

## FLANNERY'S KISS

### 1. The Dream, Summer 1978

It is the summer of 1978. My first book, *Final Payments*, was published in April of this year. It is more successful than I could have dreamed possible. For the first time in my life, I am a person with money, enough money to rent a house in Cape Cod for a month. I am married but am staying in the house in Cape Cod with a man who is not my husband. He will become my husband in a year, but at this time, my mother doesn't know I'm not living with my husband, and certainly she doesn't know that I am living in a house with a man who is not my husband. I have fooled many members of the media; like my mother, they think I am living with my husband, but in fact I rent a small studio where I only pretend to live, in fact I am living with the man who is not my husband. I have installed a phone, a special phone that only my mother has the number for. Guests are warned not to answer the phone. My mother thinks the phone rings in my husband's house, but it is my special number. For the first time this year, I speak in public as a writer, someone who, it is assumed, has some kind of authority. I do not feel this authority in any way. This is a dream I have at this time:

I am on a panel with Flannery O'Connor. She is wearing a black dress with a white Peter Pan collar. Her hair is immaculately, if unfashionably, coiffed. Her shoes are shined; her stockings are impeccable. Her notes are carefully arranged on index cards. My stockings are ripped; my slip is showing; my

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hair is filthy; my notes are completely disorganized. Flannery turns to me and says, "The trouble with you is, you don't believe in perfection." "No," I say to her. "I do believe in perfection, but you and I think it's something different. You think it's flawlessness and I think it's completeness."

A year later, I tell Sally Fitzgerald, Flannery's dear friend, biographer, and the editor of her letters, about this dream. Sally says to me, "Flannery would never have said that." I don't want to be rude so I refrain from saying what I would like to say: "But it's MY dream."

I think that Flannery would have said it. She didn't worry about making people feel uncomfortable if she thought she was right. She once said of herself, "I never know when I hurt people until they tell me."

## 2. The Academic Conference, November 2003

I have been asked to speak at an academic conference devoted to Flannery O'Connor. It is taking place in her home town, Milledgeville, Georgia. I arrive in the middle of a session. One of the speakers is a young Jesuit. He talks about some letters of Flannery O'Connor's that were not included in Sally Fitzgerald's collection. They were written in 1955, to a young Danish man who was a book salesman for her publisher, Harcourt Brace. The Jesuit reads the letters. They are girlish. If there are not triple exclamation points, there should be. She tells the Dane how much she enjoys his company. "If you were here we could talk for about a million years," she says. The Jesuit tracks the Dane down in Denmark. He is now an old man, but he remembers the encounter with Flannery vividly. He tells the Jesuit that he enjoyed Flannery's companionship very much and that one day when he'd taken her for a drive in the country, it occurs to him that she is a woman, and that she would like him to kiss her. When he does kiss her, the experience horrifies him. He says that Flannery did not know how to kiss. Whereas when he had kissed other women they had offered him soft lips, Flannery presented him with teeth. He remembered that she was chronically ill and he felt like he was kissing a skull. Worried that she was in love with him, he

returned quite soon to Denmark. Six months later, he wrote her that he was engaged to be married. Flannery sat down upon receiving the letter and within a matter of days completed her story, "Good Country People," which is about a Bible salesman who is a fetishist of prosthetic devices and who steals a girl's wooden leg when she thinks she is seducing him. Flannery sends the story to the Dane and tells him not to think it's about him, even though the fetishist, whose name is Manley Pointer, is a Bible salesman and the Dane is a book salesman.

In a letter to a friend, Flannery says that the character she most identifies with is the girl whose wooden leg is stolen.

When I hear this, my first thought is, "But no one would say I'm a bad kisser. No one would say I don't know how to kiss."

I am appalled with myself that I have had this response. What kind of response is this to be having in relation to a great writer? I think of something my mother once said to me. I was in my forties. I had written four books and had two children. I was looking at a catalogue from Bergdorf Goodman and remarking on all the beautiful clothes I couldn't afford. My mother looked at me with what seemed to be genuine puzzlement. "When exactly," she asked me, "did you become such a superficial person?"

