

Where is the Hospitality of it All? A Writer's Treatment of Her Own Life

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Abstract

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The following paper examines the aspect of control in a non-fiction writer's life. Is the ability to write in the non-fiction genre one of the greatest forms of control over one's own life? How are southern writers like Dorothy Allison, Janisse Ray, Carson McCullers, Alice Walker, and Flannery O'Connor controlling the reader's experience in their work? The three techniques that the paper investigates as a means of control over narratives both fictional and non-fictional are voice, hospitality, and structure. Voice is the distinct flow of the story and can change as needed to disrupt the narrative. Hospitality is the term used for reader accessibility in this paper and can open the narrative up to readers who might not be familiar with aspects of the piece such as setting, culture, language, or history. Structure is a tool that controls how information is being given to the reader. Using structure allows the author to control pace, emphasis, and suspense. Great southern writers maintaining complete control over their narratives while refusing to let the southern narrative be controlled by white supremacy and erasing histories.

Where is the Hospitality of it All? A Writer's Treatment of Her Own Life

*"This is story about control / My control Control of what I say / Control of what I do
/And this time I'm gonna do it my way / I hope you enjoy this as much as I do / Are we ready? / I
am 'Cause it's all about control, / And I've got lots of it"- Janet Jackson, From "Control"*

A writer must have control.

I wanted to write about my life because I wanted to have some kind of right to it. I thought that if I could write about my life then I had a sort of retroactive control over this life even when I didn't. I couldn't control what my dad said to me when I told him I was going to go on a date with a black boy, I couldn't control the eviction from our house my freshman year, I couldn't control the COVID-19 pandemic, I couldn't control when the tulips by the birdbath rose from the ground, I couldn't control where I grew up, I couldn't control my whiteness, I couldn't control much of anything. When Janet Jackson made *Control* she had just fired her father from his position as her manager. She knew *Control* would be the album that would "make or break" her career. I don't like to go into drafts with that mindset, but I also don't have a wildly famous brother in the same field as my own. Writing is all about control, and I think southern writers keep their control on their sleeves. I think this makes for a reading experience that makes the ending feel inevitable once the story, book, or sentence ends. I'm going to examine how some writers show control over their material through voice, accessibly or what I will call hospitality, and structure.

All southerners are storytellers, let me be more clear about that. Everyone tells stories down there, by word of mouth, by mail, by sending pictures. Always about one thing or another— about one person not wanting to have her appendix removed, about the last time it rained so much or so little, about a cousin shooting off his testicle Christmas morning because he

put a gun from Santa in his pocket. My mother told me all those stories recently. It is something you pick up on in the south. The knowledge you should carve out a bit more time during your errands because someone is likely to keep you with a story. Even if they are not your mother. Even if they do not know you.

To keep someone interested in (or controlled by) a story is a skill. It is a skill that a writer will spend years learning. My father told me stories about his life and stories about me that I was too young to remember. He wasn't confident enough to make stories or *create fiction*, but he would always find something out about Mama Jo or his sisters or something would happen at work at the campground and he would have a story to tell me before bed. He was born in Oklahoma and although the stories are quite as entertaining as *The Tiger King* they were still dangerous enough— Roman candle fights, snake encounters of the venomous kind, and wild black panthers. Mama Jo would come to my grade school class every Halloween and tell us Ghost and spooky stories one about a witch who lived in a house shaped like a pumpkin and with her fifty-year's of Virginia Slims Light voice, she captivated us as she cut each shape into the orange construction paper and unfolded a jack-o-lantern.

We were completely controlled by her voice. The way she spoke and paused her fingers cutting little triangles out of this folded paper, the inevitable jack-o-lantern (what else could it have possibly been!) thrilled us as it was meant to thrill us. Our belief was suspended and we jumped when she reached her hand out pretending to be some ghoulish thing.

