Les cahiers de la nouvelle - 72

Journal of the
Short Story in English

Special Issue:
Elizabeth Spencer
Spring 2019

Presses universitaires de Rennes

ELIZABETH SPENCER'S SPACIOUS ESCAPES

Between things, in Italy, almost by accident—that's how I learned, this January, that Elizabeth Spencer had died. Four students and I stood on the deck of the #1 vaporetto, chugging down the Grand Canal in Venice on our way to a performance of "La Traviata." Venice at night is blue and gold: floating lights flicker on dark water under a darker sky, and, just at the edge of your vision, shadows turn deeper blue, and move. Two fellow Americans, Carll and Jane, struck up a conversation with us. Carll said he'd once studied with Robert Penn Warren. Of course, I mentioned another Southern writer deep in love with Italy: Elizabeth Spencer. "Oh," Carll said, "I was reading something, in the *New York Times*, wasn't it? Didn't she just die?"

Instantly my ears and eyes went dim, the gold lights pale, voices suddenly muffled, the water not glowing midnight blue but simply black. *Miss Elizabeth: gone.* I'd first met her as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina in the early 2000s, interviewed her for *The Carolina Quarterly*, giggled over wineglasses during a dinner for an Eminent Visiting Writer, visited her house in Chapel Hill (Nabokov and Turgenev on the living-room shelves, Doctors Without Borders pads beside the phone, a camellia bush against the back fence), gossiped about Walker Percy ("Oh, Walker was a darling! He was so flirtatious! [Shrewd pause] Well, maybe you'd better not put that in the interview, his widow's still livin'...") and shared our love for cats (mine orange, hers black.)

Later, I sought and received her blessing for an experimental creative-nonfiction project, *Three Elizabeths: An Imagining*, that braids her life with two other women named Elizabeth who were born, like her, in the 1920s South: Elizabeth Hardwick of Lexington, Kentucky and

Elizabeth Weldon Collier Williams of Reeltown, Alabama. Hardwick went on to become the New York intellectual of her early dreams and the wife of Robert Lowell, then additionally famous, against her will, as one half of the newly rereleased *Dolphin Letters*. Williams—my paternal great-aunt—ran away from home at age seventeen and settled in California. Elizabeth Spencer left Mississippi for New York, and then for Italy—the place that would prompt her to write, "There's a second country for everyone, one way or another" ("Preface" ix).[1] All three Elizabeths, in my telling, leave the South for second countries but never stop being haunted by home, by the memories or insights that flicker at the corner of a wanderer's real and imagined eye. In writing about them, of course, I—an Alabamian traveling first to North Carolina and then to a teaching job in Iowa, then England, and, yes, Italy—realized I was also writing about myself. In typing these words, I seem to feel Spencer's clear, compassionate, slightly veiled gaze upon me now. *Oh, honey*, it says, with the not-quite-ironic congratulation of the grown woman who's been waiting for the girl to catch up. *Of course you are.*

Read Spencer's fiction with *glances* in mind, with the unexpected connections of eyes and faces with one another or with something they might almost have missed, and you see them everywhere. *See,* of course, is a purposeful word for writers, readers, and travelers, because focusing your attention, or allowing yourself to notice something, allows the path of your own life to intersect with other roads. Over and over, Spencer's characters spot something they were perhaps not meant to see, or at the very least might easily have missed. And that glimpse leads them somewhere new—a whole "second country" of spirit or mind, even when their surroundings don't change. When you're standing in the right place to see them, those unexpected spaces of encounter or contemplation open doors into, and out of, minds and lives and futures. Any traveler knows the power of the serendipitous glance, of something overheard, of the chance that's too significant in its effects to feel merely like chance. So might anyone—even if they seldom leave their home.