I can always imagine Flannery O'Connor asking me that question. Or not needing to ask it. Simply, by her existence, by everything about her life, insisting that I ask the question of myself. Flannery O'Connor: orthodox, celibate, childless, living with her mother, devoted entirely to her art. To the perfection of a form. Unafraid to look at the darkness; unafraid to imagine that human happiness is an inferior question, an inferior goal. Flannery O'Connor: radically unsexed. How can I think of her and not think of myself as heavy with the things of this world: men, children, dogs, food, clothing, all the distractions of sexual allure? The demands of art ignored, pushed aside for the demands of what I call life. But what would she call it? Distraction? Illusion?

Flannery O'Connor represents two images of the artist,

both of which suggest that the way I have lived my life means I cannot be a real artist. The Catholic and the Romantic, both insisting on the inferiority of human connectedness, the superiority of artistic isolation. Among the least acceptable of human connections for the artist: the connection to one's children. When Faulkner's daughter complained that he didn't pay attention to her, he replied, "Whoever heard of Shakespeare's daughter?" Even Virginia Woolf only spoke of Shakespeare's sister. Until very recently, no important woman writer has had children. I am the mother of a daughter and a son.

For a variety of reasons then, Flannery has for many years caused me to feel unworthy. She has for many years caused me to feel ashamed. And in revenge, the words come to me unbidden, "No one would say I don't know how to kiss."

I remember my dream. I think that for my writing life, Flannery has been an inspiration and a torment. What I don't know: which is the stronger impulse, devotion or shame?

### 3. Flannery's Crutches

The people attending the conference are invited to visit Flannery O'Connor's home, the home where she lived with her mother from the age of twenty-six to the day of her death at thirty-nine.

Miraculously, Flannery got herself out of Milledgeville, a town that was once the state capital of Georgia, a town noted for its prison and its mental hospital, a town of fewer than ten thousand people not any of whom, perhaps, really understood her, to the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. Having graduated from Iowa, she went to the writers' colony Yaddo, in Saratoga Springs, briefly to New York, and then to live with Sally and Robert Fitzgerald in their house in Connecticut. But then she became ill; she was diagnosed with lupus, the disease that had killed her father. She resigned herself to the life of an invalid. She resigned herself to being taken care of by her mother.

Andalusia, which is pronounced AnduLOOZia, not Anda-

luTHEEa, is a dairy farm on a gently sloping tract of land. The line of trees which finds its way into so many of O'Connor's stories is visible from the front porch, screened in, with many rockers, looking as if they belonged more properly on the front porch of a small hotel. Just inside the front door, your eye falls on a velvet rope, cordoning something off. It is Flannery's bedroom. I ask the curator if I can go behind the velvet ropes and he says no.

I have rarely seen a more uncomfortable room. Her bed is single, dark wooden, monastic. The desk is near the bed, so she could get to it easily in the days when walking was difficult for her. The bedspread and the drapes are a heavy ungiveing blue. There is a black and white picture of the Sacred Heart, books in bookcases, some knickknacks on the mantle which I cannot see from the doorway across which the velvet rope stretches. Propped against the wall are Flannery's crutches, cruel-looking steel devices with semicircles where her arms might rest. The most famous picture of Flannery O'Connor catches her standing on the porch, leaning on her crutches. One of her peacocks stands beside her, a little to her left, on a lower porch step.

Flannery was a cripple.

So was my mother. My mother was stricken with polio at the age of three.

The accoutrements of affliction are something I knew from my earliest moments. They are something I grew up with.

One of the scholars at the conference who admires my work says to me, "Flannery could have been your mother."

By which, I imagine, she means that she was old enough. She was twenty-four when I was born.

She and my father share a birthday.

I want to say to the scholar, "Flannery O'Connor could never have been my mother." By which I mean three things simultaneously. She could never have been anybody's mother. Surely a less maternal figure never existed in literature. But I also want to say, "but she could never have been MY mother": my mother so operatic, so full of kisses, blows, and tears, of musical comedy songs and nicknames and endearments and temper tantrums and superstitions.

But what I also mean by, "Flannery O'Connor could not have been my mother," is that, "I'm not good enough to have

had her for a mother. I wouldn't even presume to dare to dream of a kinship. God would strike me. God would strike me dead."

Flannery's crutches.

Cruel metal against tender flesh.

My mother's braces: cruel metal, cutting leather straps.

My mother's built-up shoes.

Her canes.

