

Words into Fiction: Readings from the Canon of Eudora Welty



"Myrna! Feel sorry for Mrs. DeStefano. She's never read Eudora Welty."

The New Yorker
June 17, 1991

A Eudora Welty Timeline

Personal events

1909: Birth

Eudora Alice Welty, the second child of Chestina Andrews, homemaker and avid gardener, and Christian Webb Welty, a secretary and director of Lamar Life Insurance Company, is born on April 13, in Jackson, Mississippi.

1912: Brother Edward

Edward Jefferson is Welty born.

1915: Life in Jackson

Eudora Welty enjoys family life, including Sunday drives, summer visits to grandparents in Ohio and West Virginia, and going to theater and concerts with parents, both music lovers.

1916: Medical crisis

Around the age of seven, Welty is diagnosed with a fast-beating heart and confined to bed for several months. She reads myths and nursery rhymes, the Brothers Grimm, Edward Lear, Dickens, Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, Ring Lardner, encyclopaediae, and popular sentimental and didactic fiction.

1917: Interests

Eudora Welty learns about photography from her father who develops his own pictures, and studies the Bible with her mother. She goes to movies weekly.

1918: Brother Walter

Walter Andrews Welty is born.

1919: School

Having learned to read at home, Welty enters first grade at Jefferson Davis Elementary School in January 1919. She also attends Sunday school at Methodist Episcopal Church South, although the family members are not regular churchgoers.

1925: New house

Her parents build new home on Pinehurst Street in Jackson. Welty shares a room in Old Main dormitory with three other students. For the first time, she gets to know people from throughout the state and is fascinated by their different accents.

1927: Study of literature

As she considers a career as an artist, Welty studies literary modernists including Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and William Butler Yeats, who becomes her favorite poet.

1928: Chicago

While in school at Madison, she frequently visits Chicago, spending time at the Art Institute while waiting for train connections between Mississippi and Madison.

1930: New York City

Living in New York while attending business school, Welty rooms with friends from Jackson. She regularly visits galleries, museums, and theater, where she enjoys musical comedy and revues, as well as jazz and vaudeville in Harlem.

1931: Father dies

Eudora Welty's father becomes critically ill with leukemia and dies while receiving a blood transfusion from her mother, with Welty at bedside.

1935: Night-Blooming Cereus Club

Welty meets at her home with friends including young writers Frank Lyell, Hubert Creelmore, Nash Burger, and composer and conductor Lehman Engel; the group is dubbed the "Night-Blooming Cereus Club."

1940: Diarmuid Russell

Welty signs on with the Russell & Volkening literary agency in New York; Diarmuid Russell begins placing her fiction in magazines such as *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Bazaar*. He and Welty begin a close working relationship that blooms into an enduring friendship.

1941: Yaddo

Welty spends June and July at Yaddo writers' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. She shares housing with Katherine Anne Porter and the two become close friends.

1944: *New York Times Book Review*

For the summer, Welty works for Robert Van Gelder at *The New York Times Book Review* writing reviews of books on the war under pseudonym "Michael Ravenna." She continues writing reviews when she returns to Jackson.

1946: San Francisco

Welty travels in November to San Francisco for a stay that stretches to four months. While there, she writes "Music from Spain," sees a lot of John Fraiser Robinson, and makes new friends including Art and Antonette Fereva Foff, also clients of Diarmud Russell.

1949: Europe

Welty sails to Italy, where she sees John Fraiser Robinson, and to France where she travels with *Harper's Bazaar* editor Mary Louise Aswell. Goes on to England and then Ireland; sends note to Elizabeth Bowen, who has reviewed Welty's work favorably, and is invited to visit her at home in County Cork.

1955: Reynolds Price

While at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, to lecture, Welty meets the young Reynolds Price, editor of the undergraduate literary magazine the *Archive*.

Losing Battles

Welty's mother endures a slow and difficult recuperation from eye surgery. While caring for her, Welty works on a "long story about the country" (eventually *Losing Battles*), writing brief vignettes and scenes which she keeps in shoeboxes for assembling later.

