they possess. Ruby realizes she has the strength to lie and the strength to make that lie the truth. Bayard realizes:

I still had no yardstick to measure save that one consisting of what, despite myself, despite my raising and background (or because of them) I had for some time known I was becoming and had feared the test of it: I remember how I thought while her hands still rested on my shoulders:

At least this will be my chance to find out if I am what I think I am or if I just hope; I have taught myself is right or if I am just going to wish I were.<sup>5</sup>

Both Ruby and Bayard have grown into woman and man and, hopefully, the world they create will flourish.

"Clytie" by Eudora Welty is also similar to "Institutions" in certain respects. Seemingly, Clytie lost a lover in the past. Several hints appear in the story; the diamond cornucopia, the face which other faces come between, the disappointment when someone calls her name. Perhaps this lost love has been one of the sources of Clytie's madness. In "Institutions," Paul has lost his wife to the dreams of dime-store paperbacks. This may be one of the sources of his insanity. In both stories, the decay of the family plays an essential role. This decay seems to be a prominent theme in Southern literature. With the increase in industrialization, the extended family is disappearing and family heritage in the South is a point of honor.

This decay of family may often lead to a sense of anonymity. In "Clytie," before she commits suicide by diving into the rain barrel, she peers into the water and sees a stranger's face. She does not recognize herself. Similarly in "Institutions," Paul denies that Ruby is herself because Ruby is in the basement "all cut up." And later on, Paul says that the nurse and secretary in the hospital acted as if he weren't there. When the traditional institutions fail, people are unable to recognize their identity. At one point in "Institutions," even the sound of Ruby's own voice shocks her. This occurs after the destruction of the crops, another failed tradition.

"Institutions" does have some inherent problems. In any presentation of the bizarre, the writer runs some risk of losing his/her credibility. I tried to overcome this problem by creating a believable world of the farm and gaining the reader's trust. Then I attempted to lead the reader into the world of the mental institution. By juxtaposing these two worlds, I believe

my credibility is maintained. Thus, by the end when the world of the farm is also destroyed, I trust the reader has agreed to the rules of the story and is willing to accept the consequences.

I also sense that the story may have some problems with being overwritten. This is a fault I blame on reading Faulkner. As my writing matures, I expect to learn how to contain this tendency and use it to my benefit. I do not want to adjust the writing so much that I lose the extreme edge which I want to portray. I believe that good writing does exist just short of an extreme edge. And at this point in my writing, I prefer to be walking backward to that precipice, feeling with feet, testing the ground. Sometimes I miss my step and fall, failing but a lesson exists in this as well.

Another difficulty with the story lay in the depiction of an insane character's conversation. The primary problem with insanity in fiction is always how to make it submit to the basic rationality of the form. The motivation must be understandable, hence logical. I tried to overcome this by making his dialogue brief and to the point. As in the story of "Clytie," a character's actions may be more telling than the words which he or she speaks.

My second story, "A Good Day to Kill Pigs," is also set mainly in the South. Ruby has made her first move away from home to Philadelphia. The city is a bit overwhelming to her and she tries to remember the parts of the South which she hated, which made her move away. She remembers specifically the day of killing hogs, a job she hated.

This story bears some similarities to Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! In "A Good Day to Kill Pigs," Louise tells Ruby a story. The child Ruby believes the story will immediately help

her face the children on the bus. The woman Ruby realizes that the story was told to affect her life later. Similarly, Rosa Coldfield feels she must tell Quentin Compson the Sutpen story. Rosa claims to be doing this in case Quentin ever wants to write it down. Quentin says to himself, "Only she don't mean that. . . It's because she wants it told."<sup>6</sup> Louise also wants her story told. Both older women realize that the youth must hear the stories of their heritage. They must face the problems in order to transcend them.

Ruby hears her story as a child and remembers it later as an adult. So actually two Ruby's must attempt to deal with the story. Ruby must come to terms with the pride which Louise has replaced with something of more substance. Quentin seems to feel comparably. He thinks to himself:

. . .he would seem to listen to two separate  
 Quintins now---the Quentin Compson preparing for  
 Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since  
 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled  
 ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the  
 ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer  
 than most had, telling him about old ghost-times;  
 and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to  
 deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having  
 to be one for all that, since he was born and bred  
 in the deep South the same as she (Rosa) was---the  
 two separate Quintins now talking to one another in  
 the long silence of not people, in not language. . . .<sup>7</sup>

In other words, Quentin must listen and attempt to understand,



and he must also carry this story with him. In a sense, both Ruby and Quentin feel a need to rid themselves of the stories by telling them to the reader.