I look at Flannery's crutches and I think, inevitably, of my mother. Perhaps the kinship is not between Flannery O'Connor and me as writers but Flannery O'Connor and my mother as members of the company of the afflicted.

Does this mean I have more kinship with Flannery's mother, Regina, than I have with her? More kinship with the one who cares for the afflicted than with the afflicted artist? Does the fact that I am not afflicted mean I have been drawn into life, therefore less devoted to my art? The Catholic Romance of affliction. Flannery believed that her illness was a grace, that it allowed her to focus on only what was important. God and work.

It was up to her mother to look out for her.

It was up to me to look out for my mother.

If Flannery had not been ill, would she have traveled? Met new people, had experiences that would have changed the quality of her work? She says in one of her letters: "I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company, where nobody can follow. . . . The surface hereabouts has always been very flat. I come from a family where the only emotion respectable to show is irritation. In some this tendency produces hives, in others literature, in me both."

If she had traveled, if she had met new people, if she had been able to give and receive more affection (which she gives and receives in her letters, written from the house that she never leaves), would her work have changed?

Do we want that work changed?

Severity. Severe. Flannery O'Connor was severe. The fate

that was inflicted on her was severe. A young woman struck down, unable to live in the world.

I am alternately drawn to the severity of her vision, the rocky landscape. Eliot: "Come under the shadow of this red rock and I will show you fear in a handful of dust." The trees: only a line of trees, no focus on the leaves, no breeze in the branches, no shelter from cruel sun.

In all of Flannery O'Connor's stories, there is scarcely a moment of tenderness. When it occurs, it occurs only moments before death. When the grandmother says to the Misfit, "you're one of my own children," he shoots her. When Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" understands that he loves his mother, it is only moments before her death. I want to ask Flannery, "What about life?" I can imagine her saying to me, "When exactly did you become such a superficial person?"

"I come from a family where the only emotion respectable to feel was irritation."

Irritation. We had that, my family. There was plenty of irritation. Also affection. Cuddling. Did Flannery's mother ever cuddle her? I can't imagine it.

As pets, she raised peacocks. Peacocks can be looked at, admired from a distance, never touched. At night, they roost in the trees and scream bloodcurdling screams. All my life I have had dogs. Flannery would be shocked at the amount of time I spend cuddling my dog. She would have contempt for even the word *cuddle*.

#### 4. Our Mothers, Our Fathers

Flannery's mother. Regina Cline O'Connor. Of a genteel family. Married to a failure. Edwin O'Connor. In a letter Flannery says of her father, "He died when I was fifteen and I really only knew him by a kind of instinct." And yet, in the same letter, she shows a poignant pride and tenderness in this man whom she insists on saying she barely knew:

When you were here I was much affected to hear you say that your aunt spoke of my father in tones not usually ap-

plied to members of the Legion. I always sensed myself that the Legion was something other for him, not a rowdy organization, but something it would have been surprised to find itself. . . . Last year I read over some of the speeches he made and I was touched to see a kind of patriotism that most people would just laugh at now, something childlike, that was a good deal too good and innocent for the Legion. But the Legion was the only thing provided by the country to absorb it. And your saying what you did made me feel that it was not entirely lost and I was very grateful. . . .

My father wanted to write but had not the time or money or training or any of the opportunities I have had. I am never likely to romanticize him because I carry around most of his faults as well as his tastes. I even have about his same constitution. I have the same disease. It is something called lupus.

"I am never likely to romanticize him. . . . I knew him only by a kind of instinct." All my life, I have had to fight the impulse to romance in relation to my father. He died when I was seven, eight years younger than Flannery when she lost her father. Yet I feel that I know him profoundly, perhaps better than anyone else. Is that because of the time I have invested in romance, therefore in invention? I never remember my father being irritated with me. I know that he adored me. He was famous for his adoration of me. He would show pictures of me to strangers on trains. One of my foundational stories is about his behavior at my dance recital when I was five. I had two numbers, both solos. In the ballet number I was dressed in a flowered yellow dress with a straw hat. I danced to "In Your Easter Bonnet." For my tap number, I was in blue satin with appliquéd silver stars. The music: "You're a Grand Old Flag." It was a very great night for me. Then, all of a sudden, my father came down with some sort of stomach flu. But he said there was no way he would miss my recital. Only, he couldn't sit in the audience; he would have to stand in the back in case he had to run to the bathroom. When the curtain came up for my number, my father rushed from the back of the auditorium to the front shouting, "That's my little girl."

