CHAPTER VI
Ann Beattie is one of the most important and distinguished voices in contemporary American fiction. Beattie's fiction focuses upon the generation that came to self-definition and self-realization during the era of the 1960's, 'the wood stock generation' of idealistic dreamers. In her writings she has detailed the lives of characters caught in the ennui of lost idealism. Her search is for connectedness, for a way of making contact with a place, a relationship, or a philosophy that can bring meaning to their lives and passion to the circuit of their days. Largely unable to connect, Beattie's characters drift in and out of love, from job to job, from locale to locale. Often they are cynical; more often than not, they are too burned out emotionally even to search for a new dream to replace the dreams they have lost in ideology and in actions.

As a neorealist and a powerful and talented writer, Beattie has affirmed, once more fiction's capacity to mirror reality and to reveal both the decadence and beauty within a given era. And by the strength of her neorealist portrayals of contemporary
society, Beattie has "vouchsafed fiction's capacity to serve as a temporary stay against confusion and defeat."

Ann Beattie has distinguished herself by "coolly chronicling the sad eccentricities, plaintive longings and quiet frustrations" speaking for a new and peculiarly displaced generation. Her protagonists are typically well educated people who experience a sense of loss as they attempt to reconcile the idealistic convictions of their youth with their present lifestyles. Refusing to resolve the dilemmas developed in her fiction, Beattie rarely explores the inner motivations of her characters.

She focuses instead on their external environment, providing idiosyncratic and telling details, including frequent references to consumer goods and popular songs.

Beattie's first three volumes of short fiction focus on characters lacking permanent emotional ties who experience pervasive, vague despair and incomprehension regarding the direction of their lives. *Distortions* her first collection of stories, features characters more affected by the consequences of experimenting with drugs and sexual freedom in the 1960s than with the political upheavals of that era. The opening story is about the marriage of dwarfs. Another story is done in short takes, rather like blackout sketches:

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Wesley has gaps between his teeth
One such take begins; Janie Regis’ hair is all
different colours.4

The next one picks up. Another experimental story is entitled “It is Just another Day in Big Bear City, California,” a title which is almost a story in itself. Taken by themselves some of the straighter stories are quite impressive – “Woolf Dreams,” was written when the author was only twenty-six. Nearly all the stories show a high degree of professional polish. “Fancy Flights,” includes a much-lauded depiction of a man high on marijuana. “Wally Whistles Dixie,” also from this volume, concerns a thirty-year-old Ballerina who marries some one half her age. Almost all the characters are passive agents. They do not act but are acted upon. “The important Thing,” one character in a story in Distortions advises another, “Was to know when to give up.”5

In the second volume of short stories Secrets and Surprises, Beattie depicts similar characters in the increasingly conservative 1970s. Many of the characters in this collection are involved in relationships they can’t seem to leave, or remain saddened by the loss of a lover years after the end of the affair. In her stories Beattie shows from up close how ambiguous these relationships can be, how many secrets and surprises they can hold.
In fact in her longest story entitled “Friends” Beattie evokes in rich
detail the amorphous scene of drifting friends and lovers, since that is
what many of the friends have been or wish they were - that sets the tone
for whole collection. Perry the protagonist has abandoned the lonely
project of winterizing his Vermont house to join a crowd of old friends-
gathered from various outposts in New England for a partying week end
at Francie’s house in New Hampshire. The first night there, when all the
guests are sprawled drunkenly about the house, Perry retreats to the attic
mattress he has appropriated after countless weekend visits:

Waiting to fall asleep he thought about what
Francie had told him recently: that he was her
best friend. ‘A woman should have another
woman for her best friend,’ Francie said and
shrugged, ‘but you’re it.’ ‘Why would you
have to have a woman for a best friend?’ he
said. She shrugged again. ‘It’s hard for men
and women to be best friends,’ she said. He
nodded and she thought he understood, but all
he meant to acknowledge was that they were
close, but that there was also something hard
about that. What it was, was that it had never
been the right time to go to bed what it was,
was that it had never been the right time to go
to bed with her, and if he did it after all this
time, he would have been self-conscious.6
In any case, there is barely a moment for unassertive Perry to divulge his secret love in the confusion of friends – a band of rock musicians, a 'spacy' woman and her baby daughter, a neurotically hyper sensitive teacher and an array of other flaky types – dropping in and out, braking up and making up and there is no place for frustration or resentment to mount in Beattie’s diffuse atmosphere; ambivalence prevails.

