felt the same raw pain of separation, a wound that only the family pressing tight could close. A child with no descent line would not suffer her life but only trail after her, ghostlike, begging her to give it purpose. At dawn the villagers on their way to the fields would stand around the fence and look.

Full of milk, the little ghost slept. When it awoke, she hardened her breasts against the milk that crying loosens. Toward morning she picked up the baby and walked to the well.

Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness or boys.

"Don't tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born." I have believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that "aunt" would do my father mysterious harm. I have thought that my family, having settled among immigrants who had also been their neighbors in the ancestral land, needed to clean their name, and a wrong word would incite the kinspeople even here. But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have.

In the twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name; I do not know it. People who can comfort the dead can also chase after them to hurt them further—a reverse ancestor worship. The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her. Her betrayal so maddened them, they saw to it that she would suffer forever, even after death. Always hungry, always needing, she would have to beg food from other ghosts, snatch and steal it from those whose living descendants give them gifts. She would have to fight the ghosts massed at crossroads for the buns a few thoughtful citizens leave to decry her away from village and home so that the ancestral spirits could feast unharrassed. At peace, they could act like gods, not ghosts, their descent lines providing them with paper suits and dresses, spirit money, paper houses, paper automobiles, chicken, meat, and rice9 into eternity—essences delivered up in smoke and flames, steam and incense rising from each rice bowl. In an attempt to make the Chinese care for people outside their family, Chairman Mao1 encourages us now to give our paper replicas to the spirits of outstanding soldiers and workers, no matter whose ancestors they may be. My aunt remains forever hungry. Gifts are not distributed evenly among the dead.

My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not organized into houses and clothes. I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spit suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute.

9. Traditionally, offerings left at the graves of ancestors.
off his head. This failed because of the noise. Ruel woke up in the nick of
time. (Really, Doesn’t Crime Pay?)

Walker married Mel Leventhal, a white activist civil rights lawyer, and together
they had a daughter (they have since separated). A second collection of her poems,
Revolutionary Petunias, was published in 1973 and nominated for the National
Book Award. In 1976 she published Meridian, a novel whose heroine is involved
in the civil rights movement. More conventional in its writing than either her
poems or her stories, it is mainly interesting as a register of social history. In later
years have appeared a second collection of stories, You Can’t Keep a Good Woman
Down (1979), and her much-admired novel The Color Purple (1982), an American
Book Award winner, notable for its imaginative use of epistolary convention to
create a richly vernacular speech.

In her collection of “womanist” prose writings, in Search of Our Mothers’ Gar-
dens (1983), and as an ironic parallel to the visit to O’Connor’s house, Walker
describes (in Looking for Zora) her discovery of Zora Neale Hurston’s grave in a
decaying Florida cemetery. (Walker edited a collection of Hurston’s work, I Love
Myself When I Am Laughing . . . . . . , 1979.) She admires her black forebear’s insis-
tence on the richness of African-American folk culture and admires too her anger,
her rejection of “the sobbing school of Negrohood” in favor of livelier, more en-
ergetic creativeness. Concluding her essay, Walker remarks that

there are times—and finding Zora Hurston’s grave was one of them—when
normal responses of grief, horror, and so on do not make sense because they
bear no real relation to the depth of the emotion one feels.

Unable to cry, and remembering that Hurston was not a “teary sort of person
herself,” she feels the absurdity of grief: “And at this point, laughter gushes up to
retrieve sanity.” Something like that mixture of feelings and attitudes is what we
encounter in the varied kinds of awareness expressed in Walker’s own work.

Everyday Use

For Your Grandma

I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy
yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people
know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard
clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with
tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree
and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.

Maggie will be nervous until after her sister goes: she will stand hopelessly
in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs,
eying her sister with a mixture of envy and awe. She thinks her sister has held
life always in the palm of one hand, that “no” is a word the world never learned
to say to her.

You’ve no doubt seen those TV shows where the child who has “made it” is
confronted, as a surprise, by her own mother and father, tittering in weakly
from backstage. (A pleasant surprise, of course: What would they do if parent

and child came on the show only to curse out and insult each other?) On TV
mother and child embrace and smile into each other’s faces. Sometimes the
mother and father weep, the child wraps them in her arms and leans across
the table to tell how she would not have made it without their help. I have
seen these programs.

Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought
together on a TV program of this sort. Out of a dark and soft-seated limousine
I am ushered into a bright room filled with many people. There I meet a
smiling, shy, sporty man like Johnny Carson who shakes my hand and tells
me what a fine girl I have. Then we are on the stage and Dee is embracing
me with tears in her eyes. She pins on my dress a large orchid, even though
she has told me once that she thinks orchids are tacky flowers.

In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands.
In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I
can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man. My fat keeps me hot in zero
weather. I can work out de all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I
can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming
from the hog. One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between
the eyes with a sledge hammer and had the meat hung up to chill before
nightfall. But of course all this does not show on television. I am the way my
daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an
uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny
Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue.

But that is a mistake. I know even before I wake up. Who ever knew a
Johnson with a quick tongue? Who can even imagine me looking a strange
white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one
foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from
them. Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation
was no part of her nature.

“How do I look, Marra?” Maggie asks, showing just enough of her thin
body enveloped in pink skirt and red blouse for me to know she’s there, almost
hidden by the door.

“Come out into the yard,” I say.

Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless
person rich enough to own a car, stidle up to someone who is ignorant enough
to be kind to them? That is the way my Maggie walks. She has been like this,
chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned
the other house to the ground.

Dee is lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and a fuller figure. She’s a
woman now, though sometimes I forget. How long ago was it that the other
house burned? Ten, twelve years? Sometimes I can still hear the flames and
feel Maggie’s arms sticking to me, her hair smoking and her dress falling off
her in little black papery flakes. Her eyes seemed stretched open, blazed open
by the flames reflected in them. And Dee. I see her standing off under the
sweet gum tree she used to dig gum out of; a look of concentration on her face
as she watched the last dingy gray board of the house fall in toward the red-hot
brick chimney. Why don’t you do a dance around the ashes? I’d wanted to ask
her. She had hated the house that much.

I used to think she hated Maggie, too. But that was before we raised the

1. From In Love & Trouble (1973).
money, the church and me, to send her to Augusta to school. She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks’ habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn’t necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at just the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand.

Dee wanted nice things. A yellow organdy dress to wear to her graduation from high school; black pumps to match a green suit she’d made from an old suit somebody gave me. She was determined to stare down any disaster in her efforts. Her eyelids would not flicker for minutes at a time. Often I fought off the temptation to shake her. At sixteen she had a style of her own; and knew what style was.

I never had an education myself. After second grade the school was closed down. Don’t ask me why: in 1927 colored asked feverish questions than they do now. Sometimes Maggie reads to me. She stumbles along good-naturedly but can’t see well. She knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by. She will marry John Thomas (who has mossy teeth in an earnest face) and then I’ll be free to sit here and I guess just sing church songs to myself. Although I never was a good singer. Never could carry a tune. I was always better at a man’s job. I used to love to milk till I was hooked in the side in ’49. Cows are soothing and slow and don’t bother you, unless you try to milk them the wrong way.

I have deliberately turned my back on the house. It is three rooms, just like the one that burned, except the roof is tin; they don’t make shingle roofs any more. There are no real windows, just some holes cut in the sides, like the portholes in a ship, but not round and not square, with rawhide holding the shutters up on the outside. This house is in a pasture, too, like the other one. No doubt when Dee sees it she will want to tear it down. She wrote me once that no matter where we “choose” to live, she will manage to come see us. But she will never bring her friends. Maggie and I thought about this and Maggie asked me, “Mama, when did Dee ever have any friends?”

She had a few. Euthy’s boys in pink shirts hanging about on washday after school. Nerous girls who never laughed. Impressed with her they worshiped the well-turned phrase, the cute shape, the scalding humor that erupted like bubbles in lye. She read to them.

When she was courting Jimmy T she didn’t have much time to pay to us, but turned all her faultfinding power on him. He flew to marry a cheap city girl from a family of ignorant flashy people. She hardly had time to re-compose herself.

When she comes I will meet—but there they are!

Maggie attempts to make a dash for the house. In her shuffling way, but I stay her with my hand. “Come back here,” I say. And she stops and tries to dig a well in the sand with her toe.

