

*Y. Fine Arts*  
*Cates*  
*2nd floor*  
Christmas

Come Christmas, I expect my entire family to gather at our old farmhouse in Southeast Georgia. No excuses, and try to make it for Christmas Eve.

I like my three granddaughters slamming in and out of doors-- cold, sniffing children with our backyard dirt on the knees of their jeans.

I like my three grown children, and in-laws, circulating about the airish house while I cook the same meal I cooked for Thanksgiving: turkey and cornbread dressing, candied yams, turnip greens, pecan pies, and squash if I have them in the freezer. We eat dinner at precisely twelve noon.

I like everybody talking old times and new, letting slip clues to scabbed-over troubles I'd been spared knowing about because of the distance. I like them teasing their daddy about those Christmases he played Santa; we would barely make it to bed, after *placing* spreading the children's toys under the tree, before they would wake us to show what Santa brought. "We knew all the time it was you, Daddy."

I like everybody gone with the last slice of pecan pie, or at least by the time the next mail runs.



But last year, our oldest daughter, the nurse, insisted we come to her house for Christmas--the message was, if you want to see our children you have to come to Decatur. No problem with Decatur, but it just isn't South Georgia. My daughter and her family live in an air-tight townhouse with carpet covering the floors and concrete covering the dirt. Once we took our six-year-old, South-Georgia granddaughter for a visit, and she asked her cousins, "Where's yall'es dirt?" They took her outside to a bald spot of red clay in the flower bed between the sidewalk and the housefront. In a bowl, she mixed the clay with water and used it to fingerpaint a mural on Aunt Laura's wall.

In order to make it to Decatur before the girls got up, we had to leave South Georgia at four in the morning. A dawn so cold it was purple, so still you could hear the silence seep. The full moon was going down, west of the Interstate, backlighting bare trees I'd never noticed before. I felt as riveted and alone as the ~~wise~~ <sup>Wise Men</sup> must have felt following the star to Bethlehem. Between Valdosta and Macon, we met only ten or twelve cars. All restaurants and service stations were closed, and if we missed a rest stop along the way, we had to hit the woods. I'd done that before too. In case of emergencies such as this, I'd even taught our granddaughters how to squat in the woods. My daughters failed to see the value in that lesson.

How many times have I felt hooked car to car along the main drag through Atlanta? Come unhooked from the train, to change lanes, and your body will become one with your car's upholstery in the junkyard. But this time, no cars, no people, except for other grandparents who'd been summoned to Atlanta.



The girls were up and waiting in the living room of their townhouse. There sleepy blond heads ghosting in the sunlight through the window off the courtyard. The lights of their tree were dimmed by that same cold sun and the faint smoke of the oak fire on the stone hearth.

Ten-year-old Polly showed me her roller skates and her latest stuffed animal--a golden retriever because she cannot have the real kind, because then she'd have to take the dog to poop on the rectangle of grass along the curb where the neighbor dogs poop (her grandfather had just tracked up the dove carpet in the foyer and living room and was down on his knees, scrubbing it. I knew he could get down on his hands and knees like that, though a couple of months previous, he had stood in the hallway of the children's school, while I crawled beneath connecting chair legs to view the black construction-paper cave at Clairmont, ~~Yield~~ ~~Elementary~~ School).

Eight-year-old Betsy showed me her acrobatic doll; press a button and the pony-tailed cutie would flip and somersault and land on her feet with her arms raised.

I told them about the dolls I got when I was a little girl, and how I had to hold them up and hop them across the floor to make them act. They just looked at me.

I told them about the Brazil nuts in my stocking full of fruit, and how I would spend all Christmas day sitting on the concrete walk of our little frame house with a hammer. Trying to crack the nuts, but craking my cold thumbs instead. The girls just looked at me like somebody they'd read about in their history books.



North of Macon, people don't eat dinner till after dark. So, to get my mind off my stomach, I went outside with Polly to try out her roller skates, and for a couple of hours, I guided her up and down acres of paved hills, and over concrete curbs. She is almost as tall as me, almost as big as me. Listening to the riscing of her roller skates, and watching out for my toes, I marveled at how she'd grown on so little food. Her mother, raised on grits, had apparently forgotten all I'd taught her about three heavy meals a day.

Other children were out playing in the streets with their high-tech toys. Couples were walking, holding hands; even two women, believe it or not. There were several joggers with turned-inward eyes as if monitoring all systems for breakdown. The sun was guttering out behind the humming of the interstate, it's glow golden as the sugar maples growing from the room-sized carpets of grass. I've never felt so misplaced, so desperately homesick. An illness as real as flu.

By candlelight, my daughter served Christmas dinner: duck and rice, green salad with cilantro and mushrooms. Wine in her best crystal glasses--one glass and I was tipsy. <sup>He fell in love with Decatur,</sup> Her friend gave her a T-shirt that read "Martha Stewart doesn't live here." <sup>Oh, yeeh?</sup>  
~~WAAAA~~ "Pour ~~me~~ another glass of wine, please."