I call my parents every day. My dad wanted me to be a doctor, and now during the COVID-19 pandemic, he asks me why I don't have a job that is essential. Tells me I should go back to school for it. But don't have an essential job? Writing life is an essential job right now. Recording the days, recording the hours, recording who is sick and when and where and how

many more. What were the symptoms like? How much food is on the aisles and how much panic in the carts? I get squeamish if I see needles or blood, it was the main reason I had to hang up his dream of scrubs for me. At the time he said— “I get squeamish too.” It sounded like pride or self-loathing but it was too hard to decide which.

He doesn't think writing is my job. He meant my retail job which I was furloughed from on April 1st. The company made a big show about how they were going to continue paying employees for the first two weeks of national store closures, which is how far out the schedule is made. After that, thousands of part time employees furloughed without pay— but we got to keep our employee discount. This time has made me more aware of control than usual. Things that are both in my and out of my control. In psychology there is the idea that people attribute circumstances in their lives with either an internal or external locus of control in mind. Those with internal loci tend to think their circumstances are caused by their own efforts, they are in control of their lives, and those with external loci tend to think their circumstances are caused by other factors unrelated to their behavior. I used to think that having an internal locus of control was superior, a very southern you make your own way kind of ideology. But now, I think its important to have a balance of these controls. To know what is in one's control and what is not. I think that the character Bone in Allison's novel *Bastard Out Of South Carolina* exemplifies the complexities that come with striking a balance between both controls.

A reader is not typically in control of what they are reading unless it's a interactive book of some kind. When I read *Bastard* I felt helpless. The inevitability of it all only made that feeling worsen as I continued to read. The only way I could reconcile this feeling was remembering that the book is told through Bone's point of view and in her voice. The strong voice work in this book kept me grounded as I read. The first sentence that I highlighted while

reading *Bastard* was: “My mama didn’t have much to say about it, since strictly speaking, she wasn’t there.” It’s the third sentence, chapter 1, page 1.

I never really liked to read. I still don’t really. It’s true that you have to read to be a writer, so reading is more of a chore than it was before. Books non-writers read to feel something are my workbook. My coworker told me to read *Bastard* when I moved to Seattle and said I was a writer from the South. Between the ideas of “what are *you* doing *here*?” and “don’t you miss your family?” she gave me this suggestion and I put it onto my list of half remembered titles I would never get to— at least until after my thesis year. But I wish I had gotten to it sooner. *Bastard* will shape my writing from now on. I read it twice.

I am attracted to the power of a line. The lines that stick out to me guide my understanding of a book more than anything else. I control my own experience reading by remembering specific lines. I can feel the southern girl grit in all the lines below.

“Family is family, but even love can’t keep people from eating at each other.”(10)
”Ain’t it time the Lord did something,” (14)
“Everything seemed to come back to grief and blood, and everybody seemed legendary.”
(26)
“All of us were screaming, and no one could help.” (106)
“Oiled, smooth and supple as the gristle under chicken fat.”(112)
“I knew how mama liked her ice tea.” (131)
“Don’t say that, it’s bad luck to mention your own grave” (161)
“why hadn’t God given me a voice?” 167
“Things come apart so easily when they have been held together with lies.” (248)
“No.” (281)
“I didn’t care anymore who got killed.” (304)

In reading the book twice I hated knowing what was going to happen. The ending was controlling my reading instead of the voice. The details that Bone chooses to point out contribute not only to the fullness of her life but also keep her in control of her life even though there are so many things she can’t control. I understood how young Mama Anney was throughout the book, she was only sixteen when she had Bone, nineteen when Lyle died and at *nineteen* Aunt Ruth

told her, “‘Nothing else will ever hit you this hard,’... ‘You’re as old as your’e ever gonna get, girl. This is the way you’ll look till you die’” (8). This voice of certainty is a voice of control—control over age over looks over grief.

Allison continues to remind the reader of images and phrases throughout the book before the reader has a chance to forget about them. She foreshadows events and inevitable images throughout the book without being too heavy handed. Bone will notice something like the blue veins in her pale face, pages after the fiery death of Shannon Pearl who was known for the pasty quality of her skin and blue showing veins. That fiery death too—the fire serving as a reminder of the image Bone often orgasms to. And Bone choosing to go to her funeral is one of the few decisions she gets to make in the book.