1956: Broadway

With her mother and Jackson friends who charter a plane for the event, Welty attends the February 16th New York opening of Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov's adaptation of *The Ponder Heart*, starring David Wayne as Uncle Daniel and Una Merkel as Edna Earle; it runs for 149 performances.

1959: Walter dies

Eudora Welty's brother Walter dies in January.

1966: Mother dies

Eudora Welty's mother Chestina dies on January 20 after a long and painful series of illnesses.

Edward dies

Eudora Welty's brother Edward dies unexpectedly on January 24, just days after her mother's death.

1989: National Portrait Gallery

A portrait of Welty is added to the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution.

"Eudora" e-mail

"Eudora" e-mail program, named after the author in honor of her famous story "Why I Live at the P.O.," is made available on the Internet.

2001: Death

July 23: Eudora Welty dies in Jackson, Mississippi, from the effects of pneumonia.

Professional events

1921: Jingle contest

Eudora Welty wins the \$25 prize in the "Jackie Mackie Jingles" contest sponsored by Mackie Pine Oil Specialty Co., which sends letter encouraging Welty to "improve in poetry to such an extent as to win fame."

High school

Eudora Welty begins attending Jackson's Central High School in fall 1921; publishes sketches and poems in school newspaper and *St. Nicholas*, a magazine for young people. One of her drawings is accepted by the local newspaper, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*.

1925: College

Eudora Welty graduates from Jackson's Central High School and enrolls in fall at Mississippi State College for Women in Columbus with plans to become a writer; tries writing a novel; publishes sketches, poems, and stories in campus newspaper *The Spectator*, and two of her drawings appear in campus magazine *O, Lady*.

1926: University of Wisconsin, Madison

Welty transfers to the university for junior and senior years, but feels lonely in the "icy world" of Madison, whose people "seemed to me like sticks of flint."

1928: Shadows

Her poem "Shadows" is published in Wisconsin's *Literary Magazine* (April).

1929: College graduation

Welty receives a BA degree. She becomes seriously interested in photography; uses Kodak camera with a bellows and develops her own prints.

1930: Columbia University

Eudora Welty begins a one-year advertising course at Columbia University Graduate School of Business in New York City.

1931: Work in Jackson

Welty returns home at completion of Columbia course in 1931. She gets work writing scripts, doing odd jobs, and editing Lamar Life Radio News at WJIX, the first Jackson radio station. She also works as Jackson's social news correspondent for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*.

1935: Works Progress Administration

Welty works as a publicity agent in Mississippi, traveling throughout the state to photograph and report on WPA projects and people they serve. She uses a Recomar camera and in 1936 buys a Rolleiflex.

1936: First story published

Eudora Welty submits stories to the prestigious little magazine *Manuscript*, published in Athens, Ohio, which accepts "Death of a Traveling Salesman" and "Magic."

Photographs exhibited

In New York, Lugene Opticians sponsors "Black Saturday," an exhibition of 45 Welty prints at Photographic Galleries, March 31-April 1.

1937: "The Petrified Man"

Discouraged when Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, editors of the newly established *Southern Review*, return "Petrified Man," Welty destroys the only copy. When Warren expresses second thoughts, she rewrites it from memory; it is later included in the O. Henry Prize Stories of 1939.

Life Magazine

Six of Welty's photographs appear in *Life* in conjunction with a story on a series of deaths in Mount Olive, Mississippi, caused by the prescription drug sulfanilamide.

1938: "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies"

Welty's tale of a selfless act gone awry appears in *The Best Short Stories 1938*.

1939: "A Curtain of Green"

"A Curtain of Green," which appeared in *Southern Review*, Autumn 1938, is chosen for inclusion in *The Best Short Stories 1939*.

1940: "The Hitch-Hikers"

"The Hitch-Hikers," (*Southern Review*, Autumn 1939) is chosen for *The Best Short Stories 1940*.

1942: A Curtain of Green

Doubleday, Doran offers her a contract for a story collection, which is published in November, with introduction by Katherine Anne Porter.

"The Wide Net"

wins first prize in the O. Henry Awards competition for 1942

"A Worn Path"

wins second prize in the O. Henry Awards competition

The Robber Bridegroom

is published by Doubleday, Doran in October

1943: Stories

The Wide Net and Other Stories is published by Harcourt in September. "Livvie" wins first prize in O. Henry Awards competition for 1943, "Asphodel" is included in *The Best American Short Stories 1943*.