It is hard to see them clearly through the strong sun. But even the first glimpse of leg out of the car tells me it is Dee. Her feet were always neat-looking, as if God himself had shaped them with a certain style. From the other side of the car comes a short, stocky man. Hair is all over his head a foot long and hanging from his chin like a kinky mule tail. I hear Maggie suck in her breath. “Uhnnnn,” is what it sounds like. Like when you see the wriggling end of a snake just in front of your foot on the road. “Uhnnnn.”

Dee next. A dress down to the ground, in this hot weather. A dress so loud it hurts my eyes. There are yellow and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun. I feel my whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out. Earrings gold, too, and hanging down to her shoulders. Bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the folds of the dress out of her armpits. The dress is loose and flows, and as she walks closer, I like it. I hear Maggie go “Uhnnnn” again. It is her sister’s hair. It stands straight up like the wool on a sheep. It is black as night and around the edges are two long pigtails that rope about like small lizards disappearing behind her ears.

“Wa-su-zu-Tean-oi” she says, coming on in that gliding way the dress makes her move. The short stocky fellow with the hair to his navel is all grinning and he follows up with “Asalamalakim, my mother and sister!” He moves to hug Maggie but she falls back, right up against the back of my chair. I feel her trembling there and when I look up I see the perspiration falling off her chin.

“Don’t get up,” says Dee. Since I am stout it takes something of a push. You can see me trying to move a second or two before I make it. She turns, showing white heels through her sandals, and goes back to the car. Out she peeks next with a Polaroid. She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included. When a cow comes nibbling around the edge of the yard she snaps it and me and Maggie and the house. Then she puts the Polaroid in the back seat of the car, and comes up and kisses me on the forehead.

Meanwhile Asalamalakim is going through motions with Maggie’s hand. Maggie’s hand is as limp as a fish, and probably as cold, despite the sweat, and she keeps trying to pull it back. It looks like Asalamalakim wants to shake hands but wants to do it fancy. Or maybe he doesn’t know how people shake hands. Anyhow, he soon gives up on Maggie.


“No, Mama,” she says. “Not ‘Dee,’ Wangero Leeuwanka Kemanji!”

“What happened to ‘Dee’?” I wanted to know.

“She’s dead,” Wangero said. “I couldn’t bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me.”

“You know as well as me you named after your aunt Dicie,” I said. Dicie is my sister. She named Dee. We called her “Big Dee” after Dee was born.

“But who was she named after?” asked Wangero.

“I guess after Grandma Dee,” I said.

“And who was she named after?” asked Wangero.

“Her mother,” I said, and saw Wangero was getting tired. “That’s about as far back as I can trace it,” I said. Though, in fact, I probably could have carried it back beyond the Civil War through the branches.

“Well,” said Asalamalakim, “there you are.”

“Uhnnnn,” I heard Maggie say.

“There I was not,” I said, “before ‘Dicie’ cropped up in our family, so why should I try to trace it that far back?”

He just stood there grinning, looking down on me like somebody inspecting
a Model A car. Every once in a while he and Wangero sent eye signals over my head.

"How do you pronounce this name?" I asked.

"You don't have to call me by it if you don't want to," said Wangero.

"Why shouldn't I?" I asked. "If that's what you want us to call you, we'll call you."

"I know it might sound awkward at first," said Wangero.

"I've used it to it," I said. "Ream it out again.

Well, soon we got the name out of the way. Asalamalakim had a name twice as long and three times as hard. After I tripped over it two or three times he told me to just call him Hakim-a-barber. I wanted to ask him was he a barber, but I didn't really think he was, so I didn't ask.

"You must belong to those beef-cattle peoples down the road," I said. They said "Asalamalakim" when they met you, too, but: they didn't shake hands. Always too busy: feeding the cattle, fixing the fences, putting up salt lick shelters, throwing down hay. When the white folks poisoned some of the herd the men stayed up all night with rifles in their hands. I walked a mile and a half just to see the sight.

Hakim-a-barber said, "I accept some of their doctrines, but farming and raising cattle is not my style." (They didn't tell me and I didn't ask, whether Wangero (Dee) had really gone and married him.)

