

“ON SIMPLICITY, OR THE RISKS OF BECOMING SOPHISTICATED”

Lecture by Sonya Chung

9 July 2020

WORKS DISCUSSED

“Writing Short Stories” by Flannery O’Connor, from *Mystery and Manners*

“Common Errors” by John Gardner, from *The Art of Fiction*

“The Shirt” and “Two Days Alone” by Jane Kenyon

Life Work by Donald Hall

Remembering and “The Hurt Man” by Wendell Berry

Brown Girl Dreaming and *Another Brooklyn* by Jacqueline Woodson

“We Don’t Know When We Were Opened (Or, The Origin of the Universe)” by Morgan Parker

“Gardening Secrets of the Dead” by Lee Herrick

“In the Fields” by Blas Manuel De Luna

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING

“Contemporary Prose Styles” by Annie Dillard

“Against Interpretation” by Susan Sontag

Dakota by Kathleen Norris

There are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé by Morgan Parker

When the Emperor Was Divine by Julie Otsuka

The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros

“Writing Short Stories”

I suppose that obvious things are the hardest to define. Everybody thinks he knows what a story is. But if you ask a beginning student to write a story, you're liable to get almost anything—a reminiscence, an episode, an opinion, an anecdote, anything under the sun but a story ...

I lent some stories to a country lady who lives down the road from me, and when she returned them, she said, "Well, them stories just gone and shown you how some folks *would* do," and I thought to myself that that was right; when you write stories, you have to be content to start exactly there—showing how some specific folks *will* do, *will* do in spite of everything.

Now this is a very humble level to have to begin on, and most people who think they want to write stories are not willing to start there. They want to write about problems, not people; or about abstract issues, not concrete situations. They have an idea, or a feeling, or an overflowing ego, or they want to Be A Writer ... and in the absence of a story, they set out to find a theory or a formula or a technique...

Fiction operates through the senses, and **I think one reason that people find it so difficult to write stories is that they forget how much time and patience is required to convince through the senses.** No reader who doesn't actually experience, who isn't made to feel, the story is going to believe anything the fiction writer merely tells him. The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched.

Now this is something that can't be learned only in the head; it has to be learned in the habits. It has to become a way that you habitually look at things.

“The Nature and Aim of Fiction”

One of the most common and saddest spectacles is that of a person of really fine sensibility and acute psychological perception trying to write fiction by using these qualities alone. This type of writer will put down one intensely emotional or keenly perceptive sentence after the other, and the result will be complete dullness. **The fact is that the materials of the fiction writer are the humblest. Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't try to write fiction. It's not a grand enough job for you ...**

[Example from *Madam Bovary*]:

Flaubert has just shown us Emma at the piano with Charles watching her. He says, "She

struck the notes with aplomb and ran from top to bottom of the keyboard without a break. Thus shaken up, the old instrument, whose strings buzzed, could be heard at the other end of the village when the window was open, and often the bailiff's clerk, passing along the highroad, bareheaded and in **list slippers**, stopped to listen, his sheet of paper in his hand."

The more you look at a sentence like that, the more you can learn from it. At one end of it, we are with Emma and this very solid instrument "whose strings buzzed," and at the other end of it we are across the village with **this very concrete clerk in his list slippers**. With regard to what happens to Emma in the rest of the novel, we may think that it makes no difference that the instrument has buzzing strings or that the clerk wears list slippers and has a piece of paper in his hand, but Flaubert had to create a believable village to put Emma in. It's always necessary to remember that the fiction writer is much less immediately concerned with grand ideas and bristling emotions than he is with putting **list slippers on clerks**. [On list slippers: <http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-lis1.htm>]

"Writing Short Stories"

I think many people decide that they want to write short stories because they're short, and by short, they mean short in every way. They **think that a short story is an incomplete action in which a very little is shown and a great deal suggested, and they think you suggest something by leaving it out. It's very hard to disabuse a student of this notion, because he thinks that when he leaves something out, he's being subtle; and when you tell him that he has to put something in before anything can be there, he thinks you're an insensitive idiot.**

JOHN GARDNER, *The Art of Fiction*, "Common Errors"

Sentiment – genuine emotion or feeling

Sentimentality – emotion or feeling that rings false usually achieved by some form of cheating or exaggeration.