Serendipity alone, however, won't account for everything: you have to be willing to act on what you see. "If the work is done, the dream will come to the man who's ready for that particular dream," said Spencer's friend and fellow Southerner-in-Italy Robert Penn Warren, "it's not going to come just from dreaming in general" ("Warren" 37). *Preparation* is and is not the word for the state of Spencer's characters who find themselves at thresholds between one path and another: maybe it's

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[1] This has become the epigraph for another book I plan to write: *A Second Country: Southern Writers in Italy, 1945-1975*, on (among others) Robert Penn Warren, Eugene Walter, Tennessee Williams, William Styron, and, of course, Elizabeth Spencer.

receptivity, maybe it's *attention*, maybe it's *willingness to take a risk*. In Spencer's fiction, the "dream" takes the form of realizations, or opportunities, or suddenly refreshed angles of vision that come to the woman who happens to be standing in the right place at the right time—and a door opens for her to walk right through. "I don't doubt miracles," Spencer writes in her memoir *Landscapes of the Heart* (1998), "why should we doubt them? Things seem to be one way; then something happens that is not to be explained rationally, and they change" (272). Yet Spencer's life and career are also the result of deliberate risk-taking and quiet boldness that seem remarkable for anyone, especially a conservatively raised young woman in the South of the 1940s and 1950s. In *Landscapes of the Heart*, Spencer recounts both chance—her beloved uncle's death in a "gun accident"—and miracle, her meeting, in Rome, a handsome Cornishman, John Rusher, who would become her husband. "I am convinced that unforeseen accidents determine life," she writes. "A chance meeting, a missed appointment, a gunshot..." (276). Her memoir begins with a scene of herself at age twelve, setting out on horseback. See an open gate, and walk through—that's the path of Spencer's heroines, and the path she took herself. What someone finds in the passage from one space to another, what kind of escape that journey is, what she will use it to become—well, that is up to her.

Doors and gates mark Spencer's own narration of her intellectual and creative journeys. In *Landscapes of the Heart*, she describes the tragic, haunting sight of her family's African American cook, Laura, beaten bloody by a white man for ostensibly having "sassed" his wife:

> That night an unspeakable thing took place. We knew nothing of it, but just before bedtime, a voice called to us at the back door, out of the dark. It was Laura, some young black person with her, I don't remember who. She was hardly able to stand. She was covered with terrible purple blotches, seeping out blood everywhere. She had something white, like a pillowcase, wrapped around her head.
>
> Her story came out in broken phrases. The white woman's husband had come to her house and dragged her out. The woman had held a lantern. Her husband gave the punishment. The instrument used was a board with nails in it. Laura could hardly stumble to our door. (146)

Spencer shaped a child's horrified memory into an adult's indictment of the racial violence and segregation that had produced it—a novel shaped by that image and by the way it swung her, as a person and writer, from a state of not-knowing to an inability not to say what she saw. "Years later," she writes in *Landscapes of the Heart*, "when I came to write a novel that in the made-up terrain of fiction brought in much that I knew by heart, I called it *The Voice at the Back Door* . . . But it was Laura's voice I remember, halting and soaked with pain and shock, that sounds through

all my days. 'Didn' do nothin'! Lawd know I didn' say nothin' like she said!'" (146).

Much later, when Spencer was living in Rome, the image of bleeding, fugitive Laura reemerged to animate *The Voice at the Back Door*, her third novel. Its publication in 1956 cemented a rupture with her family that had been cracked open by the death of Emmett Till. "There are walls of every kind," she writes, "but the worst are the walls of the mind. The problem is, well-meaning people put them up without knowing what they are doing. Brick at a time, they wall you in. They think it is 'all for the best'" (163). Striving for fairness, Spencer nevertheless registers deep disagreements with the boundaries within which her family would have tried to enclose her. "There would have been plenty of reasons other than disagreements over race to get rid of a contrary, opinionated, nonconforming daughter who not only read books but wanted to write them," she says in *Landscapes of the Heart*. "All these reasons and doubtless others were in my bulging family dossier; no doubt many were valid. Certainly they were operative" (297). Even the novel's accolades—including a Pulitzer Prize, puzzlingly never awarded[2]—failed to change her father's essential view that "as an economic base for life, art was an uncertain calling and therefore apt to be a losing proposition" (296). As she recounts in the 2013 documentary "Elizabeth Spencer: Landscapes of the Heart," her father even challenged Rusher during his first visit back to Mississippi, "I've got one thing I need you to do for me—make her stop writing." Rusher, of course, refused: "Writing is a part of her life," he said.

