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Walking the Paths of His Own Premise: The Life and Literature of George Scarbrough

Randy Mackin

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctorate of Arts
May 2002

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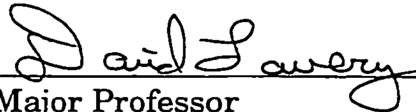

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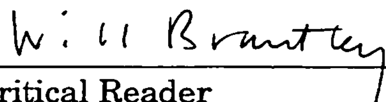

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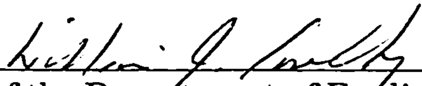

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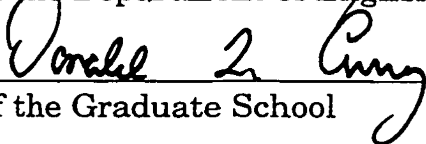

Dean of the Graduate School

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Abstract

For many years the poet and novelist George Scarbrough was little known outside the area that literary circles have labeled Appalachia. But from northern Georgia to the reaches of Virginia and all the adjacent area between and alongside, Scarbrough is recognized as a writer of serious intent, a quiet and fiercely private man who has, for most of the last century and into the new millennium, tested the limits of verse and produced literature that deserves careful attention. His literary life spans seven decades of publishing: five books of verse, a novel, and hundreds of poems appearing nationwide in the best magazines.

This study is an attempt to not only examine the quality of his work but to connect more than eighty years of an extraordinary life with the writing that Scarbrough has produced consistently and with great quality. It focuses, of course, on available primary and secondary material, but Scarbrough's consent to allow the author to read and quote from his personal journals is oftentimes the thread that has enabled me to tie biography with art.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For many years the poet and novelist George Scarbrough was little known outside the area that literary circles have labeled Appalachia. But from northern Georgia to the reaches of Virginia and all the adjacent area between and alongside, Scarbrough is recognized as a writer of serious intent, a quiet and fiercely private man who has, for most of the last century and into the new millennium, tested the limits of verse and produced literature that deserves careful attention. His literary life spans seven decades of publishing: five books of verse, a novel, and hundreds of poems appearing nationwide in the best magazines.

This study is an attempt to not only examine the quality of his work but to connect more than eighty years of an extraordinary life with the writing that Scarbrough has produced consistently and with great quality. It focuses, of course, on available primary and secondary material, but Scarbrough's consent to allow the author to read and quote from his personal journals is oftentimes the thread that has enabled me to tie biography with art. (Handwritten and typed journal entries are archived at the University of the South's duPont Library; these writings are not available to the public.)

Chapter Two is "Biography." While not presented in chronological order, the section relates the important details of Scarbrough's life but diverts to examine experiences that have had a lifelong effect on the writer: feelings of rejection, childhood traumas, and a newfound courage on the poet's part to

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say what he felt needed to be said. The second chapter includes information on Scarbrough's most recent years that have been marked by a renewed interest in his work, and what the future holds for the writer.

Subsequent chapters focus on influences that have proven constant in Scarbrough's work. Chapter Three, "Family," analyzes the importance of family in the poems, especially those that relate to the writer's father, siblings, and mother. Through poetry Scarbrough has tried to reconcile his ambivalence toward his tyrannical father, explain his life and work to his misunderstanding brothers, and celebrate the lessons of his mother.

Scarbrough admits in his journals to having had a love affair with language, and Chapter Four, "Songs of Defiance to Death," is a careful look at the value that he places on the written and spoken word. The section not only considers poetry but also comments on important prose and an essay that provide pivotal information on how closely—almost at a level of interdependence—his existence is driven by passionate loyalty to language.

It is impossible to read Scarbrough's poetry or fiction without noticing the important role landscape plays in the writing. His devotion to this small world, the southeastern corner of Tennessee called locally the Eastanalle, is unfaltering. While Polk County and environs is an actual place, Scarbrough has built a mythical county similar to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. He has peopled it with interesting characters, created for the region a personal history, and is so closely tied to his county, both emotionally and

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aesthetically, that landscape becomes the physical world from which Scarbrough forms his cosmology. This consistent sense of place has on more than one occasion caused critics to label him an Agrarian. Scarbrough has strong feelings about that description, and those viewpoints are included in Chapter Five, "A Small, Comfortable World."

Very little critical attention has been paid to Scarbrough's only novel, *A Summer Ago*. Chapter Six, "The Novel," assesses the value of the book from five perspectives: the use of descriptive and colloquial language; the farm family's specific activities during a six month period, April to September; the often humorous bits of country wisdom that find their way into the book; major themes of the best coming of age stories and the rites of passage that Alan, the protagonist, undergoes in one particular summer; and Scarbrough's use of the novel as a vehicle to romanticize the actual events of his youth.

The concluding chapter, "Holding Han-Shan's Hand," focuses on Scarbrough's recent work that is based loosely on ancient Chinese poet Han-Shan. Scarbrough admits that Han-Shan is his alter-ego; the kinship has opened new doors for Scarbrough and allowed him to write very personal, autobiographical poems that use Han-Shan as the subject, an effort that has been very successful. *Poetry* magazine has published a dozen of the poems in the last two years and Scarbrough has completed a book-length manuscript of Han-Shan poems to be titled *Under the Lemon Tree*.

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Three appendices conclude the dissertation. The first, "Scarbrough's Critics," addresses an important question: why Scarbrough is not a more widely-read poet. Appendix B is a transcript of an interview conducted at the poet's Oak Ridge home in February of 2000. Scarbrough is frank and honest in his answers. He tells stories that have not been published in any other interviews and have not yet been used as subject matter for his poems. Scarbrough is very open about his feelings and beliefs on a number of issues including childhood, religion, the Bible, regrets, poetics, and the future of the written word. The final appendix is a list of publications in which Scarbrough's work has appeared, and a list of awards he has received.

At the time of the interview Scarbrough was undergoing a physical anomaly, one which his doctors had yet to explain. The poet's hair, which has grown brilliantly white with age, seemed to be reverting to its youthful darkness. The poet parted the hair with his fingertips and the pitch black coloration Scarbrough inherited from his part-Cherokee father was visible at the roots. One gets the feeling that Scarbrough may be getting younger or that he may have found some secret that will allow him to live forever. While that is greatly to be wished for this Tennessee poet, another truth remains: George Scarbrough, on his own terms and through his exceptional talent, continues to produce literature that is important and valuable and will stand the test of time. Proper recognition for this artist is long overdue.

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Chapter 2: Biography

A. The First Poem was about the Orchard

By the time George Addison Scarbrough received his high school diploma in 1935, near age twenty, his family had moved more than a dozen times. His father, William Oscar Scarbrough, was an intinerant sharecropper who was forced, on a regular basis, to load his large clan in a wagon and find farm work on land always owned by someone else. It was a meager existence that demanded great sacrifice from his wife, Louise Anabel McDowell Scarbrough, and their seven children: Lee, Edith, George, Charles (Pete), Bill, Blaine and Kenneth (Kim). They lived in hand-me-down housing that Scarbrough describes in his journals as “more shacks than homes, more slatted cribs than shacks,” in which there was little or no privacy and certainly not places that one could call home (T-40).

While these meanderings must have seemed constant for the Scarbroughs, they really covered very little ground. George was born on October 20, 1915, on the Harrison Place, a farm near Patty Station, six miles from the Polk County seat of Benton, Tennessee. The lower end of the Appalachian Mountain range, a permanent fixture that has always proved constant in Scarbrough’s life and his work, is visible in the distance. The rivers that would one day be so influential in Scarbrough’s poetry—the Hiwassee and Ocoee—are also nearby. This region of Scarbrough’s early life, limited in

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scope to the counties of Polk and McMinn, would eventually become the land he has tilled, not only as the son of a sharecropper, but also as a poet.

An interest in the written word came at a very early age for Scarbrough, as did his ability to understand language. The cracks in the walls of his many homes were insulated with old newspapers. From these World War I-era headlines Scarbrough's mother taught him to recognize letters and, eventually, to read before he ever entered grammar school. Knowledge proved to be, however, a two-edged sword, severing him from his peers, and alienating him from much of his family, who never understood the little boy who would rather spend his spare time reading books and writing.

Scarbrough vividly remembers his first effort at poetry. He was in the fifth grade because he recollects showing the finished poem to Ms. Woodson, his beloved teacher, who praised his work. The poem was written in the vacant upstairs of the fourth house that Scarbrough lived in as a boy. Because the room was not being used, Scarbrough's father had moved the family's meat box to the second floor; the young poet turned the empty box on its side, borrowed a straight chair from downstairs, and used the set-up for a desk. Scarbrough remembers:

> The first poem was about the orchard. The man [owner] had planted a very fine orchard when we had lived there. I wrote a poem about apricots, and plums, peaches, and apples. I had read an English poem

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> about an apple orchard in the spring. So, I began to measure my lines by, obviously, the only meter English ever had . . . iambic. (Interview)

Writing his own poetry made Scarbrough even more interested in reading, and he consumed everything that was available to him. Of course, the Bible was required reading: he did not, however, read it for religious instruction but for the beauty of the words which he recognized, for the first time, as poetry that did not rhyme. Outside of Ms. Woodson's class, Scarbrough became responsible for his own education, and like the protagonist, Alan, in *A Summer Ago*, the natural world around him became a great source of fascination during his primary and secondary school years.

B. I'm Going to College

Because of constant moves from one farm to another, and because schools closed down regularly whenever childhood diseases made their rounds through the community, Scarbrough finally finished high school later than most students and began talking of college. It was a subject that his father found repulsive. In a journal entry, Scarbrough writes:

> "I'm going to college," I declared to my father one day as we hoed along a field of corn. "You're going to shit and fall back in it," he retorted. "You've got as much chance going to college as a one-legged man has in winning a ass-kicking contest." He grinned sourly. "You're going to the poor-house if you don't learn more about farming than you know now. Look at them rows you laid off. Corn's as crooked as a dog's hindleg.

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> The neighbors all a-laughing at me. For why? For having a boy like you, who couldn't stick his finger in his ass 'iffen you held his shirttail up." (I-55)

Nevertheless, the father's attitude about higher learning did not deter Scarbrough from pursuing more education. After graduation from high school, Scarbrough borrowed money—ten dollars each from twelve local men—and went to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in the fall of 1935. He also took advantage of the National Youth Administration program and earned $15 per month. After the first semester—in which Scarbrough made good grades—the school moved him to a dormitory that was run by the students themselves. After only a year at UT, Scarbrough was forced by financial difficulties to leave the university and begin farming again. He also began writing for several newspapers in East Tennessee. Gilbert Govan, at the *Chattanooga Times*, became interested in the young poet's work; the newspaper even carried a story, with photograph, on Scarbrough's recent accomplishment. The article stated:

> George A. Scarbrough, 25 . . . has been recognized as a poet of more than usual ability, and nine of his poems are in the current issue of the *Sewanee Review*, published by the University of the South, at Sewanee...The young poet writes about the things with which he daily comes in contact and of which he knows most. His subjects are

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> confined to rural life, about the soil, nature, his family, farm animals and birds and animals of the forests. (11)

While not juvenalia, the first poetry that Scarbrough published in the *Sewanee Review* provides a glimpse of a writer who has not yet fully honed his skills and is not, perhaps, courageous enough to tackle the more serious of themes. As Govan noted, the poems are about the environment that Scarbrough knows best, those things close at hand that begin to comprise the poet's cosmology. In the poem, "Experience," the speaker comes "face/To face with death" (1-2) in the form of a black bull inside stable. While the speaker keeps assuring himself that he is not afraid, his actions immediately following the encounter reveal the truth: "But when I'd climbed the ladder and come down/Outside again, I knelt and kissed the ground" (13-14). The other of these nine poems, eight of which are sonnets, hint at the same subject matter that will fill much of his first book, *Tellico Blue*: a collection of verse told in a strong narrative voice marked by perfect pitch and peopled with the unusual characters of Scarbrough's youth, including family.

The newspaper announcement about Scarbrough's verse being published at Sewanee was followed closely by another: the young poet would begin writing regular book reviews for the *Times.* Govan introduced Scarbrough by reminding readers that several of his poems had already appeared on the editorial page of that newspaper, and that those lines had sparked Govan's interest:

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> It was those poems which caused me first to grow curious about George Scarbrough. They were, I thought, evidence of two things: First, an individual with both the insight and the skill of the real poet; second, and of equal importance, one who realized that true poetic values are to be found in the daily round of living. (5)

Govan went on to connect, and then separate, Scarbrough's work from the Agrarian movement. He said that though Scarbrough was agrarian, the poet was writing out of true experience and not because of a sympathetic leaning toward a particular political and economic ideology. Alongside Govan's comments was printed Scarbrough's first review of three books of poetry from now unstudied writers. Interestingly enough, and somewhat telling of Scarbrough's own concerns, the review relies strongly on comments about the sense of place that these three poets exhibited in their work. In one statement, Scarbrough notes that the writer produced poetry of New England people and that "their story is that of the whole American scene in miniature" (5). The poet whose work was being reviewed had something in common with the reviewer: the creation of a microcosm that represents a world much larger than itself, as Scarbrough would later do with his county. The November 17, 1940, Sunday edition marked the beginning of a regular venue for Scarbrough; he continued writing reviews for the *Times* for several decades.

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According to Robert Phillips (419), it was Govan who was instrumental in securing Scarbrough's literary fellowship to the University of the South (the first ever given at Sewanee), an experience that was both positive and negative for the young writer. At the time, Govan was also a member of the *Sewanee Review* advisory board. Out of place among the more aristocratic students, Scarbrough was labeled a "covite," or one who came from the coves of Tennessee. Coupled with the ridicule was deep guilt; for the first time ever, Scarbrough was living in what seemed, at first, ideal conditions: books at his fingertips, learned professors, and no want of necessities such as food. It was at Sewanee, when Scarbrough was twenty-six years old, that he experienced his first traditional Thanksgiving dinner (at home the holiday was greeted only with an ordinary meal and one simple exception, a pumpkin pie). Scarbrough was amazed at the actions of the students who threw raisins, grapes, nuts, and apples at each other in observation of holiday. In Scarbrough's mind it seemed wasteful. In a journal entry, he wrote:

> A way of celebration, I suppose. Nonetheless, it left me bitter and dismayed, considering the prodigious waste and the sacrilege. It was sacrilege to me. In the room fairly whizzing with good things, I sat, hardly touching my food, thinking of my mother at home scraping together the makings of a meal for our family. (A-238)

Adding to this feeling of uselessness and waste was the knowledge that Scarbrough's accident-prone father was recuperating from a broken back that

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he suffered after falling out of the barn, and that his inability to work put an even greater strain on the family's survival.

Also during his two years at the University of the South, the *Sewanee Review* again published a selection of Scarbrough's poetry. In a section titled "Tennessee Tomes," editor William S. Knickerbocker chose an unusually large number of poems—fifteen—as a feature in one of the 1941 issues. While eight are sonnets and all follow traditional form, the poems show an improvement from those published just a year before. The language is tight, the enjambment effective, and the rhyme not so obvious. In terms of theme, the 1941 *Review* poems are not merely images of the farm life that Scarbrough has experienced, but speak to the political as well, especially in terms of the suffering of sharecroppers who work all year, sometimes for nothing in return. These lines from the first of two sonnets, titled "Tenant," provide a perfect example:

> It takes a stout heart to assail the land
>
> When all a farmer gets is his poor third:
>
> I've known my men who didn't understand
>
> How they had nothing after they had bared
>
> Their sweaty backs to toil the summer long.
>
> They told their grievances in halting tongue,
>
> How they had sold their labor for a song,
>
> How hope was hard for them, no longer young. (1-8)

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Although Scarbrough had opportunity to learn from outstanding teachers such as Tudor Long and George Baker, and to work for a year as an office boy and proof-reader in the *Sewanee Review* office under Andrew Lytle, his departure from the school was not pleasant. Near the end of his junior year, Scarbrough, as he puts it, "ran afoul" of Dr. Alexander Guerry, who, said Scarbrough:

> . . . harped so much on his "Sewanee gentleman" until I thought I would vomit, and somebody told him that I didn't much care for his southern gentleman. He invited me out to his house. He said, "You say you don't like my Sewanee gentleman?" and I said, "No, Dr. Guerry, because most of them have more damn money than sense." That was not a politic thing to say. (Interview)

The statement, of course, put Scarbrough on Dr. Guerry's bad side, and the professor reacted by telling the student that next year he would be working in the kitchen and cafeteria, "waiting on these boys you pretend to despise," or as Scarbrough describes it, become a "boot-lick" (Interview). Scarbrough told Dr. Guerry he would not be a servant, nor would he be back at the school the following term.

In 1947, Scarbrough would earn his B.A. degree from Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee. Seven years later, he earned the M.A. from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, with a creative thesis. He

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began pursuing a Ph.D. at UT, but never finished it, a disappointment that still bothers him today.

Looking back on his formal schooling, Scarbrough was dissatisfied with the quality of education that he received, and regrets, in a journal entry, of never attending an institution that was "plugged into the circuits of the world mind." In that same entry, Scarbrough expands:

> The University of Tennessee . . . was a hick university in a hick town, which for all its age was little better than a freshwater college . . . The University of the South . . . was plugged in to the past, purely and, I think now, quite simply in spite of the beautiful words some of the professors spoke. . . . Sewanee was an ivory tower of the worst sort. . . . Lincoln Memorial University was only a glorified high school, which disturbed and disgusted me. . . . The smell of cattle barns replaced the hawthorne at Combray. . . . Alas, for higher education. I never had any, never found any sign of it in any place I went. (H-30-31)

The only high point of those years, according to Scarbrough, was Tudor Long at Sewanee, a Miss Johnston in the undergraduate program at UTK, and Kenneth Knickerbocker, who directed Scarbrough's graduate work. All three were teachers of English.

C. A Horse of a Different Color

When not attending a university on a regular basis, Scarbrough was still in the classroom as a teacher. His first job at an area high school was in

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1937; he earned $55 per month. He lost that job when a grocery store owner, who also happened to be on the Board of Education, had him fired because he was not making any purchases at the man's business (Interview). At another school Scarbrough was charged with teaching "too analytically" and refused tenure. These losses of jobs began a pattern that was to follow him for many years, and cause a burden for the young educator when he was asked why he had taught at so many different schools. Scarbrough states:

> Again, the old complaints of being too liberal, being too forward. I taught history and gave them my own interpretations, which didn't often suit with the textbook. I taught in so many places that, toward the last, it alarmed my would-be employer, because I told him why I got shifted, that I was a horse of a different color. (Interview)

As a teacher, Scarbrough felt most comfortable in the college classroom. He taught at Hiwassee College in Madisonville, Tennessee, from 1965 to 1967, and at Chattanooga College during the 1968 academic year. By the end of his career, eighteen years in all, Scarbrough's mother had become ill and needed his attention. He gave up teaching for two reasons: to be with his mother (her son became a constant companion and nurse for the final fifteen years of her life), and because he was tired of being rejected from the teaching profession because of his viewpoints; he could never "knuckle to [the] stupidity" of administrators who were "always the fly in the ointment; unctuous hypocrites" (Journal T-185).

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Feelings of rejection, however, were not new for Scarbrough. This emotion haunted him most of his childhood, and continued into adulthood. A pall has hung over Scarbrough's outlook since he learned, at a very early age, that he was his parents' first unwanted child. Oscar and Belle Scarbrough had already two children—a boy and girl—and Scarbrough's mother apparently was satisfied with their little family. Oscar was not. In fact, Scarbrough sensed some bitterness from his mother and blame leveled at the father for demoting her to the role of childbearer. Scarbrough remembers it this way in an interview with Jerry Williamson:

> This was the first big trauma that ever happened to me, because my mother hadn't really wanted me. She wanted two children, a boy and a girl, and she had those already. So I'm sure that during the months of her pregnancy, she and Dad had a rather rough time. She blamed him for my being there; he blamed me for her blaming him for my being there. (29)

Scarbrough was only three years old when this "first big trauma" occurred. Immediately after the birth of her fourth child, Belle became very ill and George was sent to live with the Harrison brothers on the other side of the river, on the farm where he was born. It was a logical choice, since he was named for two of the brothers, former landlords George and Addison, and a good choice, it turned out, because the oldest brother, John, was very kind to the little boy, as Scarbrough recalls in the same interview:

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> Daddy liked the Harrison brothers, but it was John . . . who took me in, attended to my needs, bathed me, slept with me, dressed me in one of his big blue shirts, and held me while I cried myself to sleep. I resented being separated from my mother, but John was one of the stable points in my life, one of the kind people I knew, and that made a terrible impression on me in one way, because it made me more dependent on my mother for everything I learned. (31)

The hiatus in "Brother John's" care finally ended when Scarbrough's mother told her husband to go and bring George home because she did not feel it was right for the Harrisons to be taking care of her son any longer. Even though the boy was reunited with his mother—whom he had been forbidden by Oscar to see during those months because he said George would have cried to stay at home after visiting—the feeling of being unwanted was firmly established, as are so many negative childhood experiences. Scarbrough states:

> Rejection, the feeling, the sense, the knowledge of rejection, began to sink in then. And I guess, forever after; I still feel rejected. I don't know why. I have all these friends. I feel like the boy in the coat of many colors. (Interview)

D. Stained to Perfection

The second great traumatic experience in Scarbrough's life occurred only a few years later. Though mentioned sparingly in the journals, rape robbed

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Scarbrough of his childhood and innocence, and propelled the young boy into what Scarbrough calls "the world of overt sexuality" (Journal Q-123). In a very brief entry, Scarbrough writes, "To be raped in a cottonshed by a hardfisted farmhand when I was six years old was one way of being 'stained to perfection'" (A-231). The later journal entries are very revealing of Scarbrough's gay identity and his relationships, areas with which he is most comfortable, but he cannot help but wonder if this childhood violation was the catalyst of his sexuality as an adult. In another entry, Scarbrough contends:

> Sexually precocious I may have been. I don't know. I think we are or become what our very first encounters make of us, willynilly. I was forced to become much in advance of my years sexually; as a result of which . . . I continually yearn backward to the infancy I lost. (Q-123)

Through a pattern of memory in which it appears more and more details become vivid, Scarbrough offers another telling of the story:

> There was always that business in the cottonshed to be kept in mind. I was a pretty child and men wanted me. I stirred them without knowing it, until I became a more knowledgeable stirrer and sought revenge. Perhaps my father understood more of this than I gave him credit for. Perhaps he knew about, or suspected, the farmhand's assault, and perhaps he more carefully assigned the blame. He detested me no less for my childish part in it. I crept away afterwards

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> and picked an armful of those April-sky-blue chicory flowers and carried them home to my beloved mother, safe for the moment from the world of men. (R-75)

In his poetry Scarbrough has never broached this subject. Even after a series of abdominal surgeries that took him to the brink of death, and the newfound conviction to say what needs to be said, the rape remains taboo. In the journals there is a noticeable avoidance of sexual issues in the earlier entries, though later the subject is discussed openly. The journals provide a private medium in which Scarbrough can deal with these issues without airing them openly for all to read, as poetry does, and, perhaps, not comprehend. The following is another excerpt from the journals:

> "What do you do for a living," I am often asked. I reply, "Nothing. I keep a journal to live." The questioner does not understand. Nor would I, in his position. How could he know that a day's journey . . . could be accomplished by writing in a book? (H-73)

Adding to this fear of being misunderstood is another: that of being misjudged and dismissed simply because of his sexual orientation. Scarbrough has real concerns that if the journals were published, people would remember only that he was gay, not that he wrote literature of merit. Speaking of Walt Whitman, Scarbrough reveals this concern, "People attacked him, some still do, because he was gay, but that's the absolute lowest of low points to say about a man of his stature" (Interview). When

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asked about regrets, Scarbrough alludes to his secretive nature in dealing with sexual issues:

> I wish I hadn't tried to conceal things. I felt so low, so cheap, that I used a woman's name in a poem that was addressed to a man. . . . That's cheap. I was taught to be honest, but I have found that lies can be a man's chief support. . . . A lot of people would try to hold me accountable even when I was trying to avoid unpleasantness, and one time, possibly even death. (Interview)

Rejection was reinforced by the way other children in the family treated Scarbrough for what his father called his "sissy" ways. Scarbrough said, "But most of the sissiness, so-called, came in the charge of my cousins, who were really root-hoggers" (Williamson 31). Taking cue from their father, even some of Scarbrough's siblings were cruel toward him. At Polk County High School, the slight young man weighed only 105 pounds and was tormented by bullies, one of whom was the son of the local undertaker and openly poked fun at Scarbrough. He was, however, popular with the girls in at least one setting—just before French class—when the female students would gather around Scarbrough so he could read the day's assignment to them. As soon as that task was completed, Scarbrough remembers that the girls would always find an excuse to move closer to some other boy, usually a handsome football player. Scarbrough was amused later in life when that same bully—the undertaker's son—sent a letter requesting an autographed copy of *Tellico*

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Blue. Scarbrough sent the book, uninscribed, and then received another letter from the man, requesting that the poet sign a sheet of paper that he could paste in the book. In the Williamson interview, Scarbrough said:

> Well, I autographed a little note for him that said, "In memory of the bad old days at PCHS." Incidentally, the initials PCHS meant to us students, "Poland China Hog Shit." That's what we boys chanted under our breath in the back of the auditorium. (32)

During his junior year at PCHS, Scarbrough entered a national reading race and won second place. He read sixty-five books and commented on each in twenty-five words or less. The winner, Benny Baker—Scarbrough still remembers his name—was from a northern state; he read and reported on 115 books during the same period. For a moment, Scarbrough was the school hero, the "prize rooster" who was put on stage before the student body with his award—a collection of Modern Library books—and praised by the principal. His fellow students were not impressed. Scarbrough said, "My friends among the males couldn't give a damn how many books I read. They didn't read books; they got their girlfriends to read them" (Interview).