We sat down to eat and right away he said he didn't eat collards and pork was unclean. Wangero, though, went on through the chiclins and corn bread, the greens and everything else. She talked a blue streak over the sweet potatoes. Everything delighted her. Even the fact that we still used the benches her daddy made for the table when we couldn't afford to buy chairs.

"Oh, Mama!" she cried. Then turned to Hakim-a-barber. "I never know how lovely these benches are. You can feel the rum pumps," she said, running her hands underneath her and along the bench. Then she gave a sigh and her hand closed over Grandma Dee's butter dish. "That's it!" she said. "I knew there was something I wanted to ask you if I could have." She jumped up from the table and went over in the corner where the churn stood, the milk in it clabber by now. She looked at the churn and looked at it.

"This churn top is what I need," she said. "Didn't Uncle Buddy whittle it out of a tree you all used to have?"

"Yes," I said.

"Uh huh," she said happily. "And I want the dasher, too.

"Uncle Buddy whittle that, too?" asked the barber.

Dee (Wangero) looked up at me.

"Aunt Dee's first husband whittled the dash," said Maggie so low you almost couldn't hear her. "His name was Henry, but they called him Stash.

"Maggie's brain is like an elephant's," Wangero said, laughing. "I can use the churn top as a centerpiece for the alcove table," she said, sliding a plate over the churn, "and I'll think of something artistic to do with the dasher.

When she finished wrapping the dasher the handle stuck out. I took it for a moment in my hands. You didn't even have to look close to see where hands pushing the dasher up and down to make butter had left a kind of sink in the wood. In fact, there were a lot of small sinks; you could see where thumbs and fingers had sunk into the wood. It was beautiful light yellow wood, from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and Stash lived.

After dinner Dee (Wangero) went to the trunk at the foot of my bed and started rifling through it. Maggie hung back in the kitchen over the dishpan. Out came Wangero with two quilts. They had been pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them. One was in the Lone Star pattern. The other was Walk Around the Mountain. In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell's Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore in the Civil War.

"Mama," Wangero said sweet as a bird. "Can I have these old quilts?"

I heard something fall in the kitchen, and a minute later the kitchen door slammed.

"Why don't you take one or two of the others?" I asked. "These old things was just done by me and Big Dee from some tops your grandma pieced before she died."

"No," said Wangero. "I don't want those. They are stitched around the borders by machine."

"That'll make them last better," I said.

"That's not the point," said Wangero. "These are all pieces of dresses Grandma used to wear. She did all this stitching by hand. Imagine! She held the quilts securely in her arms, stroking them. Some of the pieces, like those lavender ones, come from old clothes her mother handed down to her," I said, moving up to touch the quilts. Dee (Wangero) moved back just enough so that I couldn't reach the quilts. They already belonged to her.

"Imagine!" she breathed again, clutching them closely to her bosom.

"But they're priceless!" she was saying now, furiously; for she has a temper.

"Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they'd be in rags. Less than that!"

"She can always make some more," I said. "Maggie knows how to quilt."

Dee (Wangero) looked at me with hatred. "You just will not understand.

The point is these quilts, these quilts!"

"Well," I said, stumped. "What would you do with them?"

"Hang them," she said. "As if that was the only thing you could do without quilts."

Maggie by now was standing in the door. I could almost hear the sound her feet made as they scraped over each other.

"She can have them, Marra," she said, like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her. "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts."
I looked at her hard. She had filled her bottom lip with checkberry snuff and it gave her a face a kind of dopey, hangdog look. It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her how to quilt herself. She stood there with her scarred hands hidden in the folds of her skirt. She locked at her sister with something like fear but she wasn't mad at her. This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work.

When I looked at her like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never had done before: hugged Maggie to me, then cragged her on into the room, snapped the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open.

"Take one or two of the others," I said to Dee.

But she turned without a word and went out to Hakim-a-barber.

"You just don't understand," she said, as Maggie and I came out to the car.

"What don't I understand?" I wanted to know.

"Your heritage," she said. And then she turned to Maggie, kissed her, and said, "You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you'd never know it."

She put on some sunglasses that hid everything above the tip of her nose and her chin.

Maggie smiled; maybe at the sunglasses. But a real smile, not scared. After we watched the car dust settle I asked Maggie to bring me a dip of snuff. And then the two of us sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed.

