Chapter VI

GERANIMUM: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES
Flannery O'Connor, who in her prime wrote boldly and confidently, clearly grappled in her formative years with questions of power and authority. This fact is evident in the stories in her Master's thesis, and those concerns continued to manifest themselves to some extent in later work as well. That thesis, *The Geranium: A Collection of Short Stories*, was completed in 1947, dedicated to her teacher at the University of Iowa, Paul Engle. While it is true that O'Connor used a later version of "The Train" as the opening chapter in *Wise Blood* and continued to rewrite her first published story and the first story in the collection, "The Geranium," until the end of her life, the other four stories in the thesis collection are clearly the work of a young writer experimenting with form and voice.

Indeed, until the late 1970s, critics largely ignored the six thesis stories, although their inclusion in the 1971 collection with its illuminating introduction by Robert Giroux will seem to have whetted scholars' interest. To this day most commentators have noted the uncharacteristic absence of O'Connor's religious themes in these stories, citing "The Turkey" (and its later, more successful version, "An Afternoon in the Park") as the most indicative of the fictional interests and strategies of the mature writer. Although several commentaries on the thesis stories appeared before 1982, Frederick Asals's *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* is perhaps the most noteworthy discussion of the apprentice stories, attempting to connect subject, theme, and technique of these stories to the later work. The Geranium consists of six short stories:

- "The Geranium"
- "The Barber"
Among the six stories, only "The Geranium," "The Turkey," and "The Train" were published in O'Connor's lifetime. "The Barber," "Wildcat," and "The Crop" were published in the early 1970s by permission of the author's literary executor at the time, Robert Fitzgerald, who, in the case of both "The Barber" and "The Crop," appends a note explaining that the stories' shortcomings obviously result from their being early works. "The Barber" is largely of interest to critics because of the early satire of the liberal intellectual, a theme that dominates the later work, while "Wildcat," with its obvious indebtedness to Faulkner's "That Evening Sun," is usually cited as indicative of the young O'Connor's search for subject and voice.

"The Geranium," is about relationships: human relationships on the broadest scale, familial relationships on a narrower scale, and spiritual relationships on an individual scale. It is the story of distances and isolation. Old Dudley has been displaced; from a small Southern town he moves to New York City to live with his daughter. O'Connor describes the apartment, six floors up, and Old Dudley's view from his window across to "another window framed by blackened red brick" (701). Old Dudley's daughter has introduced him to the depths of the subway, the heights of the El, "the halls that reminded [him] of tape measures strung out with a door every inch" (704), the stairs which he climbs and descends to identical floors and identical apartments. He often gets lost.
His universe eventually contracts to the size of one small apartment. Old Dudley’s world has changed, most disappointingly. Nature for him must now fit into the geranium pot placed on the window ledge of the apartment across the back alley. This geranium reminds him both of the drapes back home and of the Grisby boy, “who had polio and had to be wheeled out every morning and left in the sun to blink” (701). The bow decorating the pot recalls for him the bow on the Sunday uniform of the black woman who cooked for his boarding house. He wants to return to Georgia, but cannot and is reminded of home by a sickly geranium which the neighbours across the alley sun regularly each day.

In her first paragraph O’Connor establishes the context of the story: like the geranium that “shouldn’t have been there” (701), Old Dudley is out of place in the sterile environment of the city. His life there is one of passiveness without meaning; his one activity is watching those people fifteen feet away, six floors up in the adjacent building. The pattern of the story is repetitive and predictable. The geranium sends Old Dudley’s thoughts back to Georgia after each unpleasant incident he encounters. We witness the incidents, his thoughts about the geranium (no flower at all), and his remembrances of things past.

The relationship between Old Dudley and his daughter is at best strained. The bases of that strain are Old Dudley’s overwhelming pride (hubris) and the daughter’s change in values, both of which are revealed through setting. Through the omniscient narrator, we learn that living in New York City is tight. Not only is it tight, it is complicated for a man like Old Dudley. Instead of being provider, protector, and a
source of knowledge as he is in Georgia at the boarding house, Old Dudley is
dependent on his daughter, is afraid of the building itself — the “dog runs” (704), and
the men in undershirts who may growl at him — and is ignorant of the ways of the city.
He is not in control, nor is he in command.

His daughter, on the other hand, has forsaken the ways in which she was raised
and lives “tight with niggers” (707), does her duty toward her father grudgingly,
maries a city boy who drives trucks and shows signs of rootlessness, and even speaks
harshly to her father. What has seemed like an important place to Old Dudley’s
romanticized notion, based on the movie “Big Town Rhythm” (702), is actually
nowhere with no room, too tight. This life-style and the people in it his daughter
accepts. Her advice to Old Dudley that he tend to his own business echoes his thoughts
in the opening paragraph that “they had no business with it [the geranium], no business
with it” (701), and foreshadows the geranium owner’s words that what he does in his
apartment is his own business.

