

**Angela Alaimo O'Donnell**

**Flannery & Cal, Take II**

*It is mighty unseemly of you to enshrine me in your memory falling up the steps with a bottle of gin. I recollect the incident. It was not gin but rum (unopened) and the steps were slick . . . In our house the liquor is kept in the bathroom closet between the Drano and the plunger, and you don't get any unless you are about dead. The last time I had any was when I dropped the side of the chicken brooder on my foot and broke my toe.*

— Flannery O'Connor, Letter to Robert Lowell, December 25, 1958, *The Habit of Being*

Well hack my hands off and call me stumpy  
that this is your fondest memory  
of you and me. All our literary  
talk, thoughts we shared on faith and the saintly  
lives we're meant to lead but don't. We  
were birds of a feather in every-  
thing but drink, and when I tried to be  
good at that I stumbled, my folly  
clear as the rum in the bottle I broke. You see  
me as a game girl, so differently  
from how I see myself, the lonely  
child in any crowd, aloof and faintly  
desperate for the friend you'd turn out to be.  
I don't half mind it's liquor made you love me.

### **Flannery Among the Literati**

*"Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it."*

*That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it [the Eucharist] . . . It is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable.*  
— Flannery O'Connor on her evening at Mary McCarthy's dinner party,

*December 16, 1955, The Habit of Being*

I'm sure I shocked them, dumb as I was  
all night, listening to the smart folks talk.  
A country and a Catholic girl, I'd come  
to the Big City to learn to write,  
not to lose the only faith I'd known  
and could not live without. As if God was  
an invention of their lickety-split minds.  
Our hostess was smug, Cal high as a kite,  
one guest so drunk he could barely walk.  
I just waited them out, bided my time  
hoping to get through dessert and then run  
back to my flat and my book, my lone-  
some life, full up with writing and Christ.  
No damn symbol would ever suffice.

**Flannery Gets a Present**

*“I had a letter from Elizabeth Bishop . . . saying that she was sending me a present . . . a crucifix, she said, in a bottle. It’s not a crucifix at all, she just don’t know what a crucifix is. It is an altar with a Bible, chalice, and two fat candles on it, a cross above this with a ladder and the instruments of the crucifixion hung on it, and on top of the cross a rooster. Anyway, it’s very much to my taste.” — Flannery O’Connor*

*Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts,  
the words out of my mouth before  
I knew it. She took me by surprise.  
Not just a crucifix,  
the whole damn liturgy and more,  
the tale of how Christ lives and dies  
seen through a simple craftsman’s eyes.  
His art so much richer than mine,  
faith made flesh in wood and paper  
while mine hides dumb in strokes of ink,  
a distant and a sorry savior  
fit for only those who think.  
The two faux candles fairly shone.  
The mercy of that bird alone.*

### **Flannery's Folly**

*"I certainly am glad you like the stories because now I feel it's not bad I like them so much. The truth is I like them better than anybody and I read them over and over and laugh and laugh, then get embarrassed when I remember I was the one wrote them."*  
— Flannery O'Connor, Letter to Robie Macauley, May 18, 1955,  
The Habit of Being

Once or twice I've been caught in the act,  
shoulders shaking, mid-guffaw, cack-  
ling like a prize chicken pecking at her  
wayward brood, catching her hatchlings on the run.  
Call it an occupational hazard,  
having a taste for the wit I bring to  
the world. I've long been fond of fools  
and freaks in part because I am one.  
I get to spend my days among my kind,  
watch them fail spectacularly  
at the business of being human and good.  
We share a common destiny.  
Sometimes I laugh till I nearly pee.  
I don't know who's funnier, them or me.

**Flannery Gives Writing Advice**

*Get that plot business out of your head and start simply with a character or anything that you can make come alive. When you have a character he will create his own situation and his situation will suggest some kind of resolution as you get into it. Wouldn't it be better for you to discover a meaning in what you write than to impose one? Nothing you write will lack meaning because the meaning is in you.*

— Flannery O'Connor, December 11, 1956, *The Habit of Being*

Start with a person, one that you've met.  
That meeting can be in the mirror.  
Give her a problem, an eye that don't work,  
a dread disease, a temper that makes her mean.  
Surround her with fools. Though she be an idiot,  
it's a truth the fools much teach her to learn.  
Strand her some place she doesn't deserve  
to be, where she lords her superior  
mind over hills and sunsets shaped by God.  
Let her be wacky, but not so odd  
the reader can't see himself in her  
mismatched eyes, her heart that's good but flawed.  
Don't be picky. Love the one who comes your way.  
Show mercy. You might be her someday.

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## **Flannery & Poe**

*I read the best Southern writers . . . read the Russians . . . have learned something from Hawthorne, Flaubert, Balzac and something from Kafka . . . I have read almost all of Henry James . . . But always the largest thing that looms up is The Humerous Tales of Edgar Allan Poe. I am sure he wrote them all while drunk too.*

— *Flannery O'Connor, August 28, 1955, The Habit of Being*

My favorite one about the man too vain  
to wear his glasses and married his granny  
by mistake. That was good fiction to my  
young mind. In what world other than Poe's  
would the madmen take over and run  
the asylum more sanely than the sane?  
Misery that he was, he had an eye  
for the ridiculous which suited me  
just fine. We both shared a good nose  
for the macabre which odors all our days.  
I come not to bury but to praise  
his dark art, this literary black rose  
who perfumes my work with his strange scent  
teaching me his sober merriment.

**Flannery in Dixie**

*We have been undergoing big doings here on account of Secession was passed in M'ville 100 years ago. A pageant for 3 days and a big parade in 20 degree weather with young ladies on floats freezing in their drafty dresses, etc, etc. Long live the Wah Between the States.*

— Flannery O'Connor

I'm not sure why we love that war,  
but all my Southern brethren do.  
Any excuse to dig out the musket,  
the saber, the dinged-up canteen,  
and bear them like the soldiers they aren't  
but wish they'd been. Our writers  
can't stop telling tales about those days  
of guts and glory, the sundry ways  
the men in gray outbraved the boys in blue.  
They're more adept at maudlin scenes  
of Southern belles and beaux than they are  
at talking truth, the awful waste of war,  
the tragic air of loss we live and breathe,  
the lies we died for and still believe.