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Marilyn Kallet

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Date May 21, 1987

A PEOPLED GARDEN

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Connie Jordan Green

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To know of someone here and there whom we accord with, who is living on with us, even in silence--this makes our earthly ball a peopled garden.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
Apprenticeship, Book VII

ABSTRACT

The poetry begins with memories of childhood, of the people and the events which were important to that period of life. The people include the poet's mother and father, grandmothers, aunt, a few friends from adulthood, and her children. The second section within the poetry is organized around the metaphor of life as a garden. The images in these poems are of life--its lushness, its renewing cycles, its sometimes threatening nature, and the human life of exploration and expectation. The poet's primary concerns with form deal with line breaks, the shape of the poem on the page, the sounds of words, and the way in which the words together give rhythm to the lines.

Two adventures of a spunky nine-year-old farm girl are told in the fiction. In TILLY'S NIGHT ADVENTURE, Tilly, late at night, puts some young pigs back in their pen. In TILLY RECKONS WITH A SNAKE, the main character rids the henhouse of a pesky snake which has been eating the eggs. The stories are written for readers in the primary grades. The sentences, though frequently compound, are easy to follow; the images, though of farms, are common to the experiences of many children. The few words which might be beyond a six- to ten-year-old's vocabulary are easily understood from the context of the sentence.

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INTRODUCTION

I have been thinking about writing lately, wondering as I put this manuscript together what is it we do when we write. What enables those of us who sit at our desks, blank pages before us, to answer the urging that arises like a mythical summons, a summons which remains as mysterious to the writer as it is to those who observe and try to analyze the writing process?

For me part of the impulse to write poetry rises out of need--a need to capture a moment of questioning or, more rarely, a moment of understanding. Sometimes a line comes to me, and I write it, and I try another line to see if a poem is hiding somewhere within those tentative thoughts. More often an image is the starting point--a rather common image usually, perhaps the cosmos that grew in my maternal grandmother's flower beds. As I think about the apparent disarray of those daisylike flowers waving their rainbow of colors at the end of long stems, another image comes, this one of order, of my paternal grandmother's neatly hoed rows of gladioli blooming their pale pastels.

I write line after line, trying words, phrases, thoughts, discarding as much as I keep, looking for the core, for what has sent me these images. The writing is a

process of discovery. I remember my grandmothers and their so-different flower beds, reflective of many of the differences in their lives. And I remember moments in my own life--my determination each spring that I will grow the stately gladioli, evidence perhaps of a deeper desire for the order of my Virginia grandmother's life, for the brick farmhouse with its polished silver bowls and well-rubbed cherry furniture.

But I remember also that even though I often buy gladioli bulbs, I never get around to planting them. Instead, when the soil grows warm, I scatter zinnia, marigold, and cosmos seeds across my flower beds, and I go on to other chores while the plants come up of their own volition wherever a seed has managed to take hold. Maybe the process of writing about these flower images has told me something about myself. Most likely, I have simply raised more questions in my mind. Regardless of the particular outcome, I have been engaged in discovery. And it is this sense of uncovering which, I think, sends us again and again to our blank pages which we attempt to fill with poetry.

Writing fiction for children is an entirely different matter. I usually start with a story I want to tell, and since children want something to happen in their stories, I

try to put plenty of action into the telling. The story usually comes to me complete with main characters--human people who are neither perfectly good nor imperfectly bad. That's the easy part--the "thinking-up" of something to write about. Then comes the work. Once again I am engaged in discovery--what words will most accurately tell the story? I search for images which will place my reader in the action--the bristly feel of a pig's skin as Tilly presses him in her arms, the nose tingling dustiness of a hen house, the sound of an apple falling onto soft earth. I am concerned with exactness of detail and with conciseness of language--how can I most accurately convey a sense of time and place and of an event unfolding?

Perhaps, after all, the writing of juvenile fiction is not essentially different from the writing of poetry. Although the end products are quite different, the act of writing each is a search-and-select process. The same respect for language that controls the shaping of a poem also controls the shaping of a short story. The writer answers a summons using the best tools at her disposal, but she is always seeking new and better ways of saying--not only that she might better reach her readers, but also that she might better know her own answers and her own questions.

POETRY

I - THE PEOPLE

OAK RIDGE - 1944

Night after night
their soundless planes come down
at the end of my lane.
Faces swarm after me
goggled eyes
wide mouths
spread in tooth-filled grins
colorless as the grey newsreel
where I first saw them.

Night after night
they spill from planes
and pour up the hill
slanted stares holding
my deadened legs
that refuse
to climb the porch steps.

By day my dolls
sit sunning on the steps
their ripped bodies
mended
by my mother's stitches.

PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER

In the photograph
she's forty-two
eyes clear, face unlined
blemishes covered
by the photographer's art.

She has been caught
between years of children
and years of funerals
a moment
fragile as unfired porcelain.