In Georgia Old Dudley’s own business was the business of everyone else: the
old ladies; “sparrow-like wars” (703), Rabie’s whereabouts and goings on, the Grisby
boy’s daily routine — all are part of the community which Old Dudley was very much a
part of. His relationship with the old ladies of the boarding house was one of provider
(the fish he caught each Wednesday), and protector — “he was the man in the house”
(703), — a role they accepted and even expected him to play. Contrarily, he is met by
indifference from women tenants in the apartment building: Mrs. Schmitt sends the
pattern to the door by one of her children who does not speak; and the fat woman on
the stairs, the one who reminds him of Mrs. Benson back home, does not even speak as she squeezes past him. Old Dudley’s relationship with blacks is also reversed in New York City. For Rabie back in Georgia, he was master, a source of knowledge about mechanical things (guns), and a ruler of Rabie’s life. Rabie allowed that. The “nigger with the shiny shoes” (706) in the apartment building is just the opposite: he talks of guns, helps Old Dudley, and ironically is the only other person to offer kind words and support (literally) in Old Dudley’s time of need. The roles switch. Old Dudley’s pride again manifests itself in the constriction in his throat.1 The “neighbor’s” good deed is quickly abated by the geranium owner’s mockingly hostile exchange with Old Dudley. No kind words, no peace, no quiet for Old Dudley as he inquires about the geranium’s whereabouts.

His moment of reconciliation past, Old Dudley has alienated the spiritual relationship as well. He cannot speak. He can only stare down six floors at the uprooted geranium and cry. For Old Dudley the cracked flowerpot and broken geranium symbolize his final loss of touch with his community, although two people tell him how to get along in the city: his daughter tells him to mind his own business, advice generally well meant; and the neighbour tells him that “it’s a swell place – once you get used to it” (711), similar advice without explicit instruction. Nowhere in O’Connor’s works are the theme of alienation and the fear of death more evident than in “The Geranium.” The struggle to overcome mortality by establishing one’s significance apart from others is clear; Dudley refuses to relate constructively to his daughter and his neighbours. This sedentary and alienated old man spends his last days staring out of the
window at his neighbour's geranium, which is perched on a window ledge high above the abyss of a multi-storied apartment complex.

The precarious position of the geranium refers us to Dudley's own situation—and to the image of "dangling man," as the existentialists have defined it, or to the image of man as "a rope over an abyss," as Nietzsche has envisioned the human predicament.² This suggestion of Dudley as emblematic of modern man is more obvious in an early manuscript. At the start of the story, Dudley's alienation and the problem of time's progress are emphasized. A flashback to his earlier life shows that he did maintain a sense of community at his boarding house. O'Connor juxtaposes his memories of his neighbour's geranium with the geranium of the present. Dudley stares at the actual flower in front of him while he recalls the flower cared for by "Mrs. Caron back home" (701).

It is by his own choice that Dudley isolates himself from those in his former community, from his daughter by resenting her care, and from his black neighbour by resenting his help. Despite his spurious independence from other personalities, Dudley cannot define himself independently, but instead assumes stereotypical roles, such as masculine head of household or white master-roles that support his need for power over others. Thus, he cannot form meaningful relationships with others when he moves to New York. He cannot consider himself one with the community because this requires an acknowledgment of morality: sameness, not difference. Because he does not recognize that he shares the same fate as all of humanity, Dudley feels revulsion for life and for others. Once his daughter takes him shopping with her but he is too slow:
They went in a “subway” – a railroad underneath the ground like a big cave. People boiled out of trains and up steps and over into the streets. They rolled off the street and down steps and into trains – black and white and yellow all mixed up like vegetables in soup. Everything was boiling. The trains swished in from tunnels, up canals, and all of a sudden stopped. The people coming out pushed through the people coming in and a noise rang and the train swooped off again. (705)

In the passage quoted above, O'Connor seems to comment on race relations as perceived by a longtime Southerner gone North. Old Dudley can live in the same Southern boardinghouse with a black couple, praise their gardening abilities, fish every Wednesday with Rabie in the familiar river he could see from his boardinghouse window, ‘possum-hunt with Rabie at night, eat Lutisha’s food, but he cannot imagine the possibility of living side by side with a member of their race in New York City. When he sees “a nigger . . . [wearing] a grey, pin-stripe suit and a tan tie” (706) go into the apartment next door, he figures the people living there have a servant.

When his daughter suggests the black man is “looking at [the apartment] for himself” (706), Old Dudley thinks she “could be right funny when she wanted to” (706). He is eager to find out the servant’s day off so that they can go fishing; the same person’s status as neighbour, however, is unacceptable to him. As fond as he is of Rabie and Lutisha, the old man cannot fathom this reality: “You ain’t been raised to live tight with niggers that think they’re just as good as you, and you think I’d go messin’ around with one er that kind!” (707). Rabie called Old Dudley boss, shared any problems for which Dudley alone was responsible, stopped whatever he was doing to
be with Dudley, did Dudley's running for him, but this new neighbour calls him “old timer” (711), laughs at him, and speaks to him in “a voice that sounded like a nigger's laugh and a white man's sneer” (710). When he offers to help Dudley up the stairs, his language suggests superior gun knowledge: “I went deer hunting once. I believe we used a Dodson 38 to get those deer. What do you use?” (710) to which Dudley replies, “gun” (710).

Dudley is terrified because he cannot differentiate the different races of people and thereby establish himself apart from the mass of others. He goes back to the room and the window and looks down at the geranium. The man is sitting over where it should have been. When Old Dudley stares at the man, he says, “I seen you before . . . I seen you settin’ in that old chair every day, starin’ out the window . . . . What I do in my apartment is my business, see? I don’t like people looking at what I do” (712-13).

In time, the story closes where it opens, with Dudley sitting at the window waiting for the people across the way to set out the geranium. But the tenant tells Dudley it has fallen off the ledge and lies shattered below, where Dudley sees it “was at the bottom of the alley with its roots in the air” (713). In the last lines of the story, the geranium as symbol of memory of good times with Rabie and Lutisha becomes symbol of Old Dudley himself whose Southern roots have been pulled from him and, like the geranium, he hangs in the air, resisting the ways of a culture foreign to him in name, but, ironically, dear to him in reality.