As an adult, Spencer made good on an impulse she registers in childhood: "[My parents] could lock the barn door," she writes in *Landscapes of the Heart*, "but the bright horse of freedom was already loose in my world. Down the hill, across the creek, in the next pasture—where?" (22). Later, she quotes a poem by her Vanderbilt professor Donald Davidson: "Before you touch the bolt that locks this gate / Be warned. There's no return where you are going" (185). Exploration—despite its personal costs—builds a self, the ultimate goal for a woman, as articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf before her and Vivian Gornick today: "I had to learn," she writes, "that becoming a self for better or worse is the only way" (169). As with matters of race, Spencer's writing returns to challenges to orthodoxy—gender too—that are all the more astonishing for being so understated. The way to become a self, she implies, is to refuse to allow yourself to be boxed in—especially by family who want you only to be, and to remain, a good Southern girl.

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[2] The documentary "Landscapes of the Heart" indicates that *The Voice at the Back Door* was recommended for the Pulitzer in 1956 but, due to a split on the committee—perhaps because of novel's anti-segregation content—no prize for 1957 was awarded.

Weighty biographical themes these may be, but in Spencer's fiction they recur with a lightness and definition that is no less haunting for being so subtle. A single set of linked images—doors, windows, glimpses—acts as key: a character gets a glimpse, ducks sideways down or out an unexpected open door, and everything changes. And at that point, right along with the character, the reader is ushered into a new kind of space and asked to see differently. This means that Spencer's stories engage *space* both literally and figuratively: her women on thresholds, passing from one place to another and glimpsing something from the corners of their eyes, ask us to stand with them on the brink of a new kind of vision but never tell us what to think. And within that space the story makes, both reader and character are changed. I've heard the short story writer Charles d'Ambrosio remark that what makes the story different from the novel is that "from the first sentence, you're trying to shut that sucker down." Spencer's short fiction both accepts this reality and subverts it. In her short fiction, Spencer achieves both shapeliness and space—a paradoxical opening-up of possibilities and refusal of simple closures within a form that she also manages to make feel precise and concise, too.

Consider the marvelous, mysterious story "The Visit," originally published in *Prairie Schooner* in the Summer of 1964. An American classics professor, Bill, and his wife, Judy, have trekked up a mountain in Italy to seek the blessing of Thompson, a scholar of fearsome, unspecific eminence. Thompson is also the keeper of the "Thrace mosaics," which "had been whatever the polite word was for smuggled out of the Middle East" and are now allowed to the view only of Thompson's favored visitors, who may try "to peep at them" or "even to have a brief try, as with a jigsaw puzzle, at matching this to that—a foot here, an arm there, and what prestige when the thing was talked about afterward!" (214). Although Judy enjoys the landscape, Bill just frets and mansplains to the wife he obviously considers inferior: "As Judy had finished only two years of college," Spencer's narrator explains, straight-faced, "Bill often had to put her right about things" (214). Yet it is Judy, anxiously overdressed, who makes an impression on gruff Thompson that sycophantic Bill does not: "Thompson placed a hand like a bear's paw beneath her chin; his coarse thumb, raking down her cheek from temple to chin, all but left, she felt, a long scar. 'Beauty,' he remarked" (221). Left alone in what both Thompson and Bill obviously consider the unimportant group of women and children, it's also only Judy who sees the mosaics themselves, a handful of stones pilfered by Thompson's grandchildren: "Judy glimpsed handful after handful of flashing blue stones, the purest, most vibrant blue she had ever seen. The color seemed to prank about the air for a moment with the freakish skip of lightning" (220). Hearing Thompson approach, the children's mother conceals the stones from him—the

MacGuffin, as Alfred Hitchcock called the plot-motivating object, flashes into view and is then hidden once again, from Judy and from the reader. Yet both Judy and the reader incline to complicity against the pompous men: "I should have told Thompson, she thought, that the children had got into the mosaics, but suppose it wasn't true? How could you say such a thing and not make an idiot of yourself if you were wrong?" (221). Then, Judy sees something for which nothing else in the story has prepared her, or us:

> As she stood, her shadow lying faithfully beside her in the uncompromising sun, a door in the wing to her left swung open and two Hindus, splendidly dressed, the man in a tailored dark suit wearing a scarlet turban, the woman in a delicate spangled sari that prickled over the gravel, walked past the fountain, past Judy, and disappeared through a door in the façade. She had raised her hand to them, she had called, but they had not looked up. (221-22)

