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The Inner Voice

Janis Ruth Bagnall Cochrane

*Old Dominion University*

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THE INNER VOICE

by

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A Creative Project Submitted to the Faculty of Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

THE INNER VOICE

Janis Ruth Bagnall Cochrane
Old Dominion University, 1995
Director: Dr. Douglas Greene

The scope of this project is two-fold. The key purpose is to demonstrate the relationship between the voice of Lee Smith, a Southern writer from Appalachia and the voice of the author, another Southern writer from the Outer Banks. The foremost conclusion that has been drawn is that a writer's voice comes from deep inside the writer's unconscious. It is a product of generations of experiences that have embedded themselves in the writer's psyche. Some of the assumptions and prejudices surrounding southern women are discussed to some degree.

The second purpose is for this writer to show her work. This writer gets to the heart of creativity and how she uses her native talent as a hopeful author of the future.
In honor of my mother

WILMA GRAY O'NEAL

In memory of my father

ORVISS TAZEWELL O'NEAL
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project is a culmination of a lifetime of experiences. I am especially grateful to Janet Peery without whose persistence and influence I never would have made it. Thank you for being so relentless.

A special thank you to Lee Smith for her gracious contributions to me and to this project.

To my husband, Jimmy and my children Sarah and Kyle, I thank-you for all of your love and support that you've given me through this. God bless you.

And to Mikael--Thank you.
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The purpose of this paper is to connect fiction and non-fiction creative writing and to integrate the creative process into the scope of the Humanities field of study. I have chosen Lee Smith's novel *Fair and Tender Ladies* and two of my short stories to focus on in the fiction genre. In the non-fiction genre I have included a personal interview with Lee Smith, a book review of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, a magazine article, and an essay on the creative process connecting it to the Humanities field. This work is not intended as a scholarly thesis, but as a vehicle to present my original work, tying in the work of another Southern writer and a philosophy of creativity.

The portrayal of women in Southern Literature has been traditionally focused on their limitations rather than on their strengths. That is the tragic irony which is so apparent in this genre. For any achievements or self-indulgences these heroines realize there is always a price to pay, whether it be experiencing a tragedy to realize love, as in *Fair and Tender Ladies* or performing as is expected at the cost of dreams and expectations. In *Seagrass*, the leading
character has steadfast plans to leave the kind of life she is faced with for the excitement of the new and unknown. She has dreamed of this her entire life. She gives up her desires when her family asked her for help. Her family loyalty proves to be the stronger sentiment and she accepts the life she so dreaded.

Place is woven into the fiber of *Fair and Tender Ladies* so eloquently that the reader can see the Appalachians in the early morning air as a young girl picks wildflowers to carry home to her momma. I concentrate my writing on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, letting my characters portray the customs and mores of the area. The sand dunes with their golden seaoats and swaying grasses outline the coast. Every time I walk to the top of a dune and see the rolling ocean it is like waking up for the first time. There is no feeling in the world quite like running across scalding sand and falling into icy cold water and getting the taste of salt fresh in your mouth.

How people live and act, as well as their collective history, also color the perception of place.

There are two basic forms of the craft of creative writing: fiction and non-fiction. One style is created in the imagination, while the other is based on fact. Fact can be as provoking as fiction. For instance Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is one of the most brutal books that I have read.
The horrific murder of a Mid-west family by two ex-cons is every bit as chilling as Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne*. In *Dolores Claiborne* a battered housewife succeeds in murdering her husband without getting caught. Several years later she is accused of murdering her elderly employer. Both authors are masters of creativity, their abilities parallel one another. One author writes about what is real and the other writes what is imagined.

One school of thought claims that creative writing can be taught, while other schools insist that it is an innate art that has to be cultivated. Most agree that good writing must be clear, concise, mechanically and factually correct and interesting. My view is that the best writing must come from within the writer. Without the heart and soul of the author, a piece of work does not have any depth. We are all a product of our environment, our past and the pasts of our ancestors. This is where creativity is born.

The following pages will demonstrate this premise by focusing on the work of two writers, myself and Lee Smith. I have chosen three of my pieces and one of Smith's, plus an interview that I did with her. *Seagrass* and *Mommie Pheemie* are fictional short stories and *Barefoot on the Banks* is an article that is creative non-fiction. All segments in this project, except Smith's novel are my original work.

Lee Smith is a well known author, particularly in the
characterization of Southern women. She is a refined Southern mountain woman who has taken her collective history and experiences and woven them into some of the finest literature of the south. Most, but not all, of her main characters are women who exemplify the traditional view of what it is to be brought up southern.

*Fair and Tender Ladies* was published in limited edition in 1988, the same year her mother died. In March 1989, for *Fair and Tender Ladies*, she won the W. D. Weatherford Award for Appalachian Literature and in April she won the Appalachian Writers Award. Also in 1989 a play based on the main character Ivy Rowe was written and produced. It opened in Tampa in 1989 and in New York in 1990. In April 1994 at the Virginia Humanities Conference held at Christopher Newport College I was fortunate enough to see a one woman play based on the book. This was also my first encounter with Lee Smith, who was a guest lecturer. With the encouragement of a favorite professor, I timidly introduced myself to her using the professor's name as an "in." It worked! Smith is a very gracious and patient person. She agreed to talk with me and did so for about half an hour. I mentioned to her that I was contemplating a thesis project around her work; she seemed thrilled and offered her assistance.

Tragic irony is an underlying theme that weaves its way
into the paradigm of the characters in *Fair and Tender Ladies* and *Seagrass*. I would describe tragic irony, as it pertains to these stories, as that neither girl ever realizes that she really does achieve what she wants. Ivy does become a writer and May never realizes that her family and husband are real and that her escape is only possible in her dreams. Unlike Ivy, May has not given herself any means to make her desires tangible. She is never actually given an opportunity to go away.

Throughout both stories the reader is aware of the primary character flaws, their desires and the realities that are connected to them. Ivy doesn't realize her potency and fortitude until the end of the book. May, in contrast, never harmonizes with her reality.

This project is not intended as a statement of a new doctrine or philosophy, but as a tool to demonstrate the assimilation of different disciplines into the Humanities discipline. There is no truer means of portraying a culture than in its stories and those who tell them.
The scalding heat of the asphalt burned blisters onto the smooth soles of the two girls' feet. By the end of the summer their feet will have soles as tough as leather from the many miles that they will have walked on the highway. It was early morning and the sun was high; the gentle ocean breeze filled their nostrils with the scent of sweet ocean salt. The day was full of the promise of hot sun, warm sand, the surf and BOYS.

As they made their way to the pier, each girl was immersed in adolescent thoughts. . . . Her main concern at this very moment was transforming her lily white body into a dark bronze statue.

from RODANTHE

I can remember those sultry summer evenings as clearly as I can remember how good my Daddy's fried spots tasted. He would fry them to a succulent golden brown; the flaky white meat would fall right off the bone. We always had cucumbers and vinegar with them. Although Momma and Daddy poured the vinegar over their fish I never did acquire a taste for it.
My friends and I were young and spirited then; we had the wind in our hair, salt in our veins and blisters on the bottoms of our feet. The only time anybody ever wore shoes was either to church or to work, and we usually found a way to get them off our feet even then. When my shift was over at the Hatteras Island Restaurant in Rodanthe, off came my dirty white Keds. I knew that they were white under all the ketchup and grease because they were white when I bought them! Then off came the black nylon apron and down came the pony tail. I was somewhat famous for being able to get off work, put on a bathing suit and grab a spot for my towel on the beach before the other waitresses made it out of the door.

We would always lie on the north side of the pier and the surfers stayed on the south side. It was like an unwritten law. No one ever really knew why, except maybe the waves broke better on the south side and it was easier to swim on the north side. No matter, the north side generally knew what was happening on the south side and vice-versa. There always seemed to be some good sun left until around six p.m., the tide would ebb so that we could get that last quick rinse-off before going home. Those were the best swims, we would be tired from working and drained from the sun, yet excited and anticipating what the night
would bring.

After we'd gone home, eaten dinner, showered and changed (no makeup in those days!) we'd meet again either at the pier or at the drive-in, which was an early version of a fast-food restaurant. More often than not someone would suggest a bon-fire on the beach. Larry, Richie and Elvin would bring their guitars, someone would bring a radio and we'd build a fire out of driftwood. There would be singing, laughing and joke telling. Sometimes someone would bring some beer, the boys would hog it all, which was just as well because we girls weren't used to drinking.

On clear nights the phosphorous in the ocean looked as if the stars had fallen and were floating face up in the surf. There were times that we just could not resist going down the beach and in our innocence, taking most of our clothes off and diving in. Not any time since then have I felt as content and free of heart.

Before the days of drugs, loose sex and sun cancer we always managed to find ways to have a good, no, great time. The years have brought many changes to the Banks, some for the good as well as the bad, but there will never be another time as extraordinary as when I was growing up and walking barefoot on the beach.
May found her favorite spot, in between two little jetties that formed a shallow pool. She dipped her hot swollen feet into it and let out a relieved sigh. The sun was high in the cloudless blue sky and the intense heat and humidity made even the seagrass wilt. The only sounds that shattered the solitude of the beach were the shrill cries of the dirty gray sea gulls that circled overhead. The shallow blue-gray sound water looked enticingly cool. The sea grass waved stoically in the wind. She anxiously scanned up and down the beach, expecting to see the familiar slim figure of her cousin Lilly.