The second short story “The Barber” was included in New Signatures, 1947, an anthology of student writing, according to Sally Fitzgerald. However, when the story
appeared in the October 1970 *Atlantic*, Robert Fitzgerald claims in a note that “The Barber” has never been published.”⁴ O’Connor portrays a stereotypical small town Southern barbershop, in fictional Dilton, where it is “trying on liberals” (714), in which various types are represented – the liberal-thinking college teacher, the conservative-redneck, nonthinking barber, and his black cleanup boy, George, a young “Yessir” man, who knows to say only what he knows he must say to keep his job.

Although titled “The Barber,” the story’s protagonist is Rayber, a teacher at the local college, who tries to defend in the barbershop his sensible political support for candidate Darmon over the more popular racist “demagog” (715) Hawkson; however, it is the barber who wins the day. Rayber is an early model for the Rayber character-type O’Connor struggles to make authentic in *The Violent Bear It Away*. The story explains why Rayber has had to find a new barbershop after the “Democratic White Primary” (714). Because O’Connor chooses to use this expression, she places the story within a historical context.

From the Civil War through the Civil Rights Movement, the Solid South moniker designated clear support for the Democratic Party. Because primaries are more important than general elections in single-party states, Southern whites established private elections to exclude black voters. It took Supreme Court legislation, beginning with *Smith vs. Allwright* in 1944, to rule that preventing blacks from the primary elections was unconstitutional. By midcentury, white primaries were not supposed to exist.⁵ The story is really about blindness. Rayber believes he sees clearly, but his position paper ends with this pronouncement that men who use ideas without
measuring them are walking on wind. In castigating others, he unwittingly castigates himself, for he certainly does not measure his ideas. He finally articulates his political position not verbally, not rationally, but physically, violently. He slugs the barber and runs out of the shop still bibbed and half-lathered. Joe, the barber, passes small talk with Rayber during the first of three visits which Rayber makes to the barbershop: weather, hunting, and finally politics. It is an election year. Darmon, a liberal, versus Hawkson, a southern Democrat. Joe, his friend Roy, and most of the other townspeople are for Hawk who is against niggers.

When the barber asks Rayber who will receive his vote, his choice for Darmon nets him a “nigger-lover” (714) jeer. Not thinking fast enough, Rayber regrets not having told the barber he is “neither a negro – nor a white-lover” (714). To the barber, on the other hand, “there ain’t but two sides now, white and black” (714). Anybody can see that from this campaign. According to the barber, these are men who are so wrongheaded that they do not understand the need for white supremacy. O’Connor assumes the South’s position is not a secret; the barber laments, “Why, lemme tell you this – ain’t nothin’ gonna be good again until we get rid of them Mother Hubbards and get us a man can put these niggers in their places. Shuh” (714-715).

It is time for Rayber to say something but nothing appropriate will come. He wants to say something that George will understand. He is startled that George has been brought into the conversation. He remembers Jacobs telling about lecturing at a Negro college for a week. They cannot say negro – nigger – coloured – black. Jacobs says he has come home every night and shouted:
“NIGGER NIGGER NIGGER” out the back window. Rayber wondered what George’s leanings were. He was a trim looking boy.

“If a nigger come in my shop with any of that haircut sass, he’d get it cut all right.” The barber made a noise between his teeth. “You a Mother Hubbard?” he asked. (715)

The barber thinks Rayber is a Mother Hubbard, the people who listen with skepticism to Hawkson are Mother Hubbards, those who call Hawkson a “demagog” (715) are Mother Hubbards, and Hawkson has no choice but to lay those Mother Hubbards low every time he makes a speech. The barber says:

“Well, this last speech was a killeroo! Ol’ Hawk let them Mother Hubbards have it.”

“A good many people . . . . consider Hawkson a demagog.” He wondered if George knew what demagog meant. Should have said, “lying politician.” (715)

The barber reviews Hawkson’s Fourth of July speech:

It had been another killeroo, ending with poetry. Who was Darmon? Hawk wanted to know. Yeah, who was Darmon? the crowd had roared. Why, didn’t they know? Why, he was Little Boy Blue, blowin’ his horn. Yeah. Babies in the meadow and niggers in the corn. Man! Rayber should have heard that one. No Mother Hubbard could have stood up under it.

Rayber thought that if the barber would read a few . . . . Listen, he didn’t have to read nothin’. All he had to do was
think. That was the trouble with people these days – they didn't think, they didn't use their horse sense?

...... Thinking! ... You call yourself thinking?” (716)

Rayber wants to know what that has to do with thinking. The barber thinks it is plain as a pig on a sofa what that has to do with thinking. He thinks a good many other things too, which he tells Rayber. He says Rayber shall have heard the Hawkson speeches at Mullin’s Oak, Bedford, and Chickerville. Rayber settles down in his chair again and reminds the barber that he has come in for a shave: “I have an appointment .. .. I’m in a hurry” (716).

The barber then extends the Darmon image to include those who support Darmon, ultimately becoming the same as Mother Hubbards. In summing up Hawkson’s speech at Spartasville, the barber regales, “There wasn’t a Mother Hubbard left standing’, and all the Boy Blues got their horns broke” (716). O’Connor suggests that adult men who speak in a child’s Mother Goose character have a stunted development. Ironically, though, the barber, who knows clearly the role of white man keeping black man in his place, also knows the deep pleasure of the black man’s role in his own life: “There ain’t nothing like taking a nigger and a hound dog and a gun and going after quail . . . You missed a lot out of life if you ain’t had that” (722).