Sometimes it bothered him that he was just one of the people she liked to have around all the time, although it meant a lot to him that they had all been friends for so long. Beattie unobtrusively displays truly remarkable imaginative insight and accomplished control in her evocation of Perry’s low-key occupation.

The general outline of “Friends” reappears in “A Vintage Thunder Bird” and “Colorado,” and Beattie comes the closest she ever does to suggesting a representative predicament. Nick and Robert, the protagonists of these stories, are best friends with Penelope and Karen respectively, but secretly wish they were more. The women, enigmatic themselves and not very understanding of others, meanwhile move in with and out on other men. Neither Robert nor Nick makes the move to surprise his friend with an admission of his love; but each is always there
to deal with the surprises visited upon him by that friend. The surprises that directly affect the friendship, as when Penelope suddenly proposes to Robert that the two of them leave “Stifling” New Haven and head for Colorado – are not decisive turning points; they are barely registered as ripples in the general drifting course of their lives. It’s details, however more than situation outlines that count for Beattie and she makes weigh with us. She describes the nondescript, notes unconnected thoughts, records minute details in “A Vintage Thunder Bird.”

Petra gave him a hard look, and he knew that she really wanted him to go. He stared at her – ‘at the little crust of salt on her bottom lip’ – and then she turned away from him.¹

Beattie adds familial relations to other of her stories, and she shows that blood ties don’t clarify or secure matters between characters. In “Lapetite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans” the famous artists, fathers of Griffin and Diana are part of the cause of their having a relationship in the first place and all of the cause of the complications of it. Beattie usually gathers about her characters and apparently artlessly arranges.

The ironic narrator of “The Lawn Party,” one of the best stories in the collection, returns to his parents ‘house for the fourth of July with his daughter, without his wife, and without his arm, which he has lost in a car
accident with his wife’s sister, the woman he really loved. He refuses to join his relatives on the lawn but does not really escape them. Instead he distracts himself from serious solitary brooding with a sardonic banter with emissaries sent to rouse him – and even with his student/friend who might be a real companion. Beattie explores

The claims of siblings in “Deer Season,” where two sisters try to rearrange their stultifying life together when a past common lover returns.4

“A Clever Kids Story,” depicts a sister’s effort to come to terms with her memory of her youthful adoration of her brother. As usual, there is no final reckoning for Beattie’s characters, just a trying process of reacting – usually with an unsettling lack of feeling or energy to demands and events they don’t control and can’t neatly reconcile.

Another successful story “Shifting,” from this volume is the tale of dependent young woman, Natalie, living in an unfulfilled marriage. Her gradual movement toward autonomy, mirrored in her efforts to drive a “shift” car, leads her to an increased awareness of her potential to be a feeling, sensuous being and to a recognition of what is missing from her life. This voyage of discovery begins with her recurrent interest in images and people who, like herself, have negative spaces and missing parts. Her
identification with images of void and incompleteness serve as a prelude to change because they help Natalie to confront the absence of meaning in her life. These images include a mobile by Alexander Calder and a Henry Moore – like sculpture, a dismembered Vietnam veteran, an insurance appraisal of the material “valuables” in her marriage, and a series of photographs taken by Natalie in which only parts of her body are shown.