1944: "The Delta Cousins"

Based on stories and documents of friend John Fraiser Robinson's family, the stories Welty works on quickly "boil over" into a novel that she calls "Shellmound" (and later *Delta Wedding*).

1946: "A Sketching Trip"

wins mention in O. Henry Awards competition

Delta Wedding

In the spring, *Delta Wedding* is serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly* and published as a book by Harcourt in April.

1947: "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories"

In August, Welty delivers a lecture at the Northwest Pacific Writers' Conference at University of Washington. She later revises the lecture to form her first extended literary criticism (published in *Atlantic Monthly*, Feb. 1949).

1949: Guggenheim Fellowship

Welty hears that her Guggenheim fellowship has been renewed.

The Golden Apples

is published by Harcourt

1952: National Institute of Arts and Letters

Welty is elected to this society founded in 1898 to further literature and the fine arts in the United States.

1953: "The Ponder Heart"

appears in *The New Yorker* (December 5th issue)

1954: *The Ponder Heart*

Published by Harcourt in January, *The Ponder Heart* is also a Book-of-the-Month Club selection

Selected Stories of Eudora Welty

Published by Modern Library and includes "A Curtain of Green" and "The Wide Net"

1955: *The Bride of the Innisfallen and Other Stories*

dedicated to Elizabeth Bowen, is published by Harcourt in January

1960: Ford Foundation grant

Welty spends two seasons of study and observation at the Phoenix Theatre in New York on a grant from the Ford Foundation.

1963: "Where Is the Voice Coming From?"

In response to the assassination in Jackson of Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers, Welty writes this story published in *The New Yorker* on July 6.

"Must the Novelist Crusade?"

Welty writes this essay in response to civil rights disturbances in Mississippi.

1967: "The Optimist's Daughter"

Welty completes a draft of "Poor Eyes" in May which Diarmuid Russell sends to *The New Yorker*. Retitled "The Optimist's Daughter," it appears on March 15, 1969.

1968: "The Demonstrators"

(from *The New Yorker*, Nov. 26, 1966) wins first prize in O. Henry competition

1969: Harcourt out, Random House in

Welty sends her completed draft of *Losing Battles* to Diarmuid Russell in May; he submits it to several publishers. When Harcourt demands cuts, Welty terminates her contract with them and in August signs with Random House for four books, including *Losing Battles*.

1970: *Losing Battles*

Losing Battles, dedicated to her brothers, is published on Welty's birthday; it becomes her biggest seller and precipitates re-issues of her earlier works.

1971: *One Time, One Place*

Welty's photographs of Mississippi during the Depression (many part of the "Black Saturday" group exhibited in New York in 1935), are published by Random House in October.

National Book Award Nomination

Welty receives a nomination for the 1971 National Book Award for *Losing Battles*.

1972: *The Optimist's Daughter*

Random House publishes a revision of *The New Yorker* text of *The Optimist's Daughter* in spring. The book wins Welty the Pulitzer Prize the following April.

Gold Medal

Welty receives the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in May. It is presented by Katherine Anne Porter.

1973: Eudora Welty Day

In May, Welty is honored by the celebration of "Eudora Welty Day" in Mississippi.

Diarmuid Russell dies

Russell, Welty's longtime literary agent and close friend who had retired in the spring because of illness, dies on December 16.

Pulitzer Prize

Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter* wins the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

1978: *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*

Published by Random House in April

1979: National Medal for Literature

Welty wins this award, presented by the American Academy of Arts and Letters for past and continuing contributions to literature.

1980: *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*

Published by Harcourt in October, *The Collected Stories* wins the American Library Association Notable Book and the American Book awards.

Medal of Freedom

President Jimmy Carter awards Welty with the Medal of Freedom Welty at a White House ceremony in June.

1982: *Opera bouffe*

The Ponder Heart is produced as an *opera bouffe* with musical score by Alice Parker in Jackson, Mississippi.