Whenever the author reveals by some slip or self-regarding intrusion that they are less concerned about their characters than they ought to be ... frigidity characterizes the writer who presents serious material, then fails to carry through—fails to treat it with the attention and seriousness it deserves ... It is sometimes frigidity that leads writers to tinker, more and more obsessively, with form

Mannered writing is writing that continually distracts us from the fictional dream by stylistic tics that we cannot help associating, as we read, with the author's wish to intrude himself, prove himself different from all other authors.

“The Shirt”

The shirt touches his neck
And smooths over his back
It slides down his sides
It even goes down below his belt—
Down into his pants.
Lucky shirt.

“The Clothes Pin”

How much better it is
To carry wood to the fire
Than to moan about your life.
How much better
to throw the garbage
onto the compost, or to pin the clean
sheet on the line
with a gray-brown wooden clothes pin!

“Two Days Alone”

You are not here. I keep
the fire going, though it isn't cold,
feeding the stove-animal.
I read the evening paper
with five generations
looking over my shoulder

In the woodshed
darkness is all around and inside me.
The only sound I hear
is my own breathing. Maybe
I don't belong here.
Nothing tells me that I don't.

“The Suitor”

We lie back. Curtains
lift and fall,
like the chest of someone sleeping.
Wind moves the laves of the box elder;
they show their light undersides,
turning all at once
like a school of fish.
Suddenly I understand that I am happy.
For months this feeling
has been coming closer, stopping
for short visits, like a timid suitor.

MORGAN PARKER

We Don't Know When We Were Opened (Or, The Origin of the Universe)

after Mickalene Thomas

A sip of liquor from a creek. Saturday syndicated
Good Times, bare legs, colors draped like
an afterthought. We bright enough to blind you.
Dear anyone, dear high-heel metronome, white
noise, hush us, shhhhh, hush us. We're artisanal
crafts, rare gems, bed of leafy bush you call
us superfood. Jeweled lips, we're rich
We're everyone. We have ideas and vaginas,
history and clothes and a mother. Portrait-ready
American blues. Palm trees and back issues
of JET, pink lotion, gin on ice, zebras, fig lipstick.
One day we learned to migrate. One day we studied
Mamma making her face. Bright new brown, scent of Nana
and cinnamon. Shadows of husbands and vineyards,
records curated to our allure, incense, unconcern.
Champagne is how the Xanax goes down, royal blue
reigning. We're begging anyone not to forget
we're turned on with control. We better homes and gardens.
We real grown. We garden of soiled panties.
We low hum of satisfaction. We is is is is is is is
touch, touch, shine, a little taste. You're gonna
give us the love we need.

LEE HERRICK excerpt from "Gardening Secrets of the Dead" (2012)