These images function synchronically, leading to the central image at the close of the story – the revelation of Natalie as a whole person whose missing parts and partial views are now accessible, brought together as an integrated, organic whole on the eve of a rebirth. In the final paragraphs, Natalie is isolated, her feelings still relatively numb; but her inchoate awareness of the parts of her life which need and deserve expression suggests hope for her future growth and maturity.10

Concepts of void and loss of self have been widely used to characterize existence in the modern age and recur in twentieth-century literature and art to represent the anonymous self and the dehumanization of individuals. Wylie Sypher notes that “accounts of the disintegration of self are everywhere in our literature”11 and cites Robert Musil’s comment that “These days one never sees oneself whole.” For the modern sensibility, Sypher continues, the self tends to vanish or to be fragmented and the quest for an individual identity becomes, as Hermann Hesse
conceived, an attempt to rearrange the pieces of the self that are accessible at any one time, implying both the temporary and illusory quality of the task. In this context, the quest for identity requires an assessment of the fragments of the self.

Beattie’s Natalie, as a modern protagonist, is confronted with the existential dilemma of defining her life. It will entail a process of identifying what she is and what she is not, what she has and what is missing, what she wants and what she rejects. She will unwittingly deconstruct her own life, stripping away the illusions of fulfillment one at a time until she is left literally naked as her essential self.

Natalie’s efforts at self-definition are initially limited to her subliminal responses to concrete images of incompleteness. As her self-awareness grows, the images of void which trouble her become increasingly complex, culminating in her more profound confrontation with the void of existential isolation. Natalie is not an intellectual. She is not verbal, not educated, and not highly reflective. But she is intuitive and spontaneous; and with these gifts, she begins to learn about her life. Natalie’s marriage is portrayed as increasingly unhappy. Her husband, Larry, neither knows nor cares about her, devoting his energies and commitment to his training in chemistry and basketball, and to his parents.
and a best friend. Natalie is left to define her days alone, except for her ritual duties as homemaker and chauffeur.

In her free time, she goes to an art museum where she is consistently drawn to two works – a mobile by Calder and a sculpture of "two elongated mounds intertwined, made of smooth gray stone," an evocation of Henry Moore’s sculptures of reclining intertwined couples. Whenever she goes to the museum, she sits and writes notes with the "Calder mobile hanging overhead." Further, "there was one piece of sculpture in there that she wanted very much to touch, but the guard was always nearby" (90). Even when she was away from the museum, "she thought about the piece of sculpture."14

Natalie eventually takes Larry and his mother on separate occasions to the museum, and each time, Natalie gravitates toward the Moore – like sculpture only to be further alienated by their lack ofresponsiveness to a work she holds so dear. With Larry," she hesitated by the sculpture, but did not point it out to him. He didn’t look at it... He could have shifted his eyes just a little and seen the sculpture, and her, standing and staring" (100). But he does not shift his gaze toward her and looks instead at another work. With her mother-in-law, Natalie “pointed

out the sculpture, and [she] ... had glanced at it and then ignored it"^{15} (97). Just as she had consistently ignored and rejected Natalie.

Both the Calder and the Moore-like sculpture are biomorphic, suggestive of organic growth and fluid movement, and both characteristically use negative space or voids to define the limits of their mass and the interrelationships of their parts. The use of negative space gives the impression of simultaneous perception of the inside and the outside of objects. The resulting interpenetration of forms with other forms and the swift time-space dislocation of the point of view from one unstable position to another dynamic pose suggest change, growth, and movement. Henry Moore himself stated:

The first hole made through a piece of stone is a revelation. The hole connects one side to the other, making it immediately three-dimensional. A hole can itself have as much shape meaning as a solid mass. The mystery of the hole [is like] ... the mysterious fascination of caves in hillsides and cliffs.\textsuperscript{10}

Natalie relates to these works of art on multiple levels. Her personality appears impulsive, experimental, and incipiently sensual, echoing the biological rhythms and movement inherent in both works. Her need for change parallels the shifting planes of a Calder mobile and
the continuous flowing lines of the intertwined contours of the sculpture. Natalie has a passionate need to be seen and understood “inside and outside,” and the frustration of that need leaves her feeling empty and depleted, like the gaping negative spaces of the works.