Rayber prepares a speech to defend himself against barbers that both his wife and his colleague Jacobs respond to with a high degree of passiveness. His barbershop audience’s response is even worse; they laugh at him. Even George is put
on the spot by the barber, asking him after Rayber's speech who he will vote for: "I don't know is they gonna let me vote . . . . Do, I gonna vote for Mr. Hawkson" (724). George will have no vote in a Democratic White Primary, but his response is the one that is instilled in him from the Southern code of manners. Rayber, impotent in the face of ignorance, hits the barber and with his face half-lathered with shaving cream, and with the barber's bib "dangling to his knees" (724), he flees the shop. This is the scene that explains the first lines of O'Connor's tale — why they are "trying on liberals in Dilton" (714) and why Rayber has to change barbershops. There is no clear-cut victory for either Rayber or the barber in this story, no win for either intelligence or ignorance.

Although the discussion of politics centres on the question of race, the thematic thrust of the story centers on Rayber's place in the community as an intellectual. He is accepted. Joe's statement, the grinning nature of the discussion, and George's (the shine boy's) reaction to the entire episode are lost on Rayber who, unlike his colleague Jacobs, cannot come to grips with his own mind and position. The effect on Joe and the others is zero; on Rayber, complete humiliation.

Rayber suffers what Eric Voegelin calls "disorder of the soul," that is, a "failure to grasp the new truth of order and to become attuned to it." The story is not overly subtle and contains, via Joe, some of the stereotypes of blacks in the South. Rayber has had trouble with his position in the community, not just the small Southern town but also the larger community of intellectual ideas. The South's racial relationships are too complex, but, in this early story, O'Connor suggests that discrepancy exists between language spoken and behaviour displayed.
The next short story, "Wildcat," O'Connor submitted to the *Southwest Review*, who rejected it in the summer of 1946. It appeared for the first time in print in the *Spring 1970 North American Review*. Of all her thesis stories, critics consider this one—the weakest, but few have given it much attention. This is the first story in which O'Connor explores a physical disability, blindness, to suggest a keener insight. The experimentation here is important, however, for, in addition, O'Connor casts a full slate of black characters. Eight years later, she remarked in a letter to a friend that she "can only see [coloured people] from the outside."  

An old blind man smells a wildcat nearby and asks those who plan to hunt it in the woods to stay at the cabin; he knows the wildcat will come there, seeking and smelling folks' blood. A group of young people, by whom O'Connor suggests just how powerful Old Gabriel's ability to smell is, approach the cabin to be greeted by "Who that? . . . I smells fo' niggers" (725). When the visitors ask Gabriel to identify them by name, he is able to do so for the first three, stumped only by the fourth. The conflict, such as exists between the generations, concerns old Gabriel's committed belief that this wildcat wants human blood and the youths' equal assurance that the big cat is satisfied by the blood of cows. The second part makes clear why old Gabriel's warning should be heeded. The middle part is a flashback to the blind boy Gabriel, who remembers being left with a cabin full of women, who call him inside because they fear the approach of the wildcat. As a young boy, Gabriel knew that he would be attacked after Reba, was who also had the power to smell the wildcat. But young Gabriel is excited by the match:
He'd lock his arms 'round its [the wildcat's] body an' feel up for its neck an' jerk its head back an' go down wit it on the floor until its claws dropped away from his shoulders. Beat, beat, beat its head, beat, beat beat....

"Who wit ol' Hezuh?" one of the women asked.

"Jus' Nancy." (727)

Reba knows that the cat is coming; she has powers that transcend the others' abilities, and her groans become an old spiritual that predicts the day's events:

"Lord, Lord,
Gonna see yo' pilgrim today.
"Lord, Lord,
Gonna see yo' ..." (727)

When worry shifts to Nancy and Old Hezuh in a nearby cabin, Reba warns that the cat is close by, nobody should leave. Her words are no sooner released when they hear the shriek, made flesh by Nancy at their door, screaming, "Got him, sprung in through the winder, got him in the throat. Hezuh . . . ol' Hezuh" (728).

In the last part, old Gabriel smells the cat, clambers on a shelf over the chimney, which sags, cracks, and throws him to the floor. Smell becomes sound as the wildcat approaches outside. When Gabriel knows the wildcat has got a cow, he knows he can fall asleep for this night. The stubborn youth, however, are convinced they will have the wildcat the following night, having built a trap in the woods, which they plan to watch: "We goin' up in a tree over the trap every night an' wait 'til we gits it" (731). Gabriel thinks of himself as fair game for the present wildcat that has been terrorizing the neighbourhood. He associates himself with the previous victim of another wildcat
rampage that occurred when he was a boy. When Gabriel resists their plan, knowing it will be his throat that night, they can only rely on their belief in empirical data:

“How many wildcats you killed, Gabrul?” Their voices, rising to him through the darkness, were full of gentle mockery.

“When I was a boy, there was a cat once . . . . It come ‘round here huntin’ blood. Come in through the winders of a cabin one night an’ sprung in bed with a nigger an’ tore that nigger’s throat open befo’ he could holler good.”