1984: *One Writer's Beginnings*

Harvard University Press publishes a version of the lectures Welty delivered at the university in April of 1983; it wins the American Book and National Book Critics Circle awards.

1987: Writing continues

Welty continues over the next decade to write occasional book reviews, introductory essays, and prefaces. She receives the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres (France) and a National Medal of Arts.

1989: *Eudora Welty Photographs*

This collection, which includes 226 photographs from the Welty collection at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, is published by the University Press of Mississippi with a foreword by Reynolds Price.

1993: PEN/Malamud Award

Welty receives the PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in the short story.

1995: Welty Writers' Center

The Eudora Welty Writers' Center is established by the Mississippi legislature on the site of Welty's childhood home at 741 N. Congress St. in Jackson.

1996: Legion d' Honneur

Welty is inducted into France's Legion d' Honneur at a ceremony held in the Old Capitol building in Jackson.

The Eudora Welty timeline has been prepared by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

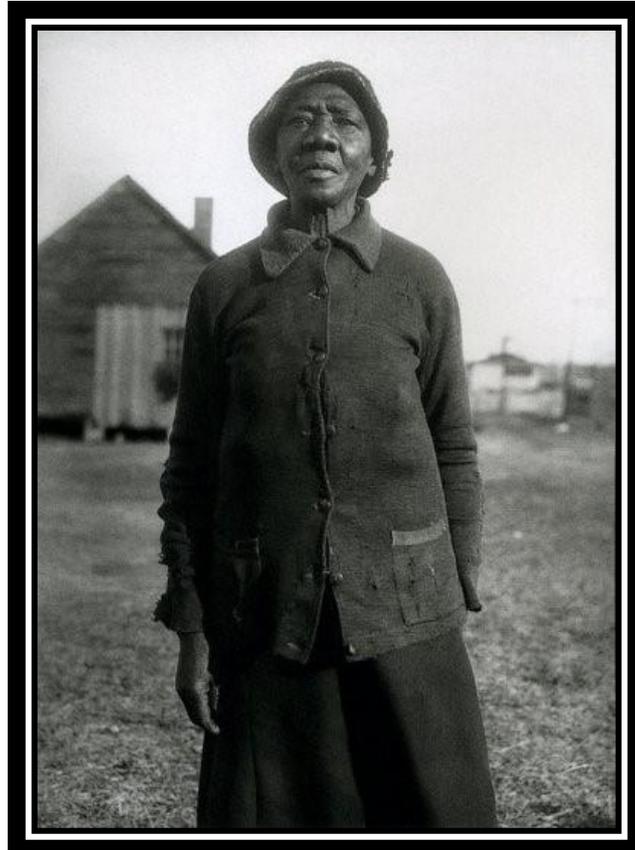
(the reading assignment for class on March 31, 2022)

“A Worn Path”

by Eudora Welty

from *The Collected Works of Eudora Welty*

Eudora Welty, “Woman in Buttoned Sweater with Heroic Face,” Hinds County 1935



It was December—a bright frozen day in the early morning. Far out in the country there was an old Negro woman with her head tied red rag, coming along a path through the pinewoods. Her name was Phoenix Jackson. She was very old and small and she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grand-father clock. She carried a thin, small cane made from an umbrella, and with this she kept tapping the frozen earth in front of her. This made a grave and persistent noise in the still air, that seemed meditative like the chirping of a solitary little bird.

She wore a dark striped dress reaching down to her shoe tops, and an equally long apron of bleached sugar sacks, with a full pocket: all neat and tidy, but every time she took a step she might have fallen over her shoelaces, which dragged from her unlaced shoes. She looked straight ahead. Her eyes were blue with age. Her skin had a pattern

all its own of numberless branching wrinkles and as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead, but a golden color ran underneath, and the two knobs of her cheeks were illumined by a yellow burning under the dark. Under the red rag her hair came down on her neck in the frailest of ringlets, still black, and with an odor like copper.

Now and then there was a quivering in the thicket. Old Phoenix said, "Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons and wild animals!. . . Keep out from under these feet, little bob-whites.... Keep the big wild hogs out of my path. Don't let none of those come running my direction. I got a long way." Under her small black-freckled hand her cane, limber as a buggy whip, would switch at the brush as if to rouse up any hiding things.