The arrangement of shapes in a Calder mobile is always provisional, as one flange swings into a new relationship with the others, suggesting, as Calder himself has said, “detached bodies floating in space.” Like a mobile, Natalie’s relationship with Larry is changing; and with that change, she may become uprooted and isolated.

The Moore-like sculpture portrays intertwined figures, symbolic of the type of intimate relationship for which she longs, a longing she feels even as she watches women “talking with their faces close together, as quietly as lovers” (98).

The two works, with their respective voids, remind Natalie of the instability of her life and the emotional connectedness that she misses. She does not simply admire these works; she identifies with them. She is no less hurt and angry when Larry and his mother dismiss the works than if they had directly rejected her. The works also offer her an opportunity to define and validate her feelings.
Larry's best friend, Andy, is a Vietnam veteran who has lost his leg and the full use of his hands. Despite the fact that Natalie does not want to take care of Andy, she empathizes with him. She envisions what it must be like to be blown apart, flying through space with one's limbs torn away. She genuinely feels sorrow that more people do not show an interest in him. Here too, Natalie is obsessed with Andy as a symbol of loss, missing parts, and neglect. Her ambivalence toward him is a mixture of guilt, fear, and identification with the losses he has suffered. Later in the story when Natalie views the photographs she has taken of herself, she concludes that "she had photographed parts of her body, fragments of it to study the pieces. She had probably done it because she thought so much about Andy's body and the piece that was gone — the leg, below the knee, on his left side" (102).

Natalie's identification with Andy also reflects her fear that sudden change will be catastrophic to her. "She had a morbid curiosity about what it felt like to be blown from the ground — to go up, and to come crashing down" (96). She continues to have these fantasies of destruction as though she were rehearsing her own demise. "She thought of Andy, in the woods at night, stepping on the land mine, being blown into the air. She wondered if it threw him in an arc, so he ended up somewhere away from where he had been walking, or if it just blasted him straight up, if he
went up the way an umbrella opens” (100). In psychological terms, she is envisioning loss and pain because she is projecting the limits of the pain that will result from change. The vision of Andy’s destruction that she recreates is, of course, much more threatening than the reality of her situation.

Andy, for all his losses and handicaps, is more adjusted to his circumstances than Natalie is to the challenges of her life. Andy thereby provides an ironic foil to her preoccupation with what is missing from her life. Andy courageously confronts the truly limited physical and emotional opportunities open to him. For us as readers, this contrast reduces Natalie’s struggle for self actualization to less than heroic proportions and reminds us that pain and frustration are relative.

Natalie clandestinely takes driving lessons from an attractive young man, Michael, as a defiant act of independence, symbolic of her shift away from her husband’s domination. These lessons signal her re-entry into the arena of experimentation and sexuality. They also lead to a further break-down in honesty and efforts to communicate with Larry. Although it is ambiguous whether Natalie has a brief affair with her adolescent teacher, some intimacy does develop between them, and the need for that intimacy is painfully clear to her when she prolongs his departure and misses him after he leaves. But Michael’s primary function
is to increase her awareness of her needs for a relationship which is both emotional and sexual. He provides only a partial and temporary answer to her problems. As a catalyst, he enters her life and promotes change but plays no lasting role.

While Natalie is in the car with Michael, he finds the envelope of photographs she has taken of herself, and he examines them: "'Wow,' the boy said. He laughed. 'Never mind. Sorry. I'm not looking at any more of them'" (101). In her eagerness to have her intimate thoughts and needs revealed, she shares parts of herself — feelings symbolized by both the suggested sexual encounter and the photographs — with a boy who cannot understand their meaning. In his youth and inexperience, he does not know how to respond. As a result, she is depressed and humiliated.