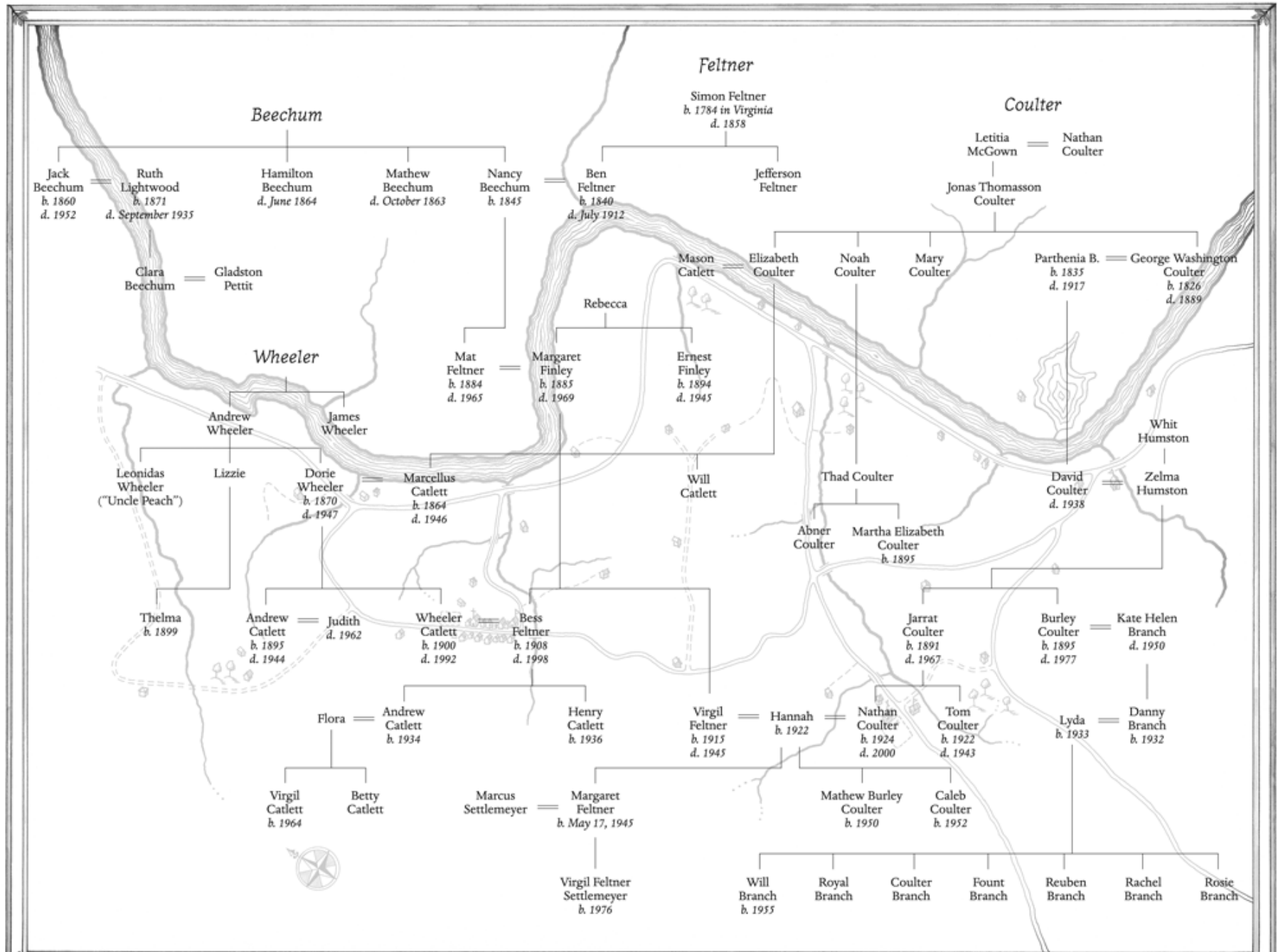
When the light pivots, hum — not so loud
the basil will know, but enough
to water it with your breath.
Gardening has nothing to do with names
like *lily* or *daisy*. It is about verbs like *uproot*,
traverse, *hush*. We can say it has aspects of memory
and prayer, but mostly it is about refraction and absence,
the dead long gone when the plant goes in. A part of the body.
Water and movement, attention and dirt [...]

In the peach fields of Madera,
I saw Kiyekatsu trip, his head
landing in front of the tractor's rolling
wheel. By chance, he moved away
and lived.

For the rest of that day,
and for the rest of that summer,
he did not work as fast
as he had before.
Sometimes he would pick a peach
and look at it
as if that peach was a moment
from his life.

One peach was his mother
dying in a Texas
cotton field, in a shack
the whole family
slept in, the only person to see her die,
her four-year-old granddaughter
barely too young to work.

One peach was a policeman beating
his brother's head into the earth,
his blood soaking into the ground,
spreading outward, like a shadow
at dusk [...]



WENDELL BERRY

The Hurt Man

When he was five, Mat Feltner, like every other five-year-old who had lived in Port William until then, was still wearing dresses. In his own thoughts he was not yet sure whether he would turn out to be a girl or a boy, though instinct by then had prompted him to take his place near the tail end of the procession of Port William boys. His nearest predecessors in that so far immortal straggle had already taught him the small art of smoking cigars, along with the corollary small art of chewing coffee beans to take the smoke smell off his breath. And so in a rudimentary way he was an outlaw, though he did not know it, for none of his grownups had yet thought to forbid him to smoke.