The characters talk about God in *Bastard* like they know Him. The South is full of Christians as is *Bastard*. The characters call out God’s name in vain or otherwise quite often, and Bone dwells on the existence or in-existence of God throughout the novel. Bone looks back on her childhood, and turns it into a cohesive story based on her own experience. She includes the retellings of stories her aunts and mother told her for the events that she didn’t witness firsthand or comprehend like as her birth. She uses religion to escape. She turns her control over to God.

Southern literature is often about escaping the place—mentally or physically. The South is a place people can’t wait to leave until they do. Bone is often fantasizing about her world. At the end of Chapter eight Bone creates a fantasy around the hospital scene, “If there really was a God, or even magic, that air would blow through me and out again. It would go back down that road to the hospital, sweep up that dirt, and throw it in Daddy Glen’s eyes. It would make him see who he was, what he’d done” (116). She fantasizes about the doctor who treated her. Hoping he would come out of the hospital and yell at Glen for what he’d done to her and Glen would

then cry and let Jesus into his heart and he would beg for forgiveness from everyone including Bone: “Yes, I would say. / Yes, I forgive you. / Then probably I would die” (116). She finishes her fantasy with those lines each one lives on their own line like divine verse. Forgiveness and God are two sides of the same coin. I won’t go as far as to say God represents forgiveness in this book, but when Bone questions if God is real she is also questioning if forgiveness is possible.

Bone’s voice is directly related to religion. After Bone visits the revival tent, with Aunt Ruth, she becomes touched by and interested in gospel music. So much so that she wants to be a gospel singer but she doesn’t have the chops for it. Her aunts and mother tell her so, so she practices often to exercise her voice. She never becomes good enough to sing with the choir. She curses God for not giving her a voice. This moment has a double meaning. Bone often wants to tell her aunts and her mother how she feels and about the abuse she suffers. She often feels that she will cause trouble for her mother if she speaks up about something. She knows her mother works hard for very little. It is her interaction with Aunt Ruth that comes to mind, ““Well, can we talk to each other or not?’ ... ‘I don’t know.’” This interaction is mentioned again in Chapter 17 after Aunt Ruth’s death, ““Can we talk to each other or not?’ She had asked me. I had tried, but in the end I had lied”(233). The whole book coming from Bone’s voice and perspective is a symbol of the voice she achieves by the end of the book and her control over her memories.

In my collection I’d accidentally written the same sentiment of the last line of Faulkner’s *Absalom! Absalom!* that last line being: “I don’t hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; I don’t. I don’t! I don’t hate it! I don’t hate it!” Janisse Ray uses this last line as the start to one of the chapters in her memoir too. I’ve never read any Faulkner. But maybe something greater than reading or place connects us southerners. A love hate relationship with everything from the wisteria to the water moccasins. In *The Ecology of a Cracker*

Childhood, Janisse Ray reflects on her own childhood growing up in a junkyard in Georgia and shares research about how the Georgia landscape has changed over the years. She also hopes to uncover the truth of southern history, “I search for vital knowledge of the land that my father could not teach me, as he was not taught, and guidance to know and honor it, as he was not guided, as if this will shield me from the errancies of the mind or bring me back from that dark territory should I happen to wander there. I search as if there were a peace to be found” (98). Her voice throughout the book is thoughtful but also full of loss.

The loss of the longleaf pines in the South is a major source of inspiration for the book. She speaks of them as if she saw them in their prime, “It is as if a roundtable springs up in the cathedral of pines and God graciously pulls out a chair for me, and I no longer have to worry about what happens to souls” (65). Ray is concerned with the balance of nature and humanity, her memoir is not only a retelling of her childhood but also a brutal confrontation of the deforestation not only of the south but the world as a result of industry and colonization. At times I find her voice a bit too preachy, “Our culture is tied to the longleaf pine forest that produced us, that has sheltered us, that we occupy. The forest keeps disappearing, disappearing, sold off, stolen” (271). It is an inevitable ending, this call to replant our forests. But I don’t think that the South has a viable future in its past. Ray never directly mentions our nation’s history with Slavery or land theft and it seems critical to her discussion of deforestation and misuse of resources. The Southern narrative is not a white narrative and the South is not a white safe haven. In fact, I often miss the south because of the great diversity that exists there.