E. Say What You Want To

Scarbrough left the confusing years of his formal training with an even greater desire to write. That desire led him to the Writers' Workshop at the State University of Iowa in 1957. Still trying to find quality in the educational system, Scarbrough was again disappointed and simply

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completed the program without any real investment on his part. He took courses in both poetry and fiction, using the same short story over and over to fulfill the professors' requirements. Scarbrough states:

> I can't say I studied. I just sat there gasping in amazement at what Paul Engle called teaching. He had long, dark, greasy hair which came way back and he would sit on the desk and his hair would fall forward and he would sling it back. He preened a little for the *Times* photographer who seemed always to be coming to the Writers' Workshop in those days. (Interview)

Disgusted, for the most part, with the time wasted trying to learn at centers of higher education, Scarbrough began an intensive personal effort to become a better writer. By the time he attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Scarbrough was already an established poet with three books to his credit: *Tellico Blue* in 1949, *The Course is Upward* in 1951, and, in 1956, *Summer So-Called*, which was mentioned in the 1957 *Encyclopaedia Brittanica Book of the Year*. Harrison Hayford wrote: "The year 1956 brought no flood tide of poetic creation, even though the work of many younger poets was marked by keen insight and technical competence;" Hayford then named, in addition to Scarbrough's book, John Ashberry's *Some Trees*, Donald Hall's *Exiles and Marriages*, and Adrienne Rich's *The Diamond Cutters*. The notation was the first in which Scarbrough was mentioned with well-known poets of his day.

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A trio of books in less than a decade by a nationally-known publisher, E.P. Dutton, is quite an accomplishment, but it would be twenty-one years before Scarbrough's fourth book, *New and Selected Poems*, would be published. That long break between volumes was not idle time. Scarbrough published widely in literary magazines and wrote reviews which reveal the essayist exploring his own ideas about poetry by examing the work of others. In "One Flew East, One Flew West, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," a review of ten books for the *Sewanee Review*, Scarbrough celebrates the variousness of American poetry. In a statement of his own views on the verse of the day, Scarbrough is setting the stage for his next book, which would be more diverse than any of the previous three. He uses as metaphor the childhood song that describes a place, the cuckoo's nest, the location of which is a mystery, but must be in "any direction, at all or all directions at the same time" (138). Scarbrough then makes the following commentary, connecting poetry with that concept from his youth:

> American poetry is the cuckoo's nest! Qualifying on every score, as I had imagined that fabulous place. Put together piecemeal of ends and oddments, of bricks and straws and bits of ocean foam. Diversity was all that I could find, and the unity that good poetry, if and when it occurs, achieves through the diversity that it makes is good. (139)

Not only was Scarbrough's own poetry becoming more diverse in relation to subject matter and ideas, the next book also marked a change in

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Scarbrough's style. While the first three books were somewhat dependent on established, traditional forms, the new poems in *New and Selected* are predominantly free verse. The recurrent attention to place and family is present, but the poems in his fourth collection are more deeply personal and, in some ways, more honest than the work that came earlier. This change in approach and willingness to take more risks was due in part to health problems that Scarbrough encountered during that twenty year period. After surviving three colon surgeries, and the attending, later unfounded fear of doctors finding a malignancy, Scarbrough decided to throw caution to the wind in terms of subject matter for his poems. That fresh attitude is evident in *New and Selected*; Scarbrough explains it this way:

> I always tried to be invisible because I didn't think I was anybody . . . that I was nobody and I was pleased when somebody spoke to me. But after the great illnesses, smelling myself rotting, I realized that it was time to throw some of that junk away, stand up in the world, say what you want to. (Interview)

Following publication of *New and Selected*, Scarbrough's next venture was the release of his only novel, *A Summer Ago*, which is discussed at length in another chapter. His most recent volume of poetry is 1989's *Invitation to Kim*, which garnered Scarbrough a nomination for the 1990 Pulitzer Prize, a flirt with national recognition that left the poet with mixed emotions. After the announcement that he had not won (in fact, he was not a finalist),

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Scarbrough again felt that familiar rejection that had long plagued his self-prescribed tentative position in the world of letters. These feelings, both of disappointment and then resolve, are mentioned in a journal entry:

> Many are nominated but few are chosen, I say to my congratulators on being nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. I had not expected to win but the fact is I felt rejected. To paraphrase Browning, another rejection, "the worst and the last." It would be easy to mean by that "last" not only the most recent but the final one, *finis*. But that would only be pain speaking, a momentary failure of being. I shall try again: that's what I'm best at, trying. I put my book *Invitation to Kim* on the shelf. I shall not look at it again for awhile. (gg6)

Despite Scarbrough's feeling of once again being overlooked, the Pulitzer nomination actually capped an ongoing career marked by recognition. Scarbrough has received two Carnegie Fund Grants, in 1956 and 1975; the Borestone Mountain Award in 1961; the Mary Rugeley Ferguson Poetry Award from the *Sewanee Review* in 1964 for his poem, "Return: August Afternoon"; a P.E.N. American Branch Grant in 1975; an Authors' League Fund Grant in 1976; the Sheena Albanese Memorial Prize by *Spirit* magazine, and the Governor's Outstanding Tennesseean Award in Literature, both in 1978.

Even in his young adulthood and middle-age years, Scarbrough did not venture far from the Eastanalle corner of Tennessee. After his father's death,

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he and his mother resided for a short time in nearby Anderson County, and they eventually settled, in 1963, at his present home, 100 Darwin Lane, Oak Ridge. In a moving journal entry, Scarbrough explains why he must stay so close to this region of East Tennessee:

> One thought that remained this morning was that of having a grave site of one's own in a family cemetery somewhere, waiting. I had remarked that were I living in New York at my age, I would be frantic to get home, to find the county again and the yard at Friendship Church in Polk County where my plot is next to my mother's and father's grave. Being home means everything to me. I can understand that it does not mean so much to many people, home being wherever they happen to be. But with me it is a matter almost of breath to be within an hour's drive of my boyhood mountain, the High Top in the home county, in whose shade virtually I will ultimately rest. (O-78)

F. Recent Years

Scarbrough's recent years have been marked by a renewed scholarly interest in his work and important recognitions. The accolades have come in various forms, including regular appearances of his work in top journals, such as *Poetry* (Chicago) and *The Southern Review*. The annual Literary Festival, held on campus at Emory and Henry College, Emory, Virginia, October 21-22, 1999, was in his honor, and the resulting Spring 2000 *Iron Mountain Review* was dedicated to Scarbrough's work. *Asheville Poetry*

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Review editor Keith Flynn chose Scarbrough for inclusion in the special millennial Spring/Summer 2000 issue, which focused on "Ten Great Neglected Poets of the Twentieth Century." The section devoted to Scarbrough contained a sampling of his work, an interview, and selected criticism. Of the ten poets chosen for this honor, Scarbrough is the only one who is still alive. And in April of 2001, Scarbrough was recognized by The Fellowship of Southern Writers at the biennial Arts and Education Council Conference on Southern Literature in Chattanooga and received the prestigious James Still Award for Writing of the Appalachian South, earned previously by Charles Frazier in 1999 and originally by James Still in 1997. Also in 2001, Scarbrough received the Bess Hokin Prize from *Poetry* magazine for his group of three Han-Shan poems that appeared in the July, 2000 issue of that publication.

The Emory and Henry Literary Festival marked the first time that Scarbrough's poetry has received comprehensive study from a group of scholars. The official publication of the festival, the *Iron Mountain Review*, carried a sampling of Scarbrough's poetry—seven selections—and essays presented at the festival by Bill Brown, Connie Green, Edward Francisco, and the author of this critical biography (the paper presented by Mackin appears, in edited form, as a chapter in this dissertation). The *Review* also included an interview between Scarbrough and Jerry Williamson, editor of *The Appalachian Journal*.

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Bill Brown, long-time Metro Nashville educator at Hume-Fogg Magnet School and student of the poet's work, focused on the element of light in Scarbrough's poetry. Brown noted examples of how Scarbrough's poetry relies on light and dark, colors and shades, to create varying moods, and how the poet is consistent in the use of certain colors in relation to particular members of his family. For example, Brown found that Scarbrough regularly associates his father with a "shadowy, winter landscape" (12), matching the man's darker character. However, his mother is revealed in a different light, according to Brown: the landscape is the same, but it is more illuminated by brightness. Brown refers to Scarbrough's poem, "County Lullabye" as "a true gathering of light in a lyric gift of landscape" (13).

Connie Green, who teaches at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and directs the Creative Writing Program there, chose as her topic the close relationship between Scarbrough's poetry and his family. Green not only provides excellent examples of familial ties, she establishes Scarbrough as an Appalachian poet because of this connection: "Because family and place have always been important to the inhabitants of this region . . . and they are central to George's poetry . . ." (20). Green finds that family is the subject to which Scarbrough returns again and again because there he finds stability but not necessarily always comfort. Green writes:

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> No matter how bitter the memory, the poet is bound ineluctably to family, and thoughts of being loosened from such bindings, even metaphorically loosened, terrify. (21)

Green concludes by naming the common force in most of Scarbrough's family poems: love, even though that emotion is sometimes difficult to bear, and can prove dangerous. In the most important passage of the essay, Green alludes to one of Scarbrough's poems, the sonnet "Experience," in which the young boy finds himself face-to-face with a large black bull inside the barn. Green writes:

> The poem, though naming neither father, brother, not any other relative, expresses the danger to be found close to home, the chancy sort of existence that shadows a life lived close to the land, a life for Scarbrough inextricably bound up in family. (24)

Likewise, Edward Francisco of Pellissippi State College notes the family and geographical connections evident in Scarbrough's poetry, but uses them to develop a deeper point: that the poet's spirituality is a product of that environment. Francisco states:

> If geography defined the terms of Scarbrough's early spiritual awareness—making him, in his own words, "a worshipper of place, a devotee of boundary and landmark" —family offered both dispensations of love and a harsh reminder of the inherited disappointments we equate with the effects of the Fall. (26)

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Francisco finds that Scarbrough struggles with a God that will place a human being, especially a child, in this world and then abandon him. According to Francisco, this question keeps Scarbrough from accepting faith on faith's terms and leads to his resistance of "the age's temptation to believe too easily in what it fails to comprehend" (29). This notion connects the poet with Flannery O'Connor's theory of the "Christhaunted" South. Francisco also suggests that Scarbrough's vision of heaven may simply be home, or a "dream of home" (30), which takes the divine out of the equation and attributes to the poet a very pragmatic spirituality.

The literary festival was a very trying weekend for Scarbrough. He was obviously weak upon arrival the first day, and suffered through an afternoon of over-attention and exhaustion. After the evening meal, he was scheduled to give a poetry reading in the impressive chapel on the Emory and Henry campus. Scarbrough said later that he had no memory of the reading, which did not go well; the ailing poet became disoriented during the event and had to retire early. The following day began with a luncheon, at which Scarbrough collapsed and had to be taken by ambulance to a nearby hospital. Doctors discovered that he had a severe infection, and upon returning home, spent several more days in the hospital before recovering. An interview which was to be held publicly after lunch was canceled, and Scarbrough and Jerry Williamson sat down together months later and completed the session.

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By the time Scarbrough was invited by the Fellowship of Southern Writers to participate in their conference, he was back in good health and tremendous spirits. Scarbrough participated in a panel discussion, titled "New Southern Writers," with Rodney Jones, Hal Crowther, John McManus, and Mary Hood, and charmed the crowd as the oldest panelist, at age eighty-five. He talked of his childhood, his work, and Southern literature in general. Scarbrough said he felt a fundamental background in all Southern writing, "from Gaines to Welty to McCullers," was the religious problem. The crowd enjoyed his comments about motivation, which he summed up in one word, "revenge," and then read an older poem, "Victory Song," about facing nature at its worst, "flickering wasps/with red-earth bodies/and amber isin-/glass wings/and death in their asses" (*New and Selected* 210-11). The poem ends with these lines:

> What can I do but laugh?
> To kill one's enemies
> is a joyful exercise:
> how else can one keep
> the whole sweet problem
> of deliverance alive?

Following the morning panel discussion, Scarbrough conducted a workshop with students at Red Bank High School. He was surprised at the honesty of

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their questions and enjoyed the opportunity to be back in a classroom, since teaching was one of his first occupations.

On Saturday evening, at the final convocation of the Fellowship and the concluding session of the conference, Scarbrough was honored with the James Still Award for his use of language to depict the Appalachian South, and for his "exact, keen eye," a phrase engraved on the plaque.[1]

Though in his ninth decade of life, Scarbrough is still experiencing firsts. Three of his poems were recently featured on the internet site, "Poetry Daily," and there is talk of an interview on National Public Radio. Scarbrough reports that he has completed a book of Han-Shan poems, tentatively titled *Under the Lemon Tree*, and his publisher, Robert Cumming of Iris Press, is planning to publish the Han-Shan volume after a new collection of Scarbrough's poems has been edited for the most immediate offering. Scarbrough has also had a number of poems accepted for publication in future issues of *Poetry* and appeared as a panelist and gave a reading at the October, 2001, Southern Festival of Books in Nashville.

[1] The award was presented by Fellowship member and novelist Lee Smith. Other honorees were Percival Everett: the Hillsdale Award for Fiction; Rodney Jones: the Hanes Award for Poetry; Mary Hood: the Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction; Hal Crowther: the Fellowship's Award for Nonfiction; and John McManus: the Fellowship's New Writing Award. The Cleanth Brooks Medal for Distinguished Achievement in Southern Letters was given to Elizabeth Spencer.

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Chapter 3: Family

A. Father-Made Harm

As the title poem of *Invitation to Kim* makes clear, Scarbrough's relationship with family has been both troubling and beneficial. Ambivalent offspring of a tyrannical father, grateful child of an overly-attentive mother, and misunderstood sibling in a large family, the poet has used words to come to terms with his role as son and brother. A portion of this poetic effort focuses on family history, an apparent attempt to understand the present by learning the past; a much larger selection of poems deals directly with particular family members, the father, especially. Also present, and important, are poems about Scarbrough's beloved mother, and two brothers, Lee and Kim.

In a revealing essay published by *Touchstone*, the magazine of the Tennessee Humanities Council, Scarbrough discusses at length the effect of family relationships and the manner in which a positive, or negative, familial environment ultimately shapes the person one becomes:

> I'm not condemning family. We have all suffered, and sometimes benefited, from family, and are all members of a family of some kind. I am only saying that from family come the really telling outcomes. (7)

For Scarbrough those "outcomes" have evolved into a lifelong effort to reconcile his existence with what he thinks his family expected and demanded of him. Unfortunately, as with many sons of overbearing fathers,

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Scarbrough never had the opportunity to resolve the conflict. Instead, his memories of his father, William Oscar Scarbrough, are, for the most part, dark and unpleasurable. In the same essay, Scarbrough writes:

> As a result of his attitude, and mine, we never had a conversation in all our lives together. Talk always lapsed when he entered the room. The other children grew silent, and I drifted away as soon as I, unnoticed, could. . . . He knew only to be rough with us and to keep us always subordinate and at a distance. This attitude persisted with him to his deathbed, from which he gave peremptory orders not to leave him, commanding what would have been, and was, willingly given. He died a hard death, and it fell to me to cradle him in my arms during his last moments, the others having fled the room. (7-8)

While the father-son relationship was barely amiable and produced horrid recollections for Scarbrough, it has proven to be rich ground for poetry. Scarbrough's second book of poems, *The Course is Upward*, is dedicated to his father, who died May 10, 1950, the previous year. The first five poems are sincere efforts to come to grips with that death, and to deal with the void left behind as the son considers what the man meant to him. In the first of the dedicatory poems, a sonnet, "Death is a Creek, Backward Flowing," the father figure retreats toward his beginnings as part of the stream, passing in his journey all that made him what he was in a "change of time" (14). The second in the group of poems, "Death is a Short Word," equates the father's

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death with language; the speaker's words are reduced "In exact proportion to how much he died" (3), devolving in both tone and substance until "Only the monosyllable [is] finally valid" (20). And in the final poem of the first section, the poet deals with the feeling that the father is becoming more important in death than he was in life. The son feels, perhaps for the first time, the impact that his father had on him and is reminded that he, as creation of the man, must carry on, however burdened by an "elided story" and "elliptic laws" (23-4). It is necessary to note that these poems were written immediately following the father's death and lack some of the bitterness that is evident in mid-career and later poetry.

From *New and Selected*, the poem, "Impasse" is a retelling of the father's death in a "room too small/to heave a bed in,/A window too high/to let the yard in,/but perfect for the exit of souls" (3-8). The speaker is trying, again, to reconcile the father-son relationship in a number of ways. The most effective is by repeating the word, father, thus rendering it powerless, at least momentarily. Having returned to the room of his father's death, the speaker remembers the event and, even though removed physically and, somewhat, emotionally, responds in childlike fear: "And my stomach crawls/like a bucketful of live/crabs shaking hands" (XII 19-21).

The most ambivalent of the father poems is "The Christmas Dance," also from *New and Selected*. In a dream-like sequence the son visits his father's grave, paying close attention to the setting in the cemetery (complete with

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contrasting imagery of doves and crows) and remembers the pain of being beaten by the man who is now dead: " . . . he whaled me until/I pissed my pants/because I tarried with a terrapin/and would not scythe briars" (88-91). The son, justifiably, finds some relief by denying identification of the father's name, forcing the dead man to wait for recognition while the speaker adheres to an old ritual, molesting the stone angel on the tombstone: "Before addressing the name,/I finger, as always,/the angel's stony robes/to make the flier masculine" (45-8). At the end of the poem the son chides his father into action: "I list his cruel debits/like a long litany never heard in the church" (141-2), and the dead father responds by rising from his grave and the two join in a Christmas dance "ringed by soft, bowing doves,/wreathed by stiff, stepping crows" (151-2).

One of the most disturbing poems in *Invitation to Kim*, "Leathers" recounts a whipping delivered on the son by a razor strap-wielding father who is honing his child to a "fine edge" (l. 5). While suffering this beating, the son drifts off into an ethereal realm where he contemplates the leather being used, not the beating itself. The speaker has the "wonderful thought/That I love leathers: straps, thongs,/Rawhides to tie with, up, down, and/Together" (6-9). He looks forward to the day when the leather strap of his father will be replaced by other objects made of the same material: a valise, a coat, or a book of poems bound in leather. The pain, and sound of the strap as it makes a "wish swish wish swish" audible pattern in the air, brings the speaker back

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to reality. The father's face has become leather, and the boy, obviously accustomed to these beatings, is content as "Excitement gathers in my loins" (18-20).

"Daddy, You Bastard," also examines the love-hate relationship that the child speaker has with his father. The adult, when angry, is described as having dark eyebrows that "dived together/like two hawks swooping down/on the same prey: poor, whimpering rabbit-boy" (3-6). The speaker says he "grew up in a striped suit," his skin permanently scarred from the many beatings (52). The poem also speaks to the enduring effects of suffering at the father's hands and mental cruelty: "Too short on love too long,/I am still short on love./It would please you to know,/Daddy, you bastard,/That I never exceeded/The cut of my clothes" (55-60).

Also from *Invitation to Kim*, "Poem for William Oscar," begins on a positive note as the child speaker is waked by the father who tells him his breakfast is ready and waiting. The tone of the poem changes, however, when the father is described as having a "salad face--/retinal image in russet//and raw tomato red," a vision the speaker retains when he closes his eyes (10-12). What appears to be an act of kindness of the part of the father is shrouded by what the boy knows to be true: the caring man who prepared the meal is an illusion, and the violent nature of the father may soon be exposed as the boy eats in "hesitant breakfast joy" (36).

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And, finally, a more recent poem exhibits empathy and offers explanation about why William Oscar Scarbrough was such a rough character. In "Ice Storm," a poem dedicated to his father, Scarbrough presents a worn and broken man, beaten into submission by a world that is "still too icy in the old,/Aristocratic way" (14-5). The father is reduced to a "Serf with his feet wrapped//In tow like mauls/To bear witness to the invariable/Command" (9-12). As a sharecropper always dependent on others for work, the male subject of the poem is allowed to do only what those in charge tell him to do. He cannot even express his anger in the open, cold air of the ice storm but must wait until he reaches the shed, safe from the ears of others, before "muttering hate/In vulgar verbs//While his pointed nose/Drips drops of brilliant phlegm/Against the world's orders" (20-4).

B. Sibling-Sized Obloquy

Sibling poems are also present throughout Scarbrough's long career. Little mention is made of the only sister and three brothers—Edith, Pete, Bill, and Blaine—but Lee and Kim are often the subject matter, or audience, for poetry. Lee was the childhood companion and playful tormentor of George, but the great love the poet feels for him is evident. Kim, the youngest of the children, holds a very special place in the writer's heart; Scarbrough readily admits that he tried to be a father figure for the baby of the family.