His outgrown dresses he saw worn daily by a pretty neighbor named Margaret Finley, who to him might as well have been another boy too little to be of interest, or maybe even a girl, though it hardly mattered—and though, because of a different instinct, she would begin to matter to him a great deal in a dozen years, and after that she would matter to him all his life.

The town of Port William consisted of two rows of casually maintained dwellings and other buildings scattered along a thoroughfare that nobody had ever dignified by calling it a street; in wet times it hardly deserved to be called a road. Between the town's two ends the road was unevenly rocked but otherwise had not much distinguished itself from the buffalo trace it once had been. At one end of the town was the school, at the other the graveyard. In the center there were several stores, two saloons, a church, a bank, a hotel, and a blacksmith shop. The town was the product of its own becoming which, if not accidental exactly, had also been unplanned. It had no formal government or formal history. It was without pretense or ambition, for it was the sort of place that pretentious or ambitious people were inclined to leave. It had never declared an aspiration to become anything it was not. It did not thrive so much as it merely lived, doing the things it needed to do to stay alive. This tracked and rubbed little

settlement had been built in a place of great natural abundance and beauty, which it had never valued highly enough or used well enough, had damaged, and yet had not destroyed. The town's several buildings, shaped less by art than by need and use, had suffered tellingly and even becomingly a hundred years of wear.

Though Port William sat on a ridge of the upland, still it was a river town; its economy and its thoughts turned toward the river. Distance impinged on it from the river, whose waters flowed from the eastward mountains ultimately, as the town always was more or less aware, to the sea, to the world. Its horizon, narrow enough though it reached across the valley to the ridgeland fields and farmsteads on the other side, was pierced by the river, which for the next forty years would still be its main thoroughfare. Commercial people, medicine showmen, evangelists, and other river travelers came up the hill from Dawes Landing to stay at the hotel in Port William, which in its way cherished these transients, learned all it could about them, and talked of what it learned.

Mat would remember the town's then-oldest man, Uncle Bishop Bower, who would confront any stranger, rap on the ground with his long staff, and demand, "Sir! What might your name be?"

And Herman Goslin, no genius, made his scant living by meeting the steamboats and transporting the disembarking passengers, if any, up to the hotel in a gimpy buckboard. One evening as he approached the hotel with a small trunk on his shoulder, followed by a large woman with a parasol, one of the boys playing marbles in the road said, "Here comes Herman Goslin with a fat lady's trunk."

"You boys can kiss that fat lady's ass," said Herman Goslin. "Ain't that tellin' 'em, fat lady?"

The town was not built nearer the river perhaps because there was no room for it at the foot of the hill, or perhaps because, as the town loved to reply to the inevitable question from travelers resting on the hotel porch, nobody knew where the river was going to run when they built Port William.

And Port William did look as though it had been itself forever. To Mat at the age of five, as he later would suppose, remembering himself, it must have seemed eternal, like the sky.

However eternal it might have been, the town was also as temporal, lively, and mortal as it possibly could be. It stirred and

hummed from early to late with its own life and with the life it drew into itself from the countryside. It was a center, and especially on Saturdays and election days its stores and saloons and the road itself would be crowded with people standing, sitting, talking, whittling, trading, and milling about. This crowd was entirely familiar to itself; it remembered all its history of allegiances, offenses, and resentments, going back from the previous Saturday to the Civil War and long before that. Like every place, it had its angers, and its angers as always, as everywhere, found justifications. And in Port William, a dozen miles by river from the courthouse and the rule of law, anger had a license that it might not have had in another place. Sometimes violence would break out in one of the saloons or in the road. Then proof of mortality would be given in blood.

And the mortality lived and suffered daily in the town was attested with hopes of immortality by the headstones up in the graveyard, which was even then more populous than the town. Mat knew—at the age of five he had already forgotten when he had found out—that he had a brother and two sisters up there, with carved lambs resting on the tops of their small monuments, their brief lives dated beneath. In all the time he had known her, his mother had worn black.

