In which we arrived in Georgia and spent our last night on the road near a bowling alley, where money was lost and pitchers of draft beer were consumed. We rose the next morning and left for Milledgeville, the home of Flannery O'Connor. We ate lunch at an Italian restaurant, tried to master the phrase "Georgia State College and University," and finally traveled through town, turning in a driveway just past a Wal-Mart and arriving at Andalusia, the home of one of the South's greatest writers. After wandering the grounds, we rested on the steps and listened to the curator and later an acquaintance of O'Connor and her mother as they told us the history behind the home and her celebrated stories. We were soon joined by Professors Martin Lamon and Karen McElmurray, who read to us and discussed their perspectives on Southern literature. We left Andalusia at early dusk, after trying to make friends with the half-ass mule in the backyard and, in keeping with tradition, throwing our Cornbread and Sushi Frisbee around the back fields of O'Connor's property. We arrived in Athens as evening fell and ate Thai food downtown as we debated tattoos and the Athens music scene. Finally we arrived in Spartanburg near midnight, ready for showers and clean clothes, exhausted but educated by ten days happily spent in the company of friends and inspired by the South, our South, and the brilliance of the many literary "characters" we had been lucky enough to meet and get to know.
“Maria Milagrosa”
An Excerpt from Surrendered Child:
A Birth Mother’s Journey
by Karen Sayler McElmurray

Home. At the holidays, 1998, I am in one, a house I call home. It’s a house of two dogs and a festive tree and a kitchen sink, although holidays take me elsewhere. At Christmas, sometimes at Thanksgiving, and for a week in summers, I take Interstate 64 through West Virginia, via Beckley and Charleston and Huntington, then on from there to Eastern Kentucky, to the little town where my mother lives, to my mother’s house and to the house of her sister. Both their houses I have by this time come to call places of secrets.

I, too, inhabit a house of secrets, lead a life my mother only suspects. I am by 1998 a writer and a reader, of books she vaguely calls novels, a category that for her includes romances and old movies and one long letter she reads to me again and again, one my father wrote her before their divorce. Long enough to be a novel, she says of these ten pages, itemized reasons my father wanted out. I am a college teacher, and she imagines me in a schoolyard with a bell, ringing in classes for children after recess. My growth, this body turned from girl to woman, is a mystery to her, its breasts and desires.

This winter, this Christmas of 1998, I am determined to shed my greatest secret, shed it like a snakeskin, like an undesirable and heavy coat. This winter, this December, I am determined to be absolved forever at the night she died. I will tell the truth, I say. I’ll come as clean as spring water. I’ll go forth, I tell myself, having sinned and confessed. I will be absolved forever at the feet of the Mother. I will tell her I have a son and that hidden, that hidden reason my father wanted out. I am a college teacher, and she imagines me in a schoolyard with a bell, ringing in classes for children after recess. My growth, this body turned from girl to woman, is a mystery to her, its breasts and desires.

I stop at a BP in Marmet for a bear claw and coffee and talk for awhile to the man at the counter. He has small, red eyes and a nervous way of sucking at his lower lip. He offers me free soft peppermints and tells me he’s worked every Christmas, New Year’s and Fourth of July for the past fourteen years. He smells like sweet wine and winks as I pay for my coffee and a pack of cigarettes. I’m not a smoker, and he’s maybe not a drinker, but we’re celebratory, high energy, and it’s nearing the zenith of this holiday—one o’clock, time for turkey and dressing and reruns of It’s a Wonderful Life.

I’m late, and I know it. But I drive slowly, thinking of my mother and her sisters. Of Ruby, who died in an auto accident a number of years ago. Ruby had secrets, the greatest of which was the exact nature of her illness. Seizures? Manic depression? She was on her way home, the night she died. I imagine her in the car on her way back to her apartment in that concrete block building with a guardrail along the halls and a persistent smell of something medicinal and sanitary. My grandfather was driving. I imagine how they came to stop sign. Ruby might have looked off to the right, to a field and sign with praying hands and a promise, Jesus Serves. Or she maybe she closed her eyes, in those last seconds before the other car crashed through, striking just as they pulled ahead. It was she who died, not my grandfather. Was that death like her dreams of a Holy Ghost with her own face?

Ruthie, the youngest sister, lives up Mining Hollow, outside of town. She also leaves home less and less, since she lost her son, gun shot in the back room. She spends her days tending house and the grave of her son, which she can see from the trailer’s kitchen window. When I went to visit there one August, Ruth’s husband was leaving to go squirrel hunting. Just joking, he waved his rifle in the air, pointed it at us. From the couch, Ruth said, I can’t stand it when you do that. She didn’t get up. I remain uncertain of the nature of that night of my cousin’s life. Suicide? Another mysterious illness? Depression, they all hint darkly. And drugs, too, ones that sent him once to an unnamed hospital, one of those places, they called it. The night of the shooting is called when that happened to him, or the night that happened, and no mention is made of death itself. It is at Ruth’s house that there’ll be Christmas dinner, if I’m in time.

I reach eastern Kentucky, and my Aunt Ruth’s, by four o’clock, having missed this traditional dinner. My lateness has thrown everything off, their twelve-thirty dinertime. They have waited, a half hour, an hour, before giving in, feasting without me. Now, my dead cousin’s daughter sits in the post-ice storm warmth of the patio, rocking on the porch glider, her patent leathery feet scooting up and back. The rest of them are inside the trailer, where there are still pots of green beans and sweet potatoes on the stove, and the refrigerator is packed with foiled pans of turkey and ham. But I can see that it’s over. My uncle has already stripped the Christmas tree, an artificial one, and I can see it lying naked in the living room, a few icicles snuggling on its branches. Dishes have been washed. Pa, my grandfather, sits in his usual spot by the door.

“Hello stranger,” he says, his whitish bird-eyes looking me up and down.

The television is blaring football and the mother of my dead cousin’s child and her now husband are lounging, sock-footed, with their other three kids, one of whom is short-necked and cripple-footed, son of his own grandfather. My uncle, who is loud and white-haired and a former radio rock’ n’ roll performer, welcomes me.