MY MOTHER'S BED

My mother still sleeps
on one side of the bed
my father's place empty
seventeen years.

She had come from coal camp
cottages, three sisters and her mother
in two double beds, space
as scarce as good meat.

Now seventy years of denial
hold her body wrapped
in sleep between sheets
cool and smooth as marble.

1938 - MY FATHER

Daily he went down into the mines
where the walls shone like diamonds
where the silence folded about him like velvet.

From the farm of his youth
where the fields like green waves rolled over him
where the days were cows marching full-uddered into their
stalls

from hay in the barn
brittle as brass with summer sun
he went down to walls damp and glistening.

1956 - LETTERS FROM MY FATHER

each Thursday
he writes
paring off a bit of his life
like the shavings he whittles
from his number 2
lead pencil

each Saturday
I read the letters
until my fingertips
shine like coal

WINTER EVENINGS

We were all safe
as long as you climbed off the bus
walked the two blocks home
those winter evenings
when we played Rummy--
cards marching like soldiers
up and down the formica table
you collecting kings, queens, jacks
to spread when we least suspected
catching us with penalties
we've never stopped counting.

THE HEATER

It was a matter of survival--
the kerosene heater, as much a part
of our winter sleep as the
pre-dawn train whistle at the
edge of the back yard;
a metallic black rectangle
wheezing fumes, acrid ghosts
to float above the metallic
black bed. My shadow
my sister's shadow, quilt-
covered whales climbing the wall
as the flames rose,
settling into ordinary lumps
as the fire dwindled.

Now the heating system hums
its pre-dawn signal.
No whales climb my walls,
smooth blankets anchor the bed.
To save on utility bills--or maybe
to awaken a memory--
I light a Ker-o-sun, white
chrome-trimmed. Only the
fumes are the same--bitter
ghosts of need.

TO MY GRANDMOTHER

You had tended
your garden in March
while snow lay
in the north shadow
of the hills
pulled back the straw
protecting the tender
strawberry plants
to let their tendrils
run over the black
earth
your mind
filled with fruit
while your back
bent to the pull
of earth.

FLOWER GARDENS

I grow only common flowers--
zinnias, marigolds,
cosmos cultivated from memory
of my grandmother's
Kentucky garden
where stalks sprouted
from soil black as
the coal dust we breathed.

My Virginia grandmother
grew gladioli in rows--
pink, yellow pastels
to tower among china cups
and silver trays.

Each spring I buy
gladiolus bulbs
leave them drying on my shelf.

Each winter
when I polish silver
I remember gladiolus
rows stretching
into years
only to forget
when cosmos
burst into bloom.

SURVIVORS

We're a long line,
women who outlive our men
thirty or forty years.
We watch skin shrivel
on the backs of their hands
like apple pieces drying
on the well house roof.
We see their eyes cloud over,
hear their breath go raspy.
My man slept sitting up
last fifteen years of his life,
lungs so full of coal dust
he'd smother flat on his back.
We never replace them.
Law, one man in a lifetime's
enough for any woman.

Got my garden started,
hoed up the black dirt myself,
dropped in potato pieces,
their eyes ready to sprout
soon as I covered them over.
Holy Book says God created woman
to be a helpmate for man,
says God made man go to sleep
then plucked out a rib,
like I'll pluck feathers
from that hen come Saturday.
God made woman out of that one rib.
Guess He meant to take something
right next to man's heart.
Most of us try all our lives
to get back there.

TO MY AUNT AFTER HER HUSBAND'S DEATH

Each morning you arise
to invent a new you
who will carry in the newspaper
empty crumbs from the toaster
heat water for tea.

You had not dreamed this day
had not known there would be hours
to be plaited
carefully as ropes
strong enough to lift you
beyond nights deep as wells.

KAY, LAST OCTOBER

Remember Kay at her potter's wheel
long fingers wet and grey as catfish
hair pushed behind ears
jawbone belying gentle curve of clay?

She balanced babies, ballast against
the rising years, gathered herbs
tomatoes to fill clear jars
color for encroaching winter.

Her hands disguised the quiet
within, where death hollowed her womb
creeping on soundless feet
till Kay remembered his black presence.

Now her sons outgrow fading jeans
while we decorate our tables
with Kay's bowls, spilling
oranges, grapes, red and yellow apples.

MAY RITUAL - I

It has become a habit
this picking of the juicy berries
their red selves hidden
among green leaves
and white blossoms--
promises of more berries.

I touch them gently
snapping the stem above the cap
leaving the cap to seal in
nourishment
I carry to the dying.

One May it was my grandmother
at eighty-four ill for the first time.
I bent my body to pick
her favorite fruit, sun on my back
like a healing hand.

Another spring it was Kay
gone to the hospital for routine surgery
closed back up and sent home
where the cancer grew its consuming cells;
red strawberries the only color left
I could bring her.

