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Active Response to the Past Imperfect: Elizabeth Spencer's *Starting Over*

Sharon E. Colley

1 *Starting Over* (2014), Elizabeth Spencer's latest collection of short stories, provides a welcome addition to a literary career that spanned over 60 years. Given Spencer's long tenure as a critically acclaimed writer, one would expect thematic concerns of the past and reconciliation to be part of the volume; they are, but in unexpected ways. Spencer depicts her characters as able to actively choose their responses to the past's continued presence.[1] Critic Malcolm Jones suggests in *The New York Times Book Review* that, for the characters in Spencer's collection, "sometimes . . . we can't escape the past, but just as often . . . we can't reclaim it" (BR9). Yet, the characters take varied approaches to persistent elements of the past. Actively making decisions that provide healthy connections is affirmed in the stories, but ending an unhealthy relationship or refusing to engage in conflict can be as much a decision as conciliatory behavior. In some cases, the connections are more personal than interpersonal, with the characters using their imaginations to link to defining past relationships. Spencer's frequent inclusion of the mysterious stresses the psychological aspects of some reconciliations. The short stories in *Starting Over* suggest that characters have the ability to choose their responses to tensions in relationships and within themselves, choices that are deeply rooted in the perspectives they adopt.

2 Though Spencer has set her texts in various locales, including Italy and Canada, her Mississippi origins have often led critics to view her in the context of Southern literature. Southern literary critics have notoriously concerned themselves with the relationship of the past and the present, as emphasized in Allen Tate's celebrated explanation of the Southern Renascence: "With the war of 1914-1918, the South reentered the world—but gave a backward glance as it slipped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renascence, a literature conscious of the past in the present" (qtd. in Young 262). More recently, Mary Louise Weaks and Carolyn Perry

argue in *The History of Southern Women's Writing* that "A likely theme of southern writers in the new millennium is the importance of looking back while at the same time moving ahead" (617). Spencer critic Catherine Seltzer finds a nuanced, fictional relationship with the past in Louis D. Rubin's 1963 essay, "The South and the Faraway Country":

> Rubin argues that the southern writer must now inhabit a fictional South, one produced in the overlap between memory—which is informed largely by a mythic South—and experience—which is marked by self-consciousness. Rubin characterizes this South as "another country," explaining "it is not the country in which they were born, nor the country to which they once fled, nor yet the South to which they came back . . . [I]t is the country of fiction." (90-91)

3 The relationship between past and present is never straightforward and, as Rubin notes, may be characterized by shifting perspectives and the writer's imagination.

4 Spencer's most highly regarded critics point out relationships between the past and the present, as well as the individual and the community, in her fiction. Terry Roberts asserts in *Self and Community in the Fiction of Elizabeth Spencer* that the author has an "all-but-obsessive interest in how the individual both shapes and is shaped by the surrounding community" (2), a relationship that may be influenced by current and/or past events. Elsa Nettels argues that Spencer's characters "are shaped by the past and shape themselves by what they make of the past. Actions are not isolated events but, like currents, flow backward and forward, altering perceptions of the past, motivating acts in time present" (72).[2] In "The Persisting South in the Fiction of Elizabeth Spencer," Peggy Prenshaw argues that, during the 1980s and early 1990s, Spencer focused thematically on "whether the present can revisit the past, reclaim old connections . . . and continue the tradition that precariously balances individualism and societal claims on the self"; Prenshaw finds that Spencer's characters can find "the harmony of the self and the other," but do so primarily through narrative (40). *Starting Over* expands on these themes of individuals in the present negotiating with, and at times rewriting, their personal, familial, or communal pasts.

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5 The ability to choose one's perspective of the past is a key component of the collection's closing story, "The Wedding Visitor." Adult Rob Ellis revisits his ancestral home in Mississippi for a cousin's wedding and, as he consciously reflects, to find connections to his familial past. In some ways, "The Wedding Visitor" reads like an adult, male revision of Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*; when he was as a child, Rob's divorced father would leave the boy with Mississippi relatives while he went on the road with business. During the wedding visit, Rob discovers that extended family are still taken in when he stumbles upon an elderly cousin, Marty, in the rambling family house. Marty lives in a section added for her, though she complains of its distance from other family members. Rob wonders if he was welcomed when he was accommodated, remembering "his old childhood resentment about the odd way they treated him" (180). Some relatives had accused him of "freeloading" (193) and teased him about his height. Uncle Mack, to Rob, "always seemed . . . cordial because he had to be" (187), but his Aunt Molly provided comfort and love; "he thought of her as a mother" (194). As a child, Rob felt uneasy at times with the extended family, not sure of his position or their affection.

6 The wedding trip provides Rob with a way to look back and see his extended family connections from a more mature position. Though initially annoyed by the reaction of cousin Emily, who turns back to a book quickly after chatting with him, he recognizes that "Emily had always been that way, doing what she wanted and not noticing anybody" (180). She was not rejecting him; she was acting in character. Later, when he remembers being teased for his size, he tells himself: "That was one of the bunch from Jackson, not close kin" (193). Rob recontextualizes without dismissing his memories to positively color his view of extended family.