As her feet cooled in the little pool she imagined herself stretched out in a chaise lounge beside an oval swimming pool. The water was deep blue. Just as she was beginning to doze, her maid brought her the phone. It was an urgent call from . . . the sound of Lilly's voice calling her name shook her out of her dream.

"It's about time you got here, Lilly. Where on earth
May and Lilly had been best friends since they were toddlers chasing wild kittens and bathing in Granny's huge washtub on the back porch. They shared everything: confidences, hopes and dreams. They were the same age, their birthdays only days apart. The day before had been Lilly's, the last day of May.

Gertie May and Lilly May were more than just friends or relations, they were blood sisters. When they were eight they pricked their fingers with a pin and pressed their bloody fingers together, declaring themselves bound to each other forever. "I'll never leave you," Lilly softly swore to May as she crossed her heart and held up her pricked finger.

"We'll be sisters forever," swore May.

As they were growing up their interests took different directions just as their looks became more diverse. One was dark and the other was pale. May was a good student and read constantly, while Lilly was more interested in boys and clothes. May consumed books on foreign places like Rome and Paris, while Lilly's favorite book was the Sears catalog.

May considered herself, in a word, average. She was average height and weight, a fate more distasteful than her carrot-red hair. She begged her momma constantly to let her put a rinse on it to make it blonde like Marilyn Monroe's. She liked her eyes, though, they were a clear water-blue just
like her momma's.

The local folks always said that Lilly was the pretty one, and that some boy would grab her up and marry her before she was twenty. She was small and slim with waist-length black hair and green eyes. May often told Lilly how lucky she was to look younger than she really was. Most island women began to age and wrinkle by the time they turned thirty, the salt and the wind giving their skin a tanned, leather-like quality. It was a hard life and showed much sooner on the women than on the men. Even so, when May looked at the worn face of her mother she saw only a warm, hard working woman whom she loved dearly and wanted to please. May often became disgusted with the haggard expression her mother wore like a crown. Many times she asked her mother, "Why are you always so tired?" and "Why are your hands so red and puckered? Why don't you ever wear any of those high-heeled shoes like the ones in the Sears catalog? You'd look so pretty in some." Momma's reply was always the same, in the same tired voice, which made her Hatteras drawl more oppressive to May. In a too serious voice she would say, "We all have to follow the good Lord's will, and it's Him that put me in this place and Him that gave me all you young'uns to tend. We ain't got it so bad, things could be a lot worse." She could always name somebody who had fallen on hard times. "Why, look at Tom and Ivadine
Stowe," she'd say. "We have a lot more than they do, we're blessed with food in the pantry and a roof over our heads. You just be thankful for that and remember you have to work for what you get in this life. Hard work is a Christian's duty to the Lord. Besides, where on earth would I go in a pair of red high-heeled shoes?"

May promised herself early on that she would never let herself become like her mother, worn out and dried up. She intended to have an exciting, adventuresome life. A beautiful life full of travel and meeting interesting people. She would not settle for just any man and she would not be burdened with a houseful of children to take care of.

Lilly had often told May that while she was not a beauty, she had character and poise and she should go to New York or even Hollywood. "With your brains and that voice, you would knock 'em dead. I can see you right now at some big party, full of movie stars. You know you'd fit right in. Grandma says you can sing better'n any angel she ever heard." Then they would start laughing and May would make a joke about being able to sing only in the winter because nobody wore shoes in the summer and you probably had to wear shoes on stage.

"Can't you see me now? Walking into some fancy party, wearing a long evening dress and rhinestone earrings and a big diamond ring and bare footed as a baby." They laughed so
hard it brought tears to their eyes.

May had been telling Lilly all of their lives about her dream of escaping from the small island fishing village that had been their family's home for a hundred or more years. Lilly never seemed to take her seriously, though. She must have just assumed that underneath her rough exterior May loved the Banks as much as she did, as she reminded May of this every day. Not only was it a way of life but the salt, sand and sea were in their blood and nothing could ever rinse them out, or so Lilly said.

"Lilly, sit down. You'll never guess what's happened, never in a million years."

Lilly sat down on the wet sand beside May.

"You look like somebody died," Lilly said. "What's wrong?"

"I wish someone had died," moaned May, "this is worse."

"Did Percy do something to you? Did he try to get you to do it?" Lilly had never been a good guesser.

"Percy," mumbled May, "what has he got to do with anything?" They had been to a few dances together and he took her to see "Thunder Alley" at the movies in Manteo once, but that was all. She really didn't even like him much.

Sex was supposed to be a taboo issue for most girls their age, but lately it had become a major topic for discussion. Even though everybody knew that the reason Sara
Etheridge was sent to Elizabeth City to live with her aunt because she was pregnant, it was only supposed to be whispered about by the adults, in private.

"Lilly, your mind's in the gutter." May rolled her eyes and wanted to laugh, or to feel insulted that Lilly would suggest such a thing, but couldn't do either. It didn't matter.

"Well, if it's not that, then tell me what it is! The way you're acting anybody would think that you just found out that you've only got six months to live."

"Edgar has asked Pop if he could marry me and Pop said yes. He didn't even bother to ask me first. I guess he knew that I would say no." May's voice trailed off as if the words were bile in her mouth. Her worst nightmare had always been being tied down to one of the boys from her part of the world. They were all either puny, bossy and mean, or just plain stupid and repulsive. But, most disgustingly, they all smelled like fish.

Lilly's voice quivered with curiosity as she commented to May, "Well, you really shouldn't be too surprised, after all you've been going together on and off for the last two years. It is just like him to go to your daddy first, without even asking you. What else did he say?" Lilly stared at May briefly before she turned to look at the water. Looking back at May, she brushed the sand from her hands from where she
had been tracing in the sand. May saw the envy in Lilly's eyes as she reached out for May's hand and cupped hers over it.

"You'd better shut your mouth before a greenhead flies into it" May said. She knew, though, that her voice sounded hollow and forced. "What is wrong with you? I'm the one in a big mess, not you."

"This is the way it usually is with us. I have been hoping Judd would ask me to marry him for the longest time. You'd think that I was a leper the way he avoids the subject." Lilly was idly tracing stick-like seagulls in the sand again. "Things always happen backwards with us, I want something and you get it, or the other way around."

"Well, it's not what I want. I wish that I could just jump on a boat that would take me out of here, to somewhere where there's more to look forward to than Christmas. Elizabeth City maybe, or even Norfolk. I know I could find some kind of job there and you could go with me." She stretched her legs out to relieve the cramp in her left knee.

Lilly shook her head slowly. "You're always dreaming and wishing for things that you can't have. It's time for you to grow up. This is your real life."

May stood up and started pacing around the edge of the water, kicking at the sand. "Can't you understand? I have got to get off of this dead end island. It's the same old
people, doing the same old fishing and cleaning and scrubbing. Scrimping all the time, killing themselves just to get by. There has got to be more to life than having babies and waiting out storms." She quickened her pace, reminding herself of Scarlett O'Hara in the "As God is my witness" scene, her favorite. She was kicking sand toward heaven just as determinedly as Scarlett had raised a handful of dirt towards heaven.

"But how? You know there's nowhere to go and no way to get there. Maybe one day there will be a bridge across the sound, but until then there's only the ferries and boats. And your pop would catch you before you stepped on either one."

May sat down hard onto the sand across from Lilly and leaned toward her, as if they were conspiring together. "Listen, Lilly, there's this correspondence school for secretaries advertised in the back of the Sears Catalogue. They send you a typewriter and everything. It only takes thirteen weeks. They even offer to help you find a job."

"How can you do that without your folks finding out about it?"

"That's just it, I can't. You can't do anything on this god-forsaken island without everybody knowing it." May wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her naked knee.
Lilly pulled herself up and turned her gaze toward the placid sound.

"That's not all. Wait till you hear the rest." Tears welled up in May's eyes. "Pop says that of course I don't have to marry him, it's my decision, but it would sure help a lot. He hasn't done too well this year and there are a lot of bills from when Stuie was so sick last winter. His nets need replacing and his boat needs to be painted. 'Momma still needs your help with the young'uns,' he said, 'and it would be a blessin if we had extra money comin' in. If you and Edgar lived with us for awhile it would mean we wouldn't freeze or starve.' I know he was exaggerating, like he always does, but he got his point across. I don't have any choice. I can't let my folks down. Momma acted like she was real relieved. I guess she thinks that if I marry Edgar I will stay here forever."

The wedding took place on the hottest day of the year in the Hatteras Assembly of God Church. It was August and the heat settled like a blanket over the island. May wore the same antique white lace dress that her mother had worn at her wedding. The dress had been passed down to each daughter, beginning with her great-great-grandmother Rowena. The high neck and stiff cuffs chafed May's delicate skin. During the ceremony she had mouthed to Lilly, "I'm sweating like a pig."
It was a wasted effort. Lilly just rolled her eyes upward and turned her head. Ever since that day on the beach Lilly's attitude toward her had changed. May could not figure out just what had gotten into Lilly. It certainly wasn't jealousy. Lilly wasn't like that.

Right after the ceremony Lilly squeezed May's hand, "Please try to at least look happy. You know this is the best thing for everybody. It'll work out, you'll see. Besides I really couldn't have stood it if you had left." She finally smiled the loving smile that May had been hoping for.