On she went. The woods were deep and still. The sun made the pine needles almost too bright to look at, up where the wind rocked. The cones dropped as light as feathers. Down in the hollow was the mourning dove—it was not too late for him.

The path ran up a hill. "Seem like there is chains about my feet, time I get this far," she said, in the voice of argument old people keep to use with themselves. "Something always take a hold of me on this hill—pleads I should stay."

After she got to the top she turned and gave a full, severe look behind her where she had come. "Up through pines," she said at length. "Now down through oaks."

Her eyes opened their widest, and she started down gently. But before she got to the bottom of the hill a bush caught her dress.

Her fingers were busy and intent, but her skirts were full and long, so that before she could pull them free in one place they were caught in another. It was not possible to allow the dress to tear. "I in the thorny bush," she said. "Thorns, you doing your appointed work. Never want to let folks pass, no sir. Old eyes thought you was a pretty little green bush."

Finally, trembling all over, she stood free, and after a moment dared to stoop for her cane.

"Sun so high!" she cried, leaning back and looking, while the thick tears went over her eyes. "The time getting all gone here."

At the foot of this hill was a place where a log was laid across the creek.

"Now comes the trial," said Phoenix.

Putting her right foot out, she mounted the log and shut her eyes. Lifting her skirt, leveling her cane fiercely before her, like a festival figure in some parade, she began to march across. Then she opened her eyes and she was safe on the other side.

"I wasn't as old as I thought," she said.

But she sat down to rest. She spread her skirts on the bank around her and folded her hands over her knees. Up above her was a tree in a pearly cloud of mistletoe. She did not dare to close her eyes, and when a little boy brought her a plate with a slice of marble-cake on it she spoke to him. "That would be acceptable," she said. But when she went to take it there was just her own hand in the air.

So she left that tree, and had to go through a barbed-wire fence. There she had to creep and crawl, spreading her knees and stretching her fingers like a baby trying to climb the steps. But she talked loudly to herself: she could not let her dress be torn now, so late in the day, and she could not pay for having her arm or her leg sawed off if she got caught fast where she was.

At last she was safe through the fence and risen up out in the clearing. Big dead trees, like black men with one arm, were standing in the purple stalks of the withered cotton field. There sat a buzzard.

"Who you watching?"

In the furrow she made her way along.

"Glad this not the season for bulls," she said, looking sideways, "and the good Lord made his snakes to curl up and sleep in the winter. A pleasure I don't see no two-headed snake coming around that tree, where it come once. It took a while to get by him, back in the summer."

She passed through the old cotton and went into a field of dead corn. It whispered and shook and was taller than her head. "Through the maze now," she said, for there was no path.

Then there was something tall, black, and skinny there, moving before her.

At first she took it for a man. It could have been a man dancing in the field. But she stood still and listened, and it did not make a sound. It was as silent as a ghost.

"Ghost," she said sharply, "who be you the ghost of? For I have heard of nary death close by."

But there was no answer--only the ragged dancing in the wind.

She shut her eyes, reached out her hand, and touched a sleeve. She found a coat and inside that an emptiness, cold as ice.

"You scarecrow," she said. Her face lighted. "I ought to be shut up for good," she said with laughter. "My senses is gone. I too old. I the oldest people I ever know. Dance, old scarecrow," she said, "while I dancing with you."

She kicked her foot over the furrow, and with mouth drawn down, shook her head once or twice in a little strutting way. Some husks blew down and whirled in streamers about her skirts.

Then she went on, parting her way from side to side with the cane, through the whispering field. At last she came to the end, to a wagon track where the silver grass blew between the red ruts. The quail were walking around like pullets, seeming all dainty and unseen.

"Walk pretty," she said. "This the easy place. This the easy going."

She followed the track, swaying through the quiet bare fields, through the little strings of trees silver in their dead leaves, past cabins silver from weather, with the doors and windows boarded shut, all like old women under a spell sitting there. "I walking in their sleep," she said, nodding her head vigorously.

In a ravine she went where a spring was silently flowing through a hollow log. Old Phoenix bent and drank. "Sweet-gum makes the water sweet," she said, and drank more. "Nobody know who made this well, for it was here when I was born."