Flannery too had dancing lessons. This is how she speaks of it: "In my early days, I was forced to take dancing to throw me

into the company of other children and to make me graceful. Nothing I hated worse than the company of other children and I vowed I'd see them all in hell before I would make the first graceful move. The lessons went on for a number of years but I won. In a certain sense."

Like Flannery, I hated the company of other children, but unlike her, I loved, have always loved, to dance. I think of her, looking through her father's speeches to the American Legion, looking for scraps: who was this man whose legacy is my disease, my death? I too read my father's words after his death. But whereas she was charmed and moved, I was horrified. My father's politics horrified me. Right wing. Perhaps neo-Fascist. Anti-Semitic. My father, an anti-Semitic Jewish convert. His politics much closer to Flannery's than to mine. Flannery's politics horrify me. I try not to think of them. I pass over them to the fiction. As I pass over my father's politics to his letters to me from the hospital. In one of them, the sentence I believe the truest, most important I have ever read. "If only once more I could see your face. Not now, but soon."

He never saw my face again. He was dead a week later.

He died of a heart attack. I never think of my future death as connected to his.

I believe that my mother was somewhat relieved at my father's death. Both Flannery and I had fathers who were not what would have been called "good providers." Both Regina O'Connor and my mother were much better at making money than their husbands. Both were practical women. With not much understanding of what their daughters did "for a living." When my first book was published, one of my aunts told my mother that people told her I had written a dirty book. My mother hadn't read it. Before she read it, she gave it to a priest to ask him if he thought it was dirty. If it was dirty she wasn't going to read it. He told her that she was free to read it; her daughter had not written a dirty book. In a letter, Flannery says of her mother, "The other day she asked me why I didn't try to write something that people liked instead of the kind of thing I do write. Do you think, she said, that you are really using the talent God gave you when you don't write something that A LOT of people like? This always leaves me

shaking and speechless, raises my blood pressure 140 degrees, etc. All I can ever say is, if you have to ask, you'll never know."

If I had continued to live with my mother, I can only imagine the level to which my blood pressure would have habitually risen. I would never have considered living with my mother. When I imagined it, it seemed like a living death. Yet I believe that, for my mother, the two of us living alone would have seemed the most desirable thing in the world. She might have quite liked it if I had been an invalid, dependent on her care. Then she could have been the healthy one. Whenever I was home, she would encourage me to spend the day in bed. "You need your rest." She didn't like it when I went out with friends. If I had become ill and lived with my mother, would I have written with the purity and fearlessness, the severe beauty that Flannery has? What kind of writer would I have been?

I am ashamed of not having lived with my mother. I am ashamed that instead of being the afflicted artist, I am robustly healthy, living with a man, having borne two children. It is hard for me to imagine a more noble calling than that of the afflicted artist. A more noble fate. The word both Flannery and I would use for it: vocation.

Flannery defended herself against the accusation of writing about unpleasant characters by invoking the concept of vocation. "There is really only one answer to the people who complain about one's writing about 'unpleasant' people—and that is that one writes what one can. Vocation implies limitation but few people realize it who don't actually practice an art."

Flannery O'Connor and I would both use the word vocation because we are both Catholic. Would the work of Flannery O'Connor mean anything to me if she weren't Catholic? If there were any other writers who combined with Catholicism those two other ingredients I found crucial to my understanding of myself: femaleness and literary aristocracy? Would I be so afflicted by her if she weren't Catholic? If she weren't the kind of Catholic that I had to flee from, at a young age, to be-

come what I felt I needed to be? Not only a writer, but a woman of the world.

As a young woman, I felt the hold of the church to be a choking grip. Flannery felt just the opposite. "I write from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. . . . I write with a solid belief in all the Christian dogmas. I find that this in no way limits my freedom as a writer and that it increases rather than decreases my vision." And yet, she is the author of one of the lines about the church I most often use: "It seems to be a fact that you have to suffer as much from the church as for it." In the same letter, she goes on to say:

I write the way I do Because (not though) I am a Catholic. However I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty. To possess this within the Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden for the conscious Catholic. It's to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level. I think that the church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endure; the only thing that makes the church endure is that it is somehow the body of Christ and that on this we are fed. It seems to be a fact that you have to suffer as much from the church as for it, but if you believe in the divinity of Christ you have to cherish the world at the same time as you struggle to endure it.