May smiled a tiny half smile in return, kissed her friend's cheek and said, "If you say so." By letting Lilly think she had accepted the marriage, she was lying to her for the very first in their lives, and she despised herself for doing it.

Reasons to celebrate were few and far between, so the local folks took advantage of every opportunity to have party. There was dancing, eating, drinking and singing. May remained very quiet and took little interest in the wedding dances or even the excitement of the guests. She only danced twice and would not eat a bite of the roasted oysters or baked tuna that was her favorite. When she thought that she could not stand it another minute she slipped behind the church without anyone seeing her and walked across the small
pebble-filled parking lot to the single rope swing that hung from a stately old water oak. May sat on the wooden plank that served as a seat, crushing her skirt to her side. Back and forth she went, sometimes holding her body rigid and letting her hair trail the ground as her feet reached for the sky. If only she were six again, she would never have to leave this swing to go back to Edgar, her new husband.

May's mother had had the usual discussion with her on a wife's marital obligation. May had heard most of it before. Her mother left a lot of the intimate details out, but May had the general, in this case, disgusting idea. She had spent the better part of her last free week trying to figure out how to get out of it. In her heart she knew that if she had wanted him, all of this would be different.

Edgar was a hulk of a man. He reminded local folks of the stories they had heard about Blackbeard, and May thought it may not have been a coincidence that Teach was his middle name. He had the same head full of wavy blue-black hair and heavy mustache as the pictures of the area's own notorious pirate. May remembered seeing his picture in books when she was a child. She never admitted to anyone that she was captivated by his stories of seafaring and often dreamed of what it would have been like to have been a lady captain sailing the seas. She would have had a crew of loyal cutthroats, who would have answered her every beck and call.
Together they would have made her the Queen of the Atlantic.

She supposed that Blackbeard, no, Edgar, was handsome in some primitive kind of way. When he became excited his eyes would shine and his mustache would twitch. The day that she told him yes, she would marry him, she thought that it might just dance off his face. He had always treated May with kindness and respect, just like she was a real lady. Even with his gruff manner May believed that he cared for her with the soft heart she thought he tried to keep hidden.

When they arrived at their honeymoon cottage, he scooped May up into his burly arms and whisked her over the threshold. The lonely little cabin at the south end of the Island had been dubbed "The Honeymoon Hotel" by its many guests. The cottage's owner, Jim Ballance, usually let young couples stay there for free as long as they cleaned it before they left. Although old and weather beaten, it had a solid foundation that had withstood many Nor'easters.

There was a small flowered sofa and two wooden rockers in the sitting area at the front of the cottage. On one side there was a sink, stove and small eating table forming a kitchenette that had a huge window overlooking the inlet between Hatteras and Ocracoke. The sleeping area was in the back, separated from the rest of the room by a flowered curtain that matched the sofa. A large stone fireplace took up most of one wall. Even though it was summer, someone had
taken the time to fill the bin with wood. As he set her down, he asked how she was doing and if there was anything she wanted. "There's some whiskey in the cabinet. But you don't drink do you? I could get you a Pepsi, or some water. I think I need a little taste of that whiskey . . . if you don't mind."

He was acting as nervous as a stray cat, May thought. He walked over to one of the cabinets in the tiny kitchen, took out a bottle with amber liquid in it. He put it up to his lips and took a long, hard swallow, then came back to May, still clenching the bottle in his gentle, though callused hand. He tried to make small talk with her about the weather and how different living with a family was going to be. "It sure is nice of your folks to let us stay with them for awhile. Your momma sure has her hands full. The twins keep her awfully busy, especially Randy. Every time I see 'em they're either gettin a whippin' or working on gettin' one." An awkward chortle came from Edgar's throat.

She stared at the ceiling then at the floor while he stared out the window. She rubbed her sweaty palms across the front of her dress. She could feel droplets of water running down her back. Then, as if needing to break the distilling quiet, Edgar said how nice it would be if they went out onto the screened porch. There was a good breeze.
and it would be cooler. May shook her head no and smiled the tiny smile she had when she was nervous. Every time she tried to open her mouth to speak, fear pinched her throat and the words could not come out. This man was no stranger to her. She had spent a lot of time with him in the past several months and knew everything about him, except the things that she thought really mattered. Like his hopes and dreams. But, like most of the other men she knew, he always said "things like that are for women to worry over. Men have more important things to think about, like work."

"Well it's gettin' late. How about gettin' outta that weddin' dress and gettin' more comfortable." The long swigs of bourbon had taken effect. He seemed much more relaxed.

May hoped that he would just pass out. That would make things a lot easier.

Grinning, Edgar went into the bathroom to undress. May could hear his clothes hit the floor while he whistled something that sounded like "Oh Susannah."

May could not move. She was afraid and repulsed at the thought of his touch. He had never even kissed her harder than a quick peck goodnight. She rubbed her hands together and looked around the room hoping to find a quick means of escape. May had never felt desperation before; it was as foreign to her as her wedding band was to her left hand.

Lying had never been easy for May. The only time she
had lied to her Momma was the time she, Lilly, and Freida had
gone swimming in the Harbor after Momma told them to stay out
of it. "With all those fish heads floating around and gas
and oil on the water, there's no telling what you'll catch!"
Momma's words still rang in her ears. She wished with all
her heart that she could go back to that day, and to her
momma, and do it over.

He came out of the bathroom barefooted and wearing a
green and black plaid cotton robe. May stared at his bare
chest. She had never seen so much curly black hair in her
life. Her father didn't have anywhere near that much hair.
He came over to where she was and knelt on the floor beside
her. "I see that you're still in your dress. I guess maybe
you're a little scared. Well, it's O.K. to be that way your
first time."

May had curled her fingers up into her hand. She could
feel her nails digging into her palms. She wished she knew
what to do with them.

Edgar was attempting to smile, but to May it looked more
like a smirk. "I promise I will be easy. You may not like
it much at first, but you'll learn to. You're a good
lookin' woman and I'm proud to have you for my wife. I
promise I will take good care of you and of our children,
when they come." May wanted to clamp her hands over her
ears and block out his words, only she couldn't unclench her
fingers. She wanted to at least say something, but her mind went blank.

May's eyes were wet as she looked down at her husband. His words sounded so sweet, so sincere. She felt her stomach flutter with guilt. At least she thought it had to be guilt. Her breath came in short gasps then slipped away entirely for an instant. When she looked in his eyes she saw love, and the heat of his love frightened her. The momentary spell that had been cast was broken, it was now or never.

"Edgar, I'm not too sure how to say this, I guess that I should have said something earlier. There's no way to tell you this except to just come right out and say it." Her palms were slick and her heart was beating in her throat. "I know that you're expecting me to be a dutiful wife, and I will, but it's my ladies time now and it's pretty messy. It hurts real bad." There was no going back now, she was committed.

Edgar eyed her suspiciously. He admitted that he was not familiar with feminine intimate details. She remembered that he and his four brothers were raised by their widowed grandmother who was already old when they went to live with her.

"You know, time of the month, monthlies." This was worse than she expected.
"Ohnn." As the realization of what she meant hit him, his steely eyes lost their look of confusion as he stared at her. "Can't you do somethin'?" He had such a look of hopefulness that May almost reconsidered.

"It just came on this morning. The first day is always the worst." She was trying to convince him as if her life truly depended on it. "Please don't be too upset and please don't tell anybody."

"It's nobody's business what happens between you and me. I know you will make it up to me in time. We have the rest of our lives, don't we?"

In response to this promise May grabbed her bag and ran into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. She had to take several deep breaths before she could gather her wits. She wasn't sure of what just happened, and what she had almost let happen. She must never let her guard down. She was certain she had no feelings for him and she was going to find a way out.

He let her go to bed that night with a heavy nightgown on. She was glad that she had thought to bring it. The thought of wearing the new lace nightgown that Mamie Stowe had made for her made her shiver. She knew that her ruse was only good for a few days, then she would have to give in. "The rest of our lives" kept running through her head. She tossed about all night. As the new morning sun broke over
the horizon, she fell into a light sleep.

Everyone was surprised, except maybe Lilly, when they came back from the cottage several days early. The next morning Edgar left for the docks earlier than he needed to. When May came down from her room that she now shared with Edgar, her mother was already washing clothes. "Momma, you work too hard. Come and sit with me while I drink my coffee." She took a cup and saucer from the cabinet shelf and poured herself a cup of the rich black coffee and carried it to the table. "Nobody makes coffee like you, Momma. Where's your cup, I'll pour you some."

"It's up on the shelf." Rebecca Williams took her place at end of the large, hand-made oak table, the seat closest to the sink. It was a large kitchen, always filled with the smell of something cooking or being cleaned. In winter it was always toasty warm and in the spring and summer all the windows would be open letting in the cool, errant ocean breezes. The whole house always smelled fresh.

"Thanks for fixing up my bedroom. It looks real nice. What did you do with all of my stuff? I hope you didn't throw any of it away. Edgar doesn't have much, I guess I can find somewhere to put it."

"May, this is his home and his family now. Lord knows it's the only decent one he's ever had. Edgar and his stuff,
as you call it, will always be welcome. I can't tell you how much it means to your daddy and me to have you both living here." Rebecca got up and put her empty cup in the sink. She turned her back to the sink and looked down at May. May readied herself for one of her mother's "mother-daughter talks."