While a more complete description of Lee appears in Scarbrough's novel, *A Summer Ago*, the feelings that the writer has for this older and wiser sibling

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are most evident in the poetry. "Sonnet for My Brother Lee" appears in the most recent collection, providing not only a tender account of brotherly love but also displaying Scarbrough's sense of humor. In the poem, Lee, the prankster figure in the poet's work, cajoles the speaker into performing stupid acts, all to his own amusement: sitting atop a gate for Lee to practice his aim with a slingshot, or jumping a fence into a "heap of dung/He knew was there for me to land in" (8-9). In each instance the younger boy runs home to tell his mother and makes promises that Lee reminds him are "made to be broken" (12), vows that the speaker will not allow Lee to manipulate him again into activities that are demeaning and dangerous. Or, as mother says in the poem, "He makes a dunce of you,/That brother of yours. Why will you play his fool?" (1-2). But because of the great admiration the younger child feels for his elder sibling, he will do whatever Lee suggests in order to be close to him. Scarbrough writes, "I never learned to distrust him wholly./Loving him, I loved being his fool" (13-14). Again on the subject of Lee, in an uncharacteristically short poem, "Lee's Funeral," Scarbrough relates his feelings at the time of his brother's death. The four line poem reveals in final terms why the speaker of both poems—one a child, the other an adult—came to love Lee so deeply:

> His hands were small and brown and quick as wrens.
>
> All I could think, seeing them stacked thick
>
> As boxing-gloves on the thin breast,

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Was that they never struck me. (198)

A Summer Ago makes clear a very pertinent point: George was his mother's child, and Lee was the father's. But, unlike the aggressive father, Lee's often painful adventures were never out of spite or contempt. In the end the speaker of the poem is struck almost speechless, and the quiet hands, once active and alive, were never raised in anger toward his younger brother.

In what may be one of Scarbrough's best poems, the title piece of *Invitation to Kim* is revealing and poignant. The poem is used as a thread that weaves its way throughout the entire book, with sections repeated in the publication at the beginning of each section. The poem is, indeed, an invitation that serves to welcome the youngest member of the Scarbrough family into George's home, both literally and figuratively. While the words might be read as an apology, a more careful interpretation shows that the long poem serves as an extended explanation of who the older brother really is and what factors made him become the misunderstood black sheep of the family.

Kim is invited into the "house/That George built/Of fetched-together/ Fragments of father-/Made harm, mother-/Minded weal, sibling-/Sized obloquy, cousin-/Crossed odium, and/All the kudos of/The great-aunt kind" (1-10. Kim is asked to try and understand that the speaker of the poem was forced to find a substitute for the love he was denied as a child. In place of spirit and affection, the speaker has turned to words and knowledge, "the

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other/ Name I chose for love" (79-80). The poet pleads with Kim not to be put off by a certain "Effeminacy of manner" (37) as the father had so despised and made point of in the past, but to understand that each person—the speaker included—is unique and peculiar to a certain setting and set of circumstances over which he has no control. The speaker explains the strange decor—peacock feathers' eyes, narrow paths between stacks of books, watercolors, mementos, a house built of metaphor—as being carefully arranged so that the house is indicative of the inhabitant: " . . . such interiors as/Mine are not as accidental/As they seem" (235-38). The poet states, emphatically:

> Come in, Brother. Because
> I love you, I have spent my
> Life trying to teach you
> Two things: How to let a
> Brother live as he will
> And die his own way:
> Two things which are only
> One in the end. (238-45)

The final lines are a plea for acceptance, and invitation to once again "share the think gleanings" that their common family history allows (248). Highly autobiographical, "Invitation to Kim" is an honest effort to find a connection, once again, with the younger brother. Scarbrough tried to be for Kim what his mother had been for him as a boy: the person who points out the smaller

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and subtler things in life and peaks an interest in self-expression. It was a mission that he views as a failure. Scarbrough explains, "I tried to do the same with Kim. And I awakened a spark in Kim that was artistic. He was a very gifted man, but he had to feed his family. He had no choice" (Interview). The poem is also a sincere request of the younger brother to accept the poet in all his diversity, particularly, his sexuality. Scarbrough states, "My brother, Kim, never forgave me for being gay. I found out later that he criticized me sharply to people who knew both of us. He had no capacity to understand the variousness of nature" (Interview).

C. Mother-Minded Weal

The one true human love of Scarbrough's life is his mother. Oddly enough, the poet chose not to write about his mother in the earlier years, likely due to the fact that she lived long after the death of his father, and the mother-son relationship was very strong. Scarbrough was his mother's caregiver for the last fifteen years of her life, even after she needed the full-time attention of a nursing facility where the son traveled daily to feed and comfort her. Scarbrough held her in his arms as she breathed her last breaths. In the later work, however, the strength of Louise Anabel McDowell Scarbrough exerts itself in a number of poems, none of which deal specifically with her life or passing but with the lessons she passed on to her son and their long-lasting influence.

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In “Monday,” the speaker uses floor scrubbing as the controlling metaphor. It is a skill he learned from his mother, passed down to her from her mother: how to “ . . . sand a floor/For scouring but to disdain/The crunch underfoot” (2-4). These lessons go on forever for the speaker, who notes, “Old preachments keep sermonizing” (4), and spill over into other godly qualities, such as cleanliness. Even though the speaker will “Scrub my own pits raw” (9), he never feels he reaches the “godliness/She subscribed to” (11-12) and will never be part of the trinity of family: grandmother, mother, and son.

The poem “Direction” is also about lessons learned and their far-reaching result. The speaker appears as both child and adult in this memory of a correction by the mother to a son who took a book from the neighbor’s home without permission. The boy is chastised by the mother who demands that he return the book at once, admonishing him with this line, “When have I taught you to break in and steal?” (2). As an adult, thinking of doing something forbidden, the speaker remembers the comment from the mother and is instantly reminded of “the way/My relucting feet must go” (14-5).

Always the protector, Scarbrough remembers his mother in a recent poem, published in a 2001 issue of *Poetry*. The piece deals with cause and effect, advice and results, and “The Good Mother” whose wisdom is tested and admired by the son. In very musical writing, the speaker remembers the way his mother, by creative means, kept her son safe. To divert him from crawling under the house, she tells him trolls and thieves live there and he could avoid

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the danger by staying upstairs. When childhood curiosity takes the boy to the edge of a dark and mysterious well, the mother tells him that "an ancient salamander/Folk lived in the depths . . . /waiting for such innocents as/Me to come and look down . . . " (11-15), and to stay away from "deep-/Down water" (20-1). In every instance the boy obeys and learns through his own actions that he will be safe as long as he follows his mother's advice: "I did. And nothing did" (8, 22, 33). In the final two stanzas, the mother has passed into that world that is both marvelous and strange, and the son waits patiently for her to return. The adult voice, however, knows that she will not be back from her berry-picking for the evening meal, and he must wait with great uncertainty for his own death so that he can be once again reunited with the good mother in "the purple glens/I am not yet allowed to enter" (53-4).

In recent years Scarbrough has been writing verse that brings together both the father and mother into the same poem. "Lesson" explores the differences between the two central characters of the poet's life. The overbearing father figure is present, and the mother is, once again, kind, nurturing, and edifying. The father tells the six year old boy, "You know nothing./Nothing at all" (2-3) as he urges him to get ready for the first day of school. The father's words, "blows to the head" (6), spurn the boy into thinking about what he does know, all "(thanks to my mother)" (11). The child realizes that he knows much more than his father gives him credit for, such as which paths to follow, when the wind "Blew in the wrong direction"

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(23), that the "moon rose over the dark mountain/When mother put out the light" (24-5). The boy, in his mind's voice, could tell the father that "darkness/Does not fall but swoops up from/The ground, overwhelming late travelers" (26-8), but does not. Instead, the father's influence proves to be the stronger, and when the child is asked in class what he wants to be as an adult, the speaker answers, "Nothing. Nothing at all" (40).

The voice of "Friendship Cemetery in Summer" is that of a mature and experienced adult who visits the side-by-side graves of his parents, a plot that shares a single headstone in Polk County, Tennessee. All around the speaker is the beauty of nature: "wild rose, the blue pine,/The blackberry, the purple alum" (1-2). These plants "flourish" in the "scented silence" of the graveyard (3-4). To honor his parents, the speaker brings his poetic ability, a product of their influence, to "test the strength of paradigm,/To chase verbs like rabbits" (7-8), but finds that words fail "in an earth/Without grammar:/Where all sentences end/In the same parsing" (10-13). The son's hope to express through words what he feels is powerless in the presence of the life of the cemetery. Verbs that he could once chase like rabbits are now replaced with real rabbits, and the natural processes of life and death are "All present and accounted for/In the wordless wind" (19-20).

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Chapter 4: Songs of Defiance to Death

Scarbrough turned to language, out of necessity, at an early age. His first memories are of words because they were recognized and appreciated as the tools with which the world around him could be explained, described, and deciphered. That purpose is the most elementary for Scarbrough, and it is an attitude about language that served its user in the first years of life. As a maturing poet, Scarbrough took language to another level and recognized that for him words were more than communication. By his own admission, words have formed the perameters of his life; they became, and still exist today, the medium through which he understands everything. Scarbrough writes in a journal entry:

> Words give us the only order we have: the only forms—social, political, religious, et cetera—we know anything about. There are no systems outside language . . . The only world I have ever known is a world of words, a world I can make disappear by repeating words over and over until all meaning escapes them. That is, I have only a verbal version of things, and as its creator I have the power of its destruction. (I-159)

Because words are so vital to him, Scarbrough attempts to shape the language of his poems in ways that are unique and, often, extraordinary. In the same way that Scarbrough is not a poet of place but *is* the place about which he writes, he also becomes emotionally invested in the words he

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chooses to use in his work. Or, as Forrest Gander has noted, "Scarbrough discovered that language itself was freedom" (112).

In "County Lullabye," this close association is made through the purest of metaphor, the combination of two words into one that speaks with even more clarity than mere association allows. The poem is a strenuous exercise in creation, the welding together of words to give each more meaning and make the new compound unique. Consider these single words made of two: *bonelight, treechange, grassemerald, stumpdark, housedark, calmlight.* Each new word not only has the meanings of its parts but also suggests a deeper meaning that must be gleaned from the forceful application of the two original roots. Scarbrough jams the words together, and this process is not unlike the country habit of making our own jams and jellies by combining essential elements to produce a desirable mixture. A jar of pure blackberry jam contains fruit and sugar. The finished product of boiling these two items together and reducing them to their real essence is identical to what Scarbrough does in "County Lullabye" with two words. The jam is still only blackberries and sugar, but it is more than that now: it also represents the best of what both have to offer. Likewise, Scarbrough's jam of words—*stumpdark* is a perfect example—produces an amalgam that combines a common object, the tree stump, with light, or the lack of it. The condition created yields a different kind of darkness, an elemental blackness of the sort

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described in the poem, "My Grandfather Said," (in *Invitation to Kim*) where the poet records what he discovered as a child trapped in a tree at night.

> All I learned is
> that night doesn't fall.
> It comes from the ground
> like black smoke rising.
> And there I sat,
> thinking to follow
> the last light down
> from the other direction! (20-21)

The child stranded in the top of that tree as shadows rise from the ground is experiencing, firsthand, *stumpdark*.

In dozens of entries the journals confirm how important language is to Scarbrough, who places a value on words that is at once common and extraordinary. Of course, words are essential because he is a poet, but they also represent his connection to the world around him, the people with whom he must co-exist, his past and present, and his memories. Scarbrough explains in his journal:

> Only one thing in my life has been constant: my interest in words. I should say "devotion" to words—for it has been a devotion, rarely known, I suspect, except among the more megalomaniacally linguistic

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> lovers who have always come to people by way of words rather than the reverse. (2:270)

And in another entry, Scarbrough equates words with survival, especially during those dark times after health problems or when, as Frost wrote in "Birches," we are "weary of considerations." Scarbrough has a long-standing habit of learning a new word every day. While most people are eating breakfast or commuting to work, Scarbrough is immersed in a dictionary, finding his new word, poring over its possible meanings, and discovering that through this process of constant edification, he is pushing death away from the door. From the journal: "Each time I meet a new word, I feel alive again. Looking it up is like a song of defiance to death" (H-6).

These new words, these "songs of defiance to death," of course make their way into the poetry. But it is in their usage that we find another unique quality of Scarbrough's poetry. It is also a facet of his work that has drawn some negative criticism. While saluting Scarbrough at the beginning of his literary career, and finding much more right than wrong with his first book, *Tellico Blue*, Sara Henderson Hay did point out in *The Saturday Review*, "Sometimes his work is marred, I think, by a sort of studied intellectualism, that modern tendency to be impressively oblique or obscure. . . . " (38). Robert Phillips also mentions this criticism but explains it away:

> Most reviewers have thought well of Scarbrough's accomplishment. The only complaint with any consistency is that the erudition of the

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> language seems not to fit with the rural imagery and the emphasis on family. Scarbrough apparently recognizes that, but for him language is what enables the poet to find or achieve order. (422)

While this may be true, the critics who fault Scarbrough only see him as a poet and not as a linguist. Scarbrough attempts, especially in description, to find the perfect word, not simply a word that will do. This loyalty to what language is in its truest form produces poetry not unlike that of Emily Dickinson, who worked from imagery and then sought the consummate words for her description. Wallace Stevens is also strict in his usage and devotion to language that challenges the reader as well as the poet.

Most critics have considered this word-play a strength in Scarbrough's poetry. In his essay "Poets After Midcentury," James Justus equates Scarbrough's word choice with the experimental and recognizes this quality as a technique that removes the poet from the "bucolics of Jesse Stuart or the more skewed pastorals of Robert Frost, a tradition in which earlier readers were content to place him" (552). Justus finds the intricacies of Scarbrough's language to be part of the poet's maturation process. He writes:

> Yet the poetic style that gradually evolves . . . is one that comes from the caressing cultivation of words for their own value and the sheer joy of indulgence in exotic diction, an indulgence that can make *intrados*, *wiffle*, and *riverine* as domesticated as *mule* and *plough*. (552)

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Edward Francisco views the use of formal language to describe the ordinary as one more of Scarbrough's particular talents that serve to add another dimension to his poems:

> I know of no living poet, and certainly no poet since Allen Tate, able to use the vernacular and the formal to more heightened effect than Scarbrough. Sometimes the combination creates a necessary distance between the poet and the experience being described. Each utterance is taut but elastic like a fish line subtending a current. (922)

And with same obvious appreciation for what Scarbrough is attempting to do, Gander comments:

> However various their forms, Scarbrough's poems are all remarkable for a vocabulary so richly sonorous, so elegant and exact, they have few contemporary equals. What he is after, he says, is a language "the size of life." (110)

As evidence of this sonorous vocabulary, consider these obscure but lyrical words that are contained within the pages of the Pulitzer Prize nominated book, *Invitation to Kim*: *pejorative, askance, plangency, gravid, consanguineous, lepidopterist, blandished, decrescent, starveling, chaffy, indurated, cozens, fricative, stithy, manumitted, lambrequin, palinged, exudation, hawsered, gaumed, contemn, trivium,* and *bivium*. Reading Scarbrough requires one to have a dictionary close at hand, and to make of the margins a personal slate where extended definitions of certain words may

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be half as long as the poem itself. Such study is not an easy task, but it is a rewarding one. To further challenge the reader, Scarbrough does not always use the most obvious definition but opts instead for a subtle application that serves to make even richer the texture of his verse. An extension of his self-described "devotion" to words, Scarbrough approaches his work like a lover who wants to know every sensual detail about the body of the poem, and he appeals to the reader through every sensuous possibility.

How does a poet make the transition from being in love with language to having a love affair with the written and spoken word? This development process is often the subject of Scarbrough's writing. In "Several Scenes from Act One," a prose piece in *New and Selected Poems*, Scarbrough explains how language was integral to his earliest memories. In the following passage, the poet remembers his father delivering to him a child's bucket and spade, gifts from a neighbor. There apparently was, however, no explanation from the father, just a handing-over of the playthings. Scarbrough went to his mother to receive the words that explained the gift:

> I felt uncomfortable under his (the father's) dark gaze and went immediately to my mother who found words to describe the miracle of spade and bucket; and I trusted in words. I lived words for the first time then, I believe, for previously I do not remember speech of any kind. I loved my mother because of her words. I did not understand my

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> father because he had none, or did not use any I could at the time comprehend. (15).

From "Several More Scenes," also prose from *New and Selected Poems*, Scarbrough explains how words began to set this young poet apart from the people around him. Words were soon to become, by his very devotion to them, the quality that made him different. The people around him did not always understand this love of language because for most of them words were a hindrance; country folk found other ways to express themselves. And understandably, many of those people with whom Scarbrough associated could not fathom how a young mountain child could have come so early to be enamored of words. Scarbrough writes:

> Words helped to make me a loner, from the start. The daily rhymes of a mountain child became the lever that prised me apart from the common round of talk and half-realized association, into no talk at all, or as little as I could afford, and association meriting the name only because I came and went, shy and vexed, among the larger figures in my home. (19)

This obsession with words kept getting in the way of his relationships with family members, especially his father, and even caused him to fail at manual tasks because Scarbrough's mind was often consumed with whatever he happened to be reading at the time. In his essay, "My Mother Language, My Father Tongue," Scarbrough writes:

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> I recall once riding the cultivator up and down the river bottom half a morning without letting the gangs down, my thoughts tending towards home where a battered old copy of *The Scottish Chiefs* was waiting for me at the noon hour. Suddenly a clod whizzed past my head and my father bellowed, "Get your ass off of that cultivator and get to the house. You ain't worth your weight in cold dog manure. Hell's bells, what have I done to deserve this?" (28-29)

Scarbrough's father, a man's man who used language like a cattle prod, immediately deemed his son's seeming lack of interest in physical labor to be a sign of femininity. As Scarbrough remembers, his father said, adding insult to injury, "'Put your apron on, and help get dinner. You ain't fit fer anything else?'" (29).

Despite the harshness of his father's words, which were juxtaposed with his mother's calmer, soothing expressions, Scarbrough did gain from his parents the primary tools necessary to become a poet, and from an early age he recognized that words could serve at least two purposes. In the same essay Scarbrough describes his mother as a "realist" who was "gestaltic by nature" and taught him how to recognize color, shape, and form. Yet it was from his father that Scarbrough learned metaphor:

> From my part-Indian father, whose cheekbones crowded his eyes almost out of sight, I learned a stock of descriptions which fitted all these things but seldom told me anything but poetry about them. . . . I

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> surmise, my penchant for poetry may have had its beginning with him rather than with my mother, for I wanted a whole set of replacements for his expressions and so turned early to a study of words. . . . So, in the beginning was indeed the word, her word and his, or his before hers, and tied to both words, my own. (29)

In Scarbrough's novel *A Summer Ago* words also are given a place of prominence and serve as the tool in this coming-of-age story by which we can judge certain aspects of the protagonist's maturity. When, near the end of the book, Alan recognizes that his pet bull will, by necessity, have to be sold at the auction in town, he accepts the fact and finds comfort in the knowledge that money from the sale will be given him to purchase a complete set of books for the coming school year, a luxury Alan has never before enjoyed. In a literal sense, Alan chooses words—the words in his new textbooks—over the farm life; he decides that books are more important to him than Buckeye, the young bull he has loved and fed to near maturity. When he returns home from town, books in hand, Alan is ecstatic; the scene is perhaps the happiest in the novel—at least for the boy who has come-of-age through his giving up the beloved animal in exchange for his already recognized passion, words:

> "Mom!" he shouted, bursting into the frontroom. "Mom! I got all my books and Lee got all his books and you got a new dress with blue ribbons in it!" (214)

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At this point, with Alan's exclamation of delight that both he and his brother have books instead of Buckeye, the novel ends.

Just as explanation for his love of words finds its way into the prose, the poetry is also inundated with references to language and how vital it is to Scarbrough's existence and work as a poet. Later in life Scarbrough would write again about ploughing, this time a breaking plough, not a cultivator. But the more mature poet (in *Invitation to Kim*) does not forget to let down the plough point as he compares writing to the springtime ritual of turning over the ground in the poem "Ploughing." The earth becomes his own personal history of language from which the poet must roll "grubs of poems out/to the lank/light." The language of earth is made up of "tattered dictions," "the roughest usage of tongues," "the serf's sniffle of verbs," and the "rottenest eggs of words," all gathered together in an attempt to describe the "stooping killdeer's/withering cry" (55-56).

Another poem, "Summer Revival: Brush Arbor" in *Invitation to Kim*, recounts a childhood memory, that of attending a church service. In the same way that the young man's fascination with his parents' language helps him understand the inherent power of words, so does the preacher's "wild and wonderful" sermon: "His word's improbable beauty brought us down/To wallow gorgeously before him in the brown/Brush of his summer church" (39). The young listener experiences the omnipotent nature of words as the sermon makes the surroundings pale by comparison, even though there is beauty

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everywhere. The church-goer learns that "Being a soul is also beautiful," but that is through the words of the minister that this notion becomes real, imaginable, and important.

In another childhood memory poem, this one, too, from *Invitation to Kim*, the experience of finding a prehistoric relic becomes real only through its connection to words. In "Implication," Scarbrough perceives language in every object, from the most common to, in this case, the most rare:

> . . . I found
> A trilobitic stone with the look
> Of language on it, and in a dry
>
> Biblical county stood like a man
> With a slab ordained to be interpreted
> To a beleaguered people, but covered
> It back with red leaves for safe-
> Keeping on the mountain. (50)

The allusion to Moses is a fitting one, but here the speaker does not take it upon himself to deliver the word to the displaced Israelites; instead he leaves the message on the mountain to be found later by some other prophet. This is the true mission of the poet as Scarbrough sees it: not to be a prophet who interprets the implications of what is written, but to be someone who writes the words and leaves them behind for others to find—or who stands

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admonished by the fear of what his father has taught him about the power of words. Later in the poem, the young man dismisses an opportunity to speak with a local hermit, who is also a lover of words, as the speaker learns by spying through a window and seeing the lonely old man reading a favorite book. Just as the speaker, a failed Moses, leaves the trilobitic stone on the mountain top, he refrains from using words because of what his father said: "'Keep your mouth shut, boy./We have no portion here'" (51).

The title poem in *Invitation to Kim* offers in purest form a glimpse of Scarbrough as apologist. Just as the poem attempts to reconcile the brother to the life of the poet, it also offers further insight into the role language plays in Scarbrough's life. The poet tells Kim:

> Put the books on the floor,
>
> These chairs are never
>
> Sat in. Clear a place
>
> On the table for the prized
>
> Cup, and take care when
>
> You walk the narrow paths
>
> Of this house. Reading
>
> Was the rede I followed,
>
> Finding in the letter
>
> The spirit that escapes
>
> The law. (3-4)

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Only a few lines later we learn that, for Scarbrough, reading equals knowledge, and knowledge equals love. How can one have a more intimate relationship with language?

Another important aspect of Scarbrough's relationship with words is that they connect him directly with the past, particularly with his own ancestors. In "Calligraphy" (from *Invitation to Kim*) Scarbrough laments the lack of physical contact he had with the maternal grandfather whom he never knew but can only imagine through scraps of words left behind. In this case, the clue is his grandfather's name, written in his own hand in calligraphy inside a blue velvet box that contains the deceased doctor's stethoscope. Scarbrough, while he is pleased to have these items in his possession, is still not satisfied and thus inquires, who was this man? The speaker says:

> These were my progenitor's.
>
> That should be satisfying enough. But it is
>
> Not. I need more than a ticked box from a man who
>
> Swam leagues of mountain inland from the Cape
>
> To reach me but did not arrive, drowning before
>
> In some interim valley, the letter unwritten,
>
> The poem I am told he was capable of, unpenned. (107)

The grandson needs more and admits to having tried to compensate for the absence of a personal relationship with his grandfather by writing of him in

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his own words, using language he felt his grandfather might have chosen. Scarbrough refers to an earlier piece, "The Private Papers of J.L. McDowell," as the poem in which he "cheated." In the end, the only tie Scarbrough has with Dr. McDowell is the written word, this time the signature in calligraphy that his grandfather penned, three words—*Joseph Leander McDowell*—that stand symbolically in place of the man, and in response to which the poet comments on his own advancing age. Scarbrough writes, "An artful script then is all/I have to speak to—beside which my own crabbed hand/Is mazed as sparrow tracks in smudged snow" (108). The grandson-poet needs to make a deeper connection and refers, finally, to the grandfather as "metaphor man."