## 5. Flannery's Sex

It is too simple to say, but I can only begin something by saying it: Flannery O'Connor's ability to accept Church dogma and my inability have its roots in our attitudes toward sex. Almost in this context, I could replace the word *sex* with the word *life*. But our attitudes toward life are so opposed because of our feelings about sex. Hers is the one I was brought up to have. The conviction that sex is, at worst, the root of all human, particularly modern, corruption. That it is, at best, a bad joke.

Here are some examples of this habit of mind in her letters:

I cannot help loving St. Thomas. His brothers didn't want him to waste himself being a Dominican and so locked him

up in a tower and introduced a prostitute into his apartment; her he ran out with a red hot poker. It would be fashionable today to be in sympathy with the woman, but I am in sympathy with St. Thomas. . . . The more I read St. Thomas the more flexible he appears to me. Incidentally, St. John would have been able to sit down with the prostitute and say, "Daughter, let us consider this," but St. Thomas doubtless knew his own nature and knew that he had to get rid of her with a poker or she would overcome him. I am not only for St. Thomas here but am in accord with his use of the poker. I call this being tolerantly realistic.

The Church's stand on birth control is the most absolutely spiritual of all her stands and with all of us being materialists at heart, there is little wonder that it causes unease. I wish various fathers would quit trying to defend it by saying that the world can support 40 billion. I will rejoice in the day when they say: "This is right, whether we all rot on top of each other or not, dear children, as we certainly may. Either practice restraint or be prepared for crowding."

When sex occurs in the stories, it is loveless or perverse. Let's look at "Good Country People," the story that was written after the shock of learning of the marriage of a man to whom she had been attracted. Arguably, the kiss she received from the Dane was the only kiss of her life. And this is how she describes the only kiss in the life of Hulga, who is the character she says she most identifies with of any in her fiction:

The kiss, which had more pressure than feeling behind it, produced that extra surge of adrenalin in the girl that enables one to carry a packed trunk out of a burning house, but in her, the power went at once to the brain. Even before he released her, her mind, clear and detached and ironic anyway, was regarding him from a great distance, with amusement but with pity. She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control. Some people might enjoy drain water if they were told it was vodka. When the boy, looking expectant but uncertain, pushed her gently away, she turned and walked on, saying nothing as if such business, for her, were common enough.

A few paragraphs later, Hulga experiences a kind of maternal tenderness for Manley Pointer, and she agrees to show him her wooden leg after he says, "It's what makes you different. You ain't like anybody else." When he says that, she feels she has been understood, and this gift makes her want to please him. She takes off her wooden leg, and he makes off with it, one of a series of trophies he has taken from women in just this way. The profound irony of this, as in many of O'Connor's stories, is that the ability to see the truth has nothing to do with the ability to live a life well, the notion of a well-lived life being suspect for O'Connor in any case. When he asks if she loves him she replies, "There mustn't be anything dishonest between us. . . . I am thirty years old. I have a number of degrees." Hulga thinks Manley is an innocent and is moved by his innocence, but she in fact is the innocent. But no mercy is shown her; she is left, without her wooden leg, trapped in a hay loft. Someone will have to rescue her. Everyone will know her shame.

#### 6. Sex and Love: Flannery and *Café Life*, March 2004

If Flannery O'Connor never portrays sexuality positively, it would seem that she has the same problem with what might be called love. She says in a letter, "I believe love to be efficacious in the looong [*sic*] run when it is translated into fiction designed for a public with a predisposition to believe the opposite." When she speaks of love and its efficacy, she has to make a bit of a joke of it, or a bit of a joke of herself. When she says love is efficacious in the long run she spells long *looong*, suggesting that its proper realm is not time, but eternity.

She would deny that her stories are loveless. She would say that the love of God scalds, it does not comfort. Let us take her on her own terms. In her stories there is very little comfort. But there is also very little kindness from the author to her characters. And after reading her for a while, I become impatient at the partialness of her vision. At what is left out. Love. I can see the mocking spelling she might use for the word love. She might spell it *loove*. Or *lurv*.