"I want to say one thing and then I will not open my mouth about it again. You may not be in love with Edgar the way you have read in books, but life isn't the same as make believe. I know more about why you came back early than you think. You're a married woman now and Edgar is a fine man. You are part of a we now and you need to act like it. Honey, just remember that a man has to feel he is the center of a woman's life. It's what gets 'em goin' and when he doesn't think that he wants to, when he becomes discontented, that's when the trouble starts. Think about what you do and say before you do it and let him think he's gettin' his way and things will turn out just fine."

May couldn't believe the words coming out of her mother's mouth. Was marriage only a game of manipulation? May felt worse than she did before. She got up and hugged her Momma's shoulders. "I will Momma, I promise." She knew it was a promise she could not keep.

"Now, go upstairs and get dressed. We're having chicken and pie-bread for dinner and I'm out of lard and we need some
coffee. Can you run over to the Red and White and get a can of each? Charge it to your daddy. Don't be gone long."

May went upstairs, washed herself and got dressed. She was on her way out of the door when she saw her pink and yellow scarf on the hall table. It was the one Lilly had bought for her in Manteo last Easter. She usually wore it around her neck but today she put it on her head. She decided she might as well look the part of an old housewife since she was one now. "I'll be back in a little while," she shouted toward the kitchen as she walked out the door.

She was about to step onto the wooden porch of Ballance's Red and White when a small blue car pulled up in front. A very blond young man stuck his head out of the car's window and smiled at her. May had never seen anyone who looked so fine before.

"Excuse me, Miss. Can you tell me where I can buy some gas? I can't get off of the main road or I'm sure to get stuck."

"Mr. Ballance sells gas here. The pump is on the other side of the store."

"Thanks." The stranger drove his car around the building, got out and went inside. A few moments later he emerged through the screen door of the store and began to pump his gas. He must have spied May out of the corner of his eye. She had been standing on the porch leaning over the
"You want to come over and look at it? It won't bite."

He didn't have to ask her twice. She walked around the car, gently caressing the sleek blue fenders and stroking the white canvas top. May knew such cars were very expensive, which meant that this fellow must have plenty of money.

"What kind is it?"

"It's a 1957 Thunderbird. I bought it new six months ago."

"It sure is beautiful. I'll bet it can almost fly!"

She eased her way around the car taking in every line. "We don't get many passers-through around here. Where are you from?"

"I'm from Virginia Beach and I'm on my way home from South Carolina. I've always wondered what was here, so I just thought that I would find out for myself."

"Not much, just seaoats, grass and sand," May said flatly as she shrugged her shoulders. She saw him glance at her left hand and discreetly stuck it in her pocket.

"What's your name, young lady?"

"May... Williams... er... ah O'Neal." She was momentarily tongue tied. She had not gotten used to calling herself by her husband's name.

"Well, which one is it?" He was smiling the nicest smile May had ever seen.
"It's May Williams O'Neal." She was so embarrassed, she knew that he must think of her as an ignorant, hick island girl. "And who are you?" She was trying to sound as sophisticated as she could, but with her beach accent it only made her sound like a real hick.

"I'm Lloyd Smith. Hey, would you like to go for a ride? Maybe you can show me around. I'll be right back." He went inside to pay for his gas. While he was gone May tried to envision what it would be like to zoom down the beach road in the little sports car. The top would be down and the wind would catch in her hair and for a few minutes she could be someone else.

May wanted to go more than anything, but as she looked around she realized that a lot of people had seen her talking to this strange man. She still did not know her new husband that well, but she did know that he would not like her talking to this man, much less getting into his car and driving off with him. The way news traveled around the village, her momma would know it before she got back home. So when Mr. Smith came out of the store she had to tell him no.

"Thanks for the offer, but I had better not, my ... pop would skin me." She almost let "husband" slip out. For some reason it was very important to her not to let Mr. Lloyd Smith know that she was a married woman.
"O.K. whatever you say. It was nice talking to you. See you later." He hopped into his car sped out onto the road. May felt a nagging sadness that she could not explain. Her life was laid out in front of her and there was no changing it. She was as anchored to the land as the seagrass that she honestly loved. All of her hopes and dreams had sped away just like the little blue sports car.

She walked into the store and found the coffee and the lard. Her momma liked Crisco best, but the only thing Mr. Ballance had was the kind in the red can. "She'll just have to make due with what they've got. What's the difference anyway?" She said this loudly enough that Pearl Meekins, who was on the other side of the shelf said, "None that I know of." May quickly made her way to the counter and set her cans down. They felt like they weighed twenty pounds. Mr. Ballance was talking to Harold Stowe.

"I'll be with you in a short minute, May." He had always been nice to the kids in the village, giving them penny candies and letting them play under his store porch in the cool, soft sand.

"Take your time, I'm not in any hurry." May glanced down at the floor and her heart sank. Mr. Ballance was using the Sears catalog to prop up a sign. The sight of it filled her with sadness. She picked up the book, knocking over the sign and turned to the back. She hurriedly scanned through
the pages until she found what she was looking for: the correspondence school ad. She became lost in the images in her mind, she kept playing the scene with Mr. Lloyd Smith over and over again.

Each time she saw herself sliding into the seat of the little blue car. Why would a suave, sophisticated man like him be interested in a bumpkin like herself? She knew that she was not ugly, but yet she couldn't match up with the girls from the city either. They all wore store bought clothes and had their hair done every week. She must look like a rag bag in her home made muslin blouse, cotton skirt and bare feet. He would take her to the city where she would buy all new clothes and have her hair styled. She'd look just like those city girls she saw in magazines. What a grand time it would be.

May spent much of her time daydreaming. If she couldn't have what she wanted, at least she could dream about it.

Pearl came up to the counter, taking May from her reverie, and laid her things next to May's. "What's your momma cooking for dinner? I think that I'll fry some croakers that Lester brought home yesterday." May just nodded and smiled down at the wrinkled face. She knew that Pearl meant well, but she wished that she would just go away and leave her alone.
She pictured herself again walking on the side of the road, the grocery bag in the crook of her arm. The sleek blue car pulled up beside her and the driver blew the horn.

"Hey, can I give you a lift?"

It was hot and she still had a mile and a half to go, a ride would be nice. She looked around and didn't see a soul. It would be safe enough, even if it wasn't, it was worth the risk.

"Well, . . . all right. Thank-you," replied May in her most polite voice. She eased into the car and off they went. She was glad that she had worn her scarf. It kept her hair from blowing into her face and eyes.

"How far to your house?"

"About a mile and a half, but you can drop me off on the road. If you try and go down the lane you might get stuck."

There were a million questions that she wanted to ask him about Virginia Beach. Was it as big as people said? Were there hundreds of jobs just waiting for people to take them? There was so much that she yearned to know.

"It's not as great as you may think it is. Actually, it's not too different from here. There's the oceanfront and then there's a lot of farmland. My folks own a farm near Back Bay, but I work in Norfolk. Norfolk is the place to be. There's movie theaters, restaurants, stores with anything you could want. Maybe some time you can visit there. If you
ever do, look me up."

He continued to talk but his words fell on deaf ears. May was too busy imagining herself in a fancy office answering telephones and talking with important people. It seemed to her that she spent most of her time wishing for something she would never have. Or could she? May sucked in her breath and the tears dribbled from her eyes. If only she had the nerve.

Lloyd Smith pulled to the side of the road. "What's wrong? Am I driving too fast?"

She saw the thread of her life dangling in front of her and she either had to grab it or roll it up and put it away forever. Lying came natural, she decided, if you wanted something bad enough. She was very good at it now. She looked at him pleadingly and poured out a story to him. "Please take me with you. People here are so mean to me. If my pop knew that I had ridden in a car with a stranger he would beat me."

"Please don't make me go back there." This time her pleading was sincere, if this chance passed her up she might as well die.

Lloyd Smith looked confused. She knew he must have wondered if she was on the level. "How old are you?" he asked.

The lies just kept racing out of her mouth. "I turned
twenty-one on my last birthday."

"I can't just take you off with me. What would your family say? Wouldn't they be worried? They'd have me arrested."

"There's nobody here to arrest anybody. When anything does happen, which it never does, we have to send for the sheriff in Manteo. Besides, there's so many of us kids they'll hardly notice if one is missing. They'll probably be relieved." Nothing could stop her now; she was too close to getting everything that she had wanted for such a very long time.

He told May that he hoped that this was not a big mistake. He knew that the local people were very clannish and looked out for their own. She looked him full in the face, her young eyes pleading with him. It had always worked on her pop, maybe it would on Lloyd too.

"Oh what the hell, let's go!" He grinned at her, showing his beautiful white teeth, and took off, spinning the wheels of the car.

May could hardly believe that it was happening. She was finally on her way out. This life was going to be dead and gone forever. How could she ever repay Lloyd Smith for rescuing her from her island prison? She glanced over at him and felt free for the first time in her life. She felt confident in what she was doing. Nothing could make her turn
She wondered how old he was and if he was married. He did not have on a wedding ring, but then neither did she, anymore. It was lying in the roadside briars about five hundred feet back down the road.

They were at the turn off to Lilly's house. "Stop here just a minute, please. I can't leave without saying goodbye to my cousin, Lilly." She took a slip of paper out of her pocket. "Do you have a pen I could use?"