“Well,” he says, “look who the cat drug in. Were the roads bad?”

I tell him the ice was still around, a little, back in Virginia, but that here, the roads were good. My mother is at the table in the adjoining dining room, with my aunt. They’re talking blood sugar levels and hairdos, but they stop and my aunt gets up, hugs me against her soft, neglected chest.

“Were you careful on those roads?” she asks.

I’ve brought her a flavored coffee selection for Christmas, but I can smell Maxwell House
from the kitchen, and my gift suddenly seems off, the hazelnut and cinnamon dwarfed by the plethora of things in this trailer. To the side, along the floor of the dining room, are plaster statues—angels, Dalmatians, chickens, rabbits, a wind-up monkey that plays reggae. Most of these are gifts from my uncle to my aunt, who seldom leaves the trailer to buy herself things. A table by the back wall displays a bible, open, and photos—my long-dead cousin, the aunt killed in the auto accident, my grandmother, dead a few years ago from pneumonia complications.

"Were the roads bad?" my mother asks.

"Them roads weren't a bit bad," my uncle calls from the other room.

I mention the ice and Virginia and the warm spell and as always, I am struck when I first see my mother, by her smallness. She has a delicate face, large green eyes with the same darkness beneath I'm getting, at forty-two, and her small hands have knuckles swollen with arthritis and housework.

While I take my place at the dining room table, my aunt offers me leftovers. Ruthie, my mother says, has been up since two-thirty a.m., basting the turkey and peeling ten pounds of potatoes for her potato salad and I wouldn't, she says, believe the dishes they've washed. But soon I'm sitting with a paper plate of turkey dressing, the potato salad, and cranberry sauce I like from childhood, sliced, garnet-colored jelly, with tiny ridges from the can on the edges.

While I eat, my mother has a second helping of dessert, her favorite. She piles her own paper plate with vanilla cream pie and chocolate cake, cheesecake with strawberry sauce on top, all the while telling me she's lost some, that she was at one hundred one when she weighed this morning, as she does every morning.

"I believe you've gained a little," she says. She looks at me speculatively, takes a bite of pie, her mouth open wide, to save her lipstick. "How were the roads?" she asks. "They looked good over this way."

I tell her about the ice storm and how I chiseled open my truck and the warming trend, since yesterday. I eat slowly, tasting fat back in the green beans, viscous marshmallow in the sweet potatoes, pickle, mustard, and Miracle Whip in the potato salad. I feel my stomach widening, my hips expanding, the untimeliness, ungainliness of me, eating, late.

"Now, she ain't fat," my uncle says. He bends behind my chair. "Just getting some of that middle age spread," he says, nuzzling my cheek with his beard.

He whispers into my ear. "Don't you have a little sugar for your uncle?"

This is the way of this afternoon, five o'clock now, Christmas ebbing. We talk of lipstick brands and permanent waves and innovative eye creams and after my mother finishes her cake, my aunt goes to get her blood sugar test kit. I decline, but they solemnly poke each other's fingers, testing the rightness of their blood. Soon it will be dark outside, and I will drive my mother and Pa home along the winding stretch of asphalt called Mining Hollow, then along Highway 23, home. I think of roads, iceless roads, connecting house to house, aunt's, mother's, my own, my own house now devoid of blue tree lights, softly dark, waiting for the certainty of my return.
Interview with Karen McElmurray

On the porch of Flannery O'Connor's beloved Andalusia in Milledgeville, Georgia, novelist and writer Karen Sayler McElmurray entertained us with discussions and readings of her memoir Surrendered Child and her newest work, Strange Birds In the Tree of Heaven. Wearing white and black with delicate jewelry and studded boots, McElmurray looked like an intellectual flower-child.

It's kind of interesting that although you've lived in the South for a while, you tell us you don't see yourself as Southern?

KM: It's really kind of funny. When I came from Kentucky to, say, Virginia, I had been living in the Appalachian Mountains and everything in Virginia seemed so foreign; the food, the people and the accents all seemed kind of alien. But what's really hilarious is the fact that I didn't know the locals thought my family and I were "foreign" too. If you're from Appalachia, you're viewed to be about as backwards as you can get. I eventually got settled in, but even now I don't know if I could say I'm Southern.

You write books in the South with Southern characters—one might think that your works would only appeal to Southerners, but their appeal is much broader. Why?

KM: Obviously in Surrendered Child I tell a story of adoption, which is a nation-wide issue I think women can relate to. The book may be my personal journey, but I also hope every birth mother goes through the same experiences of knowing that you're bringing life into the world and that ultimately you may give it up because you want the best for it. What mother, what parent for that matter, wouldn't want that?

Does Strange Birds have that same universal appeal?

KM: Perhaps not to the same degree, but I think the appeal is still there. The character of Andrew is a character stuck in an unfortunate position: he loves an older man and obviously he doesn't live in an area that is comfortable with the feelings he has or the situation he's in. In our current political climate, homosexuality is still a very controversial topic, more controversial than adoption probably. No one deserves to face ridicule or discrimination for their views or beliefs, no matter what they may be.

Was the actual writing process for Surrendered Child difficult for you? Did your research have any effects on you?

KM: Oh yeah, definitely. The absence of my son was a big part of my life even before I began to write my memoir. I remember waking up in the middle of the night and feeling my womb contract, my stomach shuddering with these phantom pains like some sort of reflex. My body was making me conscious of my son's existence (or lack thereof) and forcing me to remember him even when I had tried to push the memories into the cobwebs of my mind.

You were in denial of the experience then?

KM: Your mind can never forget the truly important events in your life. We can always insist to ourselves that something didn't happen or we can pretend that something doesn't exist but on some level the human mind can't be cheated. I was in denial about the entire experience. I had tried to repress it but it bubbled back to the surface on both a conscious and physical level.

So this forced "womb-gazing" was a motivator to start your book. Did the actual process of digging up old memories and searching for your son make writing your book a painful experience?