Just as words link Scarbrough to his own past, language also offers a tangible possibility of eternal life, a link with the future. Scarbrough plays with this idea in "Small Poem," from *Invitation to Kim*. In this work the poet realizes that the daily struggles of writing are worth the effort or, as Faulkner said, " . . . worth the agony and the sweat." If the poet can, through his own efforts—"fixing the right word/daily nail-like into/its post"—leave something behind of merit, then he has cheated death, or as Scarbrough writes, "a man could/eventually go away/without leaving" (118). Since Scarbrough has no biological offspring, the poems become his children, the next generation that carries with it the genes of the past. And in this case, the genetic makeup is the word.

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Chapter 5: A Small, Comfortable World

"To make an art for a county on the rim of a rock has been all my intent" (P-84). Scarbrough recorded this thought, one of many about why he is a writer, in the pages of his journal. From the outset of his literary life, which he says began at age twelve and has continued daily since, Scarbrough has had a larger purpose in mind than being merely viewed as a regional writer. Art is a higher calling than simple recollection through description, an aim never satisfying to Scarbrough. The art he is so intent on creating is made clear in another journal entry:

> My friend insists that art imitates life. I tell him No. That art imitates nothing. Art is. Is itself. A moment of evanescence caught from the midst of the grim, bloody mess life is. A sudden scintillant light on a leaf, under which a battle to the death is closed. What shines on the leaf is art; what happens underneath is life. . . . The artist catches this over and above the ordinary and preserves it for us in words, in paint, in metal, in whatever his medium is. (I-44)

Scarbrough's work can be gauged using his own definition. Does it have the qualities of artistic endeavor? Does it have longevity? Does it have the capabilities of producing in the reader a universal response, regardless of how tiny the poet's world may seem to be? If so, then Scarbrough is an artist, and with that title comes the responsibility of being more than regional, more than just another poet rooted deeply in a specific landscape.

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Early attempts to establish Scarbrough as simply a regional writer have long been forgotten. Most critics offering comments today recognize that Scarbrough is a poet whose work is dependent on place, but also give him credit as being capable of great range in terms of what he is able to do with this small plot of ground. Scarbrough's work is much larger than an actual place alone will allow, so he has created, for the sake of art, a mythical county, much like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County of northern Mississippi, from which he can examine human nature and trace the roots that make everyone part of this common species. Yes, Scarbrough, especially in his fiction and poetry through *Invitation to Kim*, has written almost exclusively about this area of Tennessee, the southeastern-most corner, commonly called Eastanalle. But, again, like Faulkner, this county may or may not be real in all its details; it serves not as a region, but as a microcosm of all humankind. With this notion in mind, Scarbrough's work must be approached with more latitude than simple regionalism allows.

In a scene from *A Summer Ago*, Scarbrough's only novel, the writer firmly establishes that his sense of place has boundaries but, at the same time, asserts the idea that any place can be examined from all angles and that an area, real or mythic, can be viewed as a small world inside a bottle. While traveling with his brother, Lee, to pick muscadines from an old vine tangled in a large tree, Alan, the protagonist and Scarbrough's persona in the novel, makes a discovery:

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> Not far from the tree, Alan stopped to examine a bottle lying in the ditch. Pointing upward, so that its mouth had received a small portion of washing earth, the greenish-clear glass had become a miniature garden. Inside it Alan could see a small expanse of moss, with its scarlet-headed beards, a tiny fern, perfectly formed, beautiful as its adult kind, a white fragment of pebble, and most interesting of all, a young snail, whose white limy casing gleamed against the darker background. It was a perfect world, he thought, for the snail; a small, comfortable world, like the walls of a beloved room close around and protecting. (200)

The world created inside that bottle is, in many ways, identical to the world Scarbrough creates for his readers. It is complete, it is varied, and it is, at least in one sense, inclusive. Once formed, this accidental terrarium can survive on its own merits, create its own oxygen and moisture in quantities sufficient to maintain life. Scarbrough's mythic county, located somewhere in the Eastanalle, is a microcosm replete with life and the often unusual people who inhabit it. The landscape, a veritable breeding ground of images and symbols, is omnipresent. Scarbrough notes in the journal, "The natural symbol is an outgrowth of place" (K-21). Because it is a symbol, natural or otherwise, it must carry with it qualities of universality. It is in the choice of his images and symbols that Scarbrough moves beyond the limitations of regionalism—and its dreaded stepbrother, local color—to create literature

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that can appeal to anyone, not simply those peculiar to Tennessee, or even the South.

In an apparent attempt to define place as a factor in writing, the Southern Appalachian Writers Cooperative submitted a short essay to the *Appalachian Journal* in 1976. Oddly enough, the statement appears immediately following an essay by Scarbrough in the same issue, and reads:

> "The connection to place" is *not* synonymous with provincialism, nor with local color. Great writing has always had its roots in the concrete reality of place—from Troy through Dublin and Yoknapatawpha to Tamalpais. The universal significance of man's experience is communicable only through the localized utterance. (34)

This mission statement is central to what Scarbrough does as a writer: he sees within the geographical limits of his world all the major subjects that are so prominent in literature—love, death, nature, struggle, loss, defeat, happiness, victory, religion . . . the list is endless. Place, then, serves as the backdrop, while the great dance of humanity goes on in the foreground. This is one quality that makes Scarbrough's work universal.

Forrest Gander recognizes the universality of Scarbrough's poetry. While the landscape "infuses his writing," Gander sees that it could be any landscape, for Scarbrough is simply using his place as a post from which he examines all humankind (109). The inhabitants of this world are so closely connected to place that they become "neither more nor less than/a walking

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berry," as Scarbrough describes them in the "Dedication to the Book" at the beginning of *New and Selected Poems*. Speaking of the poet's epistemology, Gander writes:

> . . . the natural world is the first order from which the merely human devolves. Both the world of human relationships and the domain of memory are fixed, for him, in a landscape of wild upland groves, vine and stalk, bastard figs, gooseberries and muscadines, a world of "almost/pure chlorophyl" . . . (109-10)

Adding to this idea of place as the beginning of humankind's lessening, Gander states emphatically that Scarbrough "believes . . . as the poet Frank Stanford once said, the way a field is planted matters less than the quality of the yield" (111). This quality of yield is another of the factors that make Scarbrough's poetry universal: any rich soil, properly cared for, will produce a favorable and substantial crop that anyone can enjoy.

In that vein, Scarbrough's first published efforts received similar criticism. Sara Henderson Hay, in her *Saturday Review* commentary on *Tellico Blue*, made it clear that the young poet, then only in his thirties, was more than a regionalist. While granting that Scarbrough wrote out of a specific place, Hay added that the poems

> are not simple objective lyrics about a locality and its people, however; like Frost, Mr. Scarbrough gives a deeper significance to a familiar

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> landscape or fact, a double meaning to what seems on the surface a single observation. (38)

Dan Leidig draws connections between Scarbrough's place, and the images that resonate from it, in his review of *A Summer Ago*, pointing out that the writing is also larger than the landscape, even when the genre is fiction. Addressing the universal nature of the novel's setting, Leidig equates the fictional county with the Biblical garden from which all life was supposed to have sprung. He writes:

> the imagery that graces the world of *A Summer Ago* and extends into the poetry is alive with import. No garden is more prominent in Scarbrough country than is Eden. These persistent thematic patterns forever preclude definitions of Scarbrough in terms of regionalism only. His perceptive distinctions and connections between garden and flight, pride and love, sign and symbol, gesture and act, word and Word ought not be omitted from a serious reading of his work. (388)

Scarbrough dismisses the idea that he is another of the regional writers in his "Sidelights" comments for the *Contemporary Authors* series. It is clear in his statements that he hopes for something larger than regional attention, suggesting that his role as writer is to take what he has been given in terms of place in order to offer it to the reader as a small piece of something much larger:

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> I am a kind of writing spider that catches only what his net is capable of catching—which means, only, that I am limited in my own time, place, and my sense of values of these. I am not a regional writer. I am a southern writer, with a difference: that difference being that I was born north of the majority of slavery, in the shadow of the southern Appalachians, not of the mountains but nurtured by them. I wish to write out for America what it meant to be such an individual in such a time and in such a place. (474)

Central to this effort to establish Scarbrough as a poet of place have been suggestions that he is a member of the Agrarian group. It is a term often mentioned when Scarbrough's work is being discussed, but there are more elements to his poetry that separate it from the Agrarian movement than connect it, not to mention the fact that Scarbrough is much younger than most original Agrarians. Perhaps Charles Edward Eaton said it best, "Enough affinities with Ransom, Tate, and Warren may indeed be buried in the poems so that a case might be made for Scarbrough's being the 'last of the Agrarians,' or perhaps the *latest* would be better, since we hope for the best" (xx). Eaton suggests that Scarbrough is on the outer edge of the Agrarian movement, not actually a part of it.

In fact, Scarbrough has found himself at the edge of many movements. His earliest poetry, which was imitative in style and took the shape of accepted forms such as the sonnet, was published just as the country saw

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new directions in verse. During the period when Scarbrough's first three books were published, America was reading Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, e e cummings and Wallace Stevens, writers who favored innovation over convention. Scarbrough's style placed him at the edge of the modern movement in American letters. When the U.S. was producing poets of the sixties and seventies whose work was highly introspective and deeply personal, Scarbrough was just beginning to take a more casual stance; *New and Selected Poems* contains verse written without paying homage to traditional forms. The problem with placing Scarbrough in a box is that he does not fit, and that is due to the fact that his career has been so long—half a century—and he does not feel a need to acknowledge an alliance with any recognized movement. He even shuns being called an Appalachian poet since he grew up and has lived in the shadow of the mountains rather than in the hills, hollows, and highlands commonly associated with those writers.

As to being an Agrarian, Scarbrough admits that he is agrarian, but not in the sense that the word is used in various criticism. Scarbrough has agrarian concerns, but the difference between him and the group that wrote *I'll Take My Stand*, published in 1930 when Scarbrough was only fifteen years old, is one of principle and purpose. The Agrarian movement, according to Lloyd Davis, had "become increasingly concerned with social developments in the South, chiefly the incursion of the idea of 'progress' pushed by the encroachment of the industrial complex and the business community" (27).

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Willbanks sees the thrust of the movement, and especially the essays of their treatise as as much philosophical and political as artistic, with a concerted effort to establish the Southern lifestyle as preferable over what the immigrating North had to offer. That has never been Scarbrough's aim. In another journal entry, he addresses this label:

> I may be the last of the Agrarians, as some have said. I wouldn't know about that. I am, so far as I am able to gauge, the first true Agrarian, knowing whereof I speak, having been there, naked to mine enemies, on the land. . . . I would not want readers to think I imagined myself heir to the *I'll Take My Stand* authors. If others choose to think so, it is all right with me. But the stand I have taken is purely private in nature: not to let the lives of my family go for nothing. (Z-95)

Scarbrough also illustrates what he feels is his relationship with the aristocracy of the South, which he sees as the breeding ground for the Agrarian movement. In the *Contemporary Authors* comments, Scarbrough says, "As a born dirt farmer, I have dirt, soil, under my nails" (474). He does equate that image with the Agrarians, asserting instead that writers like Warren, Ransom, and Tate were the wealthy landowners whose households he served as the son of an itinerant sharecropper. In another journal entry, he writes:

> I was the other side of the agrarian south as exemplified by most of the members of that group. I was the cabin in the field side, the

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> sharecropper side, not the big house, the manorial side. I could see the white building on the hill, and now and then, selling blackberries at backdoors, see through white-curtained windows the shining world within, which I supported, I and my kind, by backbreaking labor in hot and cold fields of the seasons. (Z-93)

With this almost rebellious attitude, it is easy to see why Scarbrough wants to distance himself from the Agrarians of Nashville. He feels he has nothing in common with them, except in a role of servitude. Scarbrough's poetry does not endeavor to establish the poverty-stricken lifestyle of Polk County as an example of the South at its best, but instead—as an observer and recorder—struggles to capture in words the people and their region. This is especially true of his early poetry, which alternates between lyric expressions of nature, and the poet's fascination with the unique, and often peculiar, people of his county.

In the author's preface to the second edition of *Tellico Blue*, re-released by Iris Press in 1999 to mark the book's fiftieth anniversary, Scarbrough turns his immediate attention to place and, in one sentence, re-establishes his cosmos:

> After fifty years the mountains are still in place, still blue with distance, peaked and ridged, rivered, still rife with memory, still the habitation of wild boars, bears, deer. . . . The earth remained dearer to some of us because of its remoteness. During the war years, those of us

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> who for one reason or another never left the county . . . grew even closer to the old landscapes. . . . Polk County remained off the beaten path, becoming even more isolated as the interstate highways by-passed it on their way south. (xi)

Tellico Blue is a celebration of this landscape and its inhabitants, and its animals, both human and otherwise, are the subject matter of the poems. With the publication of the first edition in 1949, Scarbrough firmly established himself as a poet of place. Two poems from the text provide perfect examples.

In "Eastward in Eastanalle," Scarbrough refers to his landscape as the "heart's world," a land "Of the spirit" (1-2). In the tradition of American poetry began by Whitman in the previous century, Scarbrough becomes the namer, and by so doing, attempts to establish the importance of the objects he finds around him: "cedar-colored skies," "clouds as white as skulls," the "tender land," the "indiscriminate land," which claims each inhabitant as its own, as its "children." Scarbrough states that the region "Deals impartially in indistinctions,/And is kind and open to interpretations/Various as men who love it." Because the land is open for interpretation, the poet takes advantage of the landscape in his efforts to describe it and, like Whitman, finds meaning in the descriptions, in his understanding of the world through image.

In "The Lark," a lyrical poem about the everpresence of nature, Scarbrough further establishes the importance of place by allowing days and

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events to pass in relation to what is going on in the world around him. The natural progression becomes, then, his calendar by which he marks memory, particularly the death of a childhood friend, Reuben. The wandering boy comes upon a group of men under a grove of sycamore trees, who understand, momentarily, the loss the boy has suffered. The speaker of the poem is then swept up in the world around him, oblivious to the men, and remarks on the passage of time in a sudden realization:

> Suddenly blazing against the sides of a wondrously
> Green valley, the Eastanalle sycamores
> Have numbered seven springs since Reuben died;
> And rivers breaking on this tilted world
> Have poured their April waters seven times
> Into our valley; and bright-green cedars
> Darkened seven times to ancient blue.
> Yet they, the elders, are not much misled.
> Spring never changes, only the face of spring. (58-66)

By paying such close attention to the landscape, the speaker comes to understand that everyday occurrences—even death—are simply part of a larger, more worldly picture. While changes are sure to happen again and again in the human realm, nature will remain constant; Spring will forever come and go in the great cycle of the natural world.

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People, too, become inextricably bound to a place to such a degree that it becomes impossible to separate one from the other. The characters that earn Scarbrough's attention are those who are slightly left of center, eccentrics who seem to be a by-product of the region. Their qualities are shaped from having lived in the same area all their lives, and this influence sometimes presents itself in the most peculiar of ways. In "Story," the poet introduces an unnamed character who lies in bed and shoots his gun "with small direction at the sky" (4). The man is under the control of place, labeling with bullet holes all four compass directions while "Lying toes-up the total length of summer" (11). Because the man is believed dangerous—and because walking near his home is, indeed, risky—the community avoids him, reducing him to fodder for gossip. Only when the shooting stops for more than a week do the neighbors, referred to in the poem as a "posse," venture close and then inside the "sieved room freckled with sun" (16).

And in another poem from *Tellico Blue*, man and landscape become caught in a struggle of control. Mr. Wyatt, from "The Creek," is a local who forbids the children to swim in a stream on his property. The poem sets up an interesting conflict between the young boys and the landowner who, in his carelessness, falls victim to his own design and is killed by his own bull. In his efforts to control nature—access to the creek and the powerful bull—the man fails and the boys are triumphant. Following Mr. Wyatt's death, the wife buries her husband and sells the bull, making it possible once again for the

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youths to enjoy the cool water of the stream. Wyatt's death, and his failure to manipulate surroundings to his own purpose, opens a door to the natural world which is rife with imagery for both the swimmers and the poet. The boys can once again "climb in the beeches/Or wade the creek to its source in the iris,/Pale and palpitant under the wild green willows . . . (10-12).

The poetry from *New and Selected Poems* offers a more mature look at place. In one of the longer poems, "The House Where Rivers Join: Confluence of Ocoee and Hiwassee," the controlling image is the structure itself, but in a more philosophical mode, Scarbrough comes to terms with his own idea of place. The poem establishes the region, Eastanalle, not only in terms of particulars such as "Pancake hills, earth droplets,/cones, quartz-glittering knolls/are fringing landscape," but as part of a much larger picture, the world as a whole (I 26-8). The microcosm, the mythical county, becomes the universe for the poet: "Then, the greater room I/lived in, all unknowing, was/the green-walled room/of a county's limitations" (III 76-9). The confluence of two rivers, which creates a mystical coloring when the waters meet, is simply one of the "limitations," a boundary by which the poet can delineate one edge of place. The county is a source of comfort for the speaker of the poem because he can firmly establish its boundaries and accept all of its vastness as home. The final lines of the poem speak to this level of acceptance and to the satisfaction of being a willing participant: "I have

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drawn the breath/of a mazed, enraptured anchorite,/couched in the elegant cave/of my county mind" (IX 54-7).

Scarbrough later revisits this idea in "Tenantry" from *Invitation to Kim.* The poem focuses on the life of an itinerant farm family that is constantly moving from one house to another, never staying long enough at any one site to truly make it a home. Instead, the county in which all these houses are located becomes home, or in other words, the world becomes home for a family eternally in motion: "It was the measurable/pleasurable earth/that was home" (17-19). The speaker of the poem, a youth with the convenience of omniscient experience, can look back and see that "Where it stood,/it stood in earth,/and the earth welcomed us,/open, gateless,/one place as another" (34-8). Making use of a Biblical allusion to Christ's promise that he would go ahead to make ready a place in God's house of many rooms, Scarbrough writes, " . . . because the county/was only a mansion/kind of dwelling/in which there were many rooms./We only moved from one/room to another,/getting acquainted/with the whole house" (43-51).

Scarbrough is making several points about the importance of place in his writing. By creating this county as his own personal cosmos, Scarbrough provides for himself a vast source of images and interesting characters. Because the "county" is symbolic of the larger world, the poet invites readers to recollect their own experiences by sharing his as both participant and observer. The emotional investment Scarbrough places in the poems is

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universal since humanity, as a whole, harbors the same feelings. The ubiquitous nature of a mythical location provides the common ground on which Scarbrough can successfully "make an art for a county on the rim of a rock."

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1. *George Addison Scarbrough, at age thirty, from the poet's photo collection.*

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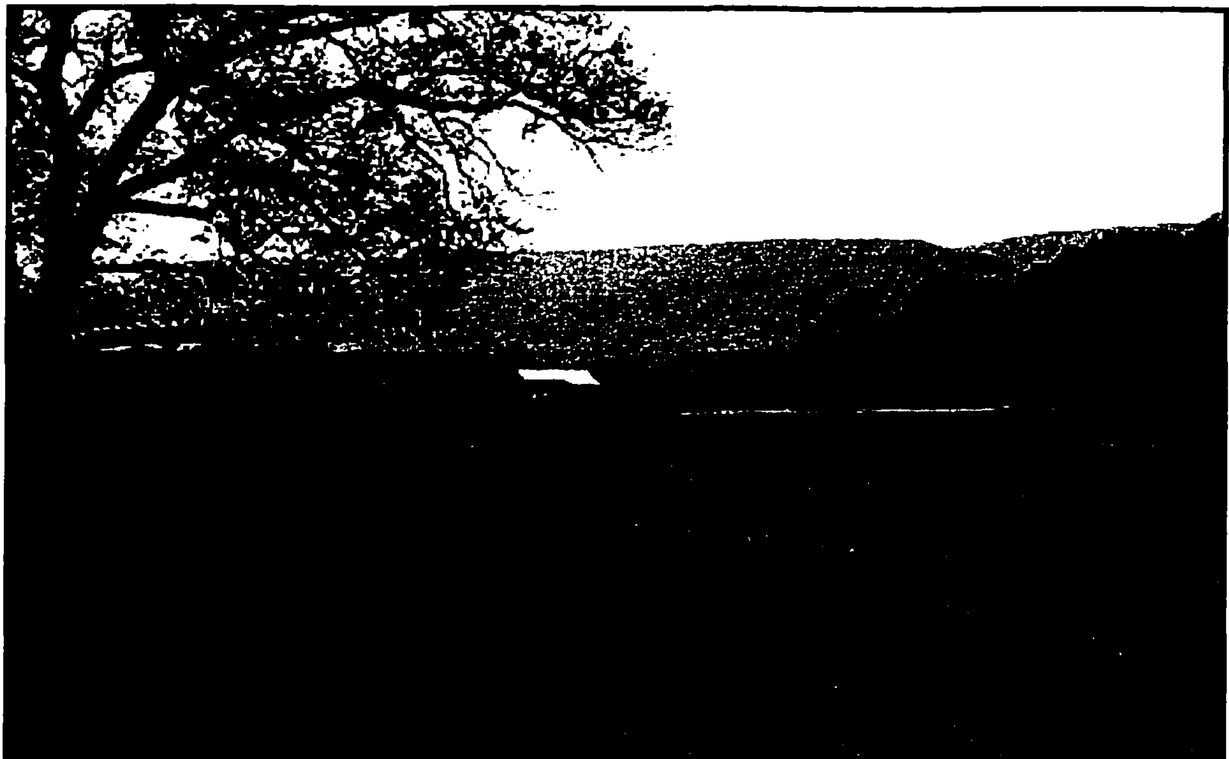
2. *Polk County, Tennessee: above, what Scarbrough calls "the essence of the Polk County I knew."* **3.** *below, the county landscape today is virtually unchanged. Top photo from Scarbrough's collection; bottom photo by author.*



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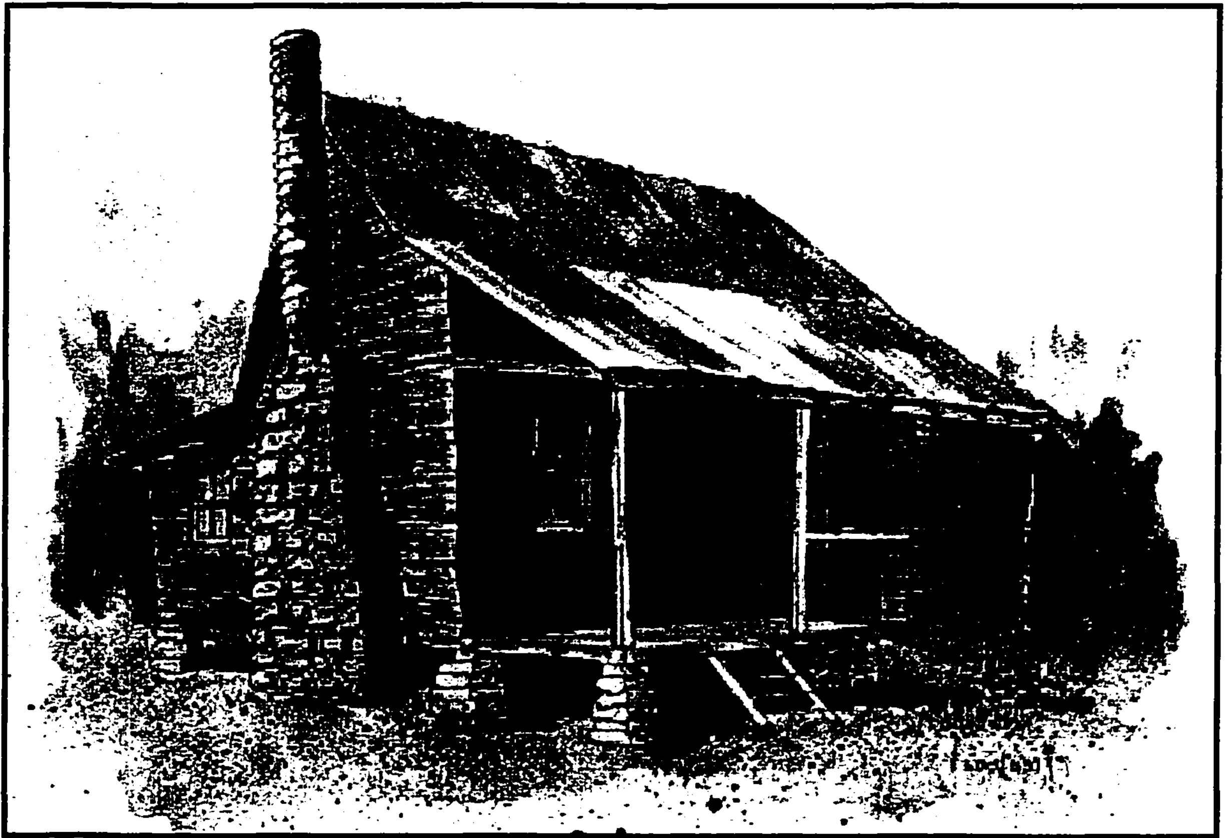
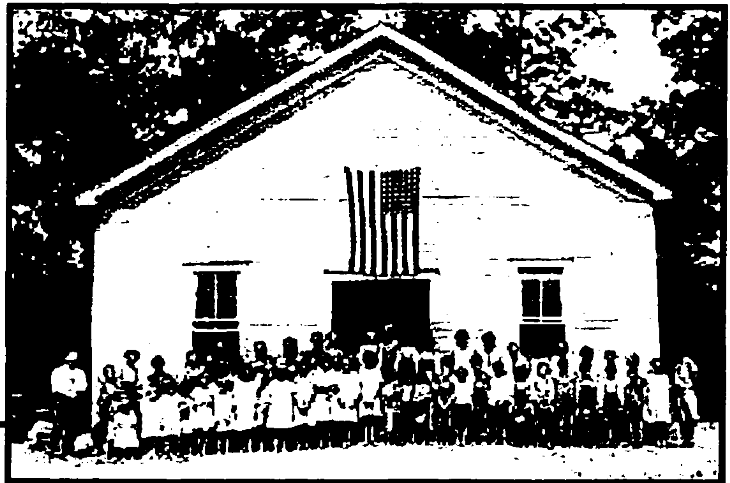


4. *The rendering of the cabin pictured above is by Scarbrough; it is the sharecropper's house where he was born, Patty Station, TN.*

5. *At right, Polk County's Oak Grove School, which Scarbrough calls "the worst scenario of my non-education."*



6. *A team of mules pulling a plow, an activity Scarbrough remembers well from his youth.*

All photos on this page from Scarbrough's collection.