This paragraph is followed by a section break—a deliberately mysterious point of transition, a gap in the narrative and on the page. Then the story concludes: Bill, inattentive and disappointed by what he regards as his professional failure, dismisses Judy's attempts to tell him about the mosaics or the "Hindu couple" as they rocket back down the mountain in their taxi. The story's final sentence gestures out into space, deliberately inconclusive: "From the corner of her eye, Judy saw a huge boulder, dislodged by their wheels, float out into a white gorge with the leisure of a dream" (222). And that is the end. Careerist Bill has failed to see the mosaics, or the beauty of the place in its subtlety and mystery—but observant, unassuming Judy has not, and neither has the reader. The ending sketches a parabolic line out into space, the path of the falling rock—glimpsed from the corner of an eye, still falling as the story ends. And, in the reader's mind, it is falling still.

The pairing of sycophantic husband Bill and increasingly bemused wife Judy lets Spencer exploit the full potential of social boundaries and borders, which a lifetime in the South has prepared her to recognize. (It also shows her gift for light, lethal satire—Bill and Thompson are instantly recognizable to any academic.) Yet the sudden glimpses of unexplained things—which transform reflective Judy in a way Bill and Thompson miss—flash light into the story, like that handful of glorious blue stones. Everything's shown and nothing is explained. Images of freedom, lift, lightness, and release mark the story, despite the apparent failure of Bill's mission. "The freakish skip of lightning," a sudden glimpse of mystery and beauty, is followed by the mysterious Hindu couple who walk into and out of the space of the story from some other, unseen realm. It is so risky. But it works. The one who is allowing herself to be immersed in a place and receptive to what it has to show—the woman, to

paraphrase Warren, who is ready to have the dream—is the one who will see what it has to offer her, and who will be changed in a way she could not have known.

Several months later, in "Ship Island: The Story of a Mermaid," Spencer explores what happens when a pretty Southern girl deserts one kind of life—a clubby, anxious world of boys and money and cutthroat sororities—for her real element: the sensual demimonde of adult experience, as different from what she is "supposed to" want as land is different from the sea. Published in *The New Yorker*'s September 12, 1964 issue, "Ship Island" transports readers to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where sky and water meet: "Some shells were empty," Spencer writes of the beach, "some, with damp drying down their backs, went for short walks. Far out, a long white shelf of cloud indicated a distance no gull could dream of gaining, though the gulls spun tirelessly up, dazzling in the white light that comes just as morning vanishes" (52). By contrast, the indoor spaces in "Ship Island" are crowded and hot, increasingly uncomfortable for Nancy, a young woman from a down-at-heel family who hesitates about being fully drawn into the upper-class collegiate world of her boyfriend, Rob—"When anybody mentioned the university, it sounded like a small country the people right there were running *in absentia* to suit themselves" (70-71). Unlike the brittle sorority girls of Rob's circle, Nancy desires, and acts on it, making love with Rob in the sand: "The island's very spine, a warm reach of thin ground, came smoothly up into the arch of her back; and it was at least halfway the day itself, with its fair, wide-open eyes, that she went over to" (59). Nancy's family obviously sees Rob as her meal ticket: "He was the kind of boy people have high, undefined hopes for" (53). Yet, while Rob is a good catch, Nancy wants more, experiencing the world with sensual curiosity he does not feel:

> Out on the island that day, out on Ship Island, she had drifted in the water like seaweed, with the tide combing her limbs and hair, tugging her through lengths of fuzzy water growth. She had lain flat on her face with her arms stretched before her, experiencing the curious lift the water's motion gave to the tentacles of weed, wondering whether she liked it or not. Did something alive clamber the small of her back? Did something wishful grope the spiral of her ear? (57).[3]

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[3] Reading Spencer's stories in their original setting, via the online archive at newyorker.com, is fascinating—surrounded by the advertisements of the time, her challenges to gender and convention look even more radical. For instance, "Ship Island" (1964) is joined by an advertisement for Wragge sportswear, featuring a well-coiffed, beskirted woman perched on a horse: "Why do polo players marry Wragge girls?" it asks. An ad for York Town cologne advises women to "Give him York Town, the authentic formula that makes more than history, that makes him feel authoritatively masculine with that crisp, citrusy aroma that lingers long in a new spray cologne." Interestingly, "The Little Brown Girl" appears