KM: That's exactly why repressed memories are repressed—we put them out of reach on a high shelf where they can't hurt us. Once I really got into the writing process and began sifting through records and papers from adoption agencies and archives, I had to learn to let myself be vulnerable. If you want your words to have emotion and actually mean something, then you have to experience those emotions so your writing has credibility. And, of course, there was the actual correspondence and meeting for the first time with my son. That was indescribable. I mean, you go through so many emotions: excitement, fear, nervousness, happiness, the list goes on and on. I had to evaluate myself very carefully. In the midst of all those swirling emotions, you begin to wonder about yourself. Are you ready for such a big step? Will his meet your expectations? Will you meet his expectations? You are meeting your own flesh and blood and you have to evaluate every possibility.
Has there been any catharsis in the last couple years now that you’ve found your son and finished the book?
KM: Yes. When you commit thought and memories to paper it becomes so much easier to handle them because you’ve already processed and sifted through your feelings. I think that is probably the hardest thing to do for any writer—knowing what to put down on paper so that everyone can know what you’re trying to say and see your point of view. And of course there was the actual meeting with my son, and if you want to know about than you should read my memoir!

It sounds like writing is a growing process for you. Do you have any advice for young writers?
KM: I write because it gives me a voice. If you feel that you’ve had something happen to you that you think others can learn from or want to hear, then write about it. Surrendered Child was written because the experience for me taught me so much and I thought that my experience could guide others. That’s really what writing at its core is, a guide, a written guide, a way to communicate to others and also to yourself. It’s a foolproof way to vocalize your feelings and your life lessons.

An Interview with Martin Lammon

Martin Lammon is a professor at the Georgia College and State University who has published several works of poetry and poetics, such as News from Where I Live and Written in Water, Written in Stone: Twenty Years of Poets on Poetry. Professor Lammon moved from book to book and from line to line as if he had waited his whole life to share his stories with us.

One of the issues we have addressed in our class is the strong tie we Southerners seem to have to our land. Having moved around as much as you have, do you agree? Do feel that ties to the land are important to being Southern?
ML: I have up and sold my house and all of my belongings in order to go to Costa Rica for only 4 months, so on the surface I'd say that I appear to be a contradiction to that theory. However, for me, where I am is my home. I am strongly attached to Milledgeville, my current residence, and I feel as if I have lived here my whole life. I like to think of myself as a turtle—my shell is my home; it travels with me wherever I go. I am not the kind of professor or writer who follows money; you know, I lived in Costa Rica where there was hardly any money. When I move somewhere, I like to think that each place I live is the place I plan to stay for the rest of my life.

So, if I were to offer you a million dollar contract for one year somewhere in Idaho, you wouldn’t take it?
ML: Of course not. I don’t like potatoes. However, I hear the weather is nice this time of year in Montana.

Do you feel like being from outside of the South has given you perspective on the South?
ML: I am at home here. However, my mother-in-law does not feel the same way, as she
I still refer to me as a ‘Yankee.’ If she’s not calling me ‘Yankee,’ she’s mistakenly calling me the dog’s name, so I guess you take your pick. I do feel that being from outside of the South has helped me in my writing. I like to think that I don’t overlook the small beauties of the South, the way locals who are used to them might. I respect the South and don’t take anything about it lightly.

Do you think Southern literature is often stereotyped by the rest of the nation? ML: Yes and no. There have been so many good writers from the South like O’Connor, Faulkner, Welty, that many non-Southerners will hold Southern writers to these standards. Being from the South can bring a positive approach from your reader but the downside to that is it can also put added pressure on your work. If your work is above average, but not up to these high standards, then it runs the risk of being wrongfully viewed as a lesser work.

Living in Milledgeville, Ga., the hometown of Flannery O’Connor, have you run into O’Connor fanatics? ML: I have met many people who love her work, but fanatic? I am not sure how many fanatics I have met. However, I did meet a lady with a very interesting O’Connor story. I had just arrived in Milledgeville to interview for my current job. Seeing as I’m a writer, I naturally figured the appropriate thing to do would be to go to a bar and have a drink or six. As I sat at the bar, it became pretty clear to the locals that I was an out-of-towner when I asked them the question that they had all been asked a hundred times before; ‘So did any of you all know Flannery?’ Notice I said ‘you all’ instead of my new favorite Southern slang ‘ya’ll’ because I was still new to the South. I’ve since gotten comfortable with that contraction. Well, the nice woman behind the bar came up and told me that she ‘kind of’ knew Flannery. She had sparked my interest so I had to ask, “what do you mean by kind of?” Then she politely informed me that she had done Flannery O’Connor’s hair in the funeral parlor on the day of her funeral.

One of your poems is in response to an e-mail, another about your father, and you’ve written an entire book on your experiences in Costa Rica. Are all of your poems based on your own life or do you sometimes write fictionally in your poetry? ML: The majority of my poems are based on my own experiences. However, I don’t really feel that they are completely autobiographical. I take a true experience, like chasing a cow in my yard, and add my own fiction to it. I let my imagination play with what could have happened in certain situations. I’m often asked if my poems are “true stories” or not, and I usually answer, “Yes, almost all the time, because I just don’t have enough imagination to make up these stories.” But what I don’t say is how much I work on the form and structure of my poems and even lately, working in forms such as a villanelle and sestina. So yes, my poems are almost always about true stories, but poems have their own demands—on both craft and story—and so I am certainly not beholden to “facts” when I’m writing poems! Lord knows, a good fact can ruin the truth more often than not!

Backroads
by Martin Lammon

Near Wauseon, Ohio, my father drives his father from Ottokie to Tedrow, northwest across Bean Creek to Fayette, that town where my mother was born. These flat lands fool my father. The gridwork of roads, plowed fields, and abandoned railroad crossings crisscross the county. He hasn’t lived here since 1956. Now his father has forgotten how keys work, how another slides open the deadbolt. The old man has forgotten his son’s name. But if a body, mind, and soul are one and knit together one life, how does one unravel when a man can’t tie his shoelaces or button his shirt? Where’s the soul gone when honey, salt, and dill taste the same? My father’s father stares out the car window. Forty years ago, he and his son sold eggs in Wauseon and Maumee, raised hogs, planted corn. They built the Ohio Turnpike, a road that emptied the land west of Toledo. Now my father is lost, steers by instinct. He knows that, soon, he’ll have to give up, pull over and ask some stranger for help.