He reached into the small square glove box and pulled out an ink pen and passed it to her. She began to write. She ended it with "I love you as my dearest friend now and forever. I'll write when I can. I know you will understand." She looked around for something with which to attach the note to the fence post. There was nothing in sight. So she wrote Lilly's name on the brown paper bag from Mr. Ballance's store and dropped the note inside. She got out of the car and gently set the sack by the gate. It would be her last link with Lilly for a very long time. She turned and slid back into the car. "I'm ready now, let's go." She took a deep breath of the fresh salt air and said a silent good-bye to the sandy dunes and the brown seagrass.

They made the forty mile or so drive to Oregon Inlet in silence. May imagined what might take place at home when they discovered that she was gone. At first, Momma would
think that she had stopped at Lilly's and lost track of time. Then as the day got longer she would become worried and perhaps go look for her. When that proved fruitless, Momma would have to go and tell Edgar at the Harbor. At first he would be hopping mad, then his anger would turn to panic and eventually he would be hurt, knowing that she had run off on him. Her folks would forgive her in time and so would Lilly, but Edgar never would and for this she was surprisingly sad. But, it did not matter because she would never be able to forgive herself if she did not take this one and only chance to get away.

The line for the ferry was short and they did not have to wait long. The man working the ferry chocked the wheels of the little blue car as it came to a stop at the front of the boat. A couple of rows of chains were all that was between the cars and the ocean. May and Lloyd got out of the car and stood by the rail.

"I like to feel the salt spray in my face, " said Lloyd. "Sometimes I think that I should have joined the Navy, you know . . . join the Navy and see the world."

May smiled and turned to look behind her, drinking in everything in sight. She wanted her last memory of this place to be of pulling away and leaving it behind. As the ferry charged its diesel engines and smoke came from underneath, May pulled the cotton scarf from her head and
tossed it into the wind. She ran her fingers through her hair and let the wind catch it as she shook it out. She turned to face the north and swore never to look back again. The last thing that she saw of the fading coastline was the tall, brown seagrass.

She reluctantly realized that Mr. Ballance was talking to her. "May, honey, that'll be seventy-five cents. Are you going to pay for it or do you want to charge it? And who do you want me to charge it to? Your daddy or Edgar?"

She could not answer.

He reached over and gently shook her shoulder. "Where were you, girl? Dreaming about that new husband I'll bet."

"I'm sorry. I guess I was doing it again." She put the catalog back under the sign. She told Mr. Ballance to charge it to her daddy and picked up her bag. She headed toward the old wooden screen door that she had been going in and out of all of her life and wondered how she was going to make it another night with Edgar. She was sure she could figure out something on the long walk home.
As she usually did in the early evening, Laurie sat on the linoleum bedroom floor, her back resting against the old iron bed, her bare feet propped up on her window sill, watching out the open window as the fading burnt orange sun slid behind the sound's horizon. She was waiting for her mother to call her to supper. She had eaten a big dinner at her grandmother's house and she didn't think she could eat another bite. She figured that this would be just one more thing for her mother to fuss about. Lately it seemed that she could not do anything right. Her brother Buddy was a different story, he seemed to do everything just perfectly. Perfect Buddy. He never had to do housework. He didn't even have to make his bed. He got to do anything he wanted. It wasn't the least bit fair.

Momma's call came so sharply that it interrupted Laurie's reverie so she got up and sauntered into the dining room where the rest of the family was sitting at the table.
"What took you so long? Sit down so we can eat," Momma snapped at Laurie as she bowed her head for the blessing.

Laurie's brother Buddy grabbed the bowl of sweet potatoes at the same instant Laurie stuck out her hand for them. "You are the slowest kid on earth. We're starving to death and you act like you're the Queen of Sheba." He was always making fun of her. She hated him.

"Shut up, Buddy. We're lucky to get anything with you at the table. I might want some potatoes too, you know." She glared at him as she pulled her hand back. She wanted to flip him the bird, but her Daddy was watching so she decided she had better ignore her brother.

"That's enough bickering at the table. You are too old for this nonsense." Daddy rarely spoke curtly, but when he did, both children knew it was best to listen and mind. He was a good father, Laurie thought, when he wasn't home. He wasn't home much and when he was he stayed busy reading or fixing something. But mostly she liked him because he stayed out of her business.

"Laurie, you're not eating much. One day a strong wind is going to come along and blow you away." Momma shook her head disapprovingly and put the last bite of biscuit into her mouth. She rarely smiled or laughed. But if Buddy told one of his stupid jokes she laughed as if it was the funniest thing she had ever heard.
"I ate dinner to Mommy Pheemie's. She cooked the best pone bread I ever ate. She told me to come back and get some this evening and to bring her big pot that you borrowed yesterday."

"Honey, what pot are you talking about? I didn't borrow any pot from your grandmother. I don't know where her head is these days. Why, last Sunday she cooked dinner for everybody when she knew all along that she was coming over here. And then yesterday she stayed in her housecoat all day. She's only sixty-three. She's not old enough to be getting senile." For the first time she could remember, Laurie saw clouds of mist in her momma's eyes.

Laurie changed the subject. "How come Buddy gets to go to Manteo to the movies and I can't."

Daddy excused himself from the table and walked out the back door onto the back porch for his after-dinner cigarette. Lucky Strikes, without the filter, were his favorite, mainly because there were times when it was the only brand that was available and you had to make do with what you had most of the time. Daddy always managed to disappear when problems came up.

"He always gets to go off and I have to stay home. It's not right. He's probably not going to the movie at all. I bet you he goes to the Drafty Tavern instead. That's where all the guys from up the beach go."

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"Where did you ever get such an idea as that. Buddy knows to stay away from there and those wild boys that hang out there. Anyway, he's a lot older than you and believe it or not one day you'll get to go places too. Besides, mothers don't have to worry about boys as much as they do their little girls."

Laurie stuck out her chin and wrapped her arms across her thin chest. "It's still not fair."

"Life's not always fair. Now, help me get these dishes cleaned up and then I want you to go over to Mommie's and tell her that I don't have her pot."

At the back door of Mommie Pheemie's, Laurie spied something silvery under the shed. She walked over to the rickety little building and fished out what had caught her eye. It was the missing pot. It had something black stuck in the bottom and smelled awful. She set it back down and started back toward the house.

Mommie Pheemie had been doing some strange things lately, like forgetting to put in her teeth and calling Laurie Beatrice all of the time. The kitchen was empty so Laurie walked through the dining room to the parlor. "Mommie Pheemie, where are you?" She called a couple of times before she got an answer.

"Whouoo." Her call came from the front porch. Laurie found her grandmother sitting on the old metal glider that
Poppy had bought for her right after the war. Its present coat of paint was blue, to match the new shutters.

"Come over here and sit down beside me. I was just restin' my legs before getting ready for church." Laurie rolled her eyes. It was Saturday night. Laurie thought about saying just that but decided sometimes it was better just to overlook little things that didn't really mean much.

"Momma said that she didn't have your pot."

"What pot is that, angel?"

"The one that you said she'd borrowed. I just saw it under the shed."

"Why would one of my pots be under the shed? I'm sure that my pots are all in the kitchen where they belong."

"But, Mommie, I just this minute saw your big silver pot under the shed with some kind of gunky stuff stuck to the bottom of it."

"You did? Oh, yes, yes that's right, now I remember. I burnt some beans in the bottom of it and pitched it out."

Laurie wondered if all old people were like her grandmother, forgetful and decrepit. It didn't matter to Laurie because next to her old doll baby, Alice, who lived in the closet now, she loved her grandmother more than anything else in the world.

Laurie laid her head against Pheemie's ample shoulder.

"There's nothing sweeter than a bundle of love snuggled
up in its momma's lap. You were an angel of a baby. I was so proud of you. I dressed you up in the prettiest little frocks and put ribbons in the little bit of hair that you had. On Sunday afternoon, me and your daddy would put you in your pram and walk up and down the road showing you off."

Laurie wondered who Mommie Pheemie was talking about. She had never had a pram, she had a stroller and it was a sure bet that her daddy never walked anywhere with her.

Mommie Pheemie stroked Laurie's cropped hair with her crooked fingers. The crickets and cicadas were beginning their evening symphony. Laurie loved it here this time of day, Mommie Pheemie's house was always so still, peaceful. Laurie felt safe and warm. This was home.

"Hush, little baby, don't say a word, Momma's gonna buy you a mockingbird, and if that mockingbird don't sing, Momma's gonna buy you a diamond ring, and if that diamond ring turns brass, Momma's gonna buy you a looking glass . . . ." It was the song that Pheemie had sung Laurie's mother to sleep with when she was a baby and then Laurie's mother had sung to Laurie.

"Ma Pheemie, why do boys always get to do whatever they want? If they want to go fishing, they go. If they want to stay home from school and work, they do. On Friday and Saturday night they get to stay out and go places. Boys have
it so easy. Who made them so lucky?"

The old glider continued its soft squeaking noise and Pheemie continued to stroke Laurie's hair, taking her time in answering.

"What's Ronald done now?"

"Ma Pheemie, Uncle Ronald's dead, remember?"

"Dead? Oh, yes, he died in the war. He was a brave soldier." Laurie looked up to see tears push their way out of the tired old eyes.

"I know he was, Mommie." She looked searchingly into her grandmother's face, not really knowing what she was looking for. "I was talking about Buddy. He gets to go to Manteo to the movies tonight and I never get to do nothin'. It's not fair. How come boys are treated different than girls?"

"Because they are different."

"Oh, Pheemie, that's so archaic. Nobody thinks like that anymore. I should be able to do anything Buddy can do."