But to him, when he was five, those deaths were stories told. Nothing in Port William seemed to him to be in passage from any beginning to any end. The living had always been alive, the dead always dead. The world, as he knew it then, simply existed, familiar even in its changes: the town, the farms, the slopes and ridges, the woods, the river, and the sky over it all. He had not yet gone farther from Port William than to Dawes Landing on the river and to his uncle Jack Beecham's place out on the Bird's Branch Road, the place his mother spoke of as "out home." He had seen the steamboats on the river and had looked out from the higher ridgetops, and so he understood that the world went on into the distance, but he did not know how much more of it there might be.

Mat had come late into the lives of Nancy and Ben Feltner, after the deaths of their other children, and he had come unexpectedly, "a blessing." They prized him accordingly. For the first four or so years of his life he was closely watched, by his parents and also by Cass and Smoke, Cass's husband, who had been slaves. But now he was five, and it was a household always

busy with the work of the place, and often full of company. There had come to be times, because his grownups were occupied and he was curious and active, when he would be out of their sight. He would stray off to where something was happening, to the farm buildings behind the house, to the blacksmith shop, to one of the saloons, to wherever the other boys were. He was beginning his long study of the town and its place in the world, gathering up the stories that in years still far off he would hand on to his grandson Andy Catlett, who in his turn would be trying to master the thought of time: that there were times before his time, and would be times after. At the age of five Mat was beginning to prepare himself to help in educating his grandson, though he did not know it.

His grownups, more or less willingly, were letting him go. The town had its dangers. There were always horses in the road, and sometimes droves of cattle or sheep or hogs or mules. There were in fact uncountable ways for a boy to get hurt, or worse. But in spite of her losses, Nancy Beechum Feltner was not a frightened woman, as her son would learn. He would learn also that, though she maintained her sorrows with a certain loyalty, wearing her black, she was a woman of practical good sense and strong cheerfulness. She knew that the world was risky and that she must risk her surviving child to it as she had risked the others, and when the time came she straightforwardly did so.

But she knew also that the town had its ways of looking after its own. Where its worst dangers were, grownups were apt to be. When Mat was out of the sight of her or his father or Cass or Smoke, he was most likely in the sight of somebody else who would watch him. He would thus be corrected, consciously ignored, snatched out of danger, cursed, teased, hugged, instructed, spanked, or sent home by any grownup into whose sight he may have strayed. Within that watchfulness he was free—and almost totally free when, later, he had learned to escape it and thus had earned his freedom. “This was a *free* country when I was a boy,” he would sometimes say to Andy, his grandson.

When he was five and for some while afterward, his mother drew the line unalterably only between him and the crowds that filled the town on Saturday afternoons and election days when there would be too much drinking, with consequences that were too probable. She would not leave him alone then. She would not

let him go into the town, and she would not trust him to go anywhere else, for fear that he would escape into the town from wherever else she let him go. She kept him in sight.

That was why they were sitting together on the front porch for the sake of the breeze there on a hot Saturday afternoon in the late summer of 1888. Mat was sitting close to his mother on the wicker settee, watching her work. She had brought out her sewing basket and was darning socks, stretching the worn-through heels or toes over her darning egg and weaving them whole again with her needle and thread. At such work her fingers moved with a quickness and assurance that fascinated Mat, and he loved to watch her. She would have been telling him a story. She was full of stories. Aside from the small movements of her hands and the sound of her voice, they were quiet with a quietness that seemed to have increased as it had grown upon them. Cass had gone home after the dinner dishes were done. The afternoon had half gone by.

From where they sat they could see down into the town where the Saturday crowd was, and they could hear it. Doors slammed, now and then a horse nickered, the talking of the people was a sustained murmur from which now and then a few intelligible words escaped: a greeting, some bit of raillery, a reprimand to a horse, an oath. It was a large crowd in a small place, a situation in which a small disagreement could become dangerous in a hurry. Such things had happened often enough. That was why Mat was under watch.

And so when a part of the crowd intensified into a knot, voices were raised, and there was a scuffle, Mat and his mother were not surprised. They were not surprised even when a bloodied man broke out of the crowd and began running fast up the street toward them, followed by other running men whose boot heels pounded on the road.