After my grandfather has died, my father tells me this story, about backroads.

I’d never find on a map. He tells me how his father said “Turn here,” pointing east, then said “turn,” and again, “turn,” past old barns, cottonwoods, all the way home.
My father goes silent, and I know he tells me this story because he cannot say how he is proud, how he’s waited sixty years for this saga about his father, that last crisis where adrenalin rises and the heart’s ventricle squeezes blood to the brain, and fathers shed fear and shame like an old skin, tell their lost sons “here, turn here.” And if my father and I cannot say where the soul goes when we die, or if we have souls, what we have is enough. I have his nose, his big thighs. My body, older now, will make a good fit for his discarded skin.

Killing Pigs
by Martin Lammon

Donna Deason is having a problem with wild hogs digging up her yard. She has spoken with the game warden and he has approved having them killed. If you are interested in killing these pigs, please get in touch with Donna at Baskin Robbins.

These pigs range in size from baby pigs to grown pigs.

—University e-mail

One woman wonders out loud which of these pigs works in our department. One man warns, beware October’s special flavor-of-the-month. How can we resist? We are trained in irony. We eye each other sidewise, wonder ourselves who secretly longs to cross over the semantic gap between having them killed and killing these pigs.

China domesticated hogs nine thousand years ago. Columbus and conquistadores brought pigs to the Americas—today’s feral razorback, cloven-hooved, enlarged canines curling out each jaw. "Tusks," we say, just one gene we tinker with. We breed Berkshire, Yorkshire, Chester White, Duroc, Hampshire, Poland China, Landrace and Spotted hogs, fine names for tusk-less, thin-skinned swine.

In Middle Georgia, one hundred thirty years ago, lost pigs scavenged the Oconee River’s flood plain and forests for yams, grubs, plump black raspberries. Burned or abandoned, no barn or sty was fit for them, no smokehouse, no penned wallow, these hogs engendering their wild progeny, come now to root up a woman’s yard.
Donna Deason, I understand. In Ohio, fifteen years ago, I watched infant marmots gnaw on the grass outside my kitchen door. The mother had made a winter den below the porch. Each pup was harmless, the size of my hand, all nine together nothing so fierce as a feral hog. Yet when I threw open the door, hooted and hollered, all but one scattered. Years later I read in a book how a brood's oldest sibling will stand guard. But I learned firsthand how even a marmot pup’s teeth and hiss are fearsome to a bare-legged man standing near-naked in his morning robe.

In Ohio and Georgia, we call them groundhogs or woodchucks. The name does not matter. Gardens are ravaged. A den once settled will not be abandoned.

I could not kill them, Deason, but had it done. My landlord farmer and his son lay down in tall grass thirty yards off, rifles ready, took aim and one-by-one, each pup exploded. I didn’t see it, these groundhogs dying, these two men killing half-pigs without malice, wit, or irony.

Adventures at Uncle Dubb’s: A Perspective on a Southern Farm and a Southern Character
by Casey Lambert

My Uncle Dubb has been called a “character” by many. He loved to tell a good story (most of which were not true or stretched to the point where most of the truth fell straight through the story), thought that farm life—on a Southern farm—was heaven on earth, never failed to practice “Southern hospitality,” opening his home to anyone, was extremely stubborn and, in being too proud to ask anyone for anything, attempted to be self-sufficient. Furthermore, he owned livestock that he did not need, farm equipment that he did not use, and refused to wear anything but his standard work clothes all because of his fond memories of the old, Southern ways and out of his love for them. To me, he seems the perfect Southern “character,” though, in Uncle Dubb’s case, the “character” was a reality.

Uncle Dubb was married to Mamaw’s sister Mary Nell, and though Uncle Dubb and Mary Nell eventually divorced, my dad and I both referred to him as Uncle Dubb for the duration of his life. He was just about Dad’s favorite relative when my father was growing up because Dad was an only child and having no one to play with, found Uncle Dubb’s place to be a haven, as Uncle Dubb had a lot of property, animals, and five children. Furthermore, Uncle Dubb practically treated my father like one of his own children, so his house was one of Dad’s favorite places to go when he was little and as he was growing up. So, as was appropriate, it was Dad who introduced me to Uncle Dubb and the wonders of his farm.

Just like Dad, when I was little, my favorite place to go was Uncle Dubb’s house. Daddy would tell me, at random times, to load up in the truck and would act like we were just going for a ride with the windows down and the music up. Then, to my absolute elation, he would take the meandering road—the one road I recognized as a young child—that passed through hills and countryside and, as I knew, led to Uncle Dubb’s place. I loved Uncle Dubb for his slow speech and the way he would pass his chewing tobacco from side to side in his mouth when he was thinking hard, but I loved him more for where he lived and the constant flow of animals that he kept.

In addition to the livestock—which, with the exception of two Belgian draft horses, typically could not call Uncle Dubb’s place a permanent home—there were a variety of critters that, of their own accord, took permanent residency at Uncle Dubb’s place. In the barn—a grey, weathered structure that looked just like what a barn should look like—there were always a number of “barn cats”—wild, feral felines. The hay bales were
stacked almost to the ceiling of the barn, and the cats and kittens would hide in the hay and shelter there in the winter. They hung out there in warm weather because it was a good place to find mice and, though he would never admit it, because Uncle Dubb put out food for them. I loved jumping in the haystacks—and felt like I was on top of the world when standing atop them—and looking for kittens and cats among the yellowed grass. Dad and Uncle Dubb always warned me about the black snakes that, like the cats and kittens, took refuge in the hay; but Uncle Dubb and Dad did not realize that I liked trying to catch snakes in addition to felines, so the possibility of running into a black snake did not trouble me.