"Child, in my day young ladies stayed home and learned the things that would be necessary in life. Runnin' around and carryin' on is for men."

"Didn't you ever do anything for fun? What did Momma do when she was my age? I bet you let her go to the movies."

"I don't imagine I did. Girls thirteen years old have no business out after dark!"
"Oh, Mommie, this is not the stone age. Girls can do anything boys can . . . except go to Manteo on Saturday night."

"Don't worry honey, the time will come when you can come and go as you please. Don't rush it. Some day you'll be an old woman like me and be happy just to sit out on the porch in the evening and listen to the night."

Laurie sat up and turned to face Mommie Pheemie. "What's it like to be old?"

"Old! What's old? If you're talking about years, I've been around a long time that's for sure. I don't feel old at all. Like when we're all having Sunday dinner, sitting around the table laughing and gossiping, seeing who can eat the biggest piece of pie. My heart feels as light as a child's."

"That's usually Buddy, the hog, eating the last piece."

"But then I go to get up and my legs want to give out on me. That's when it hits me hard. I know that this sagging bag of bones is not what it used to be. Didn't you ask me what I used to do for fun? We loved to have clam bakes on the beach. We'd roast clams and ears of corn and drink gallons of lemonade. We'd have swim races. The first out to the breakers and back was the winner. I was quite a swimmer in those days. We knew how to have a good time. Kids nowadays have to be entertained. We entertained ourselves."
"There's more to do now than there was then. You know, movies and stuff. Momma says I can't date until I'm sixteen, but I don't see anything wrong with fifteen. Shelley Gray got married when she was seventeen."

"Child, quit pushing so hard to be grown, it will come soon enough. I remember the first boy that I ever courted. His name was Charles Ballance. He would come by every Sunday evening and walk me to church. He worked in his father's store and would bring me little candies. Then the war came and off he went."

"Shelley is lucky, she has her own house and nobody to tell her what she can and can't do. I can't wait until I have my own place, I won't have to look at Buddy ever again and Momma can't tell me what to do."

"You don't want to be like Shelley Gray! Why, they say that she had to get married. I can't imagine what I would have done if one of my girls had gotten themselves into that mess. I just hope that you will always remember to act like a lady. Boys that age will take advantage of any girl that will let them, then forget them. Promise me that!"

"Okay, I won't have sex until I'm married, I promise."

"Laurie!" Mommie Pheemie sighed.

"Everybody says it. It's not like it's a cuss word or anything. What did you call it?"

"We didn't. Ladies didn't discuss such things then or
"Times have changed and you've got to keep up with them."

The moon was beginning to rise above the trees. Laurie snuggled in closer to Pheemie. "I wish that I could stay here with you. Nobody understands me over there. Momma's always fussin' about what I either didn't do right or didn't do at all. Daddy's hardly ever there, and when he is he treats me like I'm a baby. Buddy teases me all the time and gets me in trouble when I didn't even do anything. They always take his side."

"Don't be too hard on your folks. They do the best they know how. As for Buddy, one day you will both be grown up and be the best of friends. You won't believe it now, but it's all part of growing up. I remember when I was fourteen, my sister Lottie took a pair of Momma's good stockings. She wore them to school and during recess she was going through the door and scraped her leg on an old nail, tearing a big hole in the stockings. When she came home she took them off and put them in my drawer, the next day Momma found them. She took a strap to me for taking something of hers without asking. Lottie just snickered and left me holding the bag. I didn't think I would ever forgive her. We grew up and now that's one of the things we look back on and laugh at."

Unimpressed with Mommie's story, Laurie dragged herself now."
off the glider and turned to leave. "Well, I've got to go now. Momma said not to stay long. And you know how she is when I'm the littlest bit late."

As Mommie Pheemie stood up, Laurie wrapped her arms around the cherished woman's waist and hugged her tight. Mommie enveloped Laurie in her arms and kissed her head, neither one letting go of the other.

"I won't tell Momma about the pot."
Fair and Tender Ladies narrates the life of Ivy Rowe from the mountains of the western part of Virginia. Written in epistolary form, it traverses the life of the mountain girl from tender adolescence to feisty old age. Smith captures the folk culture of the Appalachians, not as it is preserved in museums, but as it was lived, seen through the eyes of Ivy Rowe. Smith's most appreciable quality in this novel is her phenomenal ear for speech-rhythms. Her roots in the mountains of Virginia have given her the gift of allowing her characters voices to carry the flow of their lives in their words. We can see Ivy grow and mature through Smith's cultivation of Ivy's language in her letters.

The life and times of Ivy and her family are set to paper by Ivy in more than 60 letters she writes to friends and family. She writes mostly to her sister Silvaney, even
after learning that she has died in a mental institution during the flu epidemic of 1918. Because "Silvaney you see, was a part of me, my other side, my other half, my heart."

Ivy's earliest desire is to be a writer. When she is only twelve she confides to a friend in one of her letters that she wants to be a writer and "marry somebody that makes me feel like a poem." Because of the twist of events in the story she never attains her dream; instead she spends her life caught up in love and relationships. She writes to her sister: "We spend our years as a tale that is told I have spent my years so." Looking back on her life Ivy notes, "I never became a writer at all. Instead I have loved, and loved, and loved and loved. I am fair wore out with it."

Ivy is continually struggling to communicate. She decides that letter writing is the perfect way to accomplish this. Ivy's inner voice is the heart of her letters, in them we see her grow from a twelve year old writing to her Dutch pen pal, Hanneke, to a grandmother in her 70's battling the Peabody Coal Company. The tragic irony of the story is that Ivy never realizes that she has in essence become the writer that she always wanted to be.

The story follows Ivy through adolescence, the death of her parents and having to leave the mountain she loves. The reader is captivated by Ivy's guileless relationships and the births of her children. Her life comes full circle when
she goes back to the family cabin on Sugar Fork. We see rural mountain life through Ivy's eyes as vibrantly as if we lived it ourselves.

The novel traverses more than half a century of sociological and environmental change in the Appalachian community of Blue Star Mountain. For example, when electricity comes to the mountain, Ivy wondered at the sight of the lights all over the bottom of Bethel Mountain. At the first sight of the "fairy lamps" she says, "It is like we have owned that mountain, owned this view, It is like there has been nothing out there but what we made up in our heads." She could not imagine who could live over there. Ivy resists the change that the industrialization brings to Sugar Fork and the mountain. Although near the end of the novel she says that "I don't have a taste for much these days except Orange Julius which people bring me from the mall." At the same time she refuses a new color TV from her children. Ivy's strong will and tenacity grows with her just as her compassion and capacity for love grow.

She refuses to leave the mountain in her old age: "I have got things to think on and letters to write." Her last letter is to her dear sister Silvaney. She echoes her childhood recalling "a heavenly host of snow angels all across the yard" she and Silvaney made as children. She sees Honey Breeding's hair as it shone gold in the morning light.
"Whitebear Whittington lives yet up on Hell Mountain . . . he lives there now with his eyes on fire and no one can take him."

Ivy will capture your heart and beckon you to the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia. Lee Smith has drawn on the local color and story-telling traditions of her homeland and woven a tale that is provocative, funny and believable. We don't want Ivy's story to end, so in our hearts, she will forever be "your faithful friend, Ivy."
DISCUSSION

Fair and Tender Voice of the South

Perhaps one of the most resonant feminine voices in literature today is Lee Smith. Her novels and short stories embody the human and cultural core of her Appalachian heritage. She surely has found inspiration in the Celtic myth and song of her native mountains. Born and raised in Grundy, Virginia, she is the daughter of Ernest Lee Smith and Virginia Marshall. Her father was county treasurer for 40 years, and owner of the Ben Franklin five-and-dime in Grundy. Ernest Smith was a "kind of a maverick" descended from a line of rugged frontiersman.

Virginia Smith was from Chincoteague, Virginia, a marginal location itself, famous for its wild ponies and seascape. Her mother was the Home Economics teacher at the Grundy High School. Even though she lived in Grundy until her death in 1988, she was always a "foreigner" who felt she and her daughter were above social standards of the rest of the community.

Because her father was a county official and owned a
store, Lee was more fortunate than her peers. She always had shoes to wear. Lee left Grundy in 1960 to attend St. Catherine's private school in Richmond. Her novel, *Something In the Wind*, expresses the culture shock and sense of loss she felt while at St. Catherine's. She left there to attend Hollins College and enrolled in their writing program. By the time she had graduated with an A.B. in English she had written her first novel, which was published in 1968 as *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*. Since then she has published 10 books and numerous articles and short stories.

Smith did not find her true writing voice until she wrote "Heat Lightening," her first short story in which she returned to her mountain home for setting. *Black Mountain Breakdown* was the resulting novel. It was her first attempt to write about where she came from. Smith says that the setting was secondary, what mattered so much was a return to the language, her mother tongue. This is when her authorian voice revealed itself. She has a natural gift for capturing the dialect and the spirit of Appalachia and putting it on paper.

Smith's experience in studying and teaching myths shows itself in the way she is able to expose the inner qualities of her characters, specifically Ivy Rowe. In *Ivy*, Smith has created a female character who learns to sanctify her soul and come to make herself whole. She does this through her
and come to make herself whole. She does this through her relationships with her family and friends, but she does not truly find peace within herself until she has the liaison with Honey Breeding. Only through the awakening of her senses does she gain her own voice and comes to terms with her inner self. Ivy battles the stereotyping of the southern woman every day of her life. When she becomes pregnant before she marries, she says that she is "ruint and free." She no longer has to conform to what is expected of her. Ivy vocalizes things that many southern women keep to themselves rather than face ridicule.