The problem of her attitude toward love is most evident in her treatment of Rayber and Bishop in *The Violent Bear It Away*. I finish this book in a café in Davis, California. I am visiting my daughter and my son-in-law. I think that Flannery O'Connor would hate this town in California, which is left-leaning, progressive, where everything is recycled and no one is allowed to smoke. I think that it is impossible to imagine Flannery O'Connor having a daughter, and utterly impossible to imagine her having a son-in-law. I think how contemptuous she would be if she knew how much time I took away from work to plan my daughter's wedding. As I sit in the café, I am very happy. The beauty of her prose makes me happy, the goodness of the coffee makes me happy, all the people sitting around me strike me as beautiful. A young black man catches my eye and we smile. I imagine myself waking up in his arms and think that might be quite wonderful. I realize that I am in love with everyone in this café, and that I would never be able to write about it.

A week later, I am in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in another café, copying into my notebook passages from *The Violent Bear it Away*. There is no one in the room with me, and I am very glad of that. Then a woman comes in with her three children. The children have the precocious, unmodulated tones of the home schooled. They are bragging about their superior intellectual achievements compared to their soccer teammates who are educated in inferior public establishments. When we go downstairs to pay, the youngest child leans on the counter, taking up too much space so that I have to move my books. With his fingernail, he tries to remove a label attached to the counter. I give the whole crew what I mean to be a withering look. The mother tells her child to move away from the counter and leave the lady some space. I would find this experience much easier to put into a story than the one in the café in California.

*The Violent Bear It Away*. The epigram is taken from Matthew's gospel: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away." I have no idea what this means. Bear it away to where? The kingdom of heaven? Isn't it beyond time and space? I look for a more modern translation: "Ever since the

coming of John the Baptist the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and violent men are seizing it." This makes more sense to me, but not a lot. Did it appeal to O'Connor because of the irony contained in it, the kingdom of God, the omnipotent, seeming to be in thrall to the force of men?

This second of O'Connor's two novels centers around three characters: Young and Old Tarwater and Rayber. Old Tarwater is a self-proclaimed prophet who steals his nephew, actually his great-nephew, away from civilization and brings him up, isolated, in the woods, so that he can be free from modern corruption and ready when his own call to prophecy strikes him. Rayber is one of O'Connor's stock villains: the rationalist liberal social scientist who thinks he can encompass mystery with case studies and statistics. Rayber's only child is severely mentally damaged; his mental capacities are radically diminished, and O'Connor portrays him as little more than an animal. But his father, while often wishing for his death, is in the grips of a mysterious love for this damaged child: "the love that would overcome him . . . was not the kind that could be used for the child's improvement or his own. It was love without reason, love for something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all-demanding, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant. And it only began with Bishop. It began with Bishop and then like an avalanche covered everything his reason hated."

Now this is an extraordinary paragraph, risky and yet flawlessly rendered. More extraordinary when we consider what Bishop's fate is. Young Tarwater, the prophet who refuses the mantle of prophecy, insists on baptizing the child Bishop. But his baptism consists of a drowning, and Rayber, his father, allows it to happen—knowing that this death, despite or perhaps because of his own drowning love for his son, is something that he wanted.

O'Connor does not allow Rayber to experience a second of remorse or regret for the dead child. And in one of her letters, she utters the chilling and possibly even heretical sentence: "The murder [of Bishop] is forgotten by God and of no interest to society."

Now, for someone of O'Connor's faith, it is impossible to imagine that God would forget anything. Has her own unease at her treatment of this character pressed her to a thought she would reject in anyone else? In other letters she seems to express different feelings: "Rayber's love for Bishop is the purest love I have ever dealt with. It is because of its terrifying purity that Rayber has to destroy it." "What you ask about Rayber loving Bishop is interesting. He did love him, but throughout the book he was fighting his inherited tendency to mystical love. He had the idea that his love could be contained in Bishop but that if Bishop were gone, there would be nothing to contain it and he would then love everything and specifically Christ. The point where Tarwater is drowning Bishop is the point where he has to choose. He makes the Satanic choice, and the inability to feel the pain of his loss is the immediate result."