“According to Jam, he and Lewis had very specific ideas for the type of record they wanted to make when they began working with Jackson on Control. ‘We wanted to do an album that would be in every black home in America,’ Jam says. ‘We were going for the black album

of all time. Gritty, raw” (Decurtis). *Control* ended up being a major hit for most families in America no matter their race. The album was not only accessible to Black families then and it is still accessible to listeners nearly forty years after it was released in 1986. The album gives me all the tools I need to understand it without having experienced Jackson’s life. *Control* has a lot of hospitality. I say hospitality because it is a kindness to let someone in on a narrative they have not or could not experience themselves.

What is southern hospitality? It’s the idea that southerners are kinder, more polite or more welcoming than other people in America. So kind that they will let strangers into their home to sit at their table. I used to think that southern hospitality was more of a “fakeness” rather than a “kindness” that maybe southerners were kind because they were covering something up. Having moved to Seattle, Washington, I miss southern hospitality. Even a fake hospitality feels better than loneliness. The two places have their crests and troughs. Seattle has crows. Georgia has jays. They both share a love of straw and pumpkins, of foraging for pecans on the ground—muddy or fresh, of picking apples, taking photos of families on hay bales and flannel and the color orange of bonfires. But people in Seattle feel like strangers to me.

I don’t know what it is— maybe its because I lean the most conservative of the liberals that I meet or that I have too much time on my hands, but I wish that there was a greater sense of kindness and connection instead of virtue signaling and self-righteousness. Everyone is trying to keep up with the Jones’s while pretending they aren’t. It’s hard to write here, because everyone is writing with an agenda in mind. Nothing feels free, it feels like every word is indebted to something or someone and everyone expects the writer to pay up. There is no art for art’s sake out here and maybe it doesn’t exist anywhere, but back home we were at least hospitable to the idea. Out here art is always an agent for change, but I don’t believe that’s always what it has to

be. Art can be an agent of control. Especially in times like the COVID-19 pandemic where the only way we can let people in is through words and art.

I find Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" to be quite accessible. It is brief and clearly written, but when I first read it, I believe in middle school, I had no idea what the story was about. Then in high school and undergrad I spent most of my time with my boyfriend who did his final project in undergrad about Black social justice movements. After rereading "Everyday Use," I thought that Dee was pushing herself into a space of protest— she changed her name to "Wangero," she spoke of black power, and she felt quite in control of her life. She returns as the prodigal daughter— she has thrown away her family heritage. Not only by rejecting her name but for returning and insulting her family home. Wangero is commonly read as the villain of the story but the real villain is slavery. Walker encourages readers to see beyond the relationships between Maggie, Wangero, and the narrator and into each character's connection to their shared heritage.

Maggie the younger of the two daughters is portrayed as respectful and she has burn scars on her legs from a fire that took their first home. The daughters' perceived reactions to the shared trauma are quite different. About the fire and Maggie the narrator says, "Sometimes I can still hear the flames and feel Maggie's arms sticking to me, her hair smoking and her dress falling off her in little black papery flakes. Her eyes seemed stretched open, blazed open by the flames reflected in them(1). And about Dee, "And Dee. I see her standing off under the sweet gum tree she used to dig gum out of; a look of concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy gray board of the house fall in toward the red hot brick chimney. Why don't you do a dance around the ashes? I'd wanted to ask her. She had hated the house that much" (1). The relationship between a

mother and a daughter is an accessible story for me so is the loss of a house with sweet gum trees around. But I think that even a reader who didn't have that could find value in just that story.

But Walker continues on, the story is about Dee's homecoming. But when Dee gets home she tells her mother to call her Wangero. The narrator says, "'What happened to 'Dee?' I wanted to know. 'She's dead,' Wangero said. 'I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me'" (3). The story conflict comes to a head when Wangero asks if she can have some quilts her grandmother made, but they are meant to go to Maggie. The narrator says she can't have them and Wangero ends up leaving, angry over it. Wangero cannot take a piece of her family heritage while rejecting it at the same time. The South must do the same. The South cannot reject its heritage with erasure while taking heirlooms from that same heritage. I'm trying not to take only the beautiful heirlooms of the South and put them on display in my collection either.