During a night out, after riding in Rob's convertible to Biloxi—"the wind rushed past like an endless bolt of raw silk being drawn against Nancy's cheek"—Nancy succumbs to the impulse to escape (57). Rather than remain at the hotel table with Rob, his fraternity brothers, and their dates, "two tiny girls with tiny voices, like mosquitoes," she ducks out, down a series of corridors and stairs ("down" is a word repeated here) and into a bar where she meets a pair of men who will take her where she really wants to go: New Orleans. But that nighttime joyride means social death for Nancy, and the end of her relationship with Rob: "He's coming down deeper and deeper," she thinks, "but one thing is certain—if he gets down as far as I am, he'll drown" (75). Imperceptibly, as the prose shimmers and wavers, not quite real—"There are hidden bone-cold lairs no one knows of, in rock beneath the sea. She shook her bone-white hair" (75)—Nancy's continued diving "down," her desire to escape from the bright landlocked world of Rob and his college friends, has transformed her into a mermaid. "Her voice faded in a deepening glimmer where the human breath is snatched clean away," reads the story's end, "and there are only bubbles, iridescent and pure. When she dove again, they rose in a curving track behind her" (76). Nancy has escaped through her shapeshifting, sensory body into a place Rob cannot and will not follow—a place free of the constrictions of Southern social life Spencer has described in her own upbringing, too.

"The Absence," which occupies just two pages in *The New Yorker*'s September 10, 1966 issue, begins with a deceptively simple line: "Her husband having gone away on his long visit, Bonnie Richards settled down to a stack of books" (221). Here is apparent escape on two levels: from her normal identity as wife, into "a stack of books." Both escapes support Spencer's friend Eudora Welty's observation that "A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within" (114). Crucially, Bonnie is willing to let herself be changed, not just challenged, by what she reads: books of science, from which she learns Spencer's elegant statement of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle—"No one knew just what matter was. No instrument was delicate enough to observe atoms without making a grave impact, which altered their habits. They thus enjoyed an unbreakable privacy" (221). Crucially, too, she is willing to accept what the books point to: the same thing Buddhist practitioners call nonattachment or a form of escape from the ego. This is radical stuff, yet Spencer sets it deliberately in an ordinary domestic

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alongside the poem "The Moon in your Hands," by the poet H.D., whose unconventional life is newly discussed in Francesca Wade's excellent book *Square Haunting: Five Women, Freedom and London Between the Wars.*

setting, a woman on a mini-vacation from her ordinary life, looking out a window at flowers and birds:

> It was coming over her gradually what she wished to be—something she had never consciously thought of before. She wished to be a person, a being, who appeared and disappeared. She should have liked, conveniently, to have the power to disappear even from herself, to put herself away like something folded in a drawer, or simply not to be when there was nothing to be for. If not in a drawer, then better still to go outward as a color, soft and pleasing, or to be a bird's wing, or the water that the bird splashed in. She might even arrange to exist, to be in the regard, the very glance, of her husband or of those dear to her when they most or least looked for her—emerging into rooms or from around corners, coming toward them with a piece of news or a cup of coffee. (222-23)

To one of the central themes of *Landscapes of the Heart*—books as a portal into self-forgetful wonder—Spencer adds one of the central questions of adult identity: who am I when no one is watching? What if the external trappings of identity on which I rely—husband, money, etc.—are withdrawn? Who am I then? Yet this brief period of escape from her known self brings Bonnie, and the reader, wonder, not fear—along with the knowledge that we, like her, have looked into existential questions we usually prefer to ignore, in a brief sideways step out of normal life.

All these spaces, glimpses, and escapes are prefigured by what for me is the strangest and most haunting glimpse of all: "The Little Brown Girl," published in *The New Yorker*'s July 20, 1957 issue. If "The Absence" can be summarized, philosophically, as "Who are we when nobody's watching?," then "The Little Brown Girl," perhaps, is driven by an equally challenging question: What happens to our own identities when we take seriously—*really* seriously—the selfhood of other people on whom our social world, and thus our conception of our own selves, has come to rest? What happens when we let ourselves admit that others are not just smiling surfaces to reflect back our own conceptions of ourselves, but actual people, whose own goals for and understandings of themselves are as real as, but may diverge from, our own? In child development, the realization is crucial: other people, including adults, are not just here for my benefit. In Mississippi, it acquires a racial edge: do I, *can* I, know the complexities beneath the smiling faces, the first names and nicknames, of the African American people I am taught to regard as not just *other* but *less*?