O'Connor does not allow her characters to feel the pain of loss. They are denied the experience of grieving. I have often wondered if people are more comfortable with violence than with grief: violence is sharp, clear, bounded; grief can be eternal; it percolates and permutates. Its path is gradual and slow. It's the kind of thing that, as an artist, O'Connor can't do. She's no good at denouement, and she can't do the consequences of an act that follow onto a lived life. It is one of the failures of her craft; a failure unusual in so exigent a craftsman. Her stories, as she says, are romances, in the tradition of Hawthorne. She is interested in the climactic moment, not in the consequences of the climax. She is interested in redemption, but not in forgiveness. Consider the vast tonal difference in the two words: *redemption* and *forgiveness*. Consider the differences in temperature. Redemption is a fire that burns; forgiveness is a cooling poultice; it relieves. The sentence "I have been redeemed," is very different from "My sins have been forgiven." The first sentence speaks only of imposition; the second suggests agency. In Catholic sacramentology, sins can only be forgiven in the sacrament if the sinner asks forgiveness. As we all go on sinning, we must constantly be forgiven. Indeed re-forgiven. Redemption took place once in history; forgiveness must be relived. At the end of the sacrament of penance, the priest tells the penitent to "go in peace." This sentence is impossible to imagine in a story of Flannery O'Connor's.

I have no interest in the issue of redemption. I have written over and over about the problem of forgiveness.

### 7. The Anxiety of Influence: Beyond Bloom

So many of my reactions to Flannery O'Connor are so negative that, against my will, reluctantly, because I am temperamentally suspicious of theory, I feel I must actually read Harold Bloom's book *The Anxiety of Influence* instead of just pretending to have read it. I take the book out of the library. The language annoys me. I can't help but think it would annoy Flannery. The appropriated Greek: Clianamen, Tessera, Kenosis, Daemonization, Askesis, Aphophrades. From what I can gather, Bloom says that all strong poets (by whom he means Wordsworth) must Oedipally kill the strong father poet that has gone before him (by which he means Milton). I think: either what he is saying is crushingly obviously or it is absurd. And, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have pointed out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Bloom's model, being Oedipal, applies only to male writers. Gilbert and Gubar believe that female writers look to their precursors for inspiration and sustenance. But I find both Bloom's murderous model and Gilbert and Gubar's over-sweet one inadequate as an explanation for a relationship such as mine to Flannery O'Connor. Rather, it seems helpful to me to invoke an alternate myth, the myth of parental conflict that applies to the situation of women and their mothers, the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

This myth underscores the ambivalence of the mother-daughter relationship. Persephone flees her mother for the dark glamorous world of Hades, the powerful, exciting and dangerous seducer-mate. But so great is the power of the mother that she is pulled back above ground. But she cannot stay in the too enclosing womb; she must retreat to a darkness which is not warm but fiery. And then back again, an endlessly unstable, endlessly mobile position. One could paraphrase this myth by saying that its message is: marriage is hell but life with mom is no picnic either.

The daughter is never at rest. The daughter is never at home. Yet her solution is not murder or death but a commitment to a neverending journey.

In my own writing life, I have had periods of being strongly drawn to Flannery O'Connor and then strongly impelled to flee her. Interestingly, I have had this same response to a writer who would seem to be O'Connor's polar opposite: Virginia Woolf. Home and away, home and away.

In trying to understand my feelings about Flannery O'Connor, the best I can say is that I often do not like Flannery O'Connor, but I can't get over loving her. The woman and the work. I go back and back to her. The reason for that is something she would despise. I am drawn not only to Flannery O'Connor the writer, but to Flannery O'Connor the woman. The woman who lived the life I refused and was grateful not to have to live. But who lived it with purity and gallantry. With singleness of heart. With bravery and good humor. She is the good Catholic I can never be. And yet she made me feel there was a place for me, or for the likes of me.

I cannot even begin to guess what she would think of the likes of me. Or I can begin to guess, and it drives me to despair. I prefer to imagine the two of us in Milledgeville, having lunch at the Chick-Fil-Lay, swapping stories about our mothers and piling up details of our fellow guests, both of us planning to use them in stories. I can pretend that some of the things she wrote to her friend she wrote to me: "I only worry in these things about serving my own artistic conscience, not a mythical set of admirers who expect a certain thing. God and posterity are only served by well made articles."

Or, I can think of her as my practical mentor, a role she took on with one aspiring friend when she wrote: "Two minor items: don't name any streets Oak and Main. Even if they are that kind of street, cease and desist."