The notion of telling and consumption or comprehension is reinforced in "A Good Day to Kill Pigs" through the use of Louise's mouth and through the repeated references to eating. The pigs eat the man who has had the heart attack, and Ruby's family eat pigs. The children on the bus have open-mouthed jeering faces, and Ruby uses her mouth to lie. Louise's "toothless mouth was pursed to blow into a gut," and she has "gaping jaws" as she eats the ham. Finally in the end, Ruby refuses to use the phone an extension of the mouth, to tell Louise she misses home. The South attempts to consume its inhabitants, even though they may refuse to acknowledge the truth. In the final page of Absalom, Absalom!, Quentin also refuses to acknowledge a truth of a different sort. When questioned by Shreve on why Quentin hates the South, Quentin says:

" I don't hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I don't hate it," he said. I don't hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!<sup>8</sup>

I have rarely read anything as painful as the above outcry. Perhaps this quote has moved me more than any other to write about the subjects which I do.

Both Quentin and Ruby are searching for the meaning of their existence in the South. Seemingly, this meaning can only be found through a sense of belonging, and this belonging cannot

occur if they try to deny their roots. Ruby must accept her pig's bloodstained background, as well as her grandmother's wisdom. And this acceptance must somehow be merged into her existence in Philadelphia. Quentin, likewise, must accept and merge with the horrid Sutpen story. Quentin realizes:

Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm. . . . Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us.<sup>9</sup>

This expresses the epitome of the cyclical nature of the Southern culture referred to before; the youth predestined to relive and alter the sins and the graces of the fathers.

"A Good Day to Kill Pigs" is an ambitious story and quite possibly the least successful of the three. I do feel the premise is a good one, but often the depiction of activities alien to most of the world is a difficult task. The slaughter of pigs is not in itself grotesque, but the associations Ruby begins to form in her own mind of pigs and people is clearly an example of Flannery O'Connor's "a man forced to meet extremes of his own nature." Louise's smashing of the puppy's head is not grotesque until it is viewed through the eyes of Ruby. She has yet to learn the art of survival.

Originally, the story was told by Ruby as a child. This tended to limit the fullness of the dialogue and action. An accomplished writer is able to tell a story through anyone's eyes, as is evident in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury. But in my story, Ruby does not reap the benefits of Louise's wisdom until she is an adult and has moved away. She is then able to recognize the truth in Louise's lie. In order to accomplish this, I set the story in Philadelphia and gave Ruby a series of flashbacks. This presented yet another problem. Too many flashbacks tend to confuse the reader and cause him/her to lose interest and a sense of continuity. Thus, I reworked the story again, trying to limit the switching of time and scene. Perhaps the most important aspect of this problem, however, is the fact that the story occurs on only two days, widely spaced in time, yet so similar as to cause an association in Ruby's mind. This is usually the "stuff" of short stories, a day so special in the life of a character that it somehow alters his/her perception of the world.

Hopefully, my final story, "Blood on Snow," is a culmination of Ruby's experiences. Ruby must aid Louise in her process of

recovery from a heart attack. The grandmother is weak and has preoccupations with death, religion, and superstition. This causes Ruby's own hidden obsessions to surface. In helping Louise to deal with these fears, Ruby must also reconcile her own doubts and beliefs.

"Blood on Snow" is perhaps my most successful story. At one point in the story, I tried to stop, even actually reverse time through my use of language. This is decidedly Faulkneresque. Near the end of the story, after the birth of the new baby:

Ruby looked out and saw a red bird resting on the bush near the porch. As it took flight, Louise held her pale, veined, age spotted hand tenderly to her lips. She kissed her fingertips lightly and blew. Ruby could almost see the kiss fly through the air, through the glass of the window, across the porch, past the painted hobby horse. She thought she saw the cardinal pause in its flight, just for a second.

Through word choice, attention to detail, and pace, I have tried to stop the passage of time. This is especially important at this point in the story. Louise's youth becomes Ruby's youth and they mingle, becoming one. At the same time, Ruby realizes her youth has passed by as well; the kiss flies by the painted hobby horse.