Smith says that while writing *Fair and Tender Ladies* she felt like she was twin-ing (her term). She writes Ivy and Silvaney as being one half of each other. Silvaney is the ethereal one "like she was fotched up on the moon" and Ivy is the blood and bones one that "sometimes (is) afeared so . . . and culd not tell you why, for it is like a fire in my hart . . . ." Ivy is only able to voice herself to Silvaney in letters that she knows no one will ever read.

When Ivy meets Honey Breeding she meets her male counterpart: "When I passed close by him, it was like a current jumped from him to me—or me to him and back . . . it arched between us through the leafy air." They spent two or three days immersed in each other at the top of the
mountain. Ivy confessed to herself that she had to go to the top of the mountain to look out. This was the beginning of her coming full circle with herself. She gains a whole new access to herself.

There is conjecture that the death of LuIda is Ivy's punishment for taking off with Honey. Southern women have always expected punishment or retribution for striking out against the strict code of behavior that has governed them for centuries. This was not Smith's intention, but she does see it as a problem with the book. It is unspoken tradition in the south that for every ill act there is a price to pay. Smith doesn't believe that. Ivy was acting on her fantasies and the death of LuIda was an example of the harshness of mountain life. Ivy never castigated herself for the baby's death. She took responsibility for her actions and accepted the baby's death as part of life.

Through Ivy's voice we can see the top of Blue Star Mountain, and the Fourth of July Company picnic in Diamond and watch Oakley Fox kissing her at the mouth of the cave. We can feel the poverty and despair of the mountain folk. The perplexity of mountain life is inherent in Smith and therefore comes to the surface through her writing.

Smith writes because she is compelled. She writes for self-repair; she writes to release her deepest feelings; she writes for herself. In doing that so well, she writes
for the world. All voices are spoken in local dialects, but when they are spoken well they sing a song almost everyone knows.¹

INTERVIEW WITH LEE SMITH

Q. What would you describe as the tragic irony in "Fair and Tender Ladies"?
A. That Ivy may never understand that she is a writer, after all, that she devalues her own writing in that way and in fact, she doesn't understand that her life is so valuable and courageous and such a story as it is.

Q. What is your perspective of the southern woman, past and present? Particularly the psyche of the southern woman?
A. Well, it depends so much on the time that you're talking about. There are a lot of stereotypes about southern women that are certainly true. I grew up being told that it was very important what other people thought of you and that appearances matter and a lady never raises her voice. There was this whole set of expectations for girls to fall into. And some of the negative stereotypes of southern women are certainly true by the way we were all raised. My mother told me that if you talk real nice you can do whatever you want. Which is very manipulative. I find that I am not trying to pass any of these things along to my step-daughter and just
urging her to speak up and say what she thinks. I never heard a woman express anger when I was growing up. In fact, Pat Conroy said to me last summer, he said, "the whole south runs on denial." This is great for those of us who are writers. It's very interesting anytime there is a gap between appearance and reality. That's where fiction comes in, you know. But it is also true that newer, younger southern women are certainly breaking away from those stereotypes. It's also true that while southern women acted in a certain way, the reality was that southern women were always very powerful and competent. I mean Reynolds Price has referred to southern women as "Mac trucks" disguised as "powder puffs." Which is true, I think they're right.

Q. What differences, if any, are there in southern women who are poverty stricken, middle class and those who are privileged?

A. Well, it all has to do with power. The more poverty stricken have the less education, generally speaking and they have fewer possibilities in their lives. They have less power, I think.

Q. Religion and a deep belief in God is fundamental to a southern woman. How would Ivy say she stands in the eyes of God?
A. I think that Ivy doesn't think that she stands, looks too good in the eyes of God. Because she is the only model of a church, she's very restricted in her image of who God is and how he wants people to believe and what a church is. It's a very authoritarian, patriarchal, old fashioned kind of a mode of a church. It's the only mode that she has, the only kind of a church that she has access to. So, I think Ivy has found a way of living apart from, outside of, the expected religion.

Q. Do you think she cares?

A. She doesn't care, that's it. She's found her own God really, through her writing and through her life. I think at the end it's a more feminine conception of God that is all linked into the cycles and the seasons like the Ecclesiastes which keep coming back and she is very much in tune with nature and with a more pantheistic, feminine God. So I think she failed God through her writing and her life.

Q. Dorothy Hill says that Ivy has a collective voice, stubborn will, and self-determination made daily. Having made women's lives and their pain durable and collective, that is mythic, Smith can allow imaginative flight. Would you elaborate on this?
A. (laughing) No, I don't understand Dorothy's book. It's wild.

Q. I did some undergraduate work in mythology and dreams, so what she says comes together for me.

A. Oh, it's very interesting. It's a very interesting way to read a woman's work, but that's the kind of things that the writer can't comment on. If you're thinking like that you can't write fiction. When I have Ivy having a big depression after childbirth, I'm not thinking that now I'm making her pain durable. You know you can't think that, if you do think that then you can't write about Ivy. Well, if you think about anything, it's about individualism.

Q. What are your feeling on the way Hill has applied mythic qualities to your work, especially Fair and Tender Ladies?

A. I try not to read criticism at all but then I have this other hat that I put on which is myself as a critic. I certainly sometimes give a mythic interpretation to other people's fiction, but they, themselves, might not see it as mythic. I am certainly capable of saying that this is the archetypal journey, this is the quest, or this is the earth goddess, or this is this and I am certainly confident of my own readings when I do that. When I read something, if it's there, it's there, and my
class and I will discuss it. As a writer, though, I certainly wasn't thinking in mythic terms. However, it is true that I taught mythology for years and years. I've always loved it. My favorite author is Eudora Welty who does say things in such mythic terms. The Golden Apple is the most brilliant collection of stories in the world according to me. It's very mythological in the way it's constructed. When the God comes down in the shower of gold and all that kind of stuff. So, I'm very interested in all that and the interest is bound to seep in, I think. I think she's quite right, there are things in that book which she points out, she talks about names of my characters, I'm certainly not aware of that stuff!

Q. I noticed that in this book, and as she pointed out in other books, you use the color red a lot.

A. I know I do.

Q. Do you just like the color, no ulterior or inner motives?

A. Well, all my cousins had red and I think that I just wanted it so much. I just thought that it was so beautiful, so part of that is simply wish fulfillment.

Q. Ivy expressed herself in her letters, and one of my characters made daydreams about how she would like her
life to be. For years Ivy writes to a dead woman. May focuses more on make-believe than on her life's tangibility. What so you see is the irony in Ivy's situation?

A. Well, first, let me say that writing letters to a dead woman is exactly like daydreaming in a way because there is nobody receiving it. Ivy knows that her sister is dead, it's like daydreaming or writing in your journal, that is these thoughts are really being expressed for the self. They're most private expression of the heart's desire. Rather than being intended as any way to communicate the self to any other person. I think it's true that Ivy writes to a dead woman, the great irony, the great tragedy is that there is no living person that she can fully confide in. So again, it's like daydreaming. To my mind the irony there is that she is so full of things to say and to communicate but she can't do it to any person living. There's no recipient of the letters that would be as perfect as her sister, who is like another part of herself.

Q. Ivy is faced with many decisions but I don't think that she is ever forced to accept something she doesn't really want.

A. No, she doesn't, I think that is really true.
Q. It seems to be a prevalent trait of women from the south to be so embroiled in their families and responsibilities that they neglect themselves.

A. Yes! Yes! Absolutely. To live for other people. One of my friends told me several years ago, I will never forget this--it was the most chilling conversation, she said, "My life is a function of other people's." I think it's awfully true. Particularly true, I think, in the south, because we're more expected, trained to please.

Q. Do you feel that Ivy's encounter with Honey Breeding is sort of a fulfillment of most southern women's fantasies?

A. Absolutely! Yeah -- it certainly is a fulfillment of mine. (laughing)

Q. Well, then, how is Ivy like Lee Smith?

A. The crucial difference is that I don't think I'd go. That's why I write fiction instead of doing it.

Q. Do you honestly think that a woman with Ivy's background would actually go off with someone for a couple of days leaving her children without even a word to her husband?

A. Yeah, I actually knew somebody that did almost exactly that same thing. Somebody who had been so emotionally starved for her whole life long. But, her husband
didn't take her back, in the real instance. Her life just was horrible.

Q. As I was reading it I thought "this is really great, this is like what every woman dreams of." But I couldn't actually do it.

A. I don't think I could do it. I admire it in a way. I did think that the problem with that in the book is that so many read it as the death of the child has been her punishment, and when they do it there's always a price. I don't think that there's always a price. A lot of people just do stuff, and there's not a price and I don't believe in a system of punishment like that. I really don't. When I was writing this book, it was really like I was on automatic pilot and I wasn't thinking that "this needs this." I didn't mean to say that if somebody acts on their fantasies like that, they should be or will be punished. I did not intend that.

Q. Can you discuss the irony between Ivy finding herself through Honey Breeding and the loss of LuIda through her meeting with Honey Breeding. She seems to find one part of herself at the loss of another part of herself.