Another image of void that confronts Natalie is the photographs of the furniture which were taken for an insurance appraisal of the valuables belonging to her and Larry. Natalie proclaims sardonically that there is nothing valuable from their marriage, referring to the absence of love, commitment, and children, with no hope of better things to come. When Larry and Natalie visit a toy factory, they leave with a catalogue of toys they could order. But "she knew that they would never look at the catalogue again" (100).
Ironically, Natalie uses the simple Instamatic camera that Larry bought her for the insurance appraisal as an opportunity for self-appraisal by taking pictures of her body:

She went to the mirror in their bedroom and held the camera above her head, pointing down at an angle, and photographed her image in the mirror. She took off her slacks and sat on the floor and leaned back, aiming the camera down at her legs. Then she stood up and took a picture of her feet, leaning over and aiming down... She put her left hand on her thigh, palm up, and with some difficulty – with the camera nestled in her neck like a violin – snapped a picture of it with her right hand.18

By taking these pictures from oblique and novel angles, she is literally exploring parts of herself previously unseen by her. She makes a systematic effort to view herself, revealing her physical being as a metaphor for her efforts to understand her unconscious needs and her emergent womanhood.

As the narrative ends, Natalie closes the blinds to her room and examines herself nude in the mirror, seeing herself “whole” at last: “She undressed. She looked at her body – whole, not a bad figure – in the
mirror ... if she could feel, she would like her sense of isolation” (102). She is alone, and yet she is satisfied with her body and with her isolation. Like the detached body floating in space suggested by the Calder mobile, she projects what it is like to feel free and alive. Camus wrote that the true beginning of freedom and responsibility is the recognition that one lives with others but faces the others alone. She is preparing to face that existential void. She has yet to act upon her new awareness, but she is no longer blind to the feelings and needs she has so long denied. In that sense, Philadelphia 1972 becomes the city and date of her rebirth.

Other stories are about strange human contacts – about relationships that emphasize the root sense of isolation and enigmatic detachment latent in all her stories. In “Distant Music,” Sharon and Jack, who share “a hatred of Laundromats, guilt about not sending presents to relatives on birthdays and Christmas, and a dog-part weimaraner, part German Shepherd – named Sam,”19 meet in Washington Square on Friday to spend the week end together and trade Sam for the next week. Sharon is silent and not used to being loved; and she seems strangely unperturbed when Jack leaves her and when Sam, grown vicious, is put away.

In “Octoscope,” a less successful story, another passive woman and her baby move in with a marionette-maker, Carlos. Though the passive woman prefers Nick to Carlos, she is grateful to Carlos for
offering her and her baby some shelter. Nothing in “Octoscopy” is quite as it first seems. At the end of the ride which the narrator consents to take with Nick the night she first meets him, he takes her to a barn, with no lights, no house nearby:

“I could take you” in, he said.
“No,” I said, afraid for the first time.
“I don’t want to go in there.”
“Neither do I,” he said.20

Any threat that Nick seems to present ultimately dissolves. In the same way Carlos, described as “a kind of person who wanted a woman to live with him,”21 seems to be a typically dominant male, but after the narrator goes to live with him ‘feeling like a prostitute,’ she finds that it is weeks before he touches her, and the touch she speaks of seems to be literal, not a short hand for sexual advances. She longs almost desperately, for facts about him, words from him: “I have to know if we are to stay always, or for a long time, or a short time,”22 she says. Instead the two of them talk of eggs and beehives. There is a lot of disquieting, empty space in these stories in the characters’ heads and hearts and the holes between characters.

But Beattie sees more than blankness. The secret she shares with us in acutely captured moments and carefully recorded details is of the
unobtrusive but crucial presence of generous impulses and good intentions in lives that are lonely and undirected, in friendships that are full of ignorance and confusion. And at a time when hopelessness and bleak isolation are assumed in much fiction – and are never very far from her own – that is surprise.

*The Burning House*, Beattie's third volume of short stories includes “Learning to Fall,” in which a woman takes the son of her friend on a weekly outing to New York. They are accompanied by her lover, whom she can neither pledge herself to nor completely give up. Life is too easy an answer. It seems to be more a matter, strangely enough, of liberty. Jobs, marriages, the commitments of love, even the status of parent and child – all are in a state of flux. Thus everything is provisional, to be re-invented tomorrow and no one can depend on anyone else.