The American South was once unjustly controlled by white men. The South is thankfully no longer controlled by white men. I wonder if there is room for another white voice in the Southern literary canon even if that voice is from a white woman. But I can be nothing else, I can control what I write about but I cannot control my whiteness. I think that non-fiction allows the writer to place all their cards on the table. I can choose what truths I am hospitable to and which I am not. And in doing so become a white southern writer that brings more truth to the complex narrative that is the South. To both build the mirror and the stage from my own perspective and experience, and in doing so maybe change expectations of how Southerners treat their history.

I don't expect to write anything in my life that will revolutionize the way writers think about writing. After I read *Beloved* by Toni Morrison I wondered if I should write anything

anymore at all when I knew I would never write anything as good. If Janet Jackson didn't make *Control* because of how successful her bother was at the time we would have missed out on one of the best albums ever made. The thing about writing is you have to be damn confident to do it. I have a lot of writerly confidence and maybe it's a misplaced confidence but it keeps me writing after I read things that are much better than my own. It keeps me writing when things are hard. It keeps me writing through the negative feedback and through the positive feedback.

As a writer I always have the chance to stop. I always have the chance to go back, delete that sentence, take out that idea, change the setting, delete the story, never share it. No one will ever force my pen to the page, or my fingers to the keys, or my voice to speak. I am not special but I do have a story to tell. This white woman from the South has a story to tell. When writing my collection I found it difficult to be hospitable to people or events in my life that I don't have fond memories of. I found it difficult to be hospitable to myself. I don't think many southern writers are. Each book written by a southern woman writer is one image in a collection of prints hanging on the gallery of American literature. And when they are all there on the wall the totality of the American South becomes fuller. There are moments repeated in each of them, phrases and ideas repeated forty years apart, states apart, heritages apart, and in those moments the things at connect the southern experience. It comes from knowing southern life is hard and wanting to sand that edge down, from not knowing where your neighbor comes from or carries with them and wanting to share a good moment in a life that might be full of strife.

Carson McCullers published *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* when she was twenty-three. *Control* came out when Janet Jackson was twenty. I am twenty-six and I religiously tell myself that everyone has their own timeline for success. I turn into one of those online articles about how Tina Fey didn't get famous until she was well into adulthood and Lizzo two years ago

worked at Liberty Mutual. I hate those articles. McCullers said that she wished she hadn't gotten so well known so early, something I won't have to worry about.

Our 2014 homecoming shirts at my undergraduate Alma Mater, Georgia College, had a little picture of Flannery O'Connor and her quote, "When in Rome, do as you do in Milledgeville" on them. It was the same shirt for business majors, art therapy majors, stem majors, and English majors. She is the most famous alumna that Georgia College had. She raised peacocks at the farm Andalusia where the literary societies had their inaugurations of new members. You could go see the barn that inspired the ending of "Good Country People," work landscaping for extra money in the summer, and see the peacocks.

I don't think my writing style is in any way similar to O'Connor's. At times I think O'Connor's tone is harsh and a bit inhospitable like she is always building something up for the inevitability of tearing it down. But I do find many similarities between "Everyday Use" and "Good Country People." Both are about the guise of hospitality, both are about a mother and daughter relationship, both take place on a small house in the southern country, and both daughters change their given name. I don't think that "Good Country People" is as accessible as "Everyday Use." The O'Connor is much longer and allows more room for the build up and the tear down. The first sentence to bring me in is in the second paragraph, "Joy was her daughter, a large blond girl who had an artificial leg. Mrs. Hopewell thought of her as a child though she was thirty-two years old and highly educated." This sentence is doing good work to characterize Hulga and Mrs. Hopewell's relationship but by the end of the story we realize the real conflict is not between them but their differences in how they understand and view the world.