I think she is wrong about the world. I think it is not as she says it is. But I love the sentences. I love her as a writer of description. "The moon was reflected like pale fire in the few spots of water in the sand." "A flare of pink lightning lit the woods and he saw the black shapes of trees pierce out of the ground all around him." "His eyes glittered like open pits of light as he moved across the sand, dragging his crushed shadow behind him."

And she has no peers in describing gesture, simple action:

At the lawyer's window he knelt down and let his face hang out upside down over the floating speckled streets moving like a river of tin below and watched the glints on it from the sun which drifted pale in a pale sky, too far away to ignite anything. When I come for good, he said to himself, I'll do something to make every eye stick on me, and leaning forward, he saw his new hat drop down gently, lost and casual, dallied slightly by the breeze on its way to be smashed in the tin river below. He clutched at his bare head and fell back inside the room.

What character has ever been more precisely invoked than Mrs. Freeman in "Good Country People"?

Besides the neutral expression than she wore when she was alone, Mrs. Freeman had two other, forward and reverse, that she used for all her human dealings. Her forward expression was steady and driving like the advance of a heavy truck. Her eyes never swerved to left or right but turned as the story turned as if they followed a yellow line down the center of it. She seldom used the other expression because it was not often necessary for her to retract a statement, but when she did, her face came to a complete stop, there was an almost imperceptible movement of her black eyes, during which they seemed to be receding, and then the observer would see that Mrs. Freeman, though she might stand there as real as several grain sacks thrown on top of each other, was no longer there in spirit. . . . Mrs. Freeman could never be brought to admit herself wrong on any point. She would stand there and if she could be brought to say anything, it was something like, "Well, I wouldn't of said it was and I wouldn't of said it wasn't" or letting her gaze range over the top kitchen shelf where there was an assortment of dusty bottles, she might remark, "I see you ain't ate many of them figs you put up last summer."

This eye for the perfect detail—the dusty bottles on the top of the kitchen shelf, to name just one—is at work throughout this story, never more strikingly than in the description of Hulga's wooden leg: "The artificial limb, in a white sock and brown flat shoe, was bound in a heavy material like canvas and ended in an ugly jointure where it was attached to the stump." Only genius could have provided the white sock and

brown flat shoe, and used the syntax *brown flat* rather than *flat brown*.

In a similar vein, the beginning of "Greenleaf" is breathtakingly perfect, a situation completely rendered with not a wasted word.

Mrs. May's bedroom window was low and faced on the east and the bull, silvered in the moonlight, stood under it, his head raised as if he listened—like some patient god come down to woo her—for a stir inside the room. The window was dark and the sound of her breathing too light to be carried outside. Clouds crossing the moon blackened him and in the dark he began to tear at the hedge. Presently they passed and he appeared again in the same spot, chewing steadily, with a hedge-wreath that he had ripped loose for himself caught in the tips of his horns. When the moon drifted into retirement again, there was nothing to mark his place but the sound of steady chewing. Then abruptly a pink glow filled the window. Bars of light slid across him as the venetian blind was slit. He took a step backward and lowered his head as if to show the wreath across his horns.

The magic of this passage occurs because only ordinary objects are presented: a scrub bull, the moon, venetian blinds, and yet we are witnessing an event that promises, and will turn out to be, the stuff of myth.

And I would give a very great deal to have written the end of "Revelation."

She bent her head slowly and gazed, as if through the very heart of mystery, down into the pig parlor at the hogs. They had settled all in one corner around the old sow who was grunting softly. A red glow suffused them. They appeared to pant with a secret life. Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rum-

bling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a minute the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.

I say I would give a great deal to have written that. But what if it is the case that in order to have written the paragraphs that Flannery O'Connor wrote, one would have had to live her life? Would I give up my life as I've lived it, agreeing to live as she had, in isolation, afflicted, in the care of her mother, if I could have produced these paragraphs? I'm glad no one is asking me the question. I don't know what my answer would be.

No, that's not the truth. I know what my answer would be. It would be *no*.

Or *yes*.

Or *no*.

All citations from Flannery O'Connor's letters are from *Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being: Letters Selected and with an Introduction by Sally Fitzgerald* (NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979). All citations from Flannery O'Connor's fiction are from *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* (N.Y.: Library of America), n.d.