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7. *Above, the old "Iron Horse" locomotive that haunted the young Scarbrough's dreams, and serves as a central image in his only novel,* A Summer Ago. 8. *Below, the train still runs daily through Polk County, Tennessee, and is pictured here near the community of Patty Station. Top photo from poet's collection; bottom photo by author.*

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9. *Friendship Church in rural Polk County. Scarbrough's parents, William Oscar and Louise Anabel McDowell, are buried in the church cemetery. Scarbrough will be buried here, beside his mother.* **10.** *The parents' tombstone is pictured below.*

Photos by author.

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11. *At the Arts and Education Council Conference on Southern Literature, held in April, 2001, in Chattanooga, and sponsored by the Fellowship of Southern Writers, Scarbrough receiving the James Still Award from novelist and FSW member Lee Smith (above).*
12. *Scarbrough participating (at right) in a panel discussion, flanked by John McManus and Mary Hood.*

Photos by the author.

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13. *Ancient Chinese poet, Han-Shan, and his companion, Shi-te (with broom), an original ink drawing by Dylan Thomas Mackin, based on a seventeenth century painting. The framed original was a gift to Scarbrough from the artist.*

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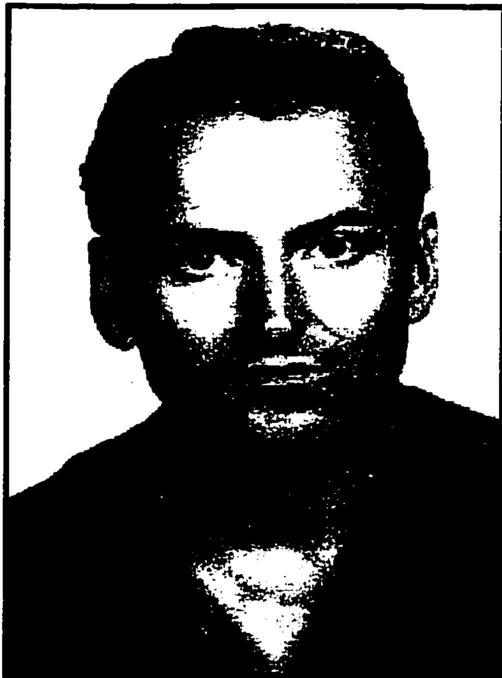

14. *Scarbrough's passport photo, 1951, top left (from the poet's collection).* **15.** *Top right, Scarbrough in the early 80's, signing a copy of* New and Selected Poems, *on the front porch of his Oak Ridge home.* **16.** *At left, the poet, February 23, 2000, at his home, before a sketch of himself at an earlier age, and beside his much-used unabridged dictionary.*

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Chapter 6: The Novel

Scarbrough's only novel, *A Summer Ago*, has received the least critical analysis of any of his work. This is due to the fact that Scarbrough had spent his career establishing himself as a poet, with three volumes published by the time *A Summer Ago* was released by St. Luke's Press in 1986. The book followed *New and Selected Poems* by almost a decade, and students of Scarbrough's work expected another collection of recent poems, not a prose recollection of childhood. But, in many ways, the novel is not simply prose. The same immaculate attention to language is evident in this book as well, and those critics who did review the novel were quick to make that observation.

In what may be the most careful of critical analyses on Scarbrough to date, Dan Leidig had both favorable and unfavorable comments about the novel. He recognizes what Scarbrough was attempting to do: recreate a more innocent time of youthful amazement and coming-of-age. Leidig does not fault the writer on these endeavors; he finds problems only in certain technical aspects of the book, which he refers to as more an "all-encompassing prose memory from which—for half a century—his poems have been departing and returning" (384). In other words, a reader could approach the novel as an extended prose poem written by a "senior and established poet" (384). The weaknesses, according to Leidig:

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> It should be said that beneath the metaphorical and linguistic brilliance of *A Summer Ago* there is a less-seasoned methodology than is to be found in the deft, crafted poems. The uneven omniscience, the tendency to transpose to a lad the seasoned conceptualizations of an adult, and the use of transparent devices to account for the boy's wide knowledge present some problems. Scarbrough's dramatic sense is better realized in his imagery than in the advancement of narrative, and the book's "enduring sense of the earth" may well identify also its limitations as "fiction." (388)

Robert L. Phillips makes similar statements in his comments on the novel, suggesting that the book is more akin to a collection of memories from childhood and relies on the remembered events more than it does on generally accepted rules of narrative. Phillips writes:

> *A Summer Ago* is an autobiographical episodic novel, more a series of sketches than a narrative. . . . Time—the passing of summer and the growth of the calf that will be sold in the fall for school books—provides the the narrative framework. Typical activities of the children of farmers . . . are the acts that tie the narrator—an agrarian—to the living, reproducing earth. He, time, and the physical world make a harmonious whole. (421)

In a journal entry Scarbrough wrote his own criticism of *A Summer Ago* which sounds strangely familiar to the comments made by Phillips and

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Leidig. The journal entry, however, establishes the novel as an experiment, a conscious leap from poetry to prose in order to achieve a desired effect by creating independent episodes that are connected but not dependent on each other. Scarbrough writes:

> I wrote each episode so that it was complete in itself as it might be, without impinging on what had gone before or what would come after. In a sense there is very little, or almost no, plot present in the book. There is a kind of plot that overshadows the story, or stories, but it is a plot of place and time and not of event: the geography of space and of location bind together what otherwise might appear to be short stories threaded on an apparent rather than a real thread. (A-255)

Regardless of how one approaches the novel, it has value on a number of levels. First and foremost is the use of language to recreate the world of Scarbrough's youth, complete with all the humor and pain of his own family's, and other families', dependence on subsistent farming. Second, the novel offers clear details about the activities which fill the months from April to September: berry picking, apple harvesting, crop tending, church revivals, skinny-dipping at the local swimming hole, and caring for farm animals. Third, the book is a collection of country knowledge: remedies, humor, stories, sayings, preparation of food stuffs for the coming winter; if Scarbrough is regional in any sense, it is through the observations and re-telling of these acts peculiar to that region of Appalachia. While the novel is not (ala the

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Foxfire books) a how-to guide for making molasses or kraut, it does offer enough information to allow the reader to understand such processes, at least as far as the protagonist, twelve-year-old Alan, can comprehend. Fourth, the novel has the strong underlying themes of the best coming of age stories. Alan is, at times, simply amazed at how his world works, how it is forever changing, while concurrently dealing with his own burgeoning sexuality and curiosity about life and death questions, particularly "the serpent principle." Fifth, and most interesting of all the elements to be found in *A Summer Ago*, the novel offers Scarbrough an invitation, which he accepts, to romanticize his youth. The demanding but pastoral life on the McDowell farm of the novel is a pleasant contrast to the real-life experiences of Scarbrough as a boy.

A. Language

The same richness of language that has become a benchmark of Scarbrough's poetry is also at work in *A Summer Ago*. The linguistic achievement of the novel indicates that it was written by an adult looking back at childhood through the senses of a practiced poet with a polished vocabulary. Consider these lines from a scene in which Alan has taken a cotton sack of corn to the mill for grinding:

> Alan wandered about in the cool, dusky light of the building, seeing, high up, the small-paned, cobwebby windows through which the daylight came softened, almost drained of the sun blazing outside. Brown beams, ancient and shaped by the wielder of some long since

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> dulled axe, were strung above him, showing the strength of mortice and tenon and here and there the square heads of the iron nails used to hold the building together. There was the smell of cornshucks and cobs everywhere he went in the dim interior, as well as the faint ammoniac odor of urine. He recognized rats, seeing their gnawed holes everywhere in the planking of the floor and the lower walls. A few of the larger holes had been boarded up with tin bucket lids; others, smaller, had pieces of tough corncobs stuck into them, like so many corked, flat-topped jugs, stoppered and containing the furtive, whiskered lives of the animals trapped behind the panels. (12-13)

No matter how precocious the child, these are not the spoken aloud memories and observations of Alan as a near teenager but the constructed recollection of an older, ominiscient narrator.

In an interview with Jerry Williamson, Scarbrough said of the novel, "*A Summer Ago* was an honest-to-God attempt to reconstruct a sort of coming-of-age tale of a boy twelve years old growing up in the Eastanalle Valley" (35). Scarbrough suggests that the novel was carefully crafted, "an honest-to-God" effort. What the poet did not tell Williamson was this information, recorded in his journal, which makes the quality of language in *A Summer Ago* even more amazing: "I wrote my novel, *A Summer Ago*, straight through in two weeks, and never re-read it nor changed a word." The process of composing this near one hundred thousand word book must have been exhausting,

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because Scarbrough adds, "I do not wish to write 'novels' anymore" (I-113). In another entry Scarbrough claims that he never read the book after publication—that he does not "know what is in the book. But that is all right," since *A Summer Ago* is a "closed account" (A-255). In fact, because of his refusal to re-write the novel, at the behest of Houghton-Mifflin, to make it more salable, Scarbrough turned down the opportunity to have the novel released by a major publisher. St. Luke's Press published the book ten years after it was written, apparently in its original form.

As David Rogers mentions in his review of the novel, language is key to Alan's discoveries. He is clearly a budding poet, and it is in this summer, in particular, that language becomes most important to the twelve year old boy. Rogers explains:

> "The growth of a poet's mind" is so implied in every scene it scarcely needs to be stated. But as well as the unfolding of the poet's consciousness, *being* itself is the subject, for the world the poet awakes to is alive with ontological electricity. (1)

The source of this electrical charge of knowledge is due not only to the myriad occurrences that happen during the six months of the book but to the realization that the way we comprehend these happenings is through words, both those we speak in description and those that are spoken to us as way of explanation. Alan, like Scarbrough, learns to appreciate language by hearing the words of his mother and father. Almost verbatim from an earlier essay by

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Scarbrough, "My Mother Language, My Father Tongue," Alan "believed he loved his mother because of her words and that he did not understand his father because his father had none. . . . " (54). Scarbrough explains further in this same passage:

> Alan's mother might with words make color drip and cry; his father could with words make, not only color, but the forces of darkness and evil as well, appear and disappear in a chameleon world like a magician practicing a sleight of hands. (54)

As an addendum to the power of his parents' words, Alan listens and absorbs the words of those other people in the community, particularly the minister, and neighbor John Wade. While both men espouse their ideas the way preachers sometimes do, the revival speaker delivers his message from the pulpit and John Wade on horseback when he takes Alan home early from the revival service. The Reverend Musgrove's words are powerful because they speak of things to come, terrible things for those who are not ready for the afterlife. Scarbrough captures the flavor of a real fire and brimstone sermon:

> "Neighbors," he shouted, "on that great and awful day what will your answers be? What will you say then to the questions of salvation and eternity? Nothing, my friends. For it will be too late. The old account will have long been settled, and you will be divided, to the left, to the right, some into eternal morning, some into the blackness of hell and

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> utter despair. Will you be on the right hand of the King coming in glory? Decide my friends. The Judgment Day is coming. The time is at hand. Make ye straight the pathway of the Lord. Be ready! O be ready!" he repeated, his voice rising until it filled the room with a terrifying roar. (176).

Neighbor Wade, also in attendance at the heated revival, decides it is time to go home and offers Alan a horseback ride to his house. On the way, Wade's words juxtapose the minister's in terms of time but offer an almost opposite, pleasing alternative to the preacher's apocalyptic view. Wade's sermon from the mount, which Alan finds powerful, perhaps even more so than the minister's, is also fashioned with words:

> "I'd tell the people that every day is judgment day, so far as we are concerned. Every sundown is the ending of the world and every morning is a new creation, with a new chance for us to make seven new and better worlds in a week, with the best perhaps on Sunday when we could just sit and think about the worlds we had made, and pick the best from all of them to make the last world in the week. And then, when we got to heaven, that last world of all, we could just sit and make it from our memory of the best of all the worlds we had made on earth." (177-78)

Having received two sermons in one evening, Alan is left to choose which best suits his view of this world and the next. He clearly prefers the message of

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John Wade; it is more comforting and places more emphasis on Alan's immediate environment. In terms of the boy's exposure, the important lesson is that not only worlds can be created through language; so can eternity. Alan interprets this insight as the poet should: words are the medium through which everything is described and understood.

Not all of Scarbrough's attention to language in *A Summer Ago* is dedicated to the examples already offered. The novelist collects and allows his characters to use a vast assortment of country sayings, many of which are as figurative as poetry itself. Scarbrough's personal journals are filled with little rhymes, often bawdy, that reduce a situation to its most basic elements in an effort to entertain. *A Summer Ago* also is quite unique because of the author's ability to use the phrases at just the right moment. By including these "one-liners" in the novel, Scarbrough recreates even more accurately the vernacular of his family and friends, offering a humorous glimpse at how the local language was sometimes twisted for the sake of embellishment.

Some of the sayings are responses or admonitions, most often delivered by the father or Lee, Alan's country-wise brother who is three years his senior. When Alan asks his father if Buckeye, his pet bull, is growing horns, Oscar McDowell does not just answer yes but says instead, "Chickens have feathers, don't they?" (9) And when Alan is caught daydreaming instead of removing the choke of dodder from a crop of lespedeza, Lee says, "Snap out of it. Any jackass can go to sleep standing up. It's going to be dark before we get this

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danged dodder done," adding as a tease, because he knew Alan's teacher, Miss Woodson, had praised a recent poem by the younger brother, "How's that for poetry, son?" (24). Another example from Lee is offered when Alan is again caught thinking instead of doing and has left his brother waiting impatiently. Lee says, "Come on. . . . Get your clothes on. . . . Stop standing there naked as a jaybird, and hop to it. Boy, you're slower than the seven-year itch" (84).

Supporting Scarbrough's statement in "My Mother Language, My Father Tongue" that he learned metaphor from his father, the patriarchal figure Oscar McDowell also uses colorful, descriptive phrases as a natural part of his speech patterns. When describing the aggressive billy goat, Can-Can, Oscar says, "That goat butts coming and going, hind part and fore, and wrong side out" (37). When Alan, during another mental wandering, considers the sillyness of hens and compares them to a hog that will "charge back and forth all morning right past the hole where he got out, and never think of returning to the pen," his own thoughts are replaced by the word-memory of his father's expression: "'A hog," said Oscar, "doesn't have the sense of a last year's bird's nest'" (84). And out of the oral tradition of tall tales, Oscar is even more descriptive when he explains to a neighbor that Alan is not a good shot with a pistol and recounts an episode in which Alan was trying to kill a snake in the spring. Alan had missed so badly that Oscar had to exaggerate

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to explain: "About knocked the spring dry . . . If the snake died, I suspect he starved for water" (42).

Finally, the phrases associated with country folk are often used to express one's philosophy. An example of this usage is found in the passage when Alan takes a sack of corn to Mr. Wyatt, a shade tree philosopher who offers the boy bits of wisdom. After he has ground the corn into meal, Mr. Wyatt says, "The staff of life, son. . . . Man's history is a long breadline" (14). Before Alan leaves the mill he visits the upstairs room to view stacks of old coffins that the miller once built for local families. Sensing Alan's fear in the semi-darkness, Mr. Wyatt uses his apron to wipe the dust off the window and says, "You see, boy. . . . Things are mostly what you make them. Light is a marvelous thing for cleaning up the corners of a dark room, or of a man's mind, for that matter" (15). And from John Wade, Alan overhears another statement of philosophy: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks . . . We bark the way we were raised to bark" (43). Just as Scarbrough has, for many years, catalogued these expressions in his journals, Alan does much the same, storing the figurative language in the mind of a young poet learning the mechanics and limitless capabilities of words.

B. April to September

As stated earlier, *A Summer Ago* is not a *Foxfire* book written for those without a real experience of the country life. What the novel offers in terms of importance is an accurate portrayal of the activities engaged by a farm

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family that was trying to eke out an existence with what they had at hand. More valuable is that the reader sees these events through Alan's eyes; by experiencing via a twelve year old boy, the mundane becomes extraordinary. Even though Alan has apparently been depended upon for chores and for a helping hand when, for instance, the staples for winter had been prepared and preserved, this summer is different. Because Alan is coming-of-age, the acts carry more meaning than ever before. It is as if Alan sees through new eyes, and the excitement is passed on vividly through Scarbrough's attention to detail and clear description. All of this is an effort on the part of the author to recreate the lifestyle of his youth and to assign some import to the fascinating, though simple, East Tennessee farmstead.

Equally significant is what Alan learns from being around the people involved in the activities. When his family, and all of the neighboring families, spend a week at John Wade's to make molasses, the community takes on a holiday atmosphere, even though the work is difficult and painstaking. Alan is more caught up in the stories that the men tell than he is in the slow process of cooking down the sorghum cane juice from one vat to another until the sweet thick liquid is seined into bright silver buckets to be stored for the winter table. Likewise, when Alan and Lee help their mother Belle shred cabbage for the gray crock that would pickle the kraut, Alan's real pleasure is in watching his mother's skilled hands layer the cabbage with just the right amount salt, or in studying the cabbage itself and its

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"arrangement of leaves about the central spine, finding the formation curiously like that in a section of sea shell he had seen in a book at school" (103). Also tied into these practices is the overshadow of tradition. John Wade always makes molasses for the community for he is the recognized master. Likewise, Alan is sent to wash the large white rock that his mother has used year after year to weigh down the pickling kraut. These self-sustaining preparations are part of a ritual that has been practiced for generations, and for the first time, the maturing Alan recognizes this importance.

Not all of the chores are pleasant, but all seem rewarding. Alan is amazed by his mother's skill at stuffing a tick mattress. An annual event, usually in July, the process receives a great deal of attention by Scarbrough for one simple reason: he sees it as an act of love, which is more important to Alan than necessity. After freeing the ticks of clinging straw, Belle boils them in an outdoor washkettle and then hangs them on the clothesline to dry. Later, in the cool of the evening, Belle would stuff them with clean straw to make the beds the best they could be. Scarbrough writes:

> Her beds were the objects almost of devotion. They must be evenly packed in the beginning, and carefully, evenly re-arranged each morning of the year. It was also her proud belief that she kept the cleanest beds in the valley. To that end, between the washing of the ticks and the filling, the wooden bedsteads had been scalded with a

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> strong solution of the lye water, and stood now drying in the sun against the side of the house. (76)

Most of Belle's actions, like this one involving the annual and daily care of the straw mattresses, are viewed as indicative of the care she took to provide for her family, a dedication not easily realized but one that Scarbrough admires through the reactions of Alan.

These farm concerns also provide a sense of continuity in the novel. The reader realizes that one act follows another, that everything is a means to an end, and each subsequent activity depends on some other that has occurred previously. In this example, the washing of ticks and beds was made possible only because the family had already produced its lye soap. This astringent requires the attention of everyone; Alan and Lee care for the ash hopper, through which water is drained and from which the odorous leachate is collected. (As presented in the novel, lye was just as important as food because it had sundry uses. Not only is it mixed with melted lard to make soap, but in various compounds could be used to tan leather, and Oscar is quick to note that lye is good for hogs: "Keeps them from being wormy" [74].) The fascination for Alan is that his family is practicing chemistry on an elemental scale. He knows that later in life this will be another discipline which he can learn, but for now:

> He was still rather baffled by the undercover world of chemistry, and feeling that he had more to unlearn than learn, he stooped and thrust

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> a finger into the lye, running richer now that the ashes were becoming saturated in the lower half of the barrel. His finger burned. Whatever it was, the power of the stuff was not to be doubted. (74)

C. Country Knowledge

Another unusual offering in the novel is the use of home remedies. Alan and his brother are so familiar with this part of farm life that they even play a game in which one of them names an ailment and the other names the cure. (Most cures come from the wild plants of the hillside.) When the flora fail to produce the needed effect, it would appear that country folk use whatever was at hand, including kerosene, or "coal-oil" as it is called in the novel, which works as a universal agent to clean wounds or repel chiggers. And when none of these cures are effective, there is always folklore to provide imaginery relief. On one of their outings, this time to pick blackberries on the Fourth of July, the boys have a conversation that is both informative and funny. Alan is clearly the more knowledgeable of the two, having gained his information about the healing power of plants from his mother. He shows off for Lee, having for once the upper hand, and tells his brother that calamus root soaked in whiskey will cure a bellyache and that Jerusalem Oak seeds in molasses will get rid of worms. Then Alan asks:

> "Suppose you had the piles, what would you do?"
>
> "I'd carry a rotten buckeye in my pocket," Lee said. "And I wear a rabbit's foot around my neck, and I hide a horsehair under a rock in

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the creek. That's what I'd do. And any other slaphappy thing I could think of. Come on!"