The track crossed a swampy part where the moss hung as white as lace from every limb. "Sleep on, alligators, and blow your bubbles." Then the track went into the road.

Deep, deep the road went down between the high green-colored banks. Overhead the live-oaks met, and it was as dark as a cave.

A black dog with a lolling tongue came up out of the weeds by the ditch. She was meditating, and not ready, and when he came at her she only hit him a little with her cane. Over she went in the ditch, like a little puff of milkweed.

Down there, her senses drifted away. A dream visited her, and she reached her hand up, but nothing reached down and gave her a pull. So she lay there and presently went to talking. "Old woman," she said to herself, "that black dog come up out of the weeds to stall you off, and now there he sitting on his fine tail, smiling at you."

A white man finally came along and found her—a hunter, a young man, with his dog on a chain.

"Well, Granny!" he laughed. "What are you doing there?"

"Lying on my back like a June-bug waiting to be fumed over, mister," she said, reaching up her hand.

He lifted her up, gave her a swing in the air, and set her down. "Anything broken, Granny?"

"No sir, them old dead weeds is springy enough," said Phoenix, when she had got her breath. "I thank you for your trouble."

"Where do you live, Granny?" he asked, while the two dogs were growling at each other.

"Away back yonder, sir, behind the ridge. You can't even see it from here."

"On your way home?"

"No sir, I going to town."

"Why, that's too far! That's as far as I walk when I come out myself, and I get something for my trouble." He patted the stuffed bag he carried, and there hung down a little closed claw. It was one of the bob-whites, with its beak hooked bitterly to show it was dead. "Now you go on home, Granny!"

"I bound to go to town, mister," said Phoenix. "The time come around."

He gave another laugh, filling the whole landscape. "I know you old colored people! Wouldn't miss going to town to see Santa Claus!"

But something held old Phoenix very still. The deep lines in her face went into a fierce and different radiation. Without warning, she had seen with her own eyes a flashing nickel fall out of the man's pocket onto the ground.

"How old are you, Granny?" he was saying.

"There is no telling, mister," she said, "no telling."

Then she gave a little cry and clapped her hands and said, "Git on away from here, dog! Look! Look at that dog!" She laughed as if in admiration. "He ain't scared of nobody. He a big black dog." She whispered, "Sic him!"

"Watch me get rid of that cur," said the man. "Sic him, Pete! Sic him!"

Phoenix heard the dogs fighting, and heard the man running and throwing sticks. She even heard a gunshot. But she was slowly bending forward by that time, further and further forward, the lids stretched down over her eyes, as if she were doing this in her sleep. Her chin was lowered almost to her knees. The yellow palm of her hand came out from the fold of her apron. Her fingers slid down and along the ground under the piece of money with the grace and care they would have in lifting an egg from under a setting hen. Then she slowly straightened up, she stood erect, and the nickel was in her apron pocket. A bird flew by. Her lips moved. "God watching me the whole time. I come to stealing."

The man came back, and his own dog panted about them. "Well, I scared him off that time," he said, and then he laughed and lifted his gun and pointed it at Phoenix.

She stood straight and faced him.

"Doesn't the gun scare you?" he said, still pointing it.

"No, sir, I seen plenty go off closer by, in my day, and for less than what I done," she said, holding utterly still.

He smiled, and shouldered the gun. "Well, Granny," he said, "you must be a hundred years old, and scared of nothing. I'd give you a dime if I had any money with me. But you take my advice and stay home, and nothing will happen to you."

"I bound to go on my way, mister," said Phoenix. She inclined her head in the red rag. Then they went in different directions, but she could hear the gun shooting again and again over the hill.

She walked on. The shadows hung from the oak trees to the road like curtains. Then she smelled wood-smoke, and smelled the river, and she saw a steeple and the cabins on their steep steps. Dozens of little black children whirled around her. There ahead was Natchez shining. Bells were ringing. She walked on.

In the paved city it was Christmas time. There were red and green electric lights strung and crisscrossed everywhere, and all turned on in the daytime. Old Phoenix would have been lost if she had not distrusted her eyesight and depended on her feet to know where to take her.