‘Freedom’ the catchword of sixties America, has translated into free fall, or a condition of weightlessness, and the most repeated motifs in the book are variants of this. “Learning to Fall,” “Gravity,” “Afloat” and “Running Dreams” are titles of stories. ‘Space Cadet’ is a phrase used by one character of another, but in some ways all the protagonists, both men and women, are defined by their relationship to this label. Zipped in, petrified, like the little boy in a beekeeper’s suit in “Sun Shine and Shadow,” they peer out through Plexiglas at the dangerous collisions
around them, at the fatal stars. "These stories are not of suspense but of suspension."23

Freedom is the freedom to take off, but when you’re being taken off from, as happens to most of the people in these stories, it doesn’t feel quite the same. What many of these characters want is to be grounded.

Like spies on the run, they’re searching for a safe house, and houses and their furnishings loom large.24

But the houses tend to be booby-trapped. Home is no longer a countyfortress, as the book title more than hints. Even the most domestic of activities – cooking dinner, fun with the dog – are fraught with a jittery sense of wrongness. Some times the characters, nostalgic for Christmas trees the way they used to be, return too their own pasts, but the lovely Pennsylvania farmhouse of “Sunshine and Shadow,” which lulls us into security with its patchwork quilts and golden oldie records, is indicative of what is likely to happen to any one who gets sucked in by the décor:

When he moved his head nose-close to the window he could see the cement driveway… where his mother had run a hose into the car and killed herself with carbonmonoxide.25
Another story “Cinderella Waltz,” turns out to be almost precise. It is not about the wife’s shocked discovery that her husband Milo left her for a man Bradley or that Milo is now dumping Bradley and his nine-year-old daughter for a new life on the west coast. It proves rather to be about the peculiar relationship that now exists between the wife and Bradley, less sympathy than identification. The woman in “Waiting” whose friends cannot console her while her husband is away, imagines the dog has died. Looked at one way “these women and - most of the men too – are all powerless to change.” Looked at another, their stasis is not so bad. If marriage and the family cracked apart and the metaphoric house is in flames, why isn’t all changed utterly? For all the lamentation over failing relationships and disintegrating families, Beattie keeps showing where the rifts stop. Memories which so often torment still connect us, sometimes savingly with the past. Children who seem the victims of broken marriages have a way of insisting on the irrevocability of the old roles, no matter what the new arrangements are. A touching nearly comic instance of this is in “Desire,” where a man named B-B cares for his ten-year-old Bryce during spring vacation… whatever the sorrow and confusion some things like being a parent – do not change. Things fall part.
Where You'll Find Me and Other Stories is another book of short stories by Ann Beattie. It contains pieces in which the past helps illuminate, if not relieve her characters' present dissatisfaction. Beattie depicts people at the onset of middle age who have never achieved the success or happiness they seemed destined for in their youth. Attempting to adjust to the death of their daughter, the couple in “In the White Night,” posses a maturity lacking in most of Beattie’s earlier characters.

The most celebrated story in this collection, “Janus,” concerns a woman’s obsession with a bowl given her by a former lover. It is noted that as in other Beattie stories, the determining factor in the protagonists’ life is loss: “thus the beautiful bowl, perpetually empty, is symbolic of the woman herself.” While generally highly praised, Where You’ll Find Me and Other Stories was regarded by some as lacking the emotional and technical range of Beattie’s earlier volumes. Others noted that while Beattie steadfastly refuses to Judge her characters, her distinctive elliptical endings are somewhat less grim in this volume and offer the possibility of positive action in the future.

For readers of her previous novels and short stories the foregoing could serve as a succinct description of Beattie’s narrative method – a method that works through omission and understatement, irony and indirection. There tends to be little authorial comment in her fiction – few
attempts to interpret behaviour or conversations and almost no efforts at all to situate her characters within some larger frame of reference, normal or historical. Instead, things simply happen – someone drifts out of one relationship and into another or moves from one house to the next.