The hurt man ran toward them where they were sitting on the porch. He was hatless. His hair, face, and shirt were bloody, and his blood dripped on the road. Mat felt no intimation of threat or danger. He simply watched, transfixed. He did not see his mother stand and put down her work. When she caught him by the back of his dress and fairly poked him through the front door—"Here! Get inside!"—he still was only alert, unsurprised.

He expected her to come into the house with him. What finally surprised him was that she did not do so. Leaving him alone in the wide hall, she remained outside the door, holding it open for the hurt man. Mat ran halfway up the stairs then and turned and sat down on a step. He was surprised now but not afraid.

When the hurt man ran in through the door, instead of following him in, Nancy Feltner shut the door and stood in front of it. Mat could see her through the door glass, standing with her hand on the knob as the clutch of booted and hatted pursuers came up the porch steps. They bunched at the top of the steps, utterly stopped by the slender woman dressed in mourning, holding the door shut.

And then one of them, snatching off his hat, said, "It's all right, Mrs. Feltner. We're his friends."

She hesitated a moment, studying them, and then she opened the door to them also and turned and came in ahead of them.

The hurt man had run the length of the hall and through the door at the end of it and out onto the back porch. Nancy, with the bunch of men behind her, followed where he had gone, the men almost with delicacy, as it seemed to Mat, avoiding the line of blood drops along the hall floor. And Mat hurried back down the stairs and came along in his usual place at the tail end, trying to see, among the booted legs and carried hats, what had become of the hurt man.

Mat's memory of that day would always be partly incomplete. He never knew who the hurt man was. He knew some of the others. The hurt man had sat down or dropped onto a slatted green bench on the porch. He might have remained nameless to Mat because of the entire strangeness of the look of him. He had shed the look of a man and assumed somehow the look of all things badly hurt. Now that he had stopped running, he looked used up. He was pallid beneath the streaked bright blood, breathing in gasps, his eyes too widely open. He looked as though he had just come up from almost too deep a dive.

Nancy went straight to him, the men, the friends, clustered behind her, deferring, no longer to her authority as the woman of the house, as when she had stopped them at the front door, but now to her unhesitating, unthinking acceptance of that authority.

Looking at the hurt man, whose blood was dripping onto the bench and the porch floor, she said quietly, perhaps only to herself, "Oh my!" It was as though she knew him without ever having known him before.

She leaned and picked up one of his hands. "Listen!" she said, and the man brought his gaze it seemed from nowhere and looked up at her. "You're at Ben Feltner's house," she said. "Your friends are here. You're going to be all right."

She looked around at the rest of them who were standing back, watching her. "Jessie, you and Tom go see if you can find the doctor, if he's findable." She glanced at the water bucket on the shelf over the wash table by the kitchen door, remembering that it was nearly empty. "Les, go bring a fresh bucket of water." To the remaining two she said, "Get his shirt off. *Cut* it off. Don't try to drag it over his head. So we can see where he's hurt."

She stepped through the kitchen door, and they could hear her going about inside. Presently she came back with a kettle of water still warm from the noon fire and a bundle of clean rags.

"Look up here," she said to the hurt man, and he looked up.

She began gently to wash his face. Wherever he was bleeding, she washed away the blood: first his face, and then his arms, and then his chest and sides. As she washed, exposing the man's wounds, she said softly only to herself, "Oh!" or "Oh my!" She folded the white rags into pads and instructed the hurt man and his friends to press them onto his cuts to stop the bleeding. She said, "It's the Lord's own mercy we've got so many hands," for the man had many wounds. He had begun to tremble. She kept saying to him, as she would have spoken to a child, "You're going to be all right."

Mat had been surprised when she did not follow him into the house, when she waited on the porch and opened the door to the hurt man and then to his friends. But she had not surprised him after that. He saw her as he had known her: a woman who did what the world put before her to do.

At first he stayed well back, for he did not want to be told to get out of the way. But as his mother made order, he grew bolder and drew gradually closer until he was almost at her side. And then he was again surprised, for then he saw her face.