1973

ANN BEATTIE

b. 1947

The American 1960s, a highly publicized decade, was bound to produce a writer who would be held responsible for chronicling the fortunes of its young people, as they grew up, got married and divorced, worked at different jobs and went to the same parties. There is some truth in the claim that Ann Beattie, who graduated from high school in 1965, is that writer; indeed she has picked up some of the mythical reputation that adheres to the film The Big Chill as somehow "representative" in its representation of late-sixties idealism and conviction gone flat or sour. Yet to stress Beattie's importance as portraitist of a generation may be to do her a disservice, since she is above all else a writer, and one with an unrepresentative, even idiosyncratic style. Her stories and novels should not be taken merely as vehicles for displaying social attitudes and manners, but as mannerist compositions that need to be not only looked at but listened to. Her style is too pronounced, too carefully contrived, to be treated as a transparent medium through which "reality" is given us directly.

On its surface her life has been relatively uneventful, from growing up in a middle-class suburb of Washington, D.C. ("an artsy little thing . . . you know, painting pictures, writing," as she put it), taking her undergraduate degree at American University, then going on to graduate study for a time at the University of Connecticut. She soon began to send stories to The New Yorker (one of her collections is dedicated to Roger Angell, of that magazine) and after the usual spate of rejections she was accepted, then others. By the time she was in her mid-twenties she had become a publishing writer in the most sought-after place, and in 1976 on the verge of her thirtieth birthday she brought out simultaneously a collection of her stories, Distortions, and her first novel, Chilly Scenes of Winter.

The stories—some of them more experimental in style than her more recent work—are about transient, usually unsatisfactory relationships between people, married and single, male and female. Their work provides them with little pleasure or fulfillment; almost anything threatens to become "just a job." What they do best, and incessantly, is talk to each other about themselves, how they feel about their lives. In fact such talk is the essential ingredient in her fiction. As one of her more severe critics, Joseph Epstein, has pointed out, what she strives for in her writing is not "development of character, accounts of motivation or moral resolution" but rather "states of feeling." In stories from her second collection, Secrets and Surprises (1978), such as A Reasonable Man, Lawn Party, and Weekend, feelings are talked around, hinted at, never quite said, but are the only "thing" that happens in the story. In Weekend (printed here) the happening has a force that is cumulative and disturbing.

Like many fiction writers, Beattie acknowledges the influence of Hemingway ("I sound like someone talking in The Sun Also Rises," says a character in The Lawn Party), but her kinship with him is especially strong in that each uses language, exchanges between characters, to suggest—by all that is left unsaid in the spare, often dull conversations, the platitudeous—what something interesting lies behind the words, that conversation. Hemingway manages in his best stories to make us feel the presence of something powerful behind things of the conventional words. Beattie's characters, decades later, yearn for there to be something real or interesting behind their banal words, and the poignancy of her novels—she is frequently a comic writer—lies in the fact that, as the characters themselves half guess, there may be nothing much behind them. Something important got lost, back there in the sixties.

Of her four novels, the longest and most ambitious is Falling in Place (1980), which spreads the usual urban and suburban anemia over the usual Beattie cast of dispirited seekers after a better day. But the book comes to life—a rather chilling, comic life—when it focuses on a fifteen-year-old girl named Mary (whose favorite characterizing response to things is "suck-O") and her younger brother John Joel, a compulsive eater who loves violent comics but little else in the world. This tossome, who could give the most obnoxious of Flannery O'Connor's fictional children a run for their money, is observed with satiric verve, and although as a whole the book doesn't add up very satisfactorily, it contains a number of brilliant parts. Beattie is essentially a writer of stories rather than a contriver of extended sequences, just as the people she writes about can only deal with life—and that just barely—at a moment. Like her contemporary the short-fiction writer Raymond Carver, Beattie has many imitators, "minimalists" who try to prove that less is more and most often make the attempt with less than maximum talents. In fact, like all distinctive stylists, she cannot be imitated, only travestied. Her sharp, idiomatic humor, often operating so quietly the reader almost misses it, is an insurance against airlessness in her fiction. Now that she has fully developed her distinctive style, the question is whether she can avoid further bureaucratizing of it—continuing efficiently to turn out the same product—and move instead in directions new and surprising to her readers.