A. She probably does find a part of herself, though. He's almost like a twin in a certain way. I kept thinking I was "twin-ing" or something. And she does, she gains
access to a whole part of herself through that, and then, of course, she loses. She loses a child. I don't mean to say that there was any kind of equality; an eye for an eye. I don't think she even saw a risk, she just took off.

Q. **Ivy is certainly a product of her environment.** When you were writing the story how much emphasis did you place on setting as opposed to character?

A. Setting was certainly a very big deal with me, and again, it does have to do with the fact that I grew up there in those mountains which are not at all scenic. I mean, in the way lots of mountains are. They are encircling and enclosing and I had the idea, somehow, of her geography and her biology, both as closing her in. Nobody that's ever been to Grundy, Va., where I was born, has ever failed to remark on how closed-in you feel. That's the way the mountains are, they just go straight up. There's no vista up there, there's no looking out. That's why it was such a big deal for her to get to the top of the mountain with Honey and look out. See, everything going on here, to my mind, does have a whole lot to do with setting.

Q. **Without Honey Breeding how would Ivy's life been different?**

A. I don't know. But actually when I was writing the book
I didn't anticipate Honey Breeding. He was not in my notes. He just came right along. And I was simply astonished.

Q. He is an important element in the story and he worked out very well.

A. He certainly is! I just meant for her to somehow get herself together after she was able to get out of the child rearing business so much and reach some type of accommodation with her life and expectations as an older woman, as so many women do. I really just didn't anticipate him and all of a sudden I was just writing him. He was a surprise to me too.

Q. Last question. Do you normally do as much background research on all of your stories as you did on this one?

A. No, I don't, I certainly don't. It just depends upon the nature of what I'm writing about. I feel that being from the part of the country that I feel is very special and pretty soon is going to be swallowed up in the mainstream and if people are interested in the fiction, I'd like to be able to refer them to other readings and other things that they would find interesting.

Q. I got side tracked in a couple of them, they are wonderful.

A. And I just like to make that available. I know that
some people teach these texts in, for instance, Appalachian writing classes or in Southern Lit and I like for people to know the difference between Appalachian and what they think of southern writing. Mainly I like to have that kind of thing in to refer people. In a book like Me and My Baby View the Eclipse, there are no notes at all because they are just contemporary stories. It's great stuff and I just want to kind of push it.
CONCLUSION

Writing From the Heart

Where does our imagination come from? I believe it comes from the abyss of the mind which is the home of the soul. Symbolically man has always associated the heart as being the vehicle of the soul: our soul being our collective unconscious. Creativity is in ideas and in doing. It also comes from the love of something, so much love, that there is no alternative but to create, not just a matter of wanting but of being compelled to.

John Gardner once said, "write the story you know and love best."2 Oftentimes, however, what we know isn't what we love and we can't always write what we love. My true reading passion is mysteries, specifically Agatha Christie and Mary Higgins Clark. Even though her work is often classified as "romantic mystery," it is still a mystery to

me. They are masters at their craft, but I cannot envision either one of them attempting a romance novel. Just as I have had no success at my attempts at mystery writing. My strength is what I know and what I have experienced, through my own personal experience and the experiences of those close to me. I love the Outer Banks; salt and sand run through my veins just as crisp mountain air and the scent of wildflowers flow through Lee Smith's.

Human beings are a correlation of the archetypal energies that have culminated over the centuries. The collective unconscious is a storage facility for a person's, or rather humanity's collective history. All of our forefathers experiences are gathered there. Therefore, if we believe in this premise, my writing, Smith's and every other writer, is an expression of the collective unconscious. There are times when I am writing that the words just flow onto the paper as if someone else is writing them. When Smith was writing *Fair and Tender Ladies* she told me that she did not plan the character of Honey Breeding and she did not know where he came from "but there he was." In Eudora Welty's book *One Writer's Beginnings*, she tells how when she reads, a voice inside her head is saying the words silently, and when she writes she hears

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3 Lee Smith, interview by author, 5 February 1995.
those words also, from a voice that she has always trusted. What is coming out is the unheard voice of the primeval forces within our psyche. Smith went further to say that she thinks most southern women fantasize about a "Honey Breeding" coming into their life.

The creative force flows over the terrain of our psyches looking for the natural hollows, the arroyos, the channels that exist in us. . . . The wild creative force flows into whatever beds we have, those we are born with as well as those we dig with our own hands.4

Smith is one of those few natural born story-tellers that are born with a gift for the craft. I, on the other hand, have to dig very deep to create and fill the creative beds women are born to cultivate. Estes' book focuses on the whole person using creative forces in all aspects of life. Everyone must choose a specific outlet for their excess energy or it will "be poisoned by destructive negativity and negligence."5 When I go through periods of not writing, I become edgy and unsettled and I begin to lose some of my drive. When I do get back to story writing, it's almost as if I have to jump-start myself into the proper mindset and force words, even if they are dreadful, onto the page.

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5Ibid., 300.
Carl Jung postulated that these creative, archetypal energies manifested themselves in dreams. The imagination is a type of dream sensation whereby the dreamer is awake instead of asleep. I maintain that creative writing is like daydreaming on paper.

Even though dreams refer to a definite attitude of consciousness and a definite psychic situation, their roots lie deep in the unfathomly dark recesses of the conscious mind. For want of a more descriptive term we call this unknown background the unconscious. We do not know its nature in and for itself, but we observe certain effects from whose qualities we venture certain conclusions in regard to the nature of the unconscious psyche. Because dreams are the most common and most normal expression of the unconscious psyche, they provide the bulk of the material for its investigation.6

The dream, far from being the confusion of haphazard and meaningless associations it is commonly believed to be, or a result merely of somatic sensations during sleep as many authors suppose, is an autonomous and meaningful product of psychic activity, . . . analysis.7

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7Ibid., 3.
as a form of dreaming. There have been novels and short stories written as the result of dreams. One novel in particular is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the result of a daydream at night, more specifically a night vision. She and her husband, Percy Shelley, were living in Switzerland and were neighbors of Lord Byron. The three, plus a gentleman by the name of Polidori, struck up a bet as to who could write the most chilling ghost story. The four exchanged ideas and stories with little results. One night after hearing a conversation between Percy and Lord Byron about the nature and principles of life and the experiments of Dr. Darwin, Mary went to bed intrigued by what she had heard. She could not sleep, but closed her eyes and her

. . . imagination, unbidden, possessed
and guided (her,) gifting the successive
images that arose in (her) mind with a
vividness far beyond the usual bounds of
reverie.\(^8\)

She further states that when she opened her eyes she still could see the terrible images that possessed her mind and wished to exchange them for reality. As writers have experienced from time immortal, once an image plants itself in the mind the only way to exorcise it is to express it in

\(^8\)Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Signet Classic, 1963) x.
writing. Then the reality of the imagination becomes fictional reality on paper.

Everyone has a collective unconscious; the tragic flaw in human nature is that not everyone has the sagacious ability to tap into it. Smith's character Ivy was acutely connected to her unconscious, even though she never recognized the actuality of it. Her sister, Silvaney, was in a sense another half of herself. Ivy refers to her as "my lost one, my heart" saying "it is like we are the same sometimes it is like we are one." She pines for her lost half when the sister is sent to live in a mental institution. When Silvaney dies early in the story Ivy refuses to believe it and keeps that side of herself alive by continuing to write to her. Writing letters that expose the innermost thoughts and feelings from the soul to a dead person is certainly a form of daydreaming in which the writer is really writing to herself. In a sense it might be compared to journal writing.

I feel that a few words concerning my use of a pen name is pertinent at this point. Other than the fact that it just feels right, using a pseudonym frees my consciousness to pursue my craft, leaving behind the daily demands on me as a wife, mother, teacher assistant, and student. My mother's maiden name is Gray and both my maternal and paternal (birth-parent) grandmother's names were forms of Anne, one was Annie
and the other was Anna. Also my mother-in-law's first name is Annie.

In Gray's character May we see a young girl that walks a thin line between reality and her daydreams. She is so much in tune with her inner self that she cannot place any perspective on the physical ambience of her existence. In a sense this correlates with Gray's (my) perceptions of life as a teenager on the Banks. There has always been this strong attachment and sense of belonging to the beach, yet there was always a nagging that there was more to be had in life than what Avon or Rodanthe offered. Many years have passed since those confusing days, a lot of those feelings forgotten, then out of nowhere they popped up in the guise of imagination.

The art of aesthetic writing arises from a creative root within the writer. All humans have an imagination and writers must dig into that imagination and nurture what is there. That is the easy part, the difficulty is in the shaping of the images and then putting those images into words. Dr. Michael Pearson expressed good writing wonderfully "it's in the power of the voice." This power of voice is what I am sure all writers want to achieve most of all. Even text book writers must have a propensity for their subject and find a balance between the aesthetic quality and the efferent value of their work. With these attributes the writing has no meaning.
their subject and find a balance between the aesthetic quality and the efferent value of their work. With these attributes the writing has no meaning.

... meaning is created through the negotiation of either readers and the text they are reading or writers and the texts they are writing. Readers use their life . . experiences . . and writers bring similar knowledge and experiences to writing. Meaning does not exist on the pages of the book that the reader is reading or in the words of the composition that a writer is writing; instead, meaning is created through the transaction between readers and what they are reading or writers and what they are writing. ⁹

WORKS CITED


SUGGESTED READING
SUGGESTED READING