What he saw in her face would remain with him forever. It was pity, but it was more than that. It was a hurt love that seemed to

include entirely the hurt man. It included him and disregarded everything else. It disregarded the aura of whiskey that ordinarily she would have resented; it disregarded the blood puddled on the porch floor and the trail of blood through the hall.

Mat was familiar with her tenderness and had thought nothing of it. But now he recognized it in her face and in her hands as they went out to the hurt man's wounds. To him, then, it was as though she leaned in the black of her mourning over the whole hurt world itself, touching its wounds with her tenderness, in her sorrow.

Loss came into his mind then, and he knew what he was years away from telling, even from thinking: that his mother's grief was real; that her children in their graves once had been alive; that everybody lying under the grass up in the graveyard once had been alive and had walked in daylight in Port William. And this was a part, and belonged to the deliverance, of the town's hard history of love.

The hurt man, Mat thought, was not going to die, but he knew from his mother's face that the man *could* die and someday would. She leaned over him, touching his bleeding wounds that she bathed and stanching and bound, and her touch had in it the promise of healing, some profound encouragement.

It was the knowledge of that encouragement, of what it had cost her, of what it would cost her and would cost him, that then finally came to Mat, and he fled away and wept.

What did he learn from his mother that day? He learned it all his life. There are few words for it, perhaps none. After that, her losses would be his. The losses would come. They would come to him and his mother. They would come to him and Margaret, his wife, who as a child had worn his castoff dresses. They would come, even as Mat watched, growing old, to his grandson, Andy, who would remember his stories and write them down.

But from that day, whatever happened, there was a knowledge in Mat that was unsurprised and at last comforted, until he was old, until he was gone.