"No, you wouldn't," Alan said, walking rapidly along behind him. "You'd carry a buckeye. The rabbit's foot is only for luck, and the horsehair would turn into a snake."

"Says you," Lee retorted. "And all the other old witches!" (100-01)

The shift, at the end of the passage, into folklore is not a great leap. The novel is filled with examples of ancient practices that were supposed to have proven results. Lee, feeling for the first time an attraction to members of the opposite sex, is versed in matters of love. For example, he reminds Alan that if you want to know your girlfriend's feelings toward you, "put a piece of lovevine on a fencepost and [if] it grows, your girl loves you. It's better than mullein for truth" (22). The McDowell boys are, obviously, as aware of the hand-me-down legends as they are the true medicinal qualities of the plants growing around them.

D. Coming of Age

Scarbrough examines a number of themes in the novel, and it is through a thematic approach that the reader sees how much maturity Alan gains during this one summer. Alan is more than usually curious about why the world is the way it is. In *A Summer Ago* the twelve year old boy tries to come to terms with several issues that have apparently been of concern for some time. Among these are the "serpent principle," death, religion, and the

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interconnectedness of life, and his own beginning sexuality. These problems for Alan are often exposed through the action of the novel, but the subconscious is at work, too, as Alan has disturbing dream sequences that are, to say the least, confusing to his young mind.

Alan learns of the "serpent principle" from his mother. After one of their afternoon walks, Alan and Belle came upon a family; the man stood in the road in a fit of near panic, all because of a snake. The unnamed individual asks Alan to kill the snake and he does, whipping it to death with a cane. Afterwards, Alan asks Belle why the people were so alarmed, and Belle answers, "Their whole lives . . . are bound up in the serpent principle" (23). In this summer of many snakes, more in number than usual according to Oscar, the image of serpents abounds in the novel. Alan comes to realize the connection between the human race and snakes, stretching back to the Old Testament account of Adam and Eve, in which Satan appeared first to them in form of a serpent. This new knowledge makes clear to Alan why human beings are so typically afraid of snakes, but he still sees them as beautiful creatures, not to be feared, but respected. As a symbol in the novel the snake is everpresent. Warnings to the boys are issued by both mother and father to be careful when afield because of the danger that an abundance of reptiles presents. Lee has matured to the point that he fears snakes because of their potential threat, but Alan, still a boy, is fascinated not only with the fanged possibilities and, as a young poet, sees their symbolic value as well:

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"Obviously there was a great deal more to snakes than just the snakes themselves. He tried to fit the pieces of the snake puzzle together" (23). The symbol becomes very real when Alan sees a traveling preacher in town, a snake-handler, a "ragged, wild-eyed man" who has a "rattlesnake wound about his extended arm"; in the other hand he holds a Bible. The scene continues:

> As the preacher exhorted the crowd, the snake moved with the motion of his arm, licking out its tongue above the heads of the crowd, whose faces were turned upward shining with an exuberant, glorious horror, mingled with dread and fear. On them all was the look of a terrible happiness. (24)

Later that day, when Alan asks his mother about the spectacle, she replies, "The snake is still the symbol of man's lost glory. . . . So he is taken up as an act of faith. For by faith, evil may be embraced without harm" (24). All this information is puzzling to Alan, but the boy begins to realize that the serpent is central to human fear because it dates back to the beginning of time.

When Alan and Lee are gathering muscadines, Alan climbs a large tree to shake the berries to the ground and "Something heavy, like a part of the vine itself, came loose and warped the ground," landing half in and half out of the basket that Lee was using to gather the fruit (201). It is a large black racer that was more afraid of the boys than the boys were of the snake, and Lee

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chased it unsuccessfully with a stick. Because the boys are still partially unaware of the fear that grips most people when they see a snake, he and Lee reject the serpent. In doing so the snake is just a snake, not a dark, foreboding symbol of man's fall. Scarbrough includes this scene to show the innocence of youth not yet corrupted by the sins of the world.

Tied closely with the "serpent principle" and the age of innocence is, of course, religion. Much of what Alan learns during the summer about religion comes from the church he attends regularly, the minister's message at the funeral of a cousin, and the revival service. What is evident in Alan's thoughts is an unconscious movement toward a view not necessarily consistent with his Bible teachings but in line with what Alan has witnessed in his father's belief system. Quoting the following passage from the novel, David Rogers writes that it could be "used as the source of a new humanism, for it places humanity at the center of things" (5):

> That these forces were in and of his father's own nature, Alan seemed to recognize; the world, for him as for most of us, centered in the light and darkness of the human beings that surrounded him. . . . The boy finds in his father his beginning and periphery, and in his mother his center and circumference; and these dimensions from point to outpost, are the universe. And so become, through the personal characteristics of those who furnish them, the universal attitude towards the living mote named the human mind. The universe, as such, does not and will

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> never count. Only sons and daughters, and their sons and daughters, furnish the sky with any place to fall. (54-5)

While these are clearly more Scarbrough's thoughts than Alan's, it is an expanded view of what the boy is becoming, again spoken through the voice of a later, mature, and skeptical adult. It is, Scarbrough suggests, a more logical approach to the world and one in line with the outlook of Oscar McDowell, and perhaps, even Alan.

Death becomes very real in this summer life of Alan McDowell. A cousin, Reuben, who is also one of Alan's closest friends and favored playmates, dies suddenly of summer dysentery; "He wasted to death through his bowels," Belle explains (69). The boys are about the same age and had been together only a few days before Reuben's death. As was the custom, the family attends the wake, and while Alan has most likely been around death and dying on the farm, the loss of Reuben has a profound effect on the boy. It causes indescribable emotions in him, but they are something short of grief. He does not want to see his dead cousin and finds the entire situation very uncomfortable, but he is shoved into the room by his father who insists that Alan pay his respects:

> In the room, full of the sounds of summer flies and bad colds, shouldered by clutches of ornamental grasses come from God knows where, Alan viewed his cousin, the small, pale master, opulent-eyed, who seemed with silver stare to be assaying the live boy, looking him

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> up and down, until Alan could no longer bear it. He looked away, through the window, into the bare yard, where a tuft of grass helped him to stature in this new community. The dime in his pocket scalded his thigh. (57).

Shortly after what must be Alan's first real experience of the death of someone close to him, the reader learns that Belle is pregnant. While the boys are never told they are to expect a sibling, it becomes evident when the mother's belly begins to swell and she has more and more difficulty performing her daily duties. In this way the death of Reuben and the life of the new baby become for Alan the completion of the cycle: Reuben's death is counter-balanced with the birth of a new brother. The realization is another element in this coming-of-age story.

With almost every passing occurrence, Alan has fitful nights of dreams, all connected somehow to the train that screams its way through the Eastanalle. The train is presented as a symbol in the novel's prologue, when Alan and Lee walk a great distance to watch the train enter Walden Valley. Its presence and power have an unnerving effect on Alan, who is seeing the locomotive for the first time. As a young boy whose entire existence has been linked to his small corner of the world, the train represents everything foreign to this safe microcosm, or as Scarbrough writes, "Something from out there was coming in" (7). Alan does not know how to react; his response is completely the opposite of Lee's—Lee has seen the train before and does not

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feel any fear associated with its presence. But, for Alan, the train will become the vehicle of his dreams, the first of which occurs the same evening: "That night he woke screaming from his sleep, cowering down in his bed, hiding under the quilts. No one had any notion why he kept repeating, 'The train! The train! The train!'" (8). The catalyst of the fear is in the train's omnipotence. While watching the engine and its cars move into the valley, Alan cannot explain why he wants to lash out at the train and prove that he is stronger than this intruder in an effort to protect not only himself but his world:

> He was sick with fright, wanting for some terrible reason to run forward shouting and fling himself under the swift-pistoning wheels of the train, to beat upon the great black engine with his hands. The huge walk and stride of the train compelled him. Perhaps he could turn it over with one strong, upsurging heave of his shoulders. Shuddering, he turned his eyes against the gray planks of the shack that served as station, sick with a fear that he might obey his impulse, white and weak with a fear that beat is dusty wings over his trembling body and told him not to be afraid. (8)

Scarbrough uses this symbol in an extremely effective way, allowing the train to become more and more real in Alan's imagination by taking on various forms synonymous with the boy's most recent experiences. For instance, following Reuben's funeral the train comes to Alan in a nightmare

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and its boxcars have become plain pine coffins like those he saw at Mr. Wyatt's mill and the double engines at the front were "shaped like a human body, head and shoulders approaching first" (59).

The train, however, is not always associated with the terrible. After Alan's initial fear has abated—after the boy has matured to the point that the engine's power is understood—he allows the train to become a present reminder that a world exists outside his own. This acceptance is part of Alan's maturation process, and near the end of the summer he sees the train as a source of potential rather than intrusion; in other words, the train, Alan comprehends, really is not a threat to his security:

> Not only had the train dominated the days; time and time again it had crept into the valley dreams, bringing with it, especially to the young, visions of the great journeys youth dreams of taking. To some, it was a reminder of a journey taken and gladly done with, a going in earlier years that had been bitterly disappointing and a return, secretly glad and determined, to the valley to resume old ties, old ways. To Alan, somehow, the train became commingled with all the events of his life, as a herald announcing and as a goad to remembrance. The lonely sound of the train gave him an indefinable heartache. (133-34)

Innocence is again key to Scarbrough's treatment of Alan's awareness of sex. The episodes are usually underlined with humor or involve animals, since Alan, like most farmboys, learns about sex by watching the antics of the

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livestock. In one example, Alan throws a stick of firewood at Clockwork, the rooster, because he has been terrorizing the family puppy, Pretty Boy. Belle corrects Alan and warns him to be careful not to kill the rooster. Alan responds, "What difference would it make? He doesn't lay eggs." Belle explains clinically, "The eggs wouldn't hatch. There has to be one good rooster in every flock to fertilize the eggs" (91). Alan's gradual introduction to sexuality is still in its genesis; because none of the adults really talk about sex, he has more questions than answers, but does realize one basic truth:

> It was a male and female world, Alan knew. Rooster and hen, bull and cow, horse and mare, man and woman. He had learned this much from the baby calves and pigs, and pups and chickens and kittens. His own mother was going to have a baby brother, he hoped. But there were still a good many things he didn't understand. So far as Lee and Ira Wade were concerned, what they said in his presence only confused and shamed him, they made their talk so secretive and dark and forbidden. If sex was so wrong, he wondered, why were his own parents involved? (91-2)

From Lee and his best friend, Ira, then, Alan is receiving mixed messages; the older boys offer hints about sex but due to their own lack of knowledge cannot really help clear up Alan's confusion. When the boys are together at the local swimming hole, the subject of conversation always turns to sex and is supported by the presence of the skinny-dipping youngsters. As Alan and

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Lee arrive at the pool they notice Ira's pants hanging from a plum tree. The fly, which is open, is framing a trumpet vine. Ira remarks, "The tree of life, buddy! . . . The real, living vine!" (80). But Ira's discourses on sex are more embarrassing for Alan than they are informative:

> Ira had been a point in Alan's education, a pivot on which his summer world had turned, the larger boy furnishing some items in particular thinking for which Alan was not yet completely ready. Ira himself was a comprehensive lecture in the subject he was most physically demonstrative of. So Alan, engulfed in shame, ran with the body he was criminal with, being no nakeder than he thought, shielding himself with territorial hands when a finger would have done, against Ira's soaring laughter. The allusions to his body were intolerable to Alan. (80)

While it is clear that Alan is innocent in his shame, the allusion to the Garden of Eden is important. Alan stands naked before Ira, the local god of all things sexual, and must endure the wrath that boys inflict on one another. The awareness that his own body is, somehow, sexual is the source of the shame, for Alan is becoming a sexual creature, too, though he does not understand the process.

E. Romanticizing His Youth

Unfortunately, the events of *A Summer Ago* are quite a bit more idyllic than the actualities of Scarbrough's own youth. It might be said that Alan's

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childhood is perhaps what Scarbrough wishes his childhood had been. The reader may see the circumstances of the novel as demanding, both in terms of physical labor and the slight callousness to which Alan is oftentimes subjected. But these episodes in the novel are romanticized; the equivalent real events were much more brutal, especially when they concerned Scarbrough's real life father, Oscar. The same cannot be said about the mother-son relationship. Belle is clearly patterned after the author's mother, Louise Anabel McDowell Scarbrough, complete with the caring attention she paid to her son, George. Just as Alan has the closer relationship with his mother in the novel, Scarbrough saw himself as his mother's child, while Lee, the name of the brother in both the book and in real life, is the son of the father.

This dichotomy is most evident in a disturbing scene from the novel. It is reminiscent of several journal accounts that recall Oscar Scarbrough's refusal to accept George as his own, and the gloating Oscar exhibited in praise of Lee. In this scene, John Wade's rooster has come into the McDowell yard one too many times to lure the chickens to another location, away from their own nests, which will result in a loss of valuable egg production. When Old Shag struts onto the McDowell property, Oscar becomes enraged, picks up a hoe, and strikes "across the red-gold feathers of the rooster's neck, hushing his invitation" (69). Oscar calls Lee, not Alan, to dispose of the rooster's carcass. A couple of days later, while the family is at breakfast, they hear the familiar

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gobbling sound of Old Shag and realize that Oscar's attempt to kill the bird had only addled him. This time, Oscar sends Lee not to dispose of the remains, but kill the rooster outright—"properly this time," Oscar instructs—and also orders Alan to go with Lee to "help him" (70). This event must be immediate, or the McDowells run the risk of having John Wade discover that his prize rooster has been killed. Alan stands by and watches:

> But Lee did not hesitate, being the child of his father. He crashed into the rooster with his young hands, fighting the thresh and beat of the bird until he found the feet, and then, sitting almost on the golden spread of the wing, like a gnome squatting on a golden pallet, with a field stone he beat the head into silence and blood.
>
> Alan, his mother's child, fled downhill, seeing around him in the trees and over and under him in the sky and in the grass, a terrible mosaic of flaring neck feathers and a crooked, bleeding beak. Never again, he felt would he feel exactly related to his obedient brother. (70)

The most painful encounters between Scarbrough and his father are transmuted in the novel. When Buckeye, Alan's pet bull that will be sold at the end of summer so Alan can purchase books for school, begins showing signs of horn growth and exhibits aggression only towards Oscar, the father announces that the horns will have to be sawed. When Oscar's ineptness almost kills the young bull, Alan is disgusted at his father's inability to do anything right. Instead of using a dehorning saw, Oscar uses a handsaw,

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simply because it is available and because he does not want to borrow the proper instrument from his neighbor: "I'm tired of asking John Wade to borrow something every time I turn around. . . . This will do. It'll have to" (105). Oscar then catches Buckeye quickly, throws him to the ground so that Lee can tie his feet, and instructs Alan to put his knees on the calf's neck to hold the head steady. Scarbrough describes the scene:

> Oscar must have disliked his part of the job, too, for he grew hurried and cross. He cut into the quick of Buckeye's head and blood rose like a small fountain, spraying him and Alan. Lee, holding Buckeye's hind feet, and leaning forward also had blood on his face. He had begun to look worried. Oscar swore, flinging the severed horn away, and began to cut the other, getting too close to the forehead again. Swearing violently and bemoaning the luck of a poor man who had poor ways, he untied the suffering Buckeye, and the calf got to his feet and staggered, bleeding, around the barnyard, his forelegs wet and shining with blood. (105)

Oscar's inability to do the procedure properly almost kills the animal. Belle, the mother with a vast knowledge of country first aid, sends Alan to the fields to find devil's snuffboxes that she uses to stop the bleeding:

> Belle dusted the rich brown dust into the red cavities on each side of Buckeye's head, and it was wonderful to see how the blood slowed

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> down in its pour and came to a small, diminishing drip under her wise hands. (106)

Alan, his mother's child, sees his father as handicapped by ignorance, always causing harm, even in his best intentions. But Belle is there; when Oscar wounds, Belle cures.

The phrase "a poor man has poor ways" is echoed in the journals. However, it is not related to the dehorning of a bull. In this example from real life, a young Scarbrough falls under the rough handling of his father who explains his actions in much the same way:

> I can hear my skull bones creak as they creaked the morning, screaming with toothache, I fled and was pursued and cast down on the floor by my angry father, who put his knee on my head and held me down with his whole weight while he extracted a side tooth with wire-pliers, destroying the one next to it. . . . He often remarked that a poor man had poor ways. I understand that now. I did not understand it then. (DD15)

The pain Alan feels is real while he watches his pet bull come so near death under his father's unskilled hands; young George's pain is actual. The parallel can be drawn that Oscar Scarbrough's assault on his son was demeaning and without emotion, that he viewed his children as another of the farm's livestock that had to be cared for the best way he could, but definitely without human compassion. When Alan screams at his father,

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"He'll bleed to death like that! . . . I told you, Dad! I told you!", Oscar McDowell answers, "Well then, by god, you do something! I've done all I know how!" (105).

Perhaps the most poignant of all examples in this coming-of-age story also has origins in real life and finds its way, again in a transmuted form, to the novel. The thread that connects the novel throughout is the young bull, Buckeye, and Alan's devotion to it. The boy's careful attention to the animal is twofold. First, the calf belongs to him and him alone and has since birth. The parents have no time for raising an animal that cannot produce milk, so it is offered to the boy. To make his interest more keen they tell him that at the end of summer he can sell the bull and use the money to purchase all of his school books for the coming year, a treat that Alan has never before enjoyed, having been forced each school term to borrow the needed texts, study with someone else, or do without. Of course Alan becomes attached to the animal as the summer progresses; he marks his own growth with that of Buckeye and dreads the day that the mature bull will have to be taken to town and sold at auction. Still, the promise of his own set of schoolbooks looms large in his mind, and there is little doubt as the novel progresses that Buckeye will, indeed, be sold. Oscar will require it. That does not, however, make the future separation of boy and pet any less painful, but Alan sees it as a means to a very desirable end.

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The tension for the reader is that this animal that has received the tendernesses of the boy may be slaughtered. But by a twist of good fortune for both Alan and Buckeye, a kind, older gentleman sees in the bull the careful attention that Alan has given and makes his purchase before Buckeye can be placed on the auction block, probably resulting in a higher price for Alan, eighteen dollars, and the assurance that the pet will have a good home and be used for breeding purposes. Seeing Alan's eyes "stung with tears," the old farmer says, "Don't worry. I'll take good care of him" (211). With money in hand, Alan is sad to lose Buckeye, but ecstatic at the prospect of books. In one symbolic swing, Alan—the young poet—has chosen books over farming, making it clear that he prefers a life devoted to words. Alan then performs a selfless act, making sure that his eighteen dollars will buy not only his books for the fall but also Lee's. Oscar steps in and allows Alan to pay for only half of Lee's eighth grade books, leaving the boy a full six dollars that he has already decided to spend on a lunchbox and satchel and a "good supply of pencils and paper"; he will have all the necessities of a writer (213).

In a similar incident Scarbrough relates in his journals another selfless act. As a student on a literary fellowship at University of the South, a magazine purchased the first three poems that Scarbrough ever sold. Feeling guilty because he was living in what seemed luxury while his family struggled back home, Scarbrough did not keep any of the money; he remembers:

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> With the money from the first poems I ever sold, I bought my youngest brother a pair of shoes. It was the fall of 1941. . . . The *Atlantic* bought three sonnets, sending me a generous check, which I sent on to my mother in McMinn County, knowing how straitened the family circumstance was. . . . I felt guilty because I was at Sewanee, well-housed, well-fed. But it was not guilt that sent that check home: it was love: the greatest love I've ever known: for my mother and Kenneth. He walked not on but because of my poems. (T-84)

Just as Alan put his best efforts into raising Buckeye and then spent a portion of his earnings on his brother, out of love, Scarbrough wanted to help his family back home, especially his brother, Kim, who benefitted because of Scarbrough's best efforts to write poetry. Both Alan and Scarbrough could have easily squandered the money; it was theirs to spend. Instead, both cared for a brother who needed material things that could be purchased with the well-earned funds.

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Chapter 7: Holding Han-Shan's Hand

Since the publication of his last book of poems, *Invitation to Kim*, Scarbrough has been experimenting with new directions in his work. His most recent endeavors prove that he is breaking fresh ground with the help of the ancient Chinese poet, Han-Shan. Using the poet as vehicle, Scarbrough is not examining exclusively the life of Han-Shan but drawing from what little is known about the Cold Mountain poet to write provocative and deeply personal poems about himself. Han-Shan has become for Scarbrough an outlet. He appears to feel safe writing verse that utilizes Han-Shan as the central character while, in actuality, dealing with matters that have been elusive in his own work: sexuality, loneliness, even isolation. Han-Shan, then, is an escape route for Scarbrough because he feels that he can be more revealing about himself by standing behind a character, allowing this ancient to feel and say comfortably what Scarbrough finds uncomfortable writing in first person:

> He is my alter ego and I'm finding that I can be, well perhaps, more truthful, hiding behind Han-Shan. . . . I'm using him to cover a lot of things that are written under first person. I get so tired of "I." I get tired of "me," but I get *tireder* of "I." I love old Han-Shan . . . [he] has come in very handy. Han-Shan, bless his old heart, has stood me in good stead. In that way, he has become a good companion, but I don't talk to Han-Shan because I'd be afraid he would answer. (Interview)

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To fully understand the connection between Scarbrough and Han-Shan, it is important to know some of the generally accepted facts about the Cold Mountain Poet, who is, by all accounts, difficult to identify. Because of the references to particular religious texts and the mini-sermons that appear in the poems, there is little doubt that Han-Shan was Buddhist. Most attempts to describe Han-Shan also agree that his religious leanings probably led him to Cold Mountain, the reclusive place where he lived as a hermit and from which he drew inspiration for his writing. The name, Han-Shan, is a direct translation of the name of the mountain where he chose to live in his later years. In this remote location, Han-Shan formed a simple cosmology; his images are taken almost exclusively from the natural world that he finds in immediate proximity.

According to "The Story of Han-shan and Shi-te," the hermit poet was often in the company of Shi-te, a male whose name means "foundling." As a child, Shi-te was discovered by monks at the Kuo-ch'ing-ssu monastery and reared among the brothers. He worked at the monastery in the dining hall and kitchen. Han-Shan would visit regularly, often to receive table scraps that were saved for him by Shi-te. The legend says the two men would entertain themselves in the evening hours by reading poetry and watching the heavens.

Beat Generation writer Gary Snyder discovered Han-Shan when he traveled to the Orient to study and translate Chinese and Japanese poetry.

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For Snyder, Han-Shan was a symbol of Buddhist thought and place, not necessarily an actual person. Snyder writes of Han-Shan and Shi-te, "They became Immortals and you sometimes run onto them today in the skidrows, orchards, hobo jungles, and logging camps of America" (35). What is important for Snyder in his work is the satisfaction of translating not words but ideas that promote Buddhist thinking and the Zen search for "the Way." For purposes of connecting Han-Shan and Scarbrough, it is also essential to note that Snyder views the Cold Mountain poet as Taoist. Han-Shan, if he did in fact exist, chose Cold Mountain as his home, and according to some legends, turned his back on society, his wife, and children and dedicated his final years to enlightenment by observing the common world and living as simply as possible or, as Snyder writes, "Unformed people delight in the gaudy, and in novelty. Cooked people delight in the ordinary" (67).