“This cat in the woods, Granpaw. It jus’ come out to git cows, Jupe Williams seen it when he gone through to the sawmill.” (725)

Gabriel’s knowledge is more profound than if he had killed a wildcat himself, as if killing one is the only way to know something. But Gabriel is denied his chance to capture a dangerous wildcat. He wishes to assume the power and control of being the hunter rather than the hunted, but is left behind, even by his grandchildren and their friends as they pass him on their way to join the hunt. At the end, he panics and imagines how “the [wildcat’s] teeth would cut sharp an’ scrape his bones inside” (729), and he frantically pulls down a shelf in his effort to escape. Gabriel feels the sweat on himself: “‘If kin smell me good’s I kin smell it, he thought. I settin’ here smellin’ an’ it comin’ here smelllin’” (729). There is a sudden scratching by the chimney. He sits forward, tense, tight-throated: “‘Come on . . . . I here. I waitin’” (729). He hears the scratching again, coming differently, coming from the corner of the house where the cat hole is: “Pick . . . pick . . . pick” (730). He knows that is a bat. He is on his feet now:
“Lord don’t want me with no wildcat marks. He is moving toward the cat hole. Across on the river bank the Lord is waiting on him with a troupe of angels and golden vestments for him to put on and when he comes, he has put on the vestments and stand there with the Lord and the angels, judging life. Won’t no nigger for fifty miles fitter to judge than him. Pick. He stops. He smells it right outside, nosing the hole. He has to climb onto something!” (730)

The old man’s animal panic then causes him to become a double for the wildcat itself:

He turned wildly and fell against a chair and shoved it up to the fire place. He caught hold of the shelf and pulled himself onto the chair and sprang up and backwards and felt the narrow shelf board under him for an instant and then felt it sag and jerked his feet up and felt it crack somewhere from the wall. His stomach flew inside him and stopped hard and the shelf board fell across his feet and the rung of the chair hit against his head and then, after a second of stillness, he heard a low, gasping animal cry wail over two hills and fade past him; then snarls, tearing short, furious, through the pain wails.” (730)

Gabriel sits stiff on the floor. “Cow,” he breathes finally. Gradually he feels his muscles loosen:

It got to her befo’ him. It would go on off now, but it would be back tomorrer night. He rose shaking from the chair and stumbled to his bed. The cat had been a half mile away. He won’t sharp like he used to be. They shouldn’t leave old people by theirselves . . . . When he woke up, the darkness was full of
morning things. He heard Mose and Luke at the stove and smelled the side meat in the skillet. He reached for his snuff and filled his lip. (730-31)

That Gabriel fears he will repeat the fate of Hezuh suggests a fatal repetition no human or animal can escape. The wildcat in this story serves as a symbol for mortality.

O'Connor chose the biblical name Gabriel for her protagonist, the angel who interprets Daniel's vision of the ram and the he-goat (Daniel 8). Because Gabriel can smell so much better than any other character, and because smell is the sense most instantaneously connected with memory, Gabriel "knows what [he] knows, boy" (731). Further, he knows that the Lord is waiting on him, and he "didn't want to be on no floor with a wildcat stuck in his face" (731). No one hears Gabriel, interpreter of visions, blind seer, who must face in darkness his coming death, as sure as he feels the "animal cries [that] wailed and mingled with the beats pounding in his throat" (731).

This story is unique among O'Connor's writing because it is the only story form the black point of view, solely about blacks, and mostly in dialogue. It is reminiscent of William Faulkner's little story "That Evening Sun," in which Nancy sits waiting for Jesus, her estranged husband, to return and kill her. Like O'Connor's Gabriel, Nancy is reconciled to dying. Like O'Connor's Gabriel, Nancy is reconciled to dying. What they both want is death on their own terms. Old Gabriel, a blind black, has the sense of smell for a rampaging wildcat (symbol of the angel of death) that he knows is coming for him — if not tonight, then the next. The contrast is between the boys (youth) who go out after the cat and Old Gabriel (age) who is willing to wait for it to come to him. His vision of the Lord waiting for him with golden vestments suggests to the reader that the wildcat (death) will get him just as it got
Hezuh when Gabe was a boy. His wish is to die as a man, instead of waiting with women for death to steal him away.

The next short story is “The Crop,” in which O’Connor experiments with both subject matter and form. It is a venture in telling a story about the process of writing and reading fiction. It may be read with two different purposes in mind: to learn about the fictional character, Miss Willerton, and to infer what O’Connor is saying about writers in general. The framing story concerns a family of four adult children, living together with prescribed roles – Willie/Willy, forty-four, who crumbs the table, Lucia and Bertha, who do the dishes, and Garner, fifty, who removes himself to the parlour to work the crossword puzzle. The sisters look after Garner, but Lucia minds everybody’s business and directs the affairs of this superbly organized household. She also “Bissells” (733) the floor, a brand-name carpet sweeper used as a verb to mean vacuum. To escape from the monotony of “regular habits” (732), Miss Willerton delights in crumbing the table, the process of removing from the tablecloth all manner of stray crumbs that have fallen during the meal, with a silver crumber and its matching crumb-catcher. While she occupies her outward self with this proper task, she uses the time to think of subjects for stories she plans to write.

Willie possesses at least one of Flannery’s own writing habits: She sits at her typewriter from morning to noon, but unlike O’Connor, Willie never writes much. The “Wille” who will be spontaneous, frivolous, and lusty is trapped inside “Miss Willerton” who cannot help but be restrained by conventional behaviour: “There were so many subjects to write stories about that Miss Willerton never could think of one”
Once Miss Willerton begins the story, her mind moves to the commentary she has made about the activity of writing at a gathering of the United Daughters of the Colonies. O'Connor spoofs the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, moving the historical connection to predate these groups.