WOODSON FAMILY TREE

OH

Hope Austin Woodson 1906-1978
Grace Vivian Whitfield Woodson 1916-1988

Cornelia Ann Woodson Long 1936-2005
Ada Woodson 1939
Alicia Ruth Woodson 1948

Edward Woodson 1939-1939
David Arthur (Woody) Woodson 1940-2014

Jack Austin Woodson 1937

Hope Austin Woodson 1960

Odella Caroline Woodson 1961

Jacqueline Amanda Woodson 1963

Roman Woodson 1966

IRBY FAMILY TREE

SC

Gunnar Irby 1911-1970
Georgiana Scott Irby 1913-2001

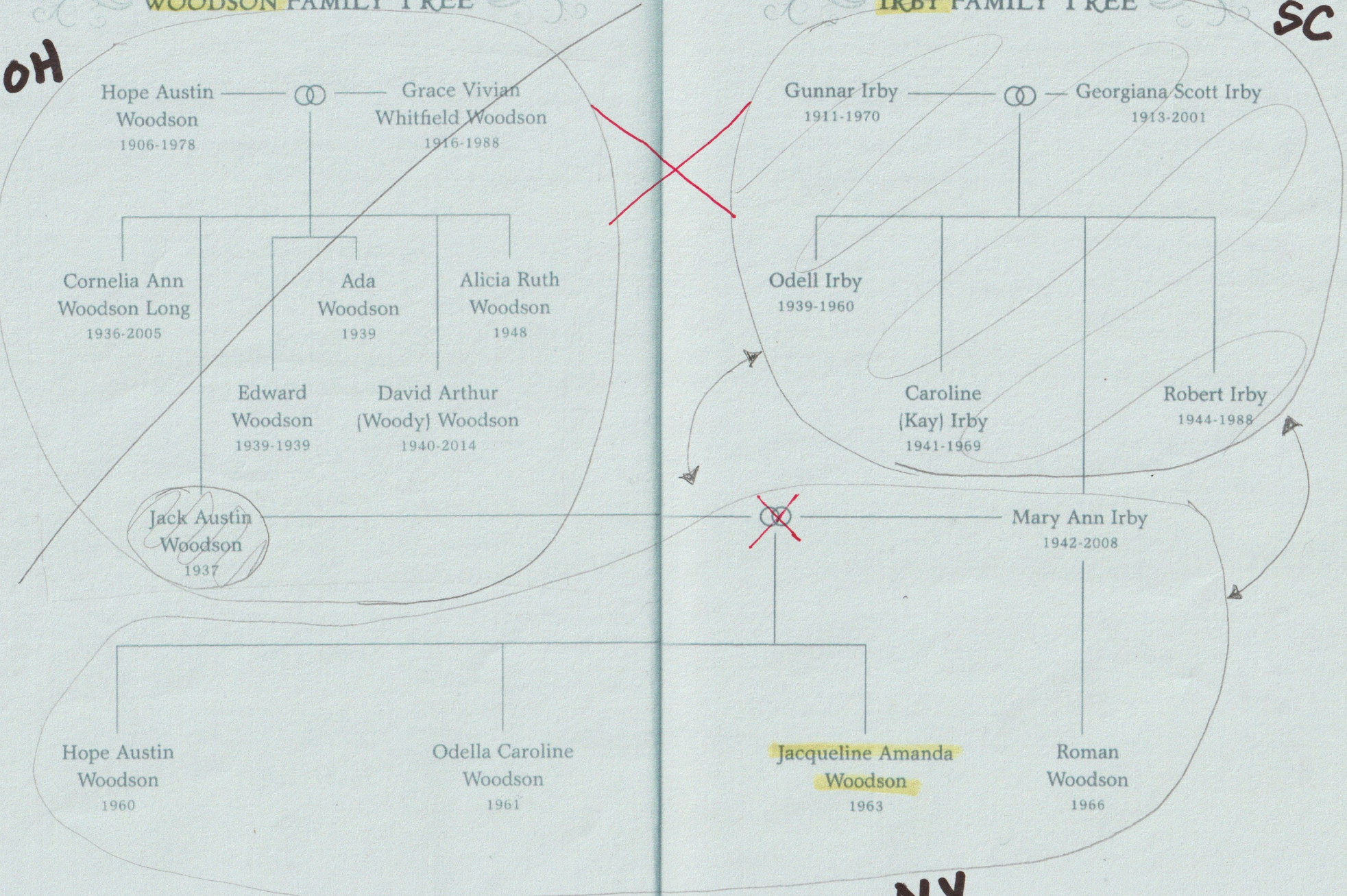
Odell Irby 1939-1960

Caroline (Kay) Irby 1941-1969

Robert Irby 1944-1988

Mary Ann Irby 1942-2008

NY



halfway home #1

*New York, my mother says.
Soon, I'll find us a place there. Come back
and bring you all home.*

She wants a place of her own that is not
The Nelsonville House, The Columbus House,
The Greenville House.

Looking for her next place.

Our next place.

*Right now, our mother says,
we're only halfway home.*

And I imagine her standing
in the middle of a road, her arms out
fingers pointing North and South.

I want to ask:

Will there always be a road?

Will there always be a bus?

Will we always have to choose
between home

and home?

journey

*You can keep your South, my father says.
The way they treated us down there,
I got your mama out as quick as I could.
Brought her right up here to Ohio.*

*Told her there's never gonna be a Woodson
that sits in the back of the bus.
Never gonna be a Woodson that has to
Yes sir and No sir white people.
Never gonna be a Woodson made to look down
at the ground.*

*All you kids are stronger than that, my father says.
All you Woodson kids deserve to be
as good as you already are.*

*Yes sirree, Bob, my father says.
You can keep your South Carolina.*

the garden

Each spring
the dark Nicholtown dirt is filled
with the promise
of what the earth can give back to you
if you work the land
plant the seeds
pull the weeds.

My southern grandfather missed slavery
by one generation. His grandfather
had been owned.
His father worked
the land from dawn till dusk
for the promise of cotton
and a little pay.

So this is what he believes in
your hands in the cool dirt
until the earth gives back to you
all that you've asked of it.

Sweet peas and collards,
green peppers and cukes
lettuce and melon,

berries and peaches and one day
when I'm able, my grandfather says,
I'm gonna figure out how to grow myself a pecan tree.

God gives you what you need, my grandmother says.
Best not to ask for more than that.

Hmph, my grandfather says. And goes back
to working the land, pulling from it all we need

and more than that.