In Faulkner's Light in August, he manages to stop, reverse, and project time. As Lena Burden walks along the road, she passes a wagon. She hears it progressing behind her:

The sharp and brittle crack and clatter of its

weathered and ungreased wood and metal is slow  
 and terrific: a series of dry sluggish reports  
 carrying for a half mile across the that still  
 pinewiney silence of the August afternoon.  
 Though the mules plod in a steady and unflagging  
 hypnosis, the vehicle does not seem to progress.  
 It seems to hang suspended in the middle distance  
 forever and forever, so infinitesimal is its  
 progress, like a shabby bead upon the mild red  
 string of road. So much is this so that in the  
 watching of it the eye loses it as sight and sense  
 drowsily merge and blend, like the road itself,  
 with all the peaceful and monotonous changes  
 between darkness and day, like already measured  
 thread being rewound onto a spool. So that at  
 last, as though out of some trivial and  
 unimportant region beyond even distance, the  
 sound of it seems to come slow and terrific and  
 without meaning, as though it were a ghost  
 travelling a half mile ahead of its own shape.  
 "That far within my hearing before my seeing,"  
 Lena thinks. She thinks of herself as already  
 moving, riding again, thinking then it will be as  
if I were riding for a half mile before I even got  
into the wagon, before the wagon ever got to where  
I was waiting, and that when the wagon is empty  
of me again it will go on for a half mile with  
me still in it. . .<sup>10</sup>

Faulkner has played with time through words. After reading a

passage like the one quoted above, I realize how powerful our language can be. Not only can words transcend time, they are able to capture and alter it.

My story, "Blood on Snow," does have some problems, one of which may be the title. The title may be a bit heavy, but I resisted changing it because I think it reflects some important meanings in the story. The idea for the story was born one Kansas winter's day when I was out for a walk. A cat had killed a cardinal and its blood was on the snow. I began to wonder how long that blood would remain on the snow. And when the snow did finally melt, would the blood be absorbed into the ground, remaining there forever? These perusings then caused me to wonder about my own Southern heritage of "haunts and Holy Ghosts." Even though my own culture may not be as obvious as the smell of collards, I feel that it has been absorbed into an important part of me, never to disappear.

Perhaps another problem is the attention paid to the birth and death. These are such extremely important concerns that they are often difficult to effectively deal with in a short story. But as stated before, a writer must test his/her edges and extremes. Also, I believe Louise's concern about death is justified due to the situation which I set up. She does not die; however, her fears of death, I feel, are ones which we all, at one time or another, experience. And I think the birth of the granddaughter is set up well enough to be credible. The older sister's pregnancy is mentioned in the beginning of the story. The unfulfilled omen of the screech owl is not an O'Henry twist, but is instead a sign to Ruby that her background cannot be denied. It can bring joy as well as fear. Hopefully, the end of

the story is uplifting and transcends the limits of the Southern belief. We all must, in one way or another, find places to put our past experiences. They may be unpleasant, but once we discover a positive way to utilize them, they can create an understanding of the world in which we live.

Writing is a difficult business. One must first have a story to tell and then find a way to tell it which makes it more than just a story. The best stories must be more than simple weather reports of life. I want to tell a reader something he has always known but has never allowed to surface. As William Faulkner stated in his Nobel prize acceptance speech, a writer must not forget, "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and sweat."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Randall Stewart, foreword, The Literature of the South, ed. Thomas Daniel Young, Floyd C. Watkins, Richmond Croom Beaty (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1968) vii.

<sup>2</sup>Stewart vii.

<sup>3</sup>Stewart viii.

<sup>4</sup>William Faulkner, "Odor of Verbena," The Literature of the South, ed. Thomas Daniel Young, Floyd C. Watkins, Richmond Croom Beaty (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1968) 1022.

<sup>5</sup>Faulkner, "Odor of Verbena," 1024.

<sup>6</sup>William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Random House, 1936) 10.

<sup>7</sup>Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, 9.

<sup>8</sup>Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, 378.

<sup>9</sup>Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, 261-262.

<sup>10</sup>William Faulkner, Light in August (New York: Random House, 1932) 5-6.



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RUBY

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

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My report consists of three short stores, "Institutions," "A Good Day to Kill Pigs," "Blood on Snow," and a Critical Afterword. These stories focus on Ruby, a girl attempting to grow up in, and to grow out of, the South. "Institutions" deals with Ruby's relationship with her father, a man who has not been able to understand the land which has given him life yet taken his sanity. The last two stories, "A Good Day to Kill Pigs" and "Blood on Snow," deal with Ruby's relationship with her grandmother, Louise. In both stories, Ruby attempts to reconcile the shame and pride involved in growing up in the South. These stories are told in the third person limited point of view through the character of Ruby. The Critical Afterword examines the manner in which my stories have been affected by the Southern tradition. In my discussion, I refer to William Faulkner's "Odor of Verbena," Light in August, and Absalom, Absalom! and Eudora Welty's "Clytie." Flannery O'Connor is also mentioned briefly.

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