7 Rob becomes the confidante for family members who regard him as close enough to trust but distant enough to tell secrets. When the wedding is threatened by an ill-advised financial decision of the groom, Rob is instrumental in setting things right. He quietly repays money from his own account and helps redeem the groom in the eyes of Uncle Mack. No longer "freeloading," he literally saves the wedding. He assumes a new role of problem solver in the family, a position that mirrors the one he holds in professional life as a political staffer (Croley 215). Uncle Mack figures out the role Rob has played and offers appreciation, in addition to a genuine invitation: "'Son,' he said, 'I know your father died not long ago and you got nobody left. But you got us. You got me for your father, and Molly for your mother, and Normie too and all the rest of us. But mainly me. I want you to call this home. It's a sacred word, son. It's yours'" (201). Rob wonders, "*Did I come for this?*" (201). He has gone from the dropped-off kid to a full adult family member.

8 As the story ends, Rob acknowledges that there are other ways to read events. Of the new marriage he helps facilitate, he wonders, "Had he secured the marriage of a possible alcoholic to a possible crook?" (202). Remembering his earlier impression of the young couple, however, he refuses to believe he made a mistake. He chooses to see the wedding and his union with extended family as positive events, with his uncle's pronouncement "a firm standing place beneath his feet" (202). Rob has rewritten his position in his complicated family past and present.

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9 Two stories that explore this choice of perception in alternate ways are "The Boy in the Tree" and "On the Hill." Wallace Harkins of "The Boy in the Tree" fears his aging mother is becoming delusional. Mrs. Harkins reports seeing a young boy observing her from a tree near her home. Wallace does not believe the boy in the tree exists, though he does see a boy, dressed in the style Wallace did as a child, eating peanuts downtown. Wallace vaguely remembers a silver-haired girl in grade school who gave him peanuts, though no one he asks seems to recall her.

10 Wallace, not his mother, may be the one with a tenuous connection to reality. A news story about a tiger moved to a nearby animal sanctuary gives Wallace a series of dreams featuring the big cat. When Wallace decides to sell some property his deceased father left him, the pending transaction promises increased wealth and prestige. Yet, feeling nostalgic misgivings, Wallace believes he yells out in a meeting, "*I don't want to!*" (54), attempting to stop the sale. No one in the room hears him say anything. These hints that Wallace may confuse imagination and reality suggest that his perceptions may be mistaken, lessening the surprise when the boy his mother has been seeing turns out to be real.

11 When visiting his mother's house, Wallace finds her offering his old clothes to Martin Grimsley, a real boy about 15 years old. Martin admits to watching from the tree, getting up the courage to visit. His appearance offers a possible solution for the boy Wallace saw—perhaps it was Martin in Wallace's old clothes. Mrs. Harkins says this is the first time she has given Wallace's garments to Martin, though, undercutting that possibility. The fact that Mrs. Harkins was not imagining Martin does not negate the possibility that Wallace was hallucinating the boy *he* saw.

12 Martin turns out to be a chatty teen who talks about, coincidentally enough, the tiger in the animal sanctuary. When Wallace, his mother, and Martin walk outside the house, Wallace keeps his eye on the edge of the woods. He expects to see "the girl with silver hair . . . the tiger walking besides her" (56). Wallace embraces imagination and feels "happy" (56). The story never clears up what is imaginary and what is real, though it is unlikely that the little girl from Wallace's childhood appears decades later, still a child, leading the rescued tiger. He expects both to come out of "the line of the woods," a space reminiscent of the property left by his father. Whether the girl or the tiger is real is beside the point; Wallace chooses to believe and embrace what is meaningful to him. The combination of images at the end, of the resilient tiger, the little girl who brought him peanuts, the father's land and the mother's presence, all bring together different aspects of what represents love for him.

13 Wallace's use of imagination is similar to that in Spencer's short story "The Little Brown Girl," published in 1957 (Croley 213). Even though its child protagonist senses a hired man could be fabricating tales of his non-existent daughter, she lets herself believe in the potential playmate. As Prenshaw notes in *Elizabeth Spencer*, the child protagonist "enjoys the mastery implicit in the creating of a playmate in her imagination." When the protagonist thinks she sees the little girl in real life, though, she runs fearfully to her mother (133). In Wallace's story, his imagination brings an unlikely combination of characters to life but he is unaware that he imagined them; he also finds their presence reassuring rather than frightening. The story reflects Nettels's nomination for "the most distinctive quality of Spencer's fiction: the emanation, in scenes rendered with the utmost clarity, of mysterious forces, indefinable, often sinister, placing characters within the 'haunted verge' . . . between the Actual and the Imaginary" (91-92). For Wallace, the forces aren't sinister, but they do place him in the margins between "the Actual and the Imaginary." Because the reconciliation takes place within Wallace, the dreamlike narrative reflects his consciousness rather than his external reality. Betina Entzminger notes that "in Spencer's stories, it is not the incidents that are fantastic, only the characters' reactions to them" (78). "The Boy in the Tree" ends ambiguously with a happy but arguably delusional Wallace. He may have taken the revision that worked for Rob Ellis too far.[3]