Now May again and Dorothy
the cancer returned for its third try.
Once more I pick berries
crawling on my knees like a supplicant
among the trailing vines
fingers stained with juice--
berries piled high in baskets
crying to some implacable god
take us, take us instead.

MAY RITUAL - II

I feed the dying
strawberries
each small sacrifice
pressed between their lips

berries with voices
like oboes
crying take us
take us instead

until libations of juice
tumble off their chins
until death becomes
filled with living.

FIRST CROP

Let me tell you about peas--
about the furrow that lies
welcoming each shriveled seed
swelling in the moist earth

of faint green
that appears in the rows
a shadow of what will be

and then of the earliest leaves
nodding to each other
across the stems.

Let me describe the growth--
stalks stretching
as warm sun lengthens

pods forming flat
and pale green
then swelling and darkening
as they welcome my hands

of peas spilling into a bowl
and of steam rising
when the first potful is cooked.

As for corn and beans--
they too grow from the soil.
Sometimes I even note their sprouting

as a mother sees
the second child too
is learning to walk.

THE GOLDFISH

The day her goldfish died
my daughter
cried three hours
until her bed was wetter
than it had been
since she was two.
She had guarded that fish
against the cat,
floated fine crumbs of food
on the surface
of the amniotic fluid
where he swam,
watched his gills
open and close
in the perfect
rhythm of his living.
She was ten, life
with its cycles stalking
her own fine fluids,
her gills rehearsing
the rhythm of her life.

PRUNING TREES

My father had the knowledge
of where to make the first cut.
Early February he'd climb
the orchard trees
and cut away unneeded wood
leaving limbs whose
remaining choice was fruit.

My children and I
come to the branches
spreading like the sky overhead.
Knowledge pulsing
through my veins
I clip away new growth--
water sprouts sprung where
I trimmed a year ago.

Below, my children drag away
limbs, eyes on my form
silhouetted against
sky, sap staining their
palms the way blood
will spot clean white linen.

II - THE GARDEN

COME INTO MY GARDEN

O zucchini, you emblem of virility,
you swell stiffly, push to the outer bounds
your firm green exuberance. There is nothing
feminine about your haste.

Crookneck squash grown from bulb bursting
behind open-mouthed flower, now you hang
by a green thread, long neck stretched
for pearls if only dew would string them.

These carrots, slender orange tapers,
eyeless, they know nothing of the dark.
They stretch their pointed existence away
from light, burrow in ignorance.

Rosy tomatoes, blushing at the sun,
you hide your voluptuousness beneath
layered leaves. What did our forefathers know
when they refused to eat your juicy selves?

Secret onions, you think the world
would peel with your skins. Too much
darkness will rot your souls; only air
and some light can save you now.

Beans, would that your leaves were
less tasty, less Oil of Gilead for fuzzy
and hard-shelled beetles, invaders from Mexico,
Japan, who rape you in the noonday sun.

Sweet-smelling corn, your tassels
spread the news--corn for the pot,
ambrosia to taste buds, stalks to cattle,
kernels for drying--everlasting grain.

In his memoirs, Years of Upheaval, Henry Kissinger reports that Mao Tse-Tung once complained to him that China had too many women.

EDEN'S GARDEN

Remember our first garden?
I put out a whole row,
fifty feet of squash seed.

We reveled in vines,
broad-leaved, dew-dotted,
shade for any passing snail.

Squash tendrils reached
through beans, climbed
corn stalks hand-over-hand.

We picked male flowers, those
intended only to ripen
the female into a yellow swell.

Then we dipped the blossoms
in meal and fried them
in bacon drippings.

We awoke one morning
to squash hanging from stalks
and hiding beneath leaves.

It was more manna
than Moses and his tribe
could eat before sundown.

Neither mouths, nor jars,
nor freezers
could contain our bounty.

FERN FRONDS

Curving here
where
roots
go
deep

last summer's
froth of fern
now green-brown
divided
winter's leavings

shoots
stretch
with sun
soaking
earth's winter humus

hothouse haven
of furling
things

where
incubation

breeds

until bursting
booming

spring's
cacophony

breaks forth furls
where
winter wore
away
all frames.

HAIKU

Memorial day--
strawberries and English peas
and overhead crows

MIDWINTER DREAMS

Scientists say
lady bugs
hibernate
deep under
garden soil
packed together
in clumps
the size of
a basketball.

Such images
haunt my sleep.
I would
spade earth
in search
of lady bugs
rouse them
from
aphid dreams
escort them
to my
infected
houseplants.

Like
learned men
I too
dream
gorged visions
of lady bugs
massed
like the stars
obeying
some secret
sign.