She paused quietly on the sidewalk where people were passing by. A lady came along in the crowd, carrying an armful of red-, green- and silver-wrapped presents; she gave off perfume like the red roses in hot summer, and Phoenix stopped her.

"Please, missy, will you lace up my shoe?" She held up her foot.

"What do you want, Grandma?"

"See my shoe," said Phoenix. "Do all right for out in the country, but wouldn't look right to go in a big building." "Stand still then, Grandma," said the lady. She put her packages down on the sidewalk beside her and laced and tied both shoes tightly.

"Can't lace 'em with a cane," said Phoenix. "Thank you, missy. I doesn't mind asking a nice lady to tie up my shoe, when I gets out on the street."

Moving slowly and from side to side, she went into the big building, and into a tower of steps, where she walked up and around and around until her feet knew to stop.

She entered a door, and there she saw nailed up on the wall the document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame, which matched the dream that was hung up in her head.

"Here I be," she said. There was a fixed and ceremonial stiffness over her body.

"A charity case, I suppose," said an attendant who sat at the desk before her.

But Phoenix only looked above her head. There was sweat on her face, the wrinkles in her skin shone like a bright net.

"Speak up, Grandma," the woman said. "What's your name? We must have your history, you know. Have you been here before? What seems to be the trouble with you?"

Old Phoenix only gave a twitch to her face as if a fly were bothering her.

"Are you deaf?" cried the attendant.

But then the nurse came in.

"Oh, that's just old Aunt Phoenix," she said. "She doesn't come for herself—she has a little grandson. She makes these trips just as regular as clockwork. She lives away back off the Old Natchez Trace." She bent down. "Well, Aunt Phoenix, why don't you just take a seat? We won't keep you standing after your long trip." She pointed.

The old woman sat down, bolt upright in the chair.

"Now, how is the boy?" asked the nurse.

Old Phoenix did not speak.

"I said, how is the boy?"

But Phoenix only waited and stared straight ahead, her face very solemn and withdrawn into rigidity.

"Is his throat any better?" asked the nurse. "Aunt Phoenix, don't you hear me? Is your grandson's throat any better since the last time you came for the medicine?"

With her hands on her knees, the old woman waited, silent, erect and motionless, just as if she were in armor.

"You mustn't take up our time this way, Aunt Phoenix," the nurse said. "Tell us quickly about your grandson, and get it over. He isn't dead, is he?"

At last there came a flicker and then a flame of comprehension across her face, and she spoke.

"My grandson. It was my memory had left me. There I sat and forgot why I made my long trip."

"Forgot?" The nurse frowned. "After you came so far?"

Then Phoenix was like an old woman begging a dignified forgiveness for waking up frightened in the night. "I never did go to school, I was too old at the Surrender," she said in a soft voice. "I'm an old woman without an education. It was my memory fail me. My little grandson, he is just the same, and I forgot it in the coming."

"Throat never heals, does it?" said the nurse, speaking in a loud, sure voice to old Phoenix. By now she had a card with something written on it, a little list. "Yes. Swallowed lye. When was it?—January—two, three years ago—"

Phoenix spoke unasked now. "No, missy, he not dead, he just the same. Every little while his throat begin to close up again, and he not able to swallow. He not get his breath. He not able to help himself. So the time come around, and I go on another trip for the soothing medicine."

"All right. The doctor said as long as you came to get it, you could have it," said the nurse. "But it's an obstinate case."

"My little grandson, he sit up there in the house all wrapped up, waiting by himself," Phoenix went on. "We is the only two left in the world. He suffer and it don't seem to put him back at all. He got a sweet look. He going to last. He wear a little patch quilt and peep out holding his mouth open like a little bird. I remembers so plain now. I not going to forget him again, no, the whole enduring time. I could tell him from all the others in creation."

"All right." The nurse was trying to hush her now. She brought her a bottle of medicine. "Charity," she said, making a check mark in a book.

Old Phoenix held the bottle close to her eyes, and then carefully put it into her pocket.

"I thank you," she said.

"It's Christmas time, Grandma," said the attendant. "Could I give you a few pennies out of my purse?"