Approximately three hundred surviving poems are associated with the name of Han-Shan. Burton Watson says that most of the poems are attributed to Han-Shan but that some critics claim Shi-te composed fifty of the poems, and a few were actually written by the Buddhist monk Feng-kan. In the section of his book on major T'ang poets, Watson acknowledges:

> Some scholars even claim, on the basis of a study of the rhymes, that the poems attributed to him (Han-Shan) range in date over a period of several centuries, though this assertion has been contested. In any event, no way has so far been discovered to ascertain the exact date of

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> the poems, though the late eighth and early ninth centuries is suggested as the most likely possibility. (259)

Concerning the themes and subjects of Cold Mountain poems, Watson describes them as sometimes happy and carefree, but also notes:

> The poems themselves, however, are by no means uniformly jolly in tone. Rather they reveal a man at times deeply contented, even rapturous with the delights of his mountain retreat, at other times troubled by privation and nagging loneliness. Underlying them throughout is the Zen . . . conviction that these very experiences of daily life, painful or peaceful, harsh or serene, are the stuff that enlightenment is made of. There is . . . no Way outside of the way of everyday life. (260)

Regardless of which scholar's ideas one finds acceptable, all make significant points that can be used to explain why Scarbrough has found a "companion" in Han-Shan. Also meaningful is the fact that so little is really known about Han-Shan, which allows Scarbrough to use poetic license to re-create the Cold Mountain poet to suit his own designs. This license opens the door even wider for Scarbrough to write personal poems about himself that use Han-Shan as a mirrored substitute.

Both Han-Shan and Scarbrough have chosen to lead solitary lives, Han-Shan on Cold Mountain, Scarbrough in a small home on a corner lot in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, only a short drive from the area that he has called "my

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personal Mesopotamia," the valley that lies in the shadow of the mountains, between the Hiwassee and Ocoee Rivers (Interview). As Watson noted, Han-Shan's poems celebrate both the delight of being alone and the torment of loneliness. In the following untitled poem by Han-Shan, a Watson translation, the poet seems happy to have chosen Cold Mountain as his permanent retreat, but after a visit with family, he finds himself painfully alone the following morning:

> I came once to sit on Cold Mountain
> and lingered here for thirty years.
> Yesterday I went to see relatives and friends—
> over half had gone to the Yellow Springs.
> Bit by bit life fades like a guttering lamp,
> passes on like a river that never rests.
> This morning I face my lonely shadow
> and before I know it tears stream down. (266)

Juxtaposed against the isolation examined in this poem, the reader also finds verse that celebrates the joys of leading a solitary existence. In the following Han-Shan poem, this one a Snyder translation, the old poet views his existence as the end result of following his predestined path:

> If I hide out at Cold Mountain
> Living off mountain plants and berries—
> All my lifetime, why worry?

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One follows his karma through.

Days and months slip by like water,

Time is like sparks knocked off flint.

Go ahead and let the world change—

I'm happy to sit among the cliffs. (55)

These same sentiments are expressed again and again in Scarbrough's journal. One example is a single line, very atypical of most of the entries, "God, I wish I had someone to talk with this evening" (I-44). Then, in another section of the journal, Scarbrough details the previous evening's visit from a student who came to conduct an interview and take photos: "I enjoyed the evening with the young man, but this morning I am talked out, exhausted, very nearly witless. The one good matter is that it will be months before someone else comes along" (O-78).

In "Anachronisms," a poem of Scarbrough's published recently in *Poetry*, Han-Shan is pleased to have company, but a bit disappointed that they fail to recognize what the poet has to offer, even folding and putting away a gift poem on "fine rice paper," while complaining constantly about the trouble they had in arriving at Han-Shan's remote home. After the visitors leave, "Still talking and waving back to him" (14), Han-Shan, or in reality, Scarbrough, returns to his happy solitude:

The good agrarian poet drinks tea from

His blue cup and stands at the South

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> Window, sniffing the scent of warm
>
> Roses wafted from beyond the plantation
>
> Of pecan trees edging the bottom
>
> Of his herb garden. (15-20)

One of the liberties Scarbrough has taken with Han-Shan is assigning the Cold Mountain poet a sexual identity. Most critics mention that Han-Shan had a male companion, and some also suggest that Han-Shan chose Shi-te in his later years as the substitute for his own wife and children. Scarbrough allows Han-Shan to be gay so that he can examine his own sexuality. When asked about the issue of sexuality, Scarbrough wrote:

> All my poems are gay poems, all my religion has been gay religion, every breath I've ever drawn has been a gay breath. You see, I understand gayness as genetic in origin. I am that I am. No reviewer of any of my books has mentioned sexual predilection. I'll be doing that in *Poetry* Chicago soon, with a poem that accepts my "gay connection" in a way I've always understood it. I wear the "coat" with pride, though mostly in hurt because of the world's way. (Letter 1 Nov. 1996)

What the poet says is very true, and yet none of Scarbrough's hundreds of poems in print, up until "Sunday Shopping," published in the February, 1997 issue of *Poetry*, could be labeled a "gay" poem. In this metered and rhymed piece, the speaker laments the absence of the *vox angelica* and the *vox humana*, relating in simple language that a lapse has occurred in a

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relationship: "The telephone is dead" (2). The central image of the poem is a worn tweed coat that the speaker and his companion purchased while shopping at a local store. The lover has left the coat on a bed before departing at the conclusion of a weekend day set aside for the two to be together:

> Sunday became our day—great, soft music,
>
> Bantering talk and laughter—the more
>
> Made so because we said love lasted.
>
> He never left his coat with me before. (17-20)

The coat becomes something of a farewell offering, a remnant of what the two had shared. Coupled with the absence of either human or angelic voices, the tone of the poem is one of finality.

"Sunday Shopping" is a very tender poem about human relationships and how they often end abruptly, even those that are well-established to the point of weekly regularity. The poem, as Scarbrough writes in the letter quoted above, illuminates his acceptance of what being gay is, because it approaches this relationship as utterly and hopelessly human. The only factor that makes it a "gay" poem is that two men are experiencing the closeness of a relationship and the one left behind is suffering the pangs of separation caused by the other's departure.

While "Sunday Shopping" is not, as later work with sexual overtones would become, a Han-Shan poem, it is the first in which Scarbrough reveals his own "sexual predilection" to the public eye. Only a few months later, in

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the July issue of the same year, *Poetry* published "The Garden," a Han-Shan poem with gay overtones that offers a more expanded view of how Scarbrough feels isolated and misunderstood for his desire to "visit longer with the postman/Without embarrassment" (8-9). Because he is concerned with what his neighbors think of him, Han-Shan manipulates his garden to provide the ultimate cover, or as Scarbrough writes, "Landscaping has become his specialty" (10). In Scarbrough's second published poem with connections to his own sexuality, a notable change has occurred in tone. "The Garden" does not mourn loss but celebrates individuality; the piece has a whimsical nature as Han-Shan plans more gardening techniques to protect himself and please his peers. He considers planting bamboo at the clothesline and between the house and the road to serve the same purpose as the clematis on the fence that shields him "against public derision" (3). And for those curious neighbors who wonder what goes on behind the walls of privacy, Scarbrough leaves a clear message that he is in control. Han-Shan "squats in the peonies by the gate/To relieve an old man's propensities" (12-13) and pretends to be "digging/among the pretty flowers" (15-16) as the neighbor exclaims, "'What a splendid garden you have!'" (19). Through a humorous approach, Scarbrough tells us that he and Han-Shan are comfortable living as individuals often viewed as left of mainstream. In many ways "The Garden" also asserts Scarbrough's acceptance of his gayness, using

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an amusing scenario to reverse the ridicule of neighbors who, in the blindness of their ignorance, do not see what they think they see.

As a parallel to "Sunday Shopping," another of Scarbrough's published Han-Shan poems deals with the absence of a lover. In "Revenant," Han-Shan finds himself alone, but discovers the apparition of Shi-te around every corner and involved in every menial task. Again, the tenderness is present because Han-Shan would like to "confine his/ Lover's absence to the bedroom," but cannot because of the bond between the two men (1-2). The reader gets the sense that this absence is only temporary; it is the fleeting desire to be at all moments with someone you love, but that is made impossible because of the routine demands of the day. Shi-te, in the poem, is only a revenant, but it is not a ghost that causes alarm; these memories bring to Han-Shan that feeling of peace and contentment that only comes in the closest of relationships: your lover's presence is felt even when he is away.

Both poets share a comparable cosmology. While Scarbrough claims to have no formal cosmology, he does admit that when prodded by a college professor who insisted he find some source for his images, he answered, "I remember telling him that a stick, a stone, a frog, a cow, whatever happened on the landscape was my cosmology" (Interview). These simple images close at hand also form the cosmology of Han-Shan's poems.

"Initial," the third Han-Shan poem published by *Poetry* in the July 2000 issue, connects Scarbrough and the Cold Mountain poet in a different way—

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through the first letter of their last names. Using very simple metaphors, a "dollar sign without bars" and a "plain double/Clef without benefit of scroll," Scarbrough tells the reader that Han-Shan is just a human being with human limitations (2-4). Even though the "S" in Han's and George's last names may resemble a monetary symbol, they are both penniless; though the "S" may appear to be an altered musical notation, neither can carry a tune, not even with the "aid of a manure/Fork" (10-11). While the curvature of letter does not guarantee Han-Shan a connection with loftier goals—music and money—it does provide a link with the natural world. Scarbrough ends the poem with this scene:

Yet once, when walking
In a winter wood, his was the charming
Gratuity of chancing upon a snake's
Ivory spine torsioned across
Old leaves on Christmas morning. (12-16)

For Han-Shan and Scarbrough, the pleasure is finding that even the letters of their names are essential to a natural cosmology and a product of that environment.

And most recently, in the April, 2001 issue of *Poetry*, Scarbrough has found another avenue of expression via Han-Shan poems: celebration of his solitary lifestyle and the opportunity not only to revel in its simplicity but point out that it is preferable to those lived by some of the people around him.

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In "Music," Scarbrough sings of Han-Shan's daily activities and the old poet's sudden realization that his is a good life. Han-Shan spends his day sitting on a flat garden stone and playing the flute, building a trellis for a rose bush, painting his drinking gourds, or papering his ceiling with his "delicate but strong" poems (12) so he "can lie and read/His own masterpieces" (14-15). The poem concludes in happiness and satisfaction: "No man, he avers, can catch/Such fish in one basket" (16-17). This is true, also, of Scarbrough's simple life in a cozy, well-kept house, where he spends his hours enjoyably writing and taking care of daily chores. More than once in his journals Scarbrough states that, when he is away from Oak Ridge, he longs for his own space and the joy he finds at home. In a similar vein, the poem "Catch-All," speaks of these same pleasures. Han-Shan wakes from a nightmare of falling to find the solidity of earth under his feet and the security that firmament provides. Han-Shan is proud that he has been able to "keep a good straw mattress between/Me and elsewhere" (11-12) and goes outside with a basket lined in manuscripts to gather the eggs. The real, again, supersedes the ethereal.

The recent attention paid to Scarbrough's work, which is discussed in another chapter of this study, does not go unnoticed, and he allows Han-Shan to comment on what it really means to him. In "Up Front," Han-Shan calls himself the "year's Poet Laureate" (20) who enjoys the notice he receives in the village and the "light tapping/Of applause" (18-19) when he reads a poem

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to the "barefoot audience" (13). But he relishes equally the opportunity to have fun with fame, to speak in his poems of "topaz melons," "citron moons," and "virent vinery"—images the peasant listeners may not comprehend. Han-Shan concludes by saying, "Besides,/He enjoys rubbing the country's nose/In the real stuff" (22-24).

And, finally, from the April issue of *Poetry*, Scarbrough makes another connection with Han-Shan, the physical. "Preferment" not only laments the loss of youth and the effects of old age, but in the poem Scarbrough gives us, for the first time, a detailed, imagined physical description of the Chinese poet. He is, of course, depicting himself; reading the poem is equivalent to looking at previous and current photos of Scarbrough, a before and after rendering. From the standpoint of corporal aspects, Scarbrough paints a portrait of the poet as a young man:

> And he was indeed handsome:
> Forehead as smooth as a garden leaf,
> Eyes dark as charcoal,
> Ears taut and pink as fanshells
> Under hair the color of government ink. (12-16)

And just as Han-Shan has lost the beauty of his youth, so has Scarbrough in the final lines of the poem:

> His temples are veined now like spice melons,
> Eyes wan as chestnuts long out of husk,

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Ears like small wilted cabbages.

And O the nose pitted as honeystone,

Mouth squashed as mashed mulberries,

Beard scragged as winter-blow clover. (28-33)

Equally important as the physical similarities is the effect: with the loss of youth comes loneliness. Scarbrough writes that Han-Shan now lives on an unused road and the poem he posts on a dilapidated gate "flutters/Unread in the wind" (26-27).

While sense of place has been discussed at length in another chapter, it is also noteworthy here to establish an additional link between Scarbrough and his alter ego. In his preface to the translations of Han-Shan poems, Snyder makes the point, "When he (Han-Shan) talks about Cold Mountain he means himself, his home, his state of mind" (35). That can be said, too, of Scarbrough on some level. The mythical county that he creates for the reader is mythical only in the sense that it is re-created in Scarbrough's mind. The people in it, the landscape, the rivers and mountains, the near profligate farmland, are very real, and the bond between the poet and this place is so tightly weaved, the two seem, at times, inseparable. That is the point Snyder makes about Han-Shan; he does not live on Cold Mountain, he is Cold Mountain.

Because of this kinship between man and the earth, a closeness that can not be explained and is difficult to describe, Scarbrough has experienced

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some disappointment that others so integrated with a particular place do not feel. In the journals he writes:

> Yes, I am stuck up to my ears in county mud. My chimney rises from fieldstones stuck in red clay up to where the silver wedding rings of a county culvert begin and continue upward the climb of the blue spiral of smoke, which, below the corrugated steel, wisps out in exhalations from the cracks in the mud. . . . What you forget is that I am only the image of my native landscape, am smart enough to know that; and despite the birdshit, often glaucous on my cheek, the leaf-fall in my hair, I never let the blue-veined rivers limit my travel, nor the blue mountains get in my light of the world, though I remain, and happily, in place. You have, it would appear, never understood at all. (K-271)

The connections between Scarbrough and Han-Shan, then, are profound and unique. As a poet desiring to explore more facets of what makes him human, Scarbrough has indeed found a true friend in Han-Shan, a mythical figure who can be shaped according to the poet's whims and behind whom Scarbrough can be more revealing on a personal level. Why has Scarbrough only published one poem that approached in first person his own sexuality? Perhaps the answer lies in his own statement, "I wear the 'coat' with pride, though mostly in hurt because of the world's way" (Letter 1 Nov. 1996). The poem, "Sunday Shopping," was an exercise in courage that Scarbrough had to face, and did, with clarity and purpose. Referring to the poem "Scrapbook," in

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which a scared child holds his mother's hand to walk across a plank bridge on the way to his first day at school, Scarbrough said, "Between the planks, the cracks looked like the Grand Canyon and I was fearful. I've been afraid all my life, afraid of everything. I don't know how I've survived" (Interview). Even in his ninth decade of life, Scarbrough is still dealing with that child-like fear; writing and publishing "Sunday Shopping" was another step across the cracks in the floor of that bridge. Scarbrough is now reaching the other end of the bridge, holding Han-Shan's hand.

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Appendix A: Scarbrough's Critics

The life's work of George Scarbrough has met with little or no negative criticism. In a career that spans most of the Twentieth Century, and is still moving forward in new directions at the beginning of the Twenty-First, one must wonder why he has not been a more popular artist than he is, why Scarbrough is not listed among the elite group of writers whose names are known outside tight literary circles. At times others have made the same observations. Consider these quotes from a number of well-respected critics:

In the *Black Warrior Review*, Rodney Jones commented in his review of *New and Selected Poems*: "These poems, among the finest written in the South in past few decades, are a direct chronicle of the development of a poetic style so individual that it invites comparison with Hopkins or Thomas...As fastidious as they are powerful, his poems are major by any standard that I know, and deserve our closest reading" (104, 108).

Of *Invitation to Kim*, Phillip Balla wrote of the first sixty-three pages, the portion of the book he felt was strongest: "Those first 63 pages recall the very best poems of Robert Penn Warren...of James Agee's 'Knoxville Summer, 1915'...They recall the searing layerings of Thomas Wolfe's best prose, the lyrical heights of the West Virginia epiphany at the end of Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*. . . . If only those 63 pages could stand on their own, Appalachian poetry would, finally, be on the map. Everybody knows, who knows, that Jeff Daniel Marion has charm, that Robert Morgan has exquisite

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loveliness, and that Jim Wayne Miller has integrity and sauciness to boot. For better or worse, they are our benchmarks. But George Scarbrough is better" (80).

Also in a review of the book nominated for the Pulitzer, David Rogers writes, "In his *Invitation to Kim*, George Scarbrough give us, through fierce love and loyalty, the textures of a life so brutally American it can stand as a living image of our cultural experience. . . . Scarbrough is, as he says in 'Thomas Jefferson,' 'A prince of fashion in a strange land.' He is a major artist and *Invitation to Kim* is a fine book" (1, 5).

Despite these accolades Scarbrough is still, and always has been, a virtually unrecognized poet, at least outside the region considered "the South." What recent adoration and appreciation his poetry has received may be, unfortunately, too little too late. Keith Flynn, who chose to include Scarbrough in the "Ten Great Neglected Poets of the 20th Century" millennial issue of the *Asheville Poetry Review*, is attempting to correct this wrong, this oversight on the part of the *literate*. Speaking of Scarbrough's inclusion, Rogers writes, "His poetry comes at you from every angle, like a flock of pigeons exploding from the rooftop only to turn and circle in a single motion, like a muscular regiment perfectly in sync landing gracefully back where it began" (x). Rogers, also in the introduction to that issue, remarks that many poets are neglected because they are not part of the "booming

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incestuous MFA programs carving cookie cutter mannequins beneath a billowing canopy of competence" (vii).

Rogers may have hit the proverbial nail on the head with his burning commentary, at least in one respect, when it comes to Scarbrough's poetry. George Scarbrough has never been part of those literary circles that promote their own. His stint at the Writers' Workshop in Iowa can not be considered productive, and the resulting attitude about workshop settings and production is evidence that this environment does not work for him. If anything, his experience drove him home to his "county" with a new resolve to redefine the limits of poetry and find an even more distinctive voice. Rodney Jones, in the *Black Warrior Review*, explains:

> The contemporary poetry scene which de-emphasizes the individual and lauds the great collective effort has not ignored George Scarbrough as much as he has ignored it, pausing to swat at it occasionally like a great, lazy bluefly. And he has earned the right, paid the full fee of his exile. (108)

The exile Jones labels has been self-imposed. The same shortcomings that resulted from his clannish family spill over into the personal adult life and professional life that Scarbrough claims as his own. Not only is he far removed from the necessary literary circles that might have worked all these years to further his career, his social circles are even more closely knit. The bane of the artistic—a life devoted to creating poetry, or painting, or

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sculpture pleasing to one mind, one eye, or one person's sense of space—traps Scarbrough in his own world. He does not like to give readings, he is uncomfortable before crowds—large or small, and now, in his latter years, is nearly unable, physically, to meet the demands of a book tour.

This hermetic existence is no accident. In an important essay, "I Yam what I Yam," published in *Touchstone*, Scarbrough explains his solitary life:

> By the time I reached college by dint of hard work and scholarships...I was a confirmed loner, not joining nor being asked to join. I went my own way, as I have always, for most part friendless, though often yearning for what I could never conceive of as becoming real—a comrade who would silently understand. . . . There was, and is, a sense of comfort and security to be found in my own company. I had books, my imagination, and my dreams. I had been forced to become self-sufficient, almost. . . . My early years unfitted me for any part of family, immediate or extended, personal or professional. Yet those years equipped me for the only kind of life I can now see as possible: that of a perennial, closeted student, cogitator, bookman, writer, even poet, as some have said. (8)

In "Small Poem," Scarbrough reveals what he hopes this solitary life will one day accomplish, perhaps after he has left this world, but left behind an impressive body of work:

> Walking

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the paths of his own

premise

fixing the right word

daily nail-like into

its post

speaking exactly

crossbar and

beam

living with

utmost precision

a man could

eventually go away

without leaving.

In the meantime, as so many artists before him, Scarbrough struggles daily to create. And consistent with his life-long effort to be an artist, George Scarbrough continues to walk the "paths of his own premise."

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Appendix B: Interview

Conducted at the writer's home,

100 Darwin Lane, Oak Ridge, TN, 23 February 2000

Tell me about your teaching experience.

The kids seemed to love me and like my teaching and some went on to become Ph.D's, but I was not given tenure–so the chargers say–because I taught children to think analytically too soon. I remember what John Rice Irwin, who was School Superintendent at the time, said. He said, "Seven miles from Oak Ridge, I'd be glad if someone taught my kids to think, any time."

The principal, who was not all that bad, said, "George, you teach and talk on the college level." So, he gathered together all the college prep kids and put them into my English class, which made the chairman of the department furious. Even her own son left her classroom. And she was, I was told later by a trusted friend, the person who brought the charge of teaching too analytically.

It was true that when her son came into my class, it was near term paper time, and the boy–not a child, he was eighteen, I guess–asked me if he could write a term paper on the premise that God was a mathematical equation. I said, "Harry, if that's what you can present, introduce, expand, conclude, summarize...that's all I want in a paper." I thought it was a strange request

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and his mother came to me. I can understand her concern. She apologized for his temerity, and I said, "Don't worry about it." He asked my permission, and I gave my permission, and I shouldn't have said it, but I said if he had tried to prove that God was a hog, and had done it in proper fashion, I would have approved it, but she didn't appreciate that at all. After the charge, I told the principal I couldn't work for him any more and I went to Hiwassee College after that.

Up to that time, something dogged me all the way. I started teaching in 1937, $55 a month. I lost that job because the man, who owned the local grocery store, and was on the local school board–with an IQ of maybe twenty-five–said, "Why aren't you trading with me?" I said, "I can't trade with you when you don't have anything, really, that I want to buy." He said, "Well, I'd hate to cut my own throat."

I taught in Claxton Junior High School in McMinn County for a year. Again, the old complaints of being too liberal, being too forward. I taught history and gave them my own interpretation, which didn't often suit with the textbook. I taught in so many places that, toward the last, it alarmed my would-be employer, because I told him why I got shifted, that I was a horse of a different color.

I think the teaching career was not all a loss. I still get cards and letters from students. I still hear from them. We're all successes in some way.

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At the University of the south, when I went there in 1941, on a scholarship, the first one ever given, I ran afoul of Dr. Alexander Guerry.

Was it a philosophical difference?

Well, I don't know what it was. I was on the honor roll. I was referred to as a *covite*, someone from the coves. The gentleman harped on his "Sewanee gentleman" until I thought I would vomit, and somebody told him that I didn't much care for his southern gentleman. He invited me out to his house. He said, "You say you don't like my Sewanee gentleman?" and I said, "No, Dr. Guerry, because most of them have more damn money than sense." That was not a politic thing to say. He said, "Next year, Scarbrough, you are going to wait on these boys you pretend to despise." Wait tables, you know, become a boot-lick. And I said, "No, I won't, Dr. Guerry, because I won't be back here next year." And he said, "You, and about twelve others here on campus, ought to put on a dress and enroll in a girl's school."

Those were his words, and when it came out in the *University of Tennessee Alumnus*, two of Dr. Guerry's sons jumped on the editor, saying, "What are you doing printing such scurrilous stuff?" And the lady laughed when she called to tell me. She said, "I told them I was glad we had some scurrility to talk about." That was it. I was always pursued by who I was, what I was, how I was.

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Tell me about your early childhood, about growing up in this portion of Eastern Tennessee.

We lived in sixteen houses before I graduated from college, twelve before I graduated from high school, and that was a great worry to me, to see my parents work as hard as they did and have as little as they had. We finally got a little house, bought with very scrupulous savings. We bought a house and twelve acres for $1,600.