Like Dickens in *Great Expectations* or Katherine Mansfield in "The Doll's House," Spencer balances, in her third-person narrative stance, a child's naivete with the adult's ability to judge events, giving the reader access to both. Maybeth, a white girl, is seven years old, rooted securely in a happy farming world of bantam roosters and a big brother and loving parents and a hired plowman, Jim Williams, behind whom she trails as

he works—"Jim knew the answer to everything. He knew why the jaybird bounced on the air when he flew and why the mule swept his nose along the ground when he turned and why the steel plow slid out of the earth as clean as when it entered. Sometimes Maybeth knew that Jim was making up, but most of the time she believed him word for word, like the catechism in Sunday School" (4). Soon Jim's stories acquire a new protagonist: a daughter of his own, Maybeth's age and size, who becomes her imaginary friend. Although Maybeth longs for the little girl to visit, Jim demurs: "'She ain't got no fine dress like you is,'" he tells Maybeth. "'She ain't got nothin' 'cept one ole brown dress. She say she shame to come'" (6). By the end of the story, Maybeth has given Jim her birthday money, two silver dollars, to buy the yellow dress they have both seen in the window downtown.

> Maybeth did not know why she had given Jim the money. It was like when you are playing mud pies by yourself and you get real salt and pepper for the pies, or when you are dressing up to play lady and you make a mess of all the closets and cedar chests trying to get something real and exactly right—the high-heeled button shoes or the hat with the plume. She and Jim were playing that Jim had a little girl. But when the playing was over, Jim did not give the money back, and, of course, she did not really know that she had expected him to, so she never asked. And because she wasn't exactly sure what money meant, her sorrow centered on the two little empty boxes in the corner of the dresser drawer. (7)

Her parents and brother scoff, telling her Jim has no child. But by the end of the story, the yellow dress has gone from the store window. And Maybeth—guided by Jim ("'She knows we done seen her, and she'll come'")—has come to think she sees the little girl under the willow trees by the creek, waiting:

> The plow ran into the earth, and Maybeth, still standing on the bluff, could hear from somewhere the creak of the harness, and the tearing of little roots as the soft ground was severed. She stood staring, and the green blur beyond the lower field fanned out and then closed together around the shape of something—was it something? —like a still image under the willow trees. Humming to himself, Jim Williams passed farther down the slope, but Maybeth stayed on the bluff, as motionless as the fluted honeysuckle bloom beside her hand and the willows across the lower field standing up in the windless air.
>
> She saw something move under the willows. (9)

Surprising herself and us, Maybeth does not go down to the creek, does not move to discover whether her friendship fantasy is real. Spurred by a nameless fear, she runs back to the house. Her mother—seeing by an expression on her face that we cannot—"laid aside her darning basket and took Maybeth into her arms and rocked her in the rocking chair" (9). And

there the story ends. What scares Maybeth so much? Is the little girl real? Has Jim Williams stolen her money? Why, despite all the lead-up to this moment of Maybeth staring into the willows, are we never told exactly what she sees, or why she runs away?

Having been haunted by this story for more than a decade now, I still do not have an answer to this question, but I have some experience with questioning itself to put next to it. Stubborn and prolonged but never-quite-clear, that glimpse into the willows forces a little girl to dwell in space where meaning is not just unclear but deliberately withheld. And thus it forces her to dwell in an adult space for the first time. The shock of that experience, which sends her to her mother's lap in tears—after all, she's only seven—feels to me like what the poet John Keats described as "Negative Capability—that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (43). And it's a cousin of the Fall, original sin, the Miltonic separation from a wholeness never to be healed, even if, with reflection, that wholeness reveals itself to have been a childhood illusion. In the segregated South, saturated with race, it is an age-appropriate but forceful shock—a cousin of what a napping Buddhist monk gets from his meditation teacher, and what Flannery O'Connor, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1965), will later deliver with an overstuffed pocketbook to the head. In all times and places, it is what we need to grow up: you are not the center of the universe, despite what your own ego (or race) might lead you to believe. It is a big and sobering lesson, yet not a moralistically delivered one, and not merely a slap. It is sad, it is rueful, it is irreducible, and it never comes clear. This is how stories think: in images that detonate and resonate. Image by image, Spencer strings together particular realities of her place and time—race, class, gender, money, obligation, and more—on a single bright thread: the heartbreaking human desire for connectedness, for comfort, and the manifold turnings it can lead us to, and through. The complexity of "The Little Brown Girl" never reduces itself no matter how many times I read it, but the dominant image remains stamped on my brain: a child in a fresh-plowed field, straining to see something that might or might not be real. That little girl becomes the writer, still looking, still trying to see.