The kinds of comments Miss Willerton makes to the women also predate what O'Connor will one day say about writing to the club ladies that will be a part of her future. Moving away from thoughts about writing to the story itself, Miss Willerton's focus once again shifts to her influences. She dismisses the subject of bakers when her mind moves to "French bakers in mushroom-looking hats. They were great tall fellows – blond and . . ." (733). She resists even thinking about what these men must look like, how she might describe them. Next, she moves to teachers as a possibility, but her own experience at the Willowpool Female Seminary reminds her that "[the school's name] sounded biological" (733). She discards bakers and teachers as suitable candidates for characters because "they weren't even a social problem" (733). She finally decides to write about a sharecropper, despite the fact that she has never met one. Miss Willerton was never intimately connected with sharecroppers but, she reflects, they will make as arty a subject as any, they will give her that air of social concern which is so valuable to have in the circles she is hoping to travel: "'I can always capitalize . . . on the hookworm.' It was coming to her now! Certainly!" (733-34).

The first sentence that O'Connor gives Miss Willerton to write is easy: "Lot Motun called his dog" (734). There is something biting and sharp about "Lot Motun
called his dog,” followed by, “the dog pricked up its ears and slunk over to him” (734).

It gives the paragraph just the send-off it needs: “He pulled the animal’s short, scraggy ears and rolled over with it in the mud” (734). Miss Willerton is a great believer in what she calls “phonetic art” (734). She maintains that the ear is as much a reader as they eye. She likes to express it that way:

“The eye forms a picture,” she had told a group at the United Daughters of the Colonies, “that can be painted in the abstract, and the success of a literary venture (Miss Willerton liked the phrase, “literary venture”) depends on the abstract created in the mind and the tonal quality. (Miss Willerton also liked, “tonal quality”) registered in the ear.”

Miss Willerton settles back. That is a good beginning. Now she will plan her action. There has to be a woman of course. Perhaps Lot can kill her. That type of woman always starts trouble. What follows is her own fantasy as she dreams herself into the plot, and is finally interrupted by Miss Lucia who asks her to run some errands. Her story never progresses beyond the third sentence because when she returns, she decides instead to write about the Irish.

O’Connor makes a subtle reference to Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*, which begins with Eille May and Lov rolling around in the dirt while the rest of the Jeeter Lester family looks on. To reinforce why Miss Willerton might be under such constraints, O’Connor has Lucia find this book and burn it, knowing that “it couldn’t be [Willie’s]” (735). Once one family member has entered Miss Willerton’s mind, she then reflects on what each family member will think of her “passionate scenes” (735). This intrusion from reality out of the way, Miss Willerton once again returns to the
story, planning how Lot Motun and his woman will look. As she ruminates how the story will work itself out, O'Connor moves the narrative into a story-within-a-story.

In the humdrum life of Miss Willerton, age forty-four, the only excitement she enjoys is escaping via her rather limited imagination (her search for topics about which to write suggests how limited). When she meets her fantasy face-to-face on the street (the couple she passes fits her description of her fictional sharecroppers), she does not recognize it. She is more interested in escaping life than in dealing with it, a tendency contrary to a good writer’s interest according to O’Connor. Miss Willerton’s absorption with her fantasy is marked by her entering the story and in her imagination becoming Lot’s wife. Familial relations play a tangential role in that family members intrude on Willie’s world with mundane demands: crumbing the table and going to the grocery store. Finally, it is O’Connor’s use (her only use) of the story within-a-story technique that interests us in studying her canon. Notwithstanding the fact that the irony is heavy-handed and that the characters are not well-drawn, it is an amusingly conceived story and reveals that in 1946 O’Connor’s artistic ability was beginning a transition from cartooning to storytelling. One is reminded of O’Connor’s comments at a writer’s conference, after reading several of the participants’ manuscripts. “After this experience,” she said:

I found myself ready to admit; if not that the short story is one of the most difficult literary forms, at least that is more difficult for some than for others. I still suspect that most people start out with some kind of ability to tell a story but that it gets lost along the way.” Later she was to say, “The more stories I write, the
more mysterious I find the process and the less I find myself capable of analyzing it.  

The next short story, "The Turkey," introduces the mystery of God's grace which permeates O'Connor's later fiction. This is the first story, excluding portions of her early novel Wise Blood, that deals overtly with the matter of law and grace. In this story one sees no easy answers about God. Ruller's thoughts dominate the story as he plays a game of cowboys with his imaginary friends. It is a game of violence with good guys and bad guys and guns and with good triumphing in the end. Ruller spends most of the first few pages chasing a wounded turkey. Finally, he literally chases it to death, claims it, and returns to town with the bird proudly slung over his shoulder. 

The story is, in many ways, a version of the classic initiation story, in which a hero comes of age and proves himself by undergoing a series of trials or tests. Often, as in Faulkner's "The Bear," this test involves the stalking, hunting, and killing of a wild animal. What makes "The Turkey" more than just standard fare is first of all, Ruller's ultimate loss of the turkey, and second the genesis and development in Ruller of a spiritual sensibility. 

Near the beginning of the story, after the chase has been under way for some time, Ruller, like Parker in "Parker's Back," runs into a tree and is knocked breathless. "It was like someone had played a dirty trick on him" (744), he thinks. But like Parker it is this violent setback which becomes the first step toward revelation. A tree, long a symbol of the cross, is here the agent of revelation. It is not so much that Ruller is chasing the turkey, but that God is chasing Ruller, and here again the emblematic
camera catches the action at the instant grace intrudes. Ruller lies on the ground for a few minutes, trying to catch his breath. Then he begins to think. “Nuts” (744), he says first. Then he thinks, “Oh hell” (745).

Pronouncing hell leads Ruller almost immediately to pronouncing God.