I took particular interest in one group of kittens, for a member of the litter was a long-haired, orange male kitten that looked much like my cat, Sunny. I was so taken with that kitten that, in joking, Uncle Dubb told me that if I could “ketch ‘eem,” I could “keep ‘eem.” Dad did not hear this comment; otherwise, knowing that I would take such a comment literally, he would have told Uncle Dubb to revoke it. Since Dad did not step in, however, I spent that entire day trying to catch the little, orange kitten, having little to no success (I think I managed to grab a bit of tail at one point). About nine months later, however, when the orange “kitten” was almost fully grown, I, figuring that Uncle Dubb’s offer still stood, decided to try a new tactic with the wild cat: the art of persuasion. I did not try to grab the animal at first. Rather, I found Uncle Dubb’s hiding spot for the cat food and placed a large amount on the ground for the cat. He and some of his brothers and sisters (also aunts, uncles, grandparents, and mother-in-law, for all I know) came out of the hay to chow down, and I waited patiently for my chance. Making wide circles around the cats, I stopped when I was directly behind the orange cat. Then, slowly and methodically, I worked my way up behind him. He was so busy eating that he never knew what hit him. I grabbed him up and held onto him with every bit of strength that I had; he was howling and yawling so loudly that it echoed across the valley and flailing and hissing and spitting and scratching me so deeply that he had to have thought that his very life depended on it. Still, I did not let go; I was determined to bring Sunny’s twin home.

Well, all the commotion had roused Uncle Dubb and Dad from the front porch (a good three hundred meters away), and, when they entered the barn, they found me still holding on to that wild cat—and it holding onto my head with all four of its paws, claws extended, just as enthusiastically. Dad managed to pry the cat off my head and then proceeded to ask me, “What the hell do you think you were doing?,” while Uncle Dubb just stood there and laughed, realizing that I had accepted his words from a few months before with absolute seriousness. I did not answer Dad’s question because I was so pissed at Dad for having let the cat get away; I feared that Uncle Dubb, now aware that I could actually catch one of his barn cats, would take his promise back so that I could not take the cat away once I caught him again. But Dad threatened to spank me until I could not sit down should I try it again, so that ended my cat-catching days at Uncle Dubb’s. Well, not really, but I was more discreet about it after that day.

Uncle Dubb managed to get the hay, in which I searched for wild cats, from people who lived nearby. A fierer cutting their fields and raking up all the grass, Uncle Dubb was allowed to clear away what was cut down; in other words, Uncle Dubb would bale the freshly cut grass and take it home for his animals. Uncle Dubb managed to feed his animals, then, by doing work for people and receiving hay in payment. Whenever I came over, however, Uncle Dubb would bring out what he called the “special hay”—which was really not that “special” in most people’s terms but hay bought from the Co-op or some such place—so that I could feed it to the horses, mules, and cattle. Whether I fed them the “special hay” or the hay Uncle Dubb acquired from cutting people’s fields, the animals never acted particularly excited about either. I think Uncle Dubb realized that the idea of me being allowed to use the “special hay” had a placebo effect on me—not the animals—in that I felt I had received special treatment.

Just as wild cats found Uncle Dubb’s a place to call home, so did numerous strays of the canine sort. Each time I visited Uncle Dubb’s, there was a new dog. One of Uncle Dubb’s favorites was Hobo, a short, lively dog that had come wandering in and, despite his “ramblin’ man” nature, had taken a liking to Uncle Dubb, choosing to stay and grace Uncle Dubb with his presence as “his dog.” My favorite of Uncle Dubb’s dogs, however, was Babe, a purebred Border Collie which he had paid a good deal of money for, though he bought her primarily for show. She did actually herd whatever happened to be in the field at a given time—goats, chickens, cattle, horses, mules; Babe was not picky. But there was no point to Uncle Dubb teaching her how to herd the animals, for all Babe did was pester them when they were trying to graze (or peck, in the chickens’ cases) in the field or play with their animal comrades. To make matters even more humorous, Uncle Dubb would always have Babe bring the horses in for feeding time. The horses and mules, however, loving sweet feed and knowing, on their own, exactly when feeding time came around, were perfectly willing to run into the barn when
it was time for the grain to be distributed and had always dashed into the barn, nearly running over anything in their path even before Babe’s arrival. With Babe’s arrival and her chasing of the horses and mules when dinner time came around, the equines would be running so fast that, once they arrived at the barn, they could hardly keep from crashing into it. All Babe’s efforts, then, only added up to broken boards on the barn and a mutual hatred of Babe on the part of every other animal on Uncle Dubb’s property.

Just as he purchased Babe for the sheer sake of having a herding dog, Uncle Dubb primarily bought and kept horses, cattle, and mules—in addition to various other livestock—just for show, as he felt that any good Southerner ought to have a few “working” animals around. My Uncle Dubb’s purchasing and handling of these havoc-wreaking horses and mules was, perhaps, the funniest thing about him. Most of the horses and mules never had names; rather, they were known by color and, those that looked alike, by special markings (“the one with the white pattern,” “the one with only half its tail, the other half hanging in the barbed wire fence,” etcetera). The animal that you especially had to watch out for was the bad-tempered bay mule that liked to chase people who stepped in her field, not to be confused with the bay mule that ran over to people in the field because she loved attention. Uncle Dubb also had two Belgian draft horses. These animals are typically used for intense plowing, hauling logs, or a related activity but only served to stand in Uncle Dubb’s field and look like good working horses, though they did no work. They were identical but for the fact that one was slightly smaller than the other; and, in a certain burst of creativity, Uncle Dubb did name them: Big Foot and Little Foot.