Hulga views the world using her intelligence and nihilism and Mrs. Hopewell views the same world from her opposing southern traditions of bliss and godliness. Mrs. Hopewell is

unable to imagine the world in new ways the world simply is with all of its crests and troughs, “Nothing is perfect. This was one of Mrs. Hopewell’s favorite sayings. Another was: that is life! And still another, the most important, was: well, other people have their opinions too!” (3). While Joy wants to be a philosopher, a lecturer, a woman who can outsmart anyone else. But both are outsmarted by Manly Pointer, that name is just too good. In “Good Country People,” O’Conner puts pressure on the validity behind southern hospitality in both characters Manly Pointer and Mrs. Hopewell. Manly is not a Bible salesman at all but a wandering charlatan who tries to seduce Hulga and ends up taking her wooden leg— but he uses the idea of good country people to get his foot in the door. Mrs. Hopewell uses southern hospitality to convince herself that her life is better than it is and that she is a good mother. It’s still hard for me to believe the ghoulishness of this short story. Mrs. Freeman’s fascination with bodily harm, Mrs. Hopewell’s obsession with ugliness, Joy’s pedantic fantasies, and how they are hidden under hospitality.

Control is nine tracks long. It was the first time that Jackson had been asked to contribute to her own songs as both writer and singer. It is a semi-autobiographical album. Writers can do anything with their work— if that’s not complete control I don’t know what is. Artists in general have complete control of what they create. And the hand of my grandmother telling spooky stories reappears, it’s a scary idea for me anyway. It’s overwhelming to have limitless possibilities. It’s overwhelming to make choices. I used to think writing was a gift, but it is really making decisions. And learning best how to make them. I wanted to make a choice about how to tell some stories from my life.

The structure of my thesis “The Marlboro Blues” is short non-fiction. It is separated into four sections by a series of vignettes my father told me as a girl. The short non-fiction pieces that follow the vignettes are all related in some way to or elaborate on that section break. The first

one is: “**I.** / Once there was an old man, he had his little daughter with him. / They went into a general store and she said, ‘I want / a chocolate ice cream cone.’ The old man said, ‘we do not have enough money.’” I think beginning the creative thesis this way gives me control not only of the structure and order of the short non-fiction pieces but makes them all a bit more accessible. It centers the more associative elements of my thesis. Each section break is in the same form with some direct repetitions. I feel that these breaks will ground the reader and increase the totality of “The Marlboro Blues.”

When asked about teaching, Dorothy Allison said in an interview with *Southern Women* magazine:

They’ve been conditioned—especially young Southern writers—to write in a voice that is not their own. I try to get them to take a breath and let that go. By that I mean you have to allow yourself to use a voice that is unique and your own, that is not what you’ve read before. There is a certain impulse in all writers to want to please. You have to give up wanting to please.

I agree that writers are conditions to write in specific ways, but I also think they are encouraged to write in certain forms. They are encouraged to choose to write either poetry or prose, fiction or non-fiction because it is easier to define one or the other. *Control* by Jackson is a combination of pop, R&B, soul, funk, disco, and rap music genres; it gave rise to the new genre new jack swing. I can’t control what has happened in my life but I can control the way I tell it. Allison wrote a fiction novel. Janisse wrote a conservation memoir. O’Connor wrote short stories. I will write short non fiction.

In Milledgeville we had two scholars one who studied Carson McCullers and another who studied Flannery O’Conner and the students could either take the McCullers class or the

O'Conner class. I didn't take either, I heard they were both very hard and I didn't want to take a hard class my last semester. My favorite work by McCullers is *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. It's a book that I don't mind reading. The novel is short and told in four parts. It is about the circumstances of a murder that occurs on a military base and the hidden desires of the characters involved. Something that is not immediately accessible to me is the setting of a military base, but McCullers is able to balance the setting, the characters, the affair, and the murder so well that I feels more like we are on a strange private island. The first sentence that arrested me is on the second page: "In his eyes, which were of a curious blend of amber and brown, there was a mute expression that is found usually in the eyes of animals." She makes the everyday seem extraordinary and the extraordinary seem every day.