Profanity, which is verbal disrespect for something sacred, depends on the existence of the sacred for its effect. Without the sacred, profanity will merely be words without shock impact. For O'Connor and all Christians, hell is connected with judgment, eternal loss, and separation from God, but to be separated from God, the possibility of union with Him must first exist. In any philosophical system that does not include God, hell of course is meaningless. So, quite naturally, hell leads Ruller to at least pronounce God’s name, if not actually ponder Him.

Here, as with so many of O'Connor's characters the profane moment becomes the entry point for God's grace. It can also be noted that Ruller accompanies his pronunciation of God’s name with a significant gesture. He draws circles in the dusty ground, just as Jesus drew in the dirt when confronted with the Pharisees’ questions. Almost immediately, however, Ruller turns the name of the Lord into a deeper profanity:

“God dammit,” he said softly. He could feel his face getting hot and his chest thumping all of a sudden inside. “God dammit to hell,” he said almost inaudibly. He looked over his shoulder but no one was there.

“God dammit to hell, good Lord from Jerusalem,” he said. His uncle said “good Lord from Jerusalem.”
“Good Father, good God, sweep the chickens out the yard,” he said and began to giggle. His face was very red. . . . “Our Father who art in heaven, shoot’em six and roll’em seven,” he said, giggling again. (745)

Again, Ruller cannot sustain his blasphemy. It leads him into an unwitting, silly, irreverent prayer, but it is prayer, a request that God will “sweep the chickens out the yard” (745). Soon he will catch the turkey. He is conscious, throughout, of another presence which makes his face red and hot, an involuntary sign of guilt. He feels judged and convicted and his human response is to redden, to laugh nervously, and then to counter it all with a bit of bravado: “He might as well go home. What did he want to be sitting around here for? He felt suddenly like he would if people had been laughing at him. Aw, go to hell, he told them. He got up and kicked his foot sharply into somebody’s leg and said, ‘take that, sucker’ ” (746).

A change is beginning to take place in Ruller for now he finds himself actually addressing God, as if the Almighty were standing there next to him. He is imagining his return home and the way he will explain his torn clothes. He will say that he fell into a hole and he asks, “What difference would it make? Yeah, God, what difference would it make? He almost stopped. He had never heard himself think that tone before” (746) He is apprehensive and appalled and wonders if he is going badly, like his brother Hane. He is not only talking to God, he is flippantly asking him what difference it will make if he lies. This god to whom he speaks is powerless, he concludes, and somewhat tricky. This god gives him a turkey to chase and then does not allow him to catch it. He looks around, feeling someone’s eyes.
The eyes are the turkey’s and they are also God’s. In fact, for Ruller the turkey becomes God’s agent, if not God Himself. Ruller possesses a strong sense of God’s intervention to save him from a bad end: “If you want me take [the turkey], he said, I’ll be glad to. Maybe finding the turkey was a sign. Maybe God wanted him to be a preacher . . . He guessed God had stopped him before it was too late. He should be very thankful. Thank you, he said” (748).

Ruller has stumbled on a truth. The turkey is God’s gift to him, but he does not know yet what kind of gift he has been given. He sturts through town with his catch slung over his shoulder. Filled with pride at being God’s chosen one, he decides he should do something for God. In fact, as the minutes pass, he begins desperately to desire something to do for God. He prays to God to send him a beggar: “He had never thought before of praying on his own, but it was a good idea. God had put the turkey there. He’d send him a beggar. He knew for a fact God would send him one” (750). God does send him one – almost immediately. Ruller thrusts his only dime at her and runs away fast.

Ruller realizes at the end of the story that God cannot be manipulated, that when one asks God for a sign or a favour, God answers, but He means literally what He says and He interprets literally one’s prayer requests. When Ruller prays for a beggar, he is given one – but this beggar does not need money. She needs food and attention, the two things Ruller most certainly will not give her. After thrusting his dime at her, he rushes off, a warm glow invading his being, thinking that maybe he would give her every cent he had.
God is inscrutable, he discovers, as he runs home without his turkey “certain
that Something Awful was tearing behind him with its arms rigid and its fingers ready
to clutch” (752). Ruller now realizes that the God who is chasing him is different from
the one he had imagined so impudently before. Sister Kathleen Feeley observes about
the greatest truth that “God works through reality according to His own designs, not
man’s.”¹¹ She also notes that this story marks the beginnings of O’Connor’s “varied
exploration of a child’s apprehension of reality.”¹²

The last short story, “The Train,” is an early and one of the six stories included
in O’Connor’s 1947 master’s thesis The Geranium: A Collection of Short Stories and
was published in The Sewanee Review in 1948. It later appeared in the 1971 collection
The Complete Stories. As mentioned earlier, O’Connor revised this story into the first
chapter of her novel Wise Blood. A man named Hazel Wickers is on a train heading for
Taulkinham, but he is obsessed with his lost home, the subject on which every facet of
the story is riveted. Haze is a nineteen-year-old youth, alone and nervous and clumsy
and haunted by the death of his mother. His thoughts are disturbed by the resemblance
of a black porter to someone back home, by a chatty woman sitting near him on the
train, and by the prospect of spending the night in the coffin-like sleeper berth.