Into the past, into the present, into the future: Elizabeth Spencer, like any great artist, still stands and looks, alert to what is—in the words of her beloved Episcopal liturgy—both seen and unseen. In *Landscapes of the Heart,* she describes returning home to Mississippi as an adult and picking up an heirloom box of milk glass, long believed forgotten. "[W]ithout my even thinking," she writes,

> my finger moved at once to the hidden catch, and the box flew open. It wasn't chance; I must have once been shown how it worked, and something in me was keeping an instinctive faith with what it knew. Had they never been lost then at all? I wondered. A great hidden world shimmered for a moment, grew almost visible, just beyond the breaking point of knowledge. Had nothing perhaps ever been lost by that great silent guardian within? (105)

Here in a world so often claiming easy answers and obviousness for questions that are anything but, I remember Spencer's questioning spirit, and her artistic example. My first novel, *Eldorado, Iowa*, is dedicated to her. As a writer and teacher, I work to trust, as she did, the power of the image, the power of intuition, the power of the artistic risk accepted, and taken.

Two days after learning of her death, I stood with students in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence. Reading aloud the opening paragraph of her novella *The Light in the Piazza*, I pointed to "Cellini's triumphant Perseus" and asked them to imagine her sly image of "tired German tourists, harnessed in fine camera equipment" at its foot, "slumped and staring at nothing" (258). These days, students are more familiar with the musical than the book. But they are still looking for open doors, for glimpses, for serendipities, and it is my honor and privilege to open books like hers at just the right place. That night in Venice, dazzled by La Fenice and "La Traviata," talking excitedly as we wound back through the streets, my students could echo Spencer's words about first seeing "Rigoletto" in Florence in 1949: "It is just as well to discover opera along with Italy" (*Landscapes* 227). For them, as for me, and for Spencer, art is a door that opened one must go through. These are the doors through which we pass, en route to becoming our selves—a process we must undertake with courage, frequent loneliness, principled dissent, and the kind of rigor, grace, and humor Elizabeth Spencer showed on the page and in her life.

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Dans la fiction brève d'Elizabeth Spencer, les portes, les fenêtres et les regards accidentels ne sont pas seulement des images récurrentes ; ce sont des indices, pour les personnages et les lecteurs, pour apprendre à vivre. Dans son introduction au recueil The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer, *l'autrice décrit comment, au cours de ses voyages du Mississippi à l'Italie, de Montréal pour retourner dans le Sud au cours des années 1950, 1960 et 1970, "les nouvelles aussi ont continué à se succéder, autour mais aussi entre des romans". De tels aperçus de mondes marqués par la brièveté reflètent la façon dont "[s]on expérience était maintenant brisée en morceaux, non moins valables, peut-être non moins intéressants – peut-être même plus pertinents ; [elle était] tentée de s'interroger sur la vie agitée du monde [qui l'entourait]". Un examen plus approfondi de la vie de Spencer – en particulier de son enfance dans le Sud, où régnait la ségrégation – éclaire la façon dont ces images d'espaces inattendus et ouverts fonctionnent dans ses nouvelles. Ce sont des chemins vers l'évasion pour ses personnages, loin de l'enfermement social ou imaginaire, vers des espaces de découverte personnelle. En mélangeant l'analyse littéraire et l'hommage personnel à Spencer, après sa mort le 22 décembre 2019, cette contribution montre qu'en ouvrant des espaces inattendus aux lecteurs, l'autrice suggère également des façons plus spacieuses de vivre sur le plan intellectuel et émotionnel.*

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ISBN 978-2-7535-8195-1
20 €