In McCullers' Essay "The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing" she says, "A writer can only say he writes from the seed which flowers later in the subconscious. Nature is not abnormal, only lifelessness is abnormal. Anything that pulses and moves and walks around the room, no matter what thing it is doing, is natural and human to a writer"(265). Even though McCullers uses the universal he, her ideas about writing align with mine. She mentions that she becomes the characters she writes, and in the Introduction of *The Mortgaged Heart: Selected Writings*, Margarita G. Smith writes:

Carson once said that she was or became in the process of writing all the characters in her work. This is probably true of most real writers who often with pain draw from their unconscious what the rest of us would just as soon keep hidden from ourselves and others. So accept the fact that Carson was not only Frankie Addams but J. T. Malone, Miss Amelia and Captain Penderton; but

familiarity with the work that she was able to finish would be only a partial clue to who and what she was.

McCullers must make the characters accessible to her whole being before she writes a fiction about them. It is a hospitality to the characters to attempt to feel what they feel and respect what they respect. It makes the book feel more authentic too.

Reflections stood out to me because I liked being let into a private space. The book is about a voyeur and it makes you feel like one. It is ghoulish like O'Connor but I think it is more entertaining in its complexities. The female character Lenora Penderton is quite strong "Leonora Penderton feared neither man, beast, nor the devil; God she had never known" (15). She is a character who is not afraid of her sexuality and she has an affair with her Major Langdon who ranks above her husband Captain Penderton who is bisexual. He keeps his sexuality hidden throughout the book but it is clear that he is quite troubled by his own sexual desires and his wife's adulatory. He is a voyeur to Private Williams just as Private Williams is a voyeur to his wife Leonora. He sees her naked while he stands outside the Captain's home, "The man who watched them stood so close to the window that his breath showed on the cold glass pane. Private Williams had indeed seen Mrs. Penderton as she left the hearth and walked upstairs to her bath. And never before in his life had this young soldier seen a naked woman" (17). His fascination with her leads to him and the Captain spending more time together and this eventually leads to the murder of Private Williams.

It is hard to imagine McCullers becoming many of these characters because of how deep and mysterious they are. The disturbed character Alison, the betrayed wife of Major Langdon who is driven into madness. She cuts off her nipples with garden shears— a notable scene from the book, "And the evening she had run home from the Pendertons' and done that ghastly thing.

She had seen the garden shears on the wall and, beside herself with anger and despair, she had tried to stab and kill herself. But the shears were too blunt. And then for a few moments she must have been quite out of her head, for she herself did not know just how it had happened” (46). Captain Penderton who beats his wife’s horse Firebird that Private Williams cares for after a long ride on the horse through the country, “He broke off a long switch, and with the last of his spent strength he began to beat the horse savagely. Breathing in great gasps, his coat dark and curled with sweat, the horse at first moved restively about the tree. The Captain keep on beating him (69). It’s amazing that McCullers controls these characters to create such a concise and satisfying story. The title of the novel is said by Anacleto at the end of Part 3, ““A peacock of a sort of ghastly green. With one immense golden eye. And in it these reflections of something tiny and—”” it is an inevitable word, “grotesque” (85). Truth can be stranger than fiction.

I began my MFA program thinking I would write fiction. I ended up writing a lot of fiction featuring characters with no mother, misfits, characters who felt like they didn’t belong, who loved nature and about their sexualities. Then, I was told to write non-fiction. It was clear that my fiction held many non-fiction stories that needed to be told in as much truth and detail as they could be told. That my characters I’d written in my fiction were actually sides of me. For some reason I thought that I didn’t have the authority to narrate my own life. That I could only make sense of it if I had fictionalized it or made a character tell it and if I put some extra motivations into the characters added some more things that didn’t happen then it could make sense and be meaningful. But now I know it has more meaning when I tell it like it is.

Non-fiction was intimidating for me, and I think that fear comes from lack of control interestingly enough. McCullers controlled every part of *Reflections* like Allison controlled every part of *Bastard*. When I’d crafted a short story or novel I could control everything but I had a

hard time making choices. In non-fiction there are the events that happened and the events that did not. There is only control in the organization of those events and that I bring my own truth to them. There is less to choose and that made it feel more accessible to me as a writer. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to make sense of the events that convinced me of who I am. The ones that made me a writer. To make art out of my life seemed, and still does at times, an impossible feat.