In addition to having work horses that did not work, Uncle Dubb had horses typically used for pleasure riding, though few of his animals were ever ridden or, as stated before, worked in any way. I vividly remember the day, soon after I had returned from horseback camp in sixth grade (with a sense that I knew what I was doing atop a horse, though I still did not have a clue), that my dad took me to Uncle Dubb’s, where, on this occasion, I saw for the first time a new horse that struck my fancy. She was too fat, too short, and knobby-kneed but had a sweet expression and came up to the fence readily, begging to be petted and acknowledged. Uncle Dubb, knowing that I had just returned from a week of horseback camp, told me that the mare had been ridden before and that I was welcome to ride her; “she’s uh good ‘lil ole Quarter Horse mare,” he said (though he pronounced “mare” with two syllables, making it sound like “mayor”). Dad, guessing the extent to which the horse had been ridden, tried to object, but my enthusiasm was not to be worked in any way. I vividly remember the day, soon after I had returned from horseback holes into the leather, not without difficulty. Then, unable to locate a bridle, I found a halter—matted and moldy—and searched for something to tie to this substitute bridle as reins; he wound up recovering the other half of the girth strap and secured—poorly—this detached piece of saddle to the halter, completing the shoddiest set of riding equipment that I had (and have) ever seen in my life. Still, I remained all-too-happy to leap on that horse’s back, despite my lacking riding gear.

When Uncle Dubb lifted the saddle on the horse’s back, she turned and looked at him as if he was the craziest fool she had ever laid eyes upon. The saddle was so old that the stirrups were no longer adjustable, so I just had to let my feet hang. In addition, the “reins” were too short, so I had to lean forward as I rode. I walked the horse into the field and, within five minutes, she had reared, bucked, and run off with me. I held on for dear life, still happy to be on a horse but a little bit scared at the same time, and my father, in a huff, eventually managed to catch up to the animal and hold her still so I could get off. Uncle Dubb, slowly chewing his tobacco, looked at us both and said, “Well, she ain’t been rode in three years, they said, but she’s a sweet-natured ‘lil thing, and I’ll sell her to yuh fer five hundred dollars.” Needless to say, Dad did not accept Uncle Dubb’s offer, though Uncle Dubb did truly believe the animal to be worth keeping and riding (if one could)—and for only five hundred dollars! That horse would have bucked me to the moon, and, though Uncle Dubb thought he was giving us a real deal, I was smart enough to know that “pleasure mount” was not one of that horse’s character traits.

If a person got a twinkle in his or her eye over Uncle Dubb’s equines, he or she certainly could not help but laugh at Uncle Dubb’s cattle. Uncle Dubb’s cows were the oddest-looking bunch of bovines that I have ever seen; they looked like generic-brand Red Angus, with a bit of Jersey mixed in there somewhere. As Dad stated, “your Uncle Dubb liked to ‘experiment’ with different breeds of cows. At one point, he had some sort of misfit red-colored longhorns that were supposedly from Texas, though your uncle never could exactly trace them back to Texas.” I remember the longhorns in particular, for one of them was mean and liked to chase people in a very threatening manner. Of course, when any animal with horns that long chases a person, he or she is going to interpret the action as being a “threat.” I would always escape him (or her) by jumping into the circular structure in the field which held hay for the animals. The bovine would then stop short and look at me in disappointment, the animal’s desire to gore my little butt, once again, failing to come to fruition. I do not think that Uncle Dubb could have sold the animals for meat if he had wanted to, and these animals were certainly not milk cows; their
Dubb and Mary Nell let him stay at their place until he felt well enough to leave; they did not think twice about letting Dad stay with them.

Though there was never an abundance of food on the table, Uncle Dubb and Mary Nell always had enough to feed their family. Like many Southerners of the past, Uncle Dubb and Mary Nell—who liked to think of themselves as self-sufficient—did have ties to the soil itself, as some of their property was dedicated to planting. They had a very large vegetable garden, from which they picked foods like tomatoes and cucumbers to eat at meals. In addition, Uncle Dubb financed his farm with money earned from his tobacco crop; eventually, he paid for the entire farm (solely) with money from his tobacco crop.

After paying off the farm, Uncle Dubb and Mary Nell—who were a pretty popular couple on the local level—decided to try their hands at business. Uncle Dubb and Mary Nell opened their own version of a “Southern country store,” though they sold nothing other than food. The store was located on Maryville’s main street and had a “Mom and Pop restaurant” sort of feel, though nothing fancier than a hot dog could be found on the menu. Still, since so many people gathered there to see familiar faces—and chatter jovially or gossip, Uncle Dubb and Mary Nell did make a good bit of money from the proceeds of their little store in the time that they owned it.

Much of Uncle Dubb’s popularity could be attributed to the one “big” appearance he made on a yearly basis. Each holiday season, Uncle Dubb drove his wagon and mule—one of the few animals he owned that was mostly tame—in the Greenback Christmas parade. The wagon was all decked out with lights of many colors, and children—dressed in Santa hats and cute red, white, and green outfits (though Uncle Dubb refused to wear anything but his normal white shirt and overalls)—hung from every corner of it, as all of Uncle Dubb’s children (and, in later years, grandchildren) were allowed, even expected, to ride in or dangle from the wagon. Typically, Uncle Dubb’s wagon and mule were the only wagon and mule duo in the parade. Though I never rode on the wagon, I do remember the amazement I experienced when watching it go down Greenback’s “main street” and, on one occasion, Highway 411, a busy road down which Uncle Dubb had to drive his wagon and mule in order to get to Greenback from Friendsville. I do wish that I still saw wagons and mules going down 411, but I am afraid those days are passed—even in places like Friendsville and Greenback.

As much as he liked sitting in his wagon, showing it off, Uncle Dubb considered the front porch of his home his ultimate “favorite spot.” Uncle Dubb and Mary Nell’s house had a huge wraparound porch, much like the classic Southern farmhouse. As many Southerners have been portrayed doing, Uncle Dubb loved sitting on the front porch and looking out over the yard—and all of the “happenings” in it—and the mountains beyond. However, Uncle Dubb rarely sat in the rocking chairs on the porch; rather, he preferred to sit in what has to be the biggest chaise lounge that I had ever seen in my life. Though Uncle Dubb often fell asleep in that enormity of a chair, he always wore such thick, dark glasses that I could never tell whether he was watching me or sleeping.
when he lay back in that thing. This was a bit of an annoyance to me, for I felt like I had
to sneak about in doing my mischief any time Uncle Dubb was on the porch. However, I
realized that Uncle Dubb got a “kick” out of me and my activities, so I did not worry
about getting in trouble with him over much. Rather, I had to worry about Uncle Dubb
being amused with my activities, telling my father about my mischievous ways as a result
of his amusement, and my father not being amused but, instead, punishing me.