Biographically, it was rough. Geographically, it was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. It had its rivers. I refer to the area between the Hiwassee and the Ocoee as my personal Mesopotamia.

(Referring to a photo) It was an earlier time that I lived in that house when the birth of Charles–the brother next to me–almost killed my mother. She got the old fever, and daddy had those two, three including me, and I was probably the one he dreaded most trying to care for, so he sent me back home, or to the place we had moved from. I lived in the house with the man I call Brother John. I was about four. Brother John was, I supposed, forty-five or fifty, but he was unmarried and he took care of me. He and another brother and one sister lived in that house. And Betty, John's sister, became almost a mother to me. He washed, fed me, he dressed me in a blue work shirt, and held me in his arms when I sobbed myself to sleep. That went on for about six weeks, and early winter came. John wanted to adopt me. He called me Little George and all those things, and made me love him, but I didn't hesitate

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when the day came in November when dad drove the team over, and mama sent me a toboggan which daddy stuck down over my head. He was not a gentle person, and he was mad at mama anyway because she said, "Go bring him home, he doesn't belong over there."

Rejection, the feeling, the sense, the knowledge of rejection, began to sink in then. And I guess, forever after; I still feel rejected. I don't know why. I have all these friends. I feel like the boy in the coat of many colors.

We moved from farm to farm. Here we went traipsing around the landscape, all fourteen or fifteen of us, various houses, various landscapes, various landlords, generally without plough and seed, mule, and all that sort of thing, which reduced daddy's share of whatever was produced to a third. The landlord, on that basis, got two-thirds, and in some of the instances, mama said it wasn't worth carrying home for either of them.

I finally graduated from high school. I was pretty bright. I tried to do well scholastically. I loved to read. I entered some contests sponsored by the *National Scholastic Magazine*, and *Boys Life*, and others. I entered a national reading race in my junior year and won second place. I read sixty-five books and reviewed them in twenty-five words or less. I won Modern Library books, some of which I still have. The man who beat me came from the north—Benny Baker—I remember his name, mostly because he had read 115. I hope it was sheer volume that prejudiced the judges. I remember the principal having me up with all the books, on stage, showing me off, the prize rooster.

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Like all athletes, my friends among the males couldn't give a damn how many books I read. They didn't read books; they got their girlfriends to read them.

After I graduated I borrowed ten dollars from twelve men, ten each, and started UT in the fall of 1935 with $120. They put me on the National Youth Administration and I made fifteen dollars a month. That helped considerably. After the first quarter, during which I learned to starve to death, I was very visible dragging my sheets and quilts up and down the streets, looking for another and better boarding house, which I never found. Meals, though, at the local boarding houses, were only twenty-five cents, and enough to feed a horse.

My second quarter, since I had made A's in English, to the amazement of everybody, including the teacher and Superintendent of Education way off in Nashville, they moved me to an old dormitory, a self-help, which was run by two Senior boys. They bought the food, they collected the rent, as it were. Cora, a black woman, cooked the food. The boys made the menu and planned the meals. We had this dumbwaiter that pulled up by ropes from the bottom, and up would come the feast. They were fairly narrow festivals. There was an apple and good vegetables. Now and then we got dessert. It might be half of a Del Monte peach, but it kept us healthy.

Of course, we swept the house, we made the beds, and cleaned the shower, and we also got quarantined for Scarlet Fever. For two weeks we weren't

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allowed outside the house. In the meantime, we all started, if we hadn't started before, collecting soot all over us, in our ears, up our noses. I lived in the basement and it was particularly sooty down there because of the old furnace. And when the doctor came in to give us all a shot, using a nice clean cloth, it came off black. He said, "If you damn boys would take a bath once in a while." People brought assignments and took the assignments back. I guess we made it scholastically as much as we would had we been in class. I didn't learn much of anything in class at UT.

What compelled you to start writing poetry?

Well, that's very easy. I loved reading and I think I knew how to read before I began school. Mother helped me with the alphabet and the walls of the house we lived in were wallpapered with World War I headlines. I read the walls and asked mama what those large black banners said. She pointed out the A's, B's, and C's, and told me what words meant.

We suffered a disastrous in-and-out of school business, because we lost school every time a disease spread, like the fever, small pox, chicken pox, dad would keep us out until all the danger of the epidemic was passed. One time I remember I was out of school for three months.

By the time I got to fifth grade, I chanced upon a marvelous teacher, Eula Woodson. She was one of the most marvelous teachers I've ever known. Greater than the great men at Sewanee, in that she took us into the fields,

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we gathered cocoons, we planted things in jars, she read to us from *The Secret Garden* if we behaved in the morning. We went to movies for a nickel apiece. They were silent films. Handsome, galloping cowboys, Nelson Eddy singing.

Benton, which was the hub of the universe, never got a theater. Of course, it had a post office and a jail. Those were the necessities. We didn't have anything to fix for lunch, so I generally walked down the hill past the jail house, and I was trying to walk fast because the men inside the jail hollered nasty things at me as I went by: "Oh, I wish I had a twist like that." Well, you couldn't help twisting if you ran. And once a fellow unzipped his pants and hung it out between the bars. It looked like one of those ghastly—not radishes—but whatever they were. And I quit going.

I tried to get to grandmother's house because I knew she always had a pot of brown beans on the stove. Granny had had three husbands. She hadn't married the second, as yet; the first two died. Mother's father was the first one, a McDowell. Grandma was a stern, hard-bitten woman, Scotch-Irish, but she wasn't unkind. And she knew when a boy was hungry. I didn't love her. I couldn't imagine anybody loving Grandma, but I respected her. Of course, respect was that or else. If we offended Grandma, we all got a strapping. She didn't like us laughing, and the more she didn't like it, the louder we laughed. I just couldn't love Grandma. She was out of sympathy with young boys who laughed.

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A wonderful old woman. She liked a little totty now and then. I remember one of her grandsons would come down to see Grandma when she was sick and Joe said he had what was Grandma's cure out in the car. Joe said, "I brought in a pint, Grandma took a couple of big swigs, and it wasn't long before she was quite well again." Alcohol seemed to figure largely into the tragedies that happened in my mama's family and my own family.

I loved Miss Woodson. She made us keep a vocabulary book. Every word that we did not understand, she made us put into a notebook, she made us find the definition, she helped us to write a good English sentence using that word. And then, of course, came the test, which the little boy in my first school said, "testes." One day, before tests, he said, "Mr. Scarbrough, are your testes hard?" After class I took him out and told him to say "tests" and "posts." My sister said, "postes." And I explained to him what his testes were.

Miss Woodson was a darling, but if I got to acting smart ass, she put me in the cloak room. One of my failings has been that I'm inclined to be a smart ass. I revere the woman's memory. I used her name in the novel, *A Summer Ago*. She was the grandest person, besides my mother, that ever came into my life. Miss Woodson has been with me all these years, she's never left; my mother has never left, I feel her presence. These women had an immense influence. It started with my mother, who would say, "Look at this, son." She'd pick up a shell or a rock or one of those little polished smooth and beautiful craw things that the hens swallow to cut up their grain. It came out

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looking like those polished stones you buy, agates and things like that. Mama didn't miss anything she could point out. If anyone else paid attention, I never knew. I tried to do the same with Kim. And I awakened a spark in Kim that was artistic. He was a very gifted man, but he had to feed his family. He had no choice. Let's say Miss Woodson always supplemented mama; she was an addendum to the trees, the water, the minnows, the mountains, the rivers, the bridges.

That bridge got into a poem that was published by *Poetry*. Between the planks, the cracks looked like the Grand Canyon and I was fearful. I've been afraid all my life, afraid of everything. I don't know how I've survived. When I read James Dickey's son's *Summer of Deliverance*, and found out that Jim had been afraid of things all his life, it kind of explained Dickey to me.

Do you remember the first poem you wrote?

Yes. The fourth house we lived in was a two story house owned by Mr. John Lewis, who had built it for himself, and it was really a rather grand house, I thought. John had moved into town to establish Lewis Hardware in Benton. We rented the bottom floor and John Brown, our neighbor who moved when we did, moved into the upstairs. John didn't stay there long, so daddy kept our great big meat box upstairs, which was very salty, smelled of ham. I made that into a desk and borrowed one of our straight chairs. We

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didn't have too many straight chairs, but mama let me have one, so I would turn the box on its side, stick my feet in there, and I would write poetry.

The first poem was about the orchard. The man had planted a very fine orchard when he had lived there. I wrote a poem about apricots, and plums, peaches and apples. I had read an English poem about an apple orchard in the spring. So, I began to measure my lines by, obviously, the only meter English ever had, and that was iambic. As T.S. Eliot said, "Iambic, in one form or another."

That was it. I think I carried the poem to school and showed it to Miss Woodson, but it was the essay that I wrote about the silent movie on the Canadian Mounties, in which I used every possible word I could get from my notebook, and crammed it into magnificent sentences—that's what I thought writing was, and I'm afraid I kept on thinking that was what writing was through part of my high school.

Eighteen years brought me *Look Homeward Angel*, beautiful as he said it, but he used at least two thirds too many words to tell a story, say, as Stephen Crane would have used. *The Open Boat*, what a classic that is. I was spoiled by Wolfe. I wrote long, freight train sentences. Little by little, that began to be ironed out because in that book contest in my third year of high school, my English teacher supplied me with fine books that were not in the library. One of the loveliest of that bunch of books was Willa Cather's *Death Comes to the Archbishop.* It's absolute marble, it's crystal. And I thought, "Here is another

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kind of writing." All this time I had been reading the Bible, not for religious purposes, but for purposes of my own writing. I got a lot of interest in poetry from the Bible. I knew it was poetry, though it didn't rhyme. It couldn't have been written in rhyme. So, rhyme is really not poetry. I got the Bible wrapped around my consciousness before I got much of anything else. The primers came along, of course, the Henny Penny's. I always shuddered when the sky fell. And I loved them, too. The flavor and tang of those old stories was wonderful.

Wolfe almost ruined me. Robert Frost helped to turn me around because he's plain. Sometimes he's beautiful. Sometimes he preaches a little. He's got a message, I guess, but he never let the message get too much in sight, particularly in "Home Burial," which I think is classic as anything in literature.

I kept on reading. I read everything I could get my hands on, good or bad. When mama and I couldn't get anything else to read, we read "True Confessions." They were brought to my mother by my Aunt Gertrude, who decided that she liked better the somewhat wilder life of Knoxville, so she left home when she was young and had a rather spotted career, the kind that sorted with "True Confessions," if I may. Anyway, she helped feed me during that first quarter at UT and bought me a very, very much too large gray coat because I didn't have a coat.

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In one of those forced absences from teaching, I went to the State University at Iowa. I can't say I studied. I just sat there gasping in amazement at what Paul Engle called teaching. He had long, dark, greasy hair which came way back and he would sit on the desk and his hair would fall forward and he would sling it back. He preened a little for the *Times* photographer who seemed always to be coming to the Writers' Workshop in those days. Nowadays, it doesn't make much noise. I also took fiction. I passed more classes with that one short story. I suppose other people had done it. I was no entrepreneur in the field of writing a paper for one class and using it for another, because I hated to write the damn things. I loved to write, but papers, research? I came back, started teaching again, started staying closer to home because my mother was getting old. I nursed her for fifteen years.

How do you approach a poem, how do you know when that poem is finished, and how do you feel about the finished poem?

When I think a poem is finished, I am very happy, because those are about the happiest times I know now. A poem can start with a word, a remark I hear. It is difficult to get that one opening line that will open all the other lines. For instance, a poem I wrote called "Wardrobe"—I'm still working on it, incidentally—is about Han Shan and how when he goes to the town he washes and mends his gray clothes because he thinks he's invisible against

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the weathered walls of the village. Then he comes home and darns, as many Chinese people do, in a long, belted shirt, with nothing below but bare legs. But when he goes into the house, he scrubs himself with aromatic brushes and oils himself with expensive oils, and goes into his library, which has all the many colored bindings. And the poet remarks that Han Shan's library is no attorney's closet where all the books are colored alike and stand at the same height. But, it's all because he likes to read over and over and over the story of Joseph and his many-colored coat. When I get it through, I hope it reads; it almost reads now.

Of course, Han Shan never read the Bible. Han Shan came along before the Bible ever did. Who cares? What difference does it make?

Poor old Han Shan. I used to walk shrinking against the walls of buildings, and that was after I went to school, until I learned everyone was mortal and in a minute the whole thing could turn around and splash blood to your face. I had a hard time growing up. I haven't grown up yet, and I don't want to, in a sense. For a long, long time, sexually, I wouldn't have anything to do with a grown man. It was unthinkable because a grown man had not been kind to me.

I always tried to be invisible because I didn't think I was anybody, lonely, that I was nobody and I was pleased when somebody spoke to me. But after the great illnesses, smelling myself rotting, I realized it was time to throw some of that junk away, stand up in the world, say what you want to. I never

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read in public, except in school. It took me six weeks to get used to the kids, as friendly as they were. Once, I was asked to Atlanta to read to six hundred teachers. I couldn't' even imagine. Deep down inside I wanted attention, and except for Brother John and whatever mother could give to seven kids, I didn't get it. I spent my holidays, Sundays and weekends, roaming the hills by myself, listening, I'm afraid, for Pan to trill his pipe somewhere. I couldn't get out of that inferiority complex until one of my professors sent word to me, "This is not going to do. Get back in here and let's get this thing straightened out."

Is Han Shan your alter ego?

He is my alter ego and I'm finding that I can be, well perhaps, more truthful, hiding behind Han Shan. Han Shan was an old, very, very ancient poet about whom very little is known. George Ellison brought me to Han Shan, and I found out as I went that Han Shan lived with his man, Shi-te. Part of the book deals with Shi-te. Han Shan stays at home a great deal, but Shi-te likes to step out now and then. I'm using him to cover a lot of things that are written under first person. I get so tired of "I." I get tired of "me," but I get *tireder* of "I." I love old Han Shan.

It's been a cruel, cruel world, but it's been wonderful, too. I wouldn't have traded it for anything. Han Shan has come in very handy. Han Shan, bless his old heart, has stood me in good stead. In that way, he has become a good

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companion, but I don't talk to Han Shan because I'd be afraid he would answer.

Do you have any specific theories about poetics?

No. I have met college professors who boasted about their cosmology. I remember one who insisted I must have a cosmology. He said, "What's in your world?" I remember telling him that a stick, a stone, a frog, a cow, whatever happened on the landscape was my cosmology. I have been asked about poetic theory. I have no poetic theory. I'm not sure that I write poetry. I'm not sure that anybody writes poetry, not in the sense of John Donne, or some of things that Keats wrote. I was never sure that Robert Browning was a poet. But, happily, perhaps, or unhappily, the tendency became towards Walt Whitman, who I think is a great fellow. And I am so happy gray Walt came along. But he's no jingler. Whitman's work is worthy of a good American poet. "Song of Myself" is super. I know it's kind of narcissistic, but he didn't claim that just for himself, but for all workmen, for all people, with a spark of something in them that didn't necessarily have to bend itself to the artistic. People attacked him, some still do, because he was gay, but that's the absolute lowest of low points to say about a man of his stature. I adore Whitman. I also adore Emily Dickinson. They comprise for me just about the topmost virtue in American poetry.

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Now, Wallace Stevens is a mighty, mighty man. You can't touch the man. I mesmerize myself with Stevens. His poetry does not lend itself to familiarity. Some of his poetry is ethereal. Like cotton candy, you try to bite into it and get a mouthful of nothing.

Tellico Blue was largely rhymed, and I love rhyme. My journals are full of bawdy limericks. I do them because they rhyme and they startle. The sonnets came very easily. I don't think now that I could write a sonnet.

Do you have any regrets as a poet?

I regret certain things have been published. There are two sonnets in *Tellico Blue* that Fred Chappell questioned. He said, "These are not right, and then again, they may be very right."

I wish I hadn't tried to conceal things. I felt so low, so cheap, that I used a woman's name in a poem that was addressed to a man. Shakespeare was luckier. He had a fair man and a dark lady. That's cheap. I was taught to be honest, but I have found that lies can be a man's chief support. I think you'll understand that. A lot of people would try to hold me accountable even when I was trying to avoid unpleasantness, and one time, possibly even death.

I regret my sharpness with my mother; she was the lodge pole of the house. And I regret not being mature enough to understand what drove my father to his brutality he exercised against me. First of all, I didn't respect my father, because I knew that my father was illiterate, I knew that he was

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arrogant, and, of course, when I was in my teens, I thought I knew everything. I found out later that I knew very little and the older I get the less I claim to know. I regret that.

I regret slapping one of my brothers when he disobeyed me because I thought I was the king of the potato patch and he wasn't building hills right. I regret personal harm because I tried to be boss, and brothers are not going to allow bosses.

Would you comment on the journals?

I wouldn't mind everyone reading the journals right this minute if it wouldn't bear down on some of my people whom I do love. My brother, Kim, never forgave me for being gay. I found out later that he criticized me sharply to people who knew both of us. He had no capacity to understand the variousness of nature. Who can outguess nature? From a billion year old gene pool, what is not likely to occur? My theory is that nature is going back to the sea horse; the male gives birth. I can't see humanity as anything but an experiment that will grow old with age and die. We're showing dreadful signs of age now in the lessening of our feelings for our country. America, and for each other, for God's sake. So, I think we may be going back to primal times and that the human race will eventually fade out, and maybe its fragile bones will last as long as the dinosaurs have, for some weak-eyed, bespectacled, hump-backed, future fellow to bend over and search for clues.

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That's why mama said to me once, "I wouldn't have you teach one of my children." A student asked me why the Indians put dead fish under their corn hills, and I said, "It's fertilizer." And before I knew what I was saying to the girl, I said, "You, child, will make fertilizer, too." Come Monday, in charged one of my students who said I was the subject of Sunday School lesson at church. The girl had brought up the fact, in Sunday School class, that people were just fertilizer. He said they went around and around and some of the students defended me.

I love the theory of evolution. I can see how it happened, random, haphazard, kill that guy over there because he has a club foot, rope that one because he thinks too much. I think the common people never did catch on. I think they don't catch on now, with all this fear of public education.

Feelings that seem to be innate—feelings of a greater power when we're helpless—psychology never explained it to me.

Do you consider yourself a religious person?

I'm not religious. I believe everything we do now is based on a mythic past, and I'm not so sure that what we're doing now won't be mythic in a few years. I grew up in a fundamentalist community, hell fire and damnation, even went to a snake handling meeting. I did not participate. I started wondering about the time I was ten or eleven; I saw holes in all these things that were being pitched at me and which I was supposed to take on faith. I

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am sure that if such a person as Christ ever existed, that he was a sociologist, that he was a man interested in helping people who could not help themselves, but he was a quick-tempered man. He whipped the piss out of that bunch in the temple, but he took pity on poor Mary Magdalene. He was a desert man, far, far away from the privileges and conveniences that Saint Paul enjoyed. Saint Paul went so far as to really screw the whole damn thing up, that's what Saint Paul did. Poor old Paul didn't know who he was or what he was; he was in the grasp of something bigger than he was.

What dangers do poets face today?

I think poetry has fallen to the level of advertising. I don't see much future for poetry. I've been told there's no hope for me, but I'll do my own hoping. I don't see much hope because people are too realistic to accept metaphor of any sort. What happens when a man says to his sweetheart, "I love you like the devil"? Now, that's a miscarriage if ever I heard one, but you do hear things like that even here. Right across that mountain we have some of the most surprising people, scholars, poets. I wish poetry could go on. I wish we could, as the King James version says, "Speak with the tongues of angels."

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Appendix C: Publications, Awards

Scarbrough's work has appeared in the following publications.

Magazines, journals, and newspapers:

Appalachian Journal

Atlantic Monthly

Black Warrior Review

Chattanooga Times (poetry and book reviews)

Chicago Review

Cold Mountain Review

College English

Creeping Bent

Cumberland Poetry Review

Driftwood

Georgia Medical Journal

Green River Review

Harper's

Hearse

Hogshead Review

Houston Post

Iron Mountain Review

Knoxville News-Sentinel

Laurel Review

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Monument

Minnesota Quarterly

Mossy Creek Journal

Mississippi Review

National Forum

New Orleans Poetry Journal

New Republic

New York Times Book Review

Old Hickory Review

Pocket Poetry

Poetry (Chicago)

Poetry Dial

Poetry Now

Polk County News

Progressive Farmer

Quarterly Review of Literature

Sam Houston Literary Review

Saturday Review

Sewanee News

Sewanee Review

Small Farm

Southern Exposure

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Southern Fireside

Southern Literary Messenger

Southern Poetry Review

Southwest Review

Spirit

Tennessee Poetry Journal

Touchstone

Unaka Range

Vanderbilt Poetry Review

Versecraft

Voices

Wind

Zone 3

Anthologies:

Anthology of Magazine Verse and Yearbook of American Poetry. ed. Alan Pater. Beverly Hills: Monitor, 1981.

Best Poems of 1961. ed. Lionel Stevenson et al. Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1992.

Contemporary Southern Poetry. ed. Guy Owen et al. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State P, 1979.

Forever the Land. ed. Russell and Kate Lord. New York: Harper, 1950.

I Have a Place. ed. Jim Wayne Miller. Pippa Passes, KY: Appalachian

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Learning Laboratory, Alice Lloyd College, 1961.

In Homage to Priapus. ed. E.V. Griffith. San Diego: Greenleaf, 1970.

New Ground. ed. Donald Askins et al. Jenkins, KY: Southern Appalachian Writers' Cooperative, 1977.

New Southern Poets. ed. Guy Owen and Mary C. Williams. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1974.

Poetry South-East: 1950-1970. ed. Frank Steele. Martin: U of TN Press at Martin, 1968.

Seven in Tennessee. ed. Stephen Mooney et al. Martin: U of TN Press at Martin, 1968.

Southern Poetry: The Seventies. ed. Guy Owen et al. Raleigh: Southern Poetry Review Press, 1977.

The Current Voice. ed. Don L. Cook et al. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971.

The Golden Year. ed. Melville Cane et al. New York: Fine Editions Press, 1960.

The Various Light. ed. Leah Bodine Drake et al. Lausanne, Switzerland: Aurora, 1964.

Their Country's Pride. ed. Sister M. Pascal Campion, O.S.F. and Sister Bede Donelan, O.S.F. Milwaukee: Bruce, 1948.

Traveling America with Today's Poets. ed. David Kheridan. New York: McMillan, 1977.

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Awards and prizes:

Literary Fellowship, University of the South, Sewanee, 1941-43.

Carnegie Fund Grant, 1956.

Borestone Mountain Award, 1961.

Mary Rugeley Ferguson Poetry Award, *The Sewanee Review*, 1964.

Carnegie Fund Grant, 1975.

P.E.N. American Branch Grant, 1975.

Authors' League Fund Grant, 1976.

The Sheena Albanese Memorial Prize, *Spirit* Magazine, 1978.

The Governor's Outstanding Tennessee Award in Literature, 1978.

Nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1990, for *Invitation to Kim*.

Honoree at "George Scarbrough Literary Festival," held October 21-22, 1999 at Emory and Henry College, Emory, Virginia.

Selected for inclusion in *Asheville Poetry Review*'s special millennial issue on "Ten Great Neglected Poets of the Twentieth Century, published as the Spring/Summer issue, 2000, Vol. 7 No. 1.

2001 Hokin Prize from *Poetry* magazine for three Han-Shan poems that appeared in the July, 2000, issue.

James Still Award for Writing of the Appalachian South, presented by the Fellowship of Southern Writers at the Biennial Arts and Education Council Conference in Chattanooga, April, 2001.

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