"Five pennies is a nickel," said Phoenix stiffly.

"Here's a nickel," said the attendant.

Phoenix rose carefully and held out her hand. She received the nickel and then fished the other nickel out of her pocket and laid it beside the new one. She stared at her palm closely, with her head on one side.

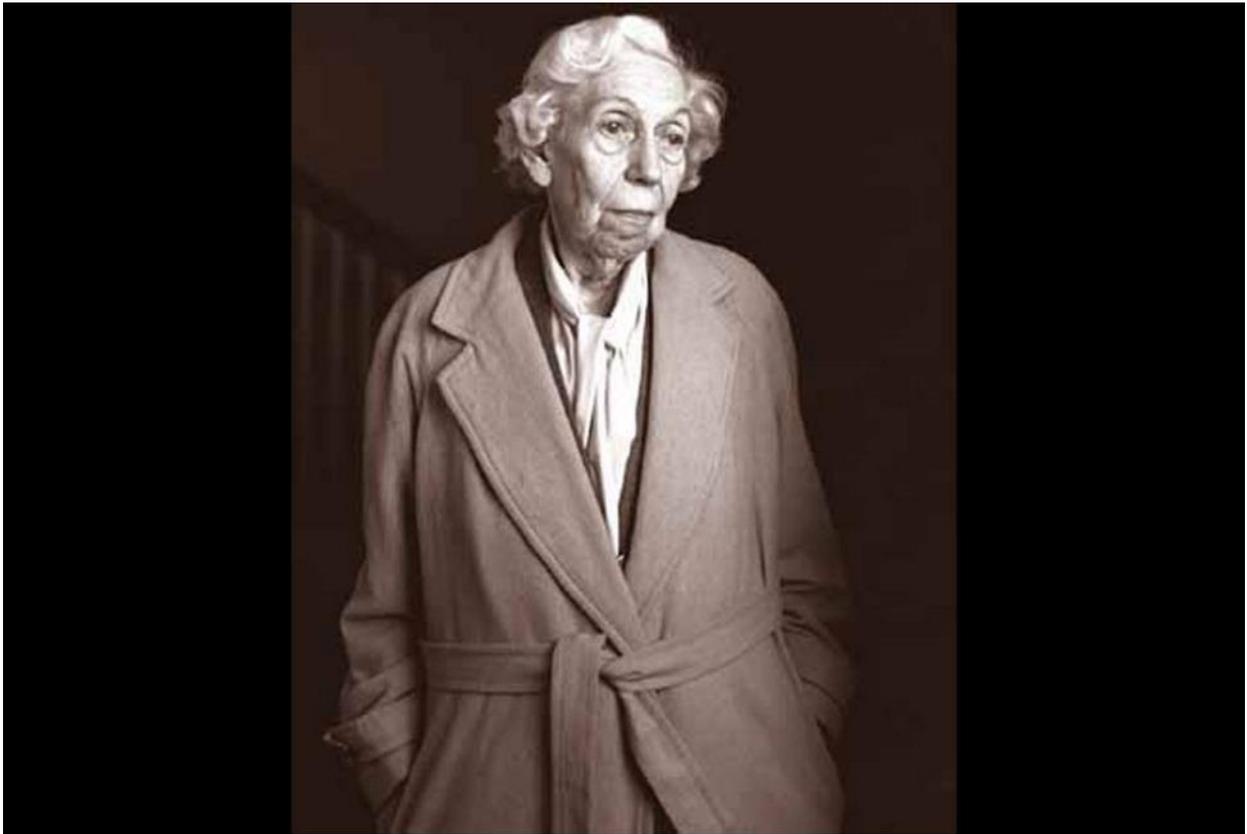
Then she gave a tap with her cane on the floor.

"This is what come to me to do," she said. "I going to the store and buy my child a little windmill they sells, made out of paper. He going to find it hard to believe there such a thing in the world. I'll march myself back where he waiting, holding it straight up in this hand."

She lifted her free hand, gave a little nod, turned around, and walked out of the doctor's office. Then her slow step began on the stairs, going down.



National Portrait Gallery, Washington, District of Columbia



Eudora Welty - Photo: Curt Richter