One of Uncle Dubb’s favorite activities to watch from the porch was children playing
ball in the front yard. When Uncle Dubb’s children were little, my father often came over,
ball and bat in hand, to play ball with them. Though my daddy was happy to have anyone
to play with, he wanted to play by his own rules, and, if Uncle Dubb’s children were
unwilling to play by Dad’s rules, Dad would threaten to take his ball and bat and go home
(though he lived a good piece away, so the threat was not very realistic). One of the main
reasons why Uncle Dubb so enjoyed watching this “ball playing”—and the arguing that
ensued over it—is due to the fact that he admired what he found to be a strong Southern
stubborn streak in my father, who refused to give an inch.

Dad and I talk about Uncle Dubb’s place often, as we share his farm, though it no
longer exists, as our favorite place to go when we were little. As we think back about it,
we are amazed at how little Uncle Dubb’s place changed from the time my father was a
child to the time I was a child. I can see sadness in my father’s eyes when we speak of his
farm, which was ideal to each of us, and my own heart feels heavy any time I think of
what has become of Uncle Dubb’s place. When I was thirteen years old, Uncle Dubb
died as a result of a massive heart attack. Uncle Dubb was sixty-seven at the time and
walking along when the attack hit him; he fell back, cracking his head on the sidewalk. In
his will, it was written that all of his land should be left to his children; he was always so
caring towards them and, prior to his death, had even given one of his sons a good bit of
property so that he could have a nice place for his new family. Unlike me—whom Uncle
Dubb loved so because I so loved and appreciated his

But Uncle Dubb’s children (all
five of them) had never liked it, had never taken interest in the animals, the land, the
spirit of the place. After his death, they sold all of the property to developers. All of his
former farmland has now been developed, and I glare at the clone-like houses with
seething anger—my emotions aimed not at the houses, but at Uncle Dubb’s children—Uncle Dubb’s children (all
five of them) had never liked it, had never taken interest in the animals, the land, the
spirit of the place. After his death, they sold all of the property to developers. All of his
former farmland has now been developed, and I glare at the clone-like houses with

Though the farm
itself has been transformed beyond recognition, Uncle Dubb’s farmhouse is still there,
abandoned and dilapidated, but standing like a stubborn eyesore amongst all of the new
houses and their cultivated lawns. Still, the memory of Uncle Dubb lives on. Every time I
drive up the once familiar hill on Clendenen Road, I look to my right where Uncle
Dubb’s place used to be and smile as an image of him with his tobacco-stained shirt,
holding out bales of hay for me to try and carry, comes to mind, and I think of what a
great, Southern man he was and all the happy memories I owe to Uncle Dubb and his
place.
Genuine Hospitality?
by Laura Vaughn

For centuries, the South's wide front porches have gladly shifted under the weight of a tired traveler in the name of "Southern hospitality." Alabama lawyer Daniel R. Hundley testifies in his Social Relations in Our Southern States (1860) that the visitor to the home of a Southern gentleman would find "a much heartier welcome, a warmer shake of the hand, a greater desire to please, and less frigidity of deportment, than will be found in any walled town upon the earth's circumference." While Hundley makes a bold claim, he cannot be very far from the truth because this generalization, for better or worse, persists even today. There seems to be something special about hospitality in the South. The implicit question thereby becomes: what circumstances—historical, social, economical or otherwise—fostered this legendary hospitality? What does the custom reveal about Southern personality or character?

Many sources point to the European honor code of the Middle Ages, based on Greco-Roman literature and philosophy and Christianity, as a possible origin. The "English Gentleman" then transplanted these ideals, along with chivalry and courtly love, to the South during colonization. It was only natural that within this context, the English Gentleman—isolated in his agrarian palace with money and time for leisure served on the trays of his slaves—would heartily welcome a visit from a friend or worthy traveler. However, given that the entire Southern population did not consist of wealthy Virginia aristocrats clinging to an old English code with money to spend and bedrooms aplenty, the reality of hospitality in the South must have differed from the perception that exists today. Not every Southerner had the gates of Tara to throw open.

The overlooked reality is that although wealthy aristocrats from southern and middle England did have money and clout, the South was largely settled by peoples from northern England, southern Ireland, and Scotland. This group had their own, often unexpected, brand of hospitality. A northerner traveling through the South may have expected to see an estate, but more likely found a simple home or cabin. Hungry for delicate fillets, salads, and wheat bread, he sat down to salted pork and some sort of "crude bread made of ground corn." Although that which the typical Southerner could offer was often unrefined and humble, it was usually given with genuine heart. This type of hospitality is not of that stock which history remembers and writes of, but is probably a more accurate portrait of Southern hospitality.

An array of factors have been suggested as contributors to the formation of this second genre of hospitality. Historically, the Welsh and Irish who settled in the South did have a hearty tradition in hospitality back in Europe. One traveler charges that the Welsh/Irish tradition was even superior to that of southern England (the latter being the hospitality that made its way to Virginia and would later be deemed the quintessential hospitality of the South.) "To those farms of England which are so comfortable," testifies the traveler, "we can hardly see anything but the outside." The Welsh and Irish, however, carried with them their open door mentality when they settled in the South. Those from southern England settled in the northeast of the United States and continued to keep their doors shut.

Economically, the South's agrarian society also influenced the development of hospitality. The South, based in agriculture and not industry, was generally poorer than the North and so tended to celebrate the little they had. They also liked to see others partake in the enjoyment. In addition, though capital was often scarce, food was generally abundant. These factors, a celebratory spirit and an abundance of food, facilitated the tradition of hospitality. In the North, where industry was more prominent, emphasis was placed on saving cash. Additionally, because food cultivation was more difficult, the giving away of food was seen as a loss of capital, which discouraged the type of hospitality seen in the South.