In Beattie’s finest work, this method has resulted in widely imitated narratives that mirror in their very structure, the fragmented, fragmentary nature of their characters’ lives, narratives that capture the strobe-light effect of contemporary life through their pointillist detail and fractured observation. Unfortunately it is also a technique with decided limitations – the author’s dead pan delivery can devolve into a prose of anomic detachment that is as irritating and ultimately as ineffectual as her characters’ relentless passivity; and her gift for external description can be used to avoid looking at more elusive emotions. We may end up knowing what her people listen to on the radio, what they keep on their end tables and what they say to their dogs – all without having the faintest idea of who they really are.

This fourth volume of short stories includes several tales that suffer from such weaknesses. “Snow” is a mannered prose poem about lost love that reads like a random collection of notebook jottings. “The Big Outside World” becomes a laboured attempt to draw some sort of analogy between an upsetting incident – some street people ambush a
package of clothes meant as a goodwill donation – and anxious woman’s state of mind. And “Coney Island” seems like a formulaic exercise in the depiction of our inability to connect:

We’re told that the two-old pals sitting around the kitchen table both have problems – one has a wife in the hospital, the other is thinking about an old love affair – but a sense of their personalities and friendship is telegraphed by only the broadest, most obvious details…

Many of the stories in this volume are more substantial – more sympathetic toward their characters as well as denser and most satisfying as fictions. Beattie’s people – the battered emotional casualties of the 1960s and the hip survivors of the Me Generation – are teetering now on the margins of middle age, and the aging process has made them somewhat less careless about their lives.

A sense of sadness hangs over many of these characters in part, it’s a nostalgic yearning for their receding youth: “We’ll put on some fifties music and play high school,” says one character, and in part an apprehension of the terrible precariousness of life. Memories of a summer in Vermont prompt a man to re-examine the emotional losses he has incurred as in “Summer People”; and a desultory chat in the kitchen jars a house keeper and her now grown charges into a mood of melancholy
recollection. The heroine of “In the White Night” remembers the time their Christmas tree caught fire and their little girl, Sharon, tried to rush toward the flames; and she also remembers the night in the hospital whom they learned that Sharon had Leukemia.

Many of Beattie’s earlier stories tend to take a random, almost improvisatory shape, several of the ones in “Where You’ll Find Me” evince a pointed interest in sustained narrative form. As it is mentioned earlier “Janus” becomes a highly crafted, almost surreal meditation on the intrusion of time past into time present and on the perils of every day life. And “Spiritus” grows from a stream-of-consciousness rift into a portrait of a man torn between his devotion to his wife and his passion for another woman.

The stories of this volume attest to Beattie’s gift for weird analogies, her ability to grab cheap, glittering bits of a dialogue out of the air. The newness about these stories is their intermittent lyricism, combined with a shift of voice that signals a willingness on the part of the author to risk subjectivity. A man is transfixed at the moment Car Crashes by a glimpse of an old friend going trick-or-treating with her children-dressed absurdly enough as a skeleton. And a woman whose daughter has recently died imagines as she drifts off to sleep beside her husband that “in the white night world outside, their daughter might be drifting past
like an ages.” With such passages Beattie Camera like accuracy with
detail gives way to something a little more personal and poetic, and the
result in stories that have the capacity to move as well as persuade us.

Commenting upon Beattie’s another collection of stories What
Was Mine, John H.Hafner states,

Ann Beattie tells fine stories that are complex
in their sense of time, perceptive in their
revelations of people and compelling in their
concerns for the ordinariness of life and the
unpredictability of the future.

For the people in the world of Ann Beattie’s short stories things fall apart.
In this new collection, the characters are wonderfully realized as they live
their lives with friends and neighbours, with husbands and wives and
children, with interesting jobs in interesting places. But things just do not
work out. ‘Marriages,’ for example, keep breaking up, yet the reasons for
the break up are not always clear though they seem inevitable. The
husbands and wives care for each other, yet they grow apart. In “Home to
Marie,” Marie plans a party, hires a caterer, then walks out on her
husband to make him realise. What it’s like “to have food prepared... and
then just to wait.” His reaction is to remember a time when he was
mugged, presumably because Marie’s action is as random and arbitrary
and mean. In *What Was Mine*, Ethan’s father survived the war only to be killed by a falling bucket of paint. Ethan’s mother isn’t able to come to terms with such a quirk of fate. In “Windy Day at the Reservoir,” Fran and Chap divorce after what seems an idyllic, though restless, vacation.