Now the train is “greyflying” (753) past instants of trees and quick spaces of
field and a motionless sky that sped darkening away in the opposite direction. The
porter passes twice, twice back and twice forward, and the second time forward he
looks sharply at Haze for an instant and pass on without saying anything; Haze turns
and stares after him as he has done the time before. He thinks that the porter resembles
someone he knows, Old Cash: “Even his walk was like. All them gulch niggers resemble. They looked like their own kind of nigger – heavy and bald, rock all through. Old Cash in his day had been two hundred pounds heavy – no fat on him – and five feet high with not more than two inches over” (753). Haze wants to talk to the porter,

The train had come to Evansville. A lady got on and sat opposite Haze. That meant she would have the berth under him. She said she thought it was going to snow. She said her husband had driven her down to the station and he said if it didn’t snow before he got home, he’d be surprised. He had ten miles to go; they lived in the suburbs. She was going to Florida to visit her daughter. She had never had time to take a trip that far off. (754)

Mrs. Wallace Ben Hosen, formerly Miss Hitchcock, boards the train in Evansville, and “Haze was glad to have someone there talking” (754). The conversation they have is more strange than the ones Haze has with the porter. He remembers how his mother used to talk the same way on the Tennessee Railroad, getting to know all about other passengers, who will only be strangers temporarily. Wickers talks to himself inside his head, revealing that his mother is a Jackson and that he is raised in Eastrod, Tennessee. When Mrs. Hosen asks if Haze is going home, he responds by telling her he “get[s] off at Taulkinham” (755), which she assumes is his home, moving directly to place someone she knows there. When Haze corrects her, she asks where he lives, but his answers are vague: “It was there... I don’t rightly know, I was there but...” (755). Even a break to speak with the porter and a return to hear Mrs. Hosen’s ceaseless prattle does not deter him from thoughts of home. She speaks of her sister’s husband who turned to liquor in Waterloo, and Haze interrupts: “I went
back there last time... I wouldn't be getting off at Taulkninham if it was there; it went apart like, you know, it..." (756). Mrs. Hosen has lost Haze; his answers do not make sense in her world. After a while Mrs. Hosen says she is hungry and asks him if he wants to go into the diner. He does. The dining car is full and people are waiting to get in. Haze and Mrs. Hosen stand in line for a half hour, rocking in the narrow passageway and every few minutes flattening themselves against the side to let a trickle of people through. He would never have had the courage to come to the diner by himself; it is fine he has met Mrs. Hosen. He thinks, "If she had not been talking, he would have told her intelligently that he had gone there the last time and that the porter was not from there but that he looks near enough like a gulch nigger to be one, near enough like old Cash to be his child" (757).

When he gets out of the diner, he is weak and his hands are making small jittery movements by themselves. It seems a year ago that he has seen the head man beckon to him to sit down. He stops between two cars and breathes in the cold air to clear his head. It helps. When he gets back to his car all the berths are made up and the aisles are dark and sinister, hung in heavy green. The porter may be a cousin of some of them gulch niggers, he thinks suddenly; he may ask him if he has any cousins around Eastrod, or maybe just in Tennessee. The porter is not at that end of the car and he goes back to look at the other end. Going around the corner he runs into something heavily pink; it gasps and mutters, "clumsy!" (758).

It is Mrs. Hosen in a pink wrapper with her hair in knots around her head. Haze slips past her and dashes down the aisle and runs suddenly into the porter so that the
porter slips and he falls on top of him and the porter’s face is right under his and it is old Cash Simmons. Haze scrambles off the floor and goes after him saying he wants to get in the berth and thinking, this is Cash’s kin, and then suddenly, like something thrown at him when he is not looking: this is Cash’s son run away; and then: he knows about Eastrod and does not want it, he does not want to talk about it, he does not want to talk about Cash.

Haze says, still looking at the porter:

“Cash is dead. He got the cholera from a pig.” The porter’s mouth jerks down and he muttered, looking at Haze with his eyes thin, “I’m from Chicago. My father was a railroad man,” and Haze stared at him and then laughed: a nigger being a railroad “man”: and laughed again, and the porter jerked the ladder off suddenly with a wrench of his arm that sent Haze clutching at the blanket into the berth. (759)

When Haze retires to his upper berth, he is free once again to remember the place that is no more, his visit to Eastrod, the decaying home, his mother, who “could rest easier knowing [the shifferrobe] was guarded some” (761). But Haze’s berth is reminiscent of his mother’s casket. Haze has gone back and sleeps in the house on the floor in the kitchen and a board has fallen on his head out of the roof and cut his face. He jumps, feeling the board, and the train jolts and unjolts and goes again. He went looking through the house to see they not left nothing in it ought to been taken. He opens all the drawers. There were two lengths of wrapping cord in the top one and nothing in the others. He takes the wrapping cord and ties the legs through the floor boards and left a piece of paper in each of the drawers: THIS SHIFFERROBE
He had seen the “shadow that came down over her face” (761) and his own situation in this berth, with no window and darkness closing in on him, forced him to spring up and throw his head over the side and hang there “wet and cold” (761), gazing at the rug below. When the tracks curve, though, Haze falls, “back sick into the rushing stillness of the train” (762). O'Connor develops an odd character here, one still interested in other people, but more consumed with a desire to figure out how to replace the home he has lost. This early Haze represents a marked departure from other thesis characters. He is interior man, her first character that is to be consumed by the vertical relationship of man to God that will take O'Connor another five years to prepare for publication in novel form.
REFERENCES:

1. It is quite interesting that from the word “geranium,” ger is “echoic of a hoarse cry,” similar perhaps to the one is a good example Old Dudley makes when his throat tightens up, an occurrence each time he is confronted with his sense of loss of place.


9. The choice of the name Lot is one of O’Connor’s ways of having fun in her stories. The Biblical name means “veil” and certainly in the story Miss Willerton’s world is obscured from reality. Also, it is Lot’s wife who during their escape from Sodom looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26).