Finally, the long distances implicit in the Southern rural and agricultural society caused a traveler to weary easily. This meant that hospitality was not just a frivolity, but rather a real necessity. Conversely, those same long distances also had an isolating effect on those who provided the hospitality, and so a new face was often seen as a welcome change.

The welcome extended by the humble couple of Eudora Welty's
“Death of a Traveling Salesman” is a literary depiction of a simple, yet sincere hospitality. They open their doors to Bowman, a lost traveling salesman, and give him a meal, a roof, a drink, and also pull his car out of a gorge. While all Bowman’s basic needs are fulfilled, he is not offered the couple’s bed. They do not put on a big production, yet Bowman is well taken care of. Welty celebrates their sincere gesture by emphasizing the blessings in the couple’s modest life and contrasting this with the emptiness in Bowman’s life.

However, further investigation reveals that not all motivations were so genuine and self-effacing. Historians Clement Eaton and William R. Taylor contend that the lower class whites took to the ideal not out of a generous spirit and tradition, but instead to become more like those of higher status. For example, many did open their doors but only in exchange for material compensation. Or, as first generation Georgia native Wyatt-Brown suggests, it also had to do with fear of social condemnation. He cites that if someone, “out of either covetousness or ill-nature, didn’t comply with this generous custom, he had a mark of infamy set upon him, and was abhor’d by all.” Continuing on the subject, he says: “There was an undercurrent of deep mistrust, anxiety, and personal competition.” Harvey K. Newman, expert on hospitality and its economic implications in Atlanta, defines hospitality as the “claim of graciousness before the public in order to appear hospitable and gracious towards others.” Where’s the generosity in that?

As a consequence, the sincerity or genuineness of Southerners who offer hospitality is called into question. Mrs. Hopewell of Flannery O’Connor’s Good Country People is a fitting character sketch of the personality called here into question. She is a basically silly woman, who, with her overwhelming collection of disingenuous epithets, is the epitome of insincerity. Her approach to hospitality is equally artificial. When a traveling Bible salesman—who, ironically, is equally insincere—arrives at the old lady’s door claiming to be just a “good country person,” Mrs. Hopewell sees through his farce and would like to throw him out. Instead, in testament to the obligatory nature of hospitality in the South, she lets him stay saying, “I can’t be rude to anybody.”

Mrs. Hopewell is not the first character in southern literature that has been sketched as silly, indirect, or insincere. These character traits that seem to be, if not distinctly Southern, then more prominently Southern, continually reappearing in female characters of Southern literature, (and if I may be so bold, in the Southern reality as well). A demonstrative anecdote of this is one told to me by a female professor who, leaving the north, ventured into the South to teach, unaware of Southern cultural norms. After asking a neighbor’s wife if she could borrow their lawnmower, she is met with only ambiguity. The neighbor responds saying that it would be, ‘Well, fine yes, that would be fine. The only thing is that, well, Charles said that he was havin’ some problems startin’ it up, and really, I mean you could give it to a try I just don’t know it’s up to you.” The bewildered New York Jew could not figure out for the life of her if the woman was giving her permission to use the lawnmower or not. She decided not to borrow the lawnmower and instead sat wishing that she knew how to decode the mixture of vocal tones, patterned hesitations, and a million other subtleties. Poor lady, not even a month in the South and is already tangled in the kudzu.

In trying to find a root or historical circumstance that would explain the Southern woman’s tendency to be insincere, I bumped back into the previously referenced code of honor from the Middle Ages. Again, this code was based on Greco-Roman philosophy, Christianity, but, most notably, on stoicism. In The Companion to Southern Literature, Wendell Jones asserts that the ethics of Southerners are based in works such as Cicero’s Duties, Epictetus’s Discourses and Manual, Seneca’s Moral Essays and Epistles, and Marcus Aurelius’s Meditations—all works that emphasize stoic philosophy. Therefore, suffering in silence instead of being direct and saying what one thinks becomes a thing of honor in the South. This moral tenet was also convenient in justifying slavery as part of a larger good; that we all must, each in his way, suffer in order to benefit mankind.

The most stoic of all stoics had to be the women of the Old South who were expected to be “good, kind, modest and self-effacing.” The poster girl is Gone with the Wind’s Melanie Wilkes. In Virginia by Glasgow, the self-effacing lady-mother type who devotes everything to her husband and children ends up alone and crushed. These are the good ladies of the Old South. In her article on the “Southern lady” in literature, Dorothy Scura contends that people like Mrs. Hopewell or Caroline Compson from Faulkner’s Sound and the Fury, are the “remnants of the ideal lady—only pretensions and empty rituals.” Scura concludes,

In her appearance in fiction before the Civil War, the lady was presented as an icon, a sacred necessity for patriarchal culture. In later fiction, she often did not survive that war. But in 20th century fiction, she is found in many incarnations.

Mrs. Hopewell is an example of the good Southern woman gone bad. O’Connor and other authors devote numerous pages to and even seem to affirm the Mrs. Hopewells by allowing them unpunished in their narratives. Contrarily, the ones like Mrs. Hopewell’s daughter Joy, who do voice their true feelings end up sad, alone, and legless—thanks to a convincing bible salesman who runs off with her prosthetic leg. Joy, in addition to having to tolerate her mother, was also victim to the convincing insincerity of dishonest Bible salesman Manly Pointer. 11 Both Manly Pointer, who escapes with Joy’s leg under his arm and a smile on his face, and Mrs. Hopewell, complacent in her garden, come out on top. As long as society and literature continue to affirm and even reward this type of personality, the Mrs. Hopewell’s of the world will thrive and prosper. Meanwhile enjoy the hospitality, whatever the motivation may be. The South’s expansive porches are still intact and begging one more wayfaring, weary traveler.