LOAF OF BREAD

rises
like toadstools
after summer rain
a softness
tempting
fingers

fire
will alter
yeasty smell
to warm kitchen aroma
softness to brown
crust

knife
teeth
caress of tongue
will restore to
earth
air
water

ARS POETICA: LESSONS IN BREAD BAKING

Daughter, the shape you seek lies hidden in
the dough. Women before you have sought
the smooth form, the light rising. The secret
begins with your ingredients--soft wheat
nurtured by summer rains, ripened in autumn's
sun, or hard winter wheat pushed through soil
grown cold; yeast bubbling in the bowl where warm
water caresses it; honey or sugar,

something sweet to bind the flour and
encourage yeast to grow. Others you choose --
butter, eggs, milk, raw grain. But go carefully.
Too many mingle until the loaf is
neither rye nor pumpernickel nor
plain wholesome whole wheat. Bread cannot be hurried.
Allow time for each new element to
sink within the mix, to spread its cells

among others until there is no longer
flour, yeast, liquid, but merely dough. Your reward
is in shaping the loaf. Now there is substance
for your touch, sticky strands you flour and
mold into a long loaf or twist into
intricate braids, their secret execution
grown easy for your practiced fingers.
For baking you need only patience to

allow the heat its work; that and
a good nose so you take up the loaf just
when the aroma fills your kitchen.
The finished bread you tie in a bag
and carry to neighbors. Back home you search
for fresh ingredients to bake
into new loaves, gifts you hunger
to give the world.

INTROSPECTION

Mirror gazing
I leave to fairy tales.
Let others ask questions
of their own reflections.

Light on mirrors
blinds the eye.

Light
leaking through trees
is sufficient
for seeking shadowed images.

Shade suits
my slanted sightings.

FISHERMEN ON AN APRIL MORNING

I have dreamed shadows
men quiet as minnows sliding beneath boat hulls

their sleek shapes
quick as a flick of fish tail

their going
silent as silhouettes gliding through sea grass

their absence like the lake
white against the dark bank.

RAPUNZEL AT FIFTY

I've cut it off--
all of it.
See how palely
my neck glows--
covered those years
by that hair.
It's white
as the moonlight
that used to bathe you
when you stood
at the foot of the tower
calling my name
your voice
clear as church bells.

It's as if I have
a new head
weightless as clouds
so light
it would float away
if not for the thin
string of my neck.

I've found my ears too.
My palms fit them
like eyelids.
Now I hear only what I want--
the silver rush of streams
falling through the woods,
the red trill of birds.
My ears are butterflies
lighting where they please.

There'll be no more
nightly scaling the wall
hand over hand
through my long hair.
There'll be only birds
lifting hair after hair
hanging that old heaviness
in the dogwoods
to bloom with petals
gone all to silver.

THE MOTHER'S STORY

It's the mothers who get the bum rap--trying
all those years to raise Jack decent-like
trying to keep food on the table, a shirt
on his back, the wolf from the door--but that's

another story. We were squeaking by until that damn
cow went dry as last week's cornbread. Us without
a hen on the place to lay an egg or fill a pot and it
coming on February and a long time until poke salet.

So I said to Jack, look son, you just take that
brindled cow, lead her by a halter down to the square
this being Saturday morning and all the yokels
hanging about the hardware store spitting

at the stove and trading tall tales. See if you
can't swap that dry cow for a side of bacon
a bushel of potatoes stored in some root cellar
maybe a squash or pumpkin not gone soft with age.

What we need, son, is food. So Jack he put on his
blue jean jacket, his wrists dangling out the sleeves
like some scarecrow in a field. And off he went
heading for town, the cow sad-eyed behind him

not knowing whether she was part of some Old Testament
tale of sacrifice or if this was a modern fable.
To take my mind off my stomach I commenced scrubbing
out the cupboards, wiping down cobwebs that had grown

since the last food was stored there. Well, it wasn't
anytime until I heard somebody turning the doorknob.
In walked Jack, whistling under his breath, his face
split by a grin wide as a yule log. I didn't see

any grocery bags anywhere about. Where'd you leave
the vittles, I asked straight out. Didn't get none.
I raised the skillet, fixing to knock some sense
into that jughead. Aw, Ma, he said, flinging his arms

over his head, I made me a better trade. A better trade
I yelled. It better be. Then I folded my arms across
my chest, the skillet still dangling, handy, cause
I figured I hadn't heard the end of this. Jack never

was too bright. His first-grade teacher thought he'd profit by a little more home-learning, and it's been that way ever since. Okay, Jack, I said, what's a better trade than food for folks that're starving?

Jack he just pulled his fist out of his pocket and he grinned some more. It's here in my hand Ma. I couldn't think of anything worth a cow that'd fit in the palm of a hand unless it was

a gold piece. So I commenced to grin too. You done good, Jack, I says. You're sharper than folks give you credit for. And I pried open his fist with my fingers, my eyes hungry for the shine of that gold.