Time is important in all these stories. The action moves back and forth, and central events are often remembered ones. Whether the story is told from a first person point of view or omnisciently from a center of consciousness, the reader often experiences events through a haze of nostalgia. Even the title suggests this. But this sense of time of the importance of the past is not usually captured through plot. In fact in many of the stories, not much happens though much is remembered. Startling things occur. A woman gives a rocking chair to Goodwill because “it encouraged lethargy”; a divorced couple vacations together; bees suddenly invade and bring chaos to party; a man celebrates his wife’s promotion by taking her ice skating and buying her new panties; a retarded boy drowns in a reservoir.

The unexpected reveals character and carries meaning. In “Windy Day at the Reservoir” Mrs. Briual observes:

> What did it matter if you were a little eccentric, if you did not act exactly like everyone else? People were quick to forgive.
They forgave you because they were eager to keep things polite and eager to get on with their own lives.\textsuperscript{31}

This startling quality is also a part of the imagery of the stories: “He frowned like an archaeologist finding something he had no context for and having to decide, rather quickly whether it was, say, an icon or petrified cow dung”; a couple “were as attuned to each other as members of a chorus line. He looked at the corn bread and her hand pulled the tray forward.” The unexpectedness of so much of the action, of the imagery, of the characters is all a part of the general sense that things happen no matter what, that all a person can do is be prepared, that ripeness is all.

Many of the stories are centered on an object that assumes symbolic importance to the characters. The story “In Amalfi” has a magic ring. A woman whom she does not know asks Christine to keep her ring for her while she goes out in a boat.

The ring was amazing. It sparkled so brightly in the sun that Christine was mesmerized. It was like the beginning of a fairy tale, she thought – and imagine a woman giving a total stranger her ring ... The woman had sensed that she could trust Christine... Even though she was right, the woman had taken a huge risk.\textsuperscript{32}
There is an important bracelet and a duck that plays the piano in “Honey” a manhole cover in “Installation #6” a dog that performs tricks in “Horatio’s Tricks,” a rabbit in a classroom in “You Know What,” two photographs with reversed labels in “What Was Mine,” a set of Fiestware in “Windy Day at the Reservoir.” Each object is an ordinary part of an ordinary setting that gradually acquires an importance beyond the ordinary as it reveals character, triggers thoughts, establishes interpersonal relationships, changes the direction of momentum of its story. The rabbit for example in “You Know What” shifts that story’s center from a study of the unconventional marriage of Francine and Stefan to a revelation that results in an unusual male friendship. Likewise, the Fiestware in “Windy Day at the Reservoir” reveals Lou’s character and the flaw in his marriage to Pia, exposes the propensity of Fran and Chap to snoop and allows Mrs. Brikel to have the story’s last word.

Ann Beattie tells fine stories that are complex in their sense of time, perceptive in their revelations of people and compelling in their concerns for the ordinariness of life and the unpredictability of the future.

Beattie’s most recent short stories collection Park City, Chronicles the ‘Wood Stock Generation’ from youth to middle age: experimenting with drugs traveling aimlessly, settling down, breaking up, finding
resolution. Lorrie Moore in *New York Times Book Review* comments on *Park City*:

*Park City* is ... a book that should win the admiration of short story writers and readers everywhere for its pointed reminder of Beattie’s unshakably intelligent, deep hearted, long and unsurpassed duration to the form.\(^{33}\)

Beattie throughout her short fiction focuses on characters who have never achieved the success or happiness in their lives. Her stories are complex in their sense of time and perceptive in their revelations of people. They are compelling in their own concerns for the ordinariness of life and the unpredictability of the future.
References


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