There is nothing more controlled than a bound book. It is an object it is as long or as short as it is, it is a totality. In writing "The Marlboro Blues" I wanted to see my life as something I could hold. Something that I made from it. Something that I chose to make. I want it to push the boundaries of genre just as a life does every day. A life is a totality.

I like the idea of totality in works of art. Separate units that are not totaled, they are not added up or subtracted, but they are in themselves a totality. I want my collection to have the feeling of totality. Similar to an artist's collection of prints. The High Museum of Art in Atlanta is my favorite museum in the world and the first museum I'd ever been to during a third grade field trip. Since then I have been many times. It's the museum where they filmed the scene in *Marvel Studios' Black Panther* where Killmonger steals the vibranium weapon. They call it the Museum of Great Britain but I said that's the High, that's America, that's the south. I have been many times. I hadn't known who Romare Bearden was before visiting the museum in the fall of 2019. The exhibit was a collection of mixed media images that represented Bearden's life growing up in North Carolina. He was a light skinned black man who made beautiful layered paintings of his African American heritage and beside them wrote a sentence or two; he passed away in 1988. What captivated me about the exhibit was the relationship between the images and the sentences not just individually but when taken as a totality. They created a narrative that felt so full. At the High there were thirty-nine images and the corresponding sentences and I felt like I saw a whole

life. I bought the art book from the museum, a hard copy that contained all forty-seven images and sentences from the two collections called Bearden's *Profile Series* and more articles and images about his work.

I bought a postcard I will never send of #19 in the *Profile series Part I*, "Daybreak Express" the image is of a woman lying in bed on her stomach, her body is in profile, her head, her shoulders, her back to the small, her butt, her thighs to the crook of her knee, her calves, her heels and soles of her feet, she is the center of the image at first. I read the sentence expecting it to be about her: "You could tell not only what train it was but also who the engineer was by the sound of the whistle." Was there a train in the image? Yes, while I was distracted by the woman and wondering how Bearden got her skin to look like oxidizing rust there was a window in the top right corner with a train riding along the horizon and white smoke was pluming from the top. The sentence and the image are teaching me how to understand each other and from that relationship is a wonderful resonance.

A friend of mine told me that my collection reminded them of an artist's collection of prints or photos. It made me feel like what I was trying to accomplish had at least begun. Not that I think my work is as important or complete as Bearden's, but maybe my story is best told through many pages of writing that is read aloud in my voice and a resonance exists within that. Southerners like to tell their truth, whatever that looks like, if it looks like trains in Bearden's *Profile Series*, or the empty forests from Ray's *Cracker Childhood*, or a girl like Bone, and they expect a reader to really hear it.

Southern writers from Carson McCullers, Dorothy Allison, Alice Walker, Flannery O'Connor to Janisse Ray all have a distinct voice that propels the reader into the same world called South. It is the voice of the author that unifies the things that seem quite different or

mismatched. It is the voice that makes each author distinct. It is the voice that catches and captivates. One can hear the same story told in many different voices and then find that the story is no longer the same. Southern writers are hospitable, they let readers into a world called South which is more mysterious, beautiful, and terrible than a non-southerner could know. We control the South by writing about it. We control our reader by leading them into the tops of barns, a deforested junkyard, and or a woman's bedroom.

I am from the American South— Kennesaw, Georgia to be specific, and in writing and resumes one must always be specific. I am a woman. I am a writer. There are many American Southerners, there are many women, there are many writers, and many who are all three. But, no one tells it the way I tell it. And what is it? Specifically, a retelling of my life. No one tells a southerner how to tell their story. But thats how you make a writer. You tell them how to make their story more than just a story. You teach them how to make choices. You start young, chocolate or strawberry? You listen to dad tell you about his coin collection, to teachers explaining plot diagrams and characters and setting, you start listening to the news learn about details, learn about dates, learn history. You come of age when you can choose where to begin to tell the story. Whether or not you finish it that's what makes you a writer or not.

So, "Gimme a beat!"

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