There nestled against the calluses in his palm, right straddle his life line, lay a bean-- one solitary bean, light brown with speckles of pink circling it, the kind of bean

that takes two cups to boil up into a pot the kind you'd serve with fatback and fresh onions out of the garden. But there wasn't any of that to go with it. It was just

a bean, a single bean, as dry and unmated as our old cow. I still had the skillet in one hand and I flung it hard as I could right through the window, the bean

that solitary bean, behind it. Jack and me went to bed hungrier than ever, the cold wind howling around the rags I stuffed into that window hole. You know the rest of the story

how the beanstalk appeared overnight and what Jack did. But I'm still here in this drafty house and I want to know how I'm going to explain to the authorities that dead giant filling up the

back yard. And what's the I.R.S. going to say about all those golden eggs--those eggs that won't crack into a yellow yolk and fry up like the sunball floating above the clouds.

40 - LOVE

They call it a love match.
What they mean is love is nothing.
You score points and move away from love--
move to 15, 30, 40, maybe deuce
where you add and add again
to win the game, take the set.
Your points come with the sweet thwack of racquet
dead center against the ball,
your eyes always on that ball
no time for looking at your opponent across the net--
that other half of your game
who would gladly give you love
while he whacks whacks steadily;
your concentration on the smooth flow of your body--
elbow straight, arm extended
so that racquet and arm are one long reach,
an instrument created just for stroking,
driving the ball low and hard over the net,
years of practice in that perfect union
of flesh and wood and catgut
stretched for strength.

FROM OUT THE DEEP

That winter we wrapped the house in plastic
and set our instruments on a watery course.
Five months we plowed the seas
rising and sinking with the secret tides.
At ten fathoms sharks lurked
their black fins brushing our windows.
I stayed inside dreaming safer depths.

At twenty fathoms we encountered
a school of porpoises, stub noses
pressing against the porthole
bleeps of intelligence cutting
the wavering surface. We sank on.

The whale was a surprise.
What are you doing at this depth
I mouthed behind the separating surface.
She sounded, blotting all light
as her blackness pressed past my sight.

The giant squid lived at thirty fathoms
undulating arms probing.
I retired from the window
sought wisdom in books
while I awaited the crush.

Then we stopped sinking, settled
uneasy less our resting place prove
only a ledge from which the plunge
would be final. Light filtered weakly
to our depth. For days we dared not move.

At last we felt the currents changing
saw through our porthole light waxing.
We rose through coral reefs, schools
of rainbow-hued fish to clear blue seas
where sunlight shimmered off our bow.
We shed plastic like worn-out skin
and beached on a strange shore
half a year from where we began.
It was months before I remembered land.

HEATING WITH A WOODSTOVE

On a February afternoon
temperature in the seventies
we go to the woodlot.
Last fall's woodpile
has dwindled to burls
unsplittable stumps
littering the earth.

So we gather axe, maul,
chain saw, fuel and file,
assault the trees felled
last fall. Perspiration
puddles beneath winter layers--
firewood's first warming.

There is more to come.
We pile split logs in a trailer
stack them near the house.
We cradle an armload to the stove.
We'll warm again
hauling ashes
sweeping bark
polishing blackened metal.

BLACKBERRY TIME

Each July
we belt buckets
around our waists
freeing our hands
to pick the berries
fingers gentle
on the blackest
knowing how easily
juice spills.
First there's
a plunk for each
berry in the bucket
a sign that the harvest
has begun.
Then quiet as
the piles build
into heaps
we'll eat
juice staining
our teeth, our tongues,
life slipping down
our throats
the way these berries
these purple-black
fruits pulled from briars
slip yearly
between our fingers.

WINTER YEARS--TO MY HUSBAND

Nights are as welcome as they were
in our honeymoon days--
the slow descent of the sun,
the gradual warming of our bodies
between sheets smooth as the
surface of our lives,
the house a quiet cell
containing only us two--
proton and neutron who
have known about union
these thirty years.

FICTION

TILLY'S NIGHT ADVENTURE

Tilly pulled the quilt up to her chin. The October breeze blowing through the open window felt cool on her shoulders.

Whuf, came a sound from several feet away.

Tilly held her breath, but the room was quiet. Ada must be playing a joke on her.

Bang! Something fell over on the porch outside their window.

Tilly eased her foot under the covers until it touched her sister's leg. Ada couldn't be in bed and make something fall outside at the same time, even though she was three years older than Tilly.

It must be the wind, Tilly decided. She closed her eyes.

Pant, pant, pant. Heavy breathing just outside their window.

Tilly lay as still as she could. She thought of the screenless open window and how she sometimes climbed through it when she didn't want to bother with the door.

Whuf.

Tilly nudged her sister, and Ada rolled toward her. "What do--"

Tilly clamped her hand over Ada's mouth. "Shh," she whispered. "There's somebody outside our window."

Tilly removed her hand. The two girls lay motionless in the quiet night.

"I don't hear anything," Ada hissed. "Tilly, if this is one of your tricks--"

The sound of a body bumping the wall stopped Ada in mid-sentence. "What was that?" she whispered fearfully.

"No idea," Tilly whispered back.

The deep breathing was closer, and Tilly expected to see a leg swinging over the window sill any minute now. She sat up slowly and whispered, "I'm going to look."

"No! It's too dangerous." Ada grabbed Tilly's arm.

"Not as dangerous as lying here, waiting to be pounced on. Let go!"

Quietly Tilly swung her legs to the floor. When she was almost to the window, she heard footsteps. There was more than one person out there!

Tilly flattened her body against the wall. Slowly she drew back the curtain and peeked around the window frame.

There was no one staring back. Then she felt something bump the wall near her knees. She caught her breath and made herself look down at the porch.

She collapsed in a heap with gasps of laughter.

"Tilly? Tilly, what's wrong?" cried Ada.

Tilly crawled back into bed, still giggling. "It's the pigs. One of the boys forgot to latch the gate!"

"Oh," said Ada, settling back. Then, "Uh, oh. Tilly, it wasn't the boys. Daddy sent me to feed the pigs tonight! Oh, what'll I do? Daddy'll be mad."

Tilly lay quietly for a few minutes. Outside, the pigs continued snuffling.

There was snuffling in bed, too. Tilly felt Ada's body shake, and she knew her sister was crying. She sat up and patted Ada's arm awkwardly. "It's okay, Ada. We'll just put the pigs back in their pen."

Ada sat up, too. "You mean go outside now--at night? I can't--I'm scared!"

That's true, thought Tilly. Ada was always afraid to go out at night. With a sigh, Tilly got up, reached for her overalls, and slipped her feet into her shoes.

"I'll be back," she said as she swung her legs over the window sill.

The pigs were settling down for the night, and Tilly considered returning to bed. When Daddy saw the pigs, Ada would be in hot water for leaving the gate open. That would be fair. Tilly got into trouble often enough herself, and it'd be refreshing to have her sister get fussed at for a change.

But then their brothers would taunt, "Girls can't do anything right," and Tilly would be lumped in with Ada, as if she'd left the gate unlatched!

Tilly nudged a pig with the toe of her shoe. He grunted and scooted his back along the rough porch floorboards.

A few pigs still meandered arounnd the yard. In the bright moonlight Tilly counted twelve pigs--all Daddy kept in the pen. The boar and sows and older pigs were in the apple orchard. Tilly approached one of the pigs that was still moving. Maybe I can herd them toward the barn one at a time, she thought.

The pig stared at her, his small eyes glinting in the moonlight, but Tilly wasn't afraid. The boar and sows were sometimes dangerous, but young pigs were mostly curious.

She attempted to shoo him toward the barn. He backed up, and Tilly stepped closer.

The pig sidled off, turned and ran--not toward the barn, but straight toward the porch, where most of the pigs now slept.

Oh, no, Tilly thought. She imagined all twelve pigs dashing around the yard, oinking loudly. Tilly sank to the ground in despair. The pig stopped running and went back to snuffling.

Tilly sighed. Well, she couldn't herd them--not even one at a time. But somehow she had to get twleve pigs back into the pen without making much noise. Perhaps she should make Ada help.

No, Tilly decided. Having Ada outside would just add one more problem, and twleve problems were enough.

Tilly eyed the pigs speculatively. They were young--maybe she could carry them.

Tilly eased up to a sleeping pig. He lay on his side, short legs sticking straight out. She bent over and clasped him firmly around his rotund middle. He grunted and jerked, but Tilly held him close to her body and started toward the barn. The pig squirmed, and the bristles along his hide scratched her as she kept her arms tight around him.

Anyone who thinks pigs are soft and cuddly should try carrying one, she thought.

She carried the pig past the boxwood hedge enclosing the yard. Her arms were growing numb from the pig's weight. Just another twenty yards, and she could deposit her load in the pigpen!

Whoo, whoo, hooted an owl nearby.

Tilly and the pig both jumped, and he leaped from her arms and ran.

"No, you don't," cried Tilly, dashing after him.

The pig reached the boxwood hedge.

"Now I've got you," Tilly said as she cornered him. She threw herself at him--but her hands grazed his curly tail as he dashed past the spot where she had been standing a few seconds earlier.

Tilly lay face down in the dirt, her hair caught in the lower boxwood branches. Maybe I'll just give up and go to bed, she thought. Who cares what the boys say or how mad Daddy gets with Ada.

Then she thought of Ada lying in bed, straining to hear what was going on--fearing the pigs would suddenly wake everybody up.

Tilly grinned. It might be tough out here, but she wouldn't trade places with Ada for all the apples in the orchard.

That's it! she thought. She would lead the pigs!

Tilly stood up and ran toward the orchard. She let herself in through the gate.

None of the older pigs was in sight. But Tilly was dismayed to see that they had eaten all the fallen apples.

She looked up into a tree. Small round apples were silhouetted along the branches. She climbed up, her weight causing a few apples to fall to the ground with soft plunks.

Tilly heard a distant snort. On, no, she thought. If the boar comes, I'll have to spend the night in this tree.

She strained to hear, but the orchard was quiet.

Quickly Tilly picked some apples, stuffing them into the pockets of her overalls. Then she snatched up the apples that had fallen and ran for the gate.

Once outside the orchard, Tilly carefully counted the apples she had collected--she had enough! She hurried back to the porch, where all the pigs were stretched on their sides, sound asleep.

She approached the nearest and rubbed an apple against his snout. The pig grunted and stood up, opening his mouth hungrily.

"Not yet," Tilly whispered. She backed away holding the apple low, and the pig followed her. She crossed the

yard, passed the boxwoods, and walked to the pigpen. The pig followed, snuffling quietly. Tilly swung open the gate and tossed in the apple. The pig entered the pen, and while he gobbled down the apple, Tilly fastened the latch.

One down, eleven to go, she thought. Nearly an hour later, she closed the gate behind the last pig.

Tilly knew that Ada would be anxious to hear what had happened. She ran back to the farmhouse and climbed through their bedroom window.

Ada's soft snoring greeted her.

Well, if that doesn't beat all, thought Tilly. There she was falling in the dirt and having her life threatened by the boar, just to save Ada's neck. And Ada was sleeping!

Tomorrow she'll probably boss me around same as ever, Tilly thought. Then she grinned. "Oink, oink," she said softly. That was what Ada was going to hear--just "oink, oink" every time Ada got too bossy.

Tilly fell asleep with a smile on her face.

TILLY RECKONS WITH A SNAKE

Tilly crawled out of the cool shade of the wisteria vine and watched her sister running in panic across the field. As Ada fled past the wisteria, Tilly caught her by the sleeve.

"What's the matter?"

Ada looked over her shoulder, then shuddered. "A snake."

"What snake?"

"In the hen house, in a nest. It looked slimy and cold. Ugh!"

Gathering eggs was one of the few jobs Ada was willing to do. Anything outdoors that their brothers didn't consider "men's work" fell to Tilly and Ada. And now Ada had found an excuse to stay away from the hen house.

"I'll get the eggs," Tilly said. "Where's the basket?"

"I threw it at the snake," Ada said as she ducked into the house.

Tilly walked across the field wondering what she would meet at the hen house. Before unlatching the door, she stopped and listened. She heard only the soft scratching

of hens. Inside the egg basket lay on the floor. The hen house was dry and dusty and smelled like ammonia.

She rocked the basket with her foot. No snake. She gathered four eggs, but when she reached into the next nest, it was empty.

When Tilly returned to the house, Ada was setting the table. "Did you get rid of the snake?"

"I didn't see him, but something got some eggs, and it was probably your snake."

"I can't go back in that chicken house," Ada said with a shudder. "You'll have to gather eggs."

"Why me? I don't especially like snakes either."

"Then we'll tell Jesse or Obadiah."

Jesse and Obadiah, their older brothers, delighted in claiming that girls couldn't do what boys could.

"We don't need boys to get rid of a snake," Tilly said.

"Then you'll gather the eggs for me?" Ada almost purred.

By morning Tilly had a plan.

"Going to the garden?" Jesse asked as Tilly passed the barn, hoe in hand.

"No"

"Well, don't keep the hoe. I've got to do corn."

Tilly, she thought, you're crazy. Why don't you let Jesse kill the snake? So what if he teases you awhile.

Awhile, ha! she thought. I bet every time he saw me for the next twenty years he'd say, "Why, hello. You must be the girl who's afraid of snakes." No, she'd get rid of her own snake.

Tilly settled in the chicken house, hoe across her knees. One by one, the hens came in and laid an egg.

Each time, Tilly expected the snake to slither in. But at lunchtime he still hadn't arrived. She propped the hoe against the chicken house and hurried home.

Ada met her at the door. "Did you get him?"

"He hasn't showed up."

Ada poured her an extra large glass of buttermilk.

After lunch, Tilly looked again in the hen house, but the snake didn't appear.

Later, she lay beneath the wisteria and thought about snakes. Finally she had an idea. She ran to the tool shed. For an hour she cut, sawed, and hammered.

With her project under her arm, she rushed to the hen house. She took an egg from the nest, tied a piece of string around it and placed it in the box she'd built. She tied the string to a small stick and propped open the door to the box. Now, she thought, the snake will crawl into

the box and swallow the egg, pulling the stick and shutting the door. Then I'll take the snake off somewhere.

She crossed the field happily. Jesse was once more in the barn.

"Well, here's the little sister who's about to hoe corn for me."

"Hoeing corn isn't my chore."

"You're right. But I didn't have a hoe, and now Daddy wants me and Obadiah in the steer pen."

Tilly gritted her teeth. Now she'd have to hoe like crazy, because if she didn't, Jesse would say, "Well, I knew a girl couldn't hoe that much corn in an hour."

"Oh, before you start hoeing--somebody left the tool shed in a mess. And it wasn't Obadiah or me."

Tilly headed to the tool shed and started putting away tools, as she should have done earlier. She'd been too excited about the trap.

She bumped into Obadiah as she was leaving. He grinned at her. "Glad to see girls know how to put away tools. By the way, don't be trapping any skunks. They make stinking pets. Ha, ha."

So he knew she'd built a trap. Now he'd try to find out what she was doing with it. After she caught the

snake, she'd tear the trap down and let Obadiah drive himself crazy looking. She smiled at the thought.

As she approached the hen house, she heard loud clucking. She ran the last fifty yards. A hen huddled inside the cage. When Tilly opened the trap door, the hen walked out, ruffling her feathers. Inside the box a fresh egg lay beside the other one.

Tilly removed the trap. She couldn't rescue every hen who decided this was the perfect nest.

She still had more than half her row of corn to hoe when the supper bell rang. And she wasn't even halfway through thinking about her problem.

Obadiah and Jesse were waiting for her at the house.

"Little sister," Jesse said, "you look awfully hot. Is hoeing too hard for girls?"

Tilly pushed past them and sat down at the table.

"Did you get him yet?" Ada whispered.

Tilly shook her head.

"Have you been playing? I haven't seen you since lunch."

Ada had tied a red ribbon in her hair. Her skin looked cool and her shirt was as fresh as when she'd put it on that morning. Tilly looked at the sawdust embedded in her jeans and the dust covering her shoes and stockings.

The smell of the hen house still filled her nostrils. Playing, indeed!

As she chewed her cornbread, a plan began to form in her mind.

After dinner she hoed and thought.

Later, she went into the living room, quietly opened the sewing stand, and took out a cool, smooth object. Then she hurried to the chicken house.

That night Tilly dreamed about snakes curled in egg baskets and snakes trapped in cages. Finally, she dreamed about a snake so fat he couldn't wiggle through the holes in the chicken house.

"Guess you'll have to gather eggs yourself this afternoon," she told Ada after breakfast.

"What'd you do with the snake?" Ada asked.

"Nothing yet."

"Then I'm not going near that chicken house. I'll just get Jesse or . . ."

"That snake'll be gone before lunchtime."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Ada said.

"Oh, you want me to bring the snake to you when I catch him?"

Ada shuddered. "I don't want to see that snake ever again."

When Tilly unlatched the door to the chicken house, she saw him immediately. At least, she saw half of him.

The snake had swallowed the wooden egg she'd placed in the nest. His muscles couldn't crush the darning egg the way he crushed hen egg shells. The wooden egg lay in his stomach, a visible lump. When he'd tried to crawl back out of the hen house, he'd been trapped in the crack between the boards.

Tilly raced to the tool shed, grabbed the hoe, and ran back to the hen house. She closed her fingers on the snake's body, feeling the cool touch of him, like touching the marble-top table in the living room. She pulled the snake into the hen house, then with a quick flick of her wrist, brought the hoe blade down in back of his head. She didn't like to kill things, but living on a farm she'd learned to do the killing efficiently when it had to be done.

She dragged the snake from the hen house. From her pocket she took a sharp kitchen knife. She turned the snake over, drew the knife quickly down his body, cutting through muscle to expose the wooden egg. Then, using the knife blade, she flipped the egg free of the snake. She scooped up the egg in some large leaves, tossed the snake into the bush, and returned the hoe to the shed.

After she washed the egg, she returned it to the sewing stand.

All through lunch, she smiled.

"I'll do your share of the lunch dishes," Ada whispered.

Tilly grinned even more broadly. Jesse and Obadiah looked puzzled.

If there was anything better than having a chore done for you, it was having your brothers curious about what you'd been up to.

This was probably going to be the best afternoon of her whole life, Tilly decided.

VITA

Connie Jordan Green was born in Grant Town, West Virginia, on February 4, 1938. She grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. She attended Denison University, Granville, Ohio, and in June 1960 was graduated from Auburn University, Alabama, with a degree in mathematics and science education. She has taught in nursery, elementary, junior, and senior high schools. She has also taught creative writing for Roane State Community College in Harriman, Tennessee, and freshman composition at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

In 1978 she began writing a weekly column entitled "Country Matters" for the Loudon County News Herald. In 1985 the Tennessee Press Association awarded the column third place in the personal column category. She has also done freelance articles for such publications as The Tennessee Conservationist and Homelife. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in national and regional publications, some of which are listed in the Acknowledgments.

She is married to Richard C. Green. They are the parents of three children: Gregory Scott, Melissa Gaye, and Amanda Ruth. She and her husband live on a farm in Loudon County, Tennessee.