14 "On the Hill," while not overtly similar to "The Boy in the Tree," revises its conclusion in significant ways. One of the most critically acclaimed stories in the volume, "On the Hill" relates the mystery of Barry and Jan Daughtery through the eyes of neighbor Eva Rooke. Eva, married to Dick Rooke and hoping to carry a child to term, finds herself intrigued by the neighbors in the house on the hill. At first, the Daughterys are wildly popular for the elegant parties they throw, though their past remains uncertain. The mystery deepens when the parties stop and the Daughtery's son, Riley, shows up repeatedly and inexplicably at the Rooke's house; Jan may or may not be inebriated the first time Eva takes Riley home. Barry Daughtery is seen coming out of the Holy

Brotherhood of Jesus Church, an independent and isolated church that Eva is surprised to find him attending. Though her husband, Dick, repeatedly cautions Eva to stay out of the Daughterys' lives, drawn partly by concern for the children and partly by curiosity, she becomes increasingly interested in the family, a fascination that does not end when the Daughterys suddenly move away.

15 Eva rejoices in a successful pregnancy and, when her son is born, suggests naming him Riley after the Daughterys' son. Dick instead suggests Richard or Rick. "'What's gone is gone,' he said. 'What's real remains'" (131). The story concludes: "So they built the wall. From back of it, came the faint echo of stamping feet, and on the hill a bear explored, a deer was watchful, and a little boy wandered, searching forever" (131). The wall is metaphorical, as the Rookes end a search for answers. They block out the past and its images, just as Wallace embraced them. The Rookes turn away from the boy, deer and bear in the forest, while Wallace moves towards the girl, tiger and woods. Which choice is better remains unclear; both are ways to deal with the past and survive, but both stories end with a sense of something unresolved, a haunting almost. Prenshaw suggests that Spencer's short stories focus "more often on the telling image, the gesture that can make a story cohere, than on plot or action" (*Elizabeth Spencer* 131). The open tree line and the wall from "The Boy in the Tree" and "On the Hill," respectively, use similar imagery for different purposes to reveal the characters' choices in perceiving their pasts.

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16 Connecting imaginatively to the past occurs overtly in "Return Trip," the first story in *Starting Over*. Edward, a recent widower, stops by for a surprise visit with his cousin, Patricia, and her husband, Boyd, in North Carolina. Boyd's long held feelings of animosity towards Edward, stemming from a decades-old incident in Mississippi, rekindle almost immediately. Years ago, after a family house party with lots of drinking, newlywed Patricia had gone to bed early and, in the later dark, cousin Edward mistakenly chose her room for the night. The next morning, the unsuspecting bedfellows insisted nothing happened, but Boyd was furious. The fact that their only son, Mark, looks like Edward does not help matters.

17 Boyd's dislike for Edward does not arise only from romantic jealousy. At the time of the incident, Patricia realizes, "he didn't care for any of them, especially Edward" (27). He had been annoyed when the family made inside jokes and talked about absent members because it made him feel like an outsider. Boyd seems to regard Patricia's family as a threat to their relationship. Reviewer Michael Croley argues that "Edward's arrival represents the past she [Patricia] once held close and had to release for her life with Boyd" (213). Despite the fact that "Nobody had ever doubted that Boyd was right for Patricia" (32), he resents the extended family's shared history, even in the present day of the story. Sensing Boyd's discomfort, Edward cuts his visit short and leaves to call on other relatives. Boyd seems to be successful, once again, in separating Patricia from her family of origin. In some ways, the story echoes the theme of Spencer identified in her short stories: "liberation and the regret you have when you liberate yourself" (qtd. in Prenshaw, *Elizabeth Spencer* 132). Patricia escapes the immediate control of her family, but she seems unsure whether this was a victory.

18 In the last paragraph, however, Patricia chooses her extended family connections, even as she affirms her love for and marriage to Boyd. As she slips her feet into the river near their North Carolina summer home, "she heard the Mississippi voices for the first time" (35). Patricia imaginatively hears the voices of long dead or long lost relatives, talking about "unimportant things" as families do. Listening, "[s]he knew she would hear them always, from now on" (35). Though Patricia loves Boyd, her familial past is part of who she is. She may live with her husband, but she does not renounce her imaginative connections to her Mississippi past, as Boyd hopes she will. Reviewer Patricia Schultheis argues that it is Patricia's perspective that matters the most; she is shaped by her Mississippi past (144). The dreamlike nature of the story's ending reinforces that the integration is internal; because the connections are psychic rather than social, however, they may be even more permanent. Patricia does not connect to her familial past through proximity or even through personal relationships, but she refuses to abandon the link in her imagination and in her sense of self.

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19 The personal past takes center stage in "Sightings." Protagonist Mason Everett begins the story as a divorced man who keeps distance even from those he cares about. He does not often see his teenage daughter, Tabby, though he "had long loved her from a distance" (59). Similarly, he irregularly dates Marsha; "Though he didn't see her often, he liked to know she was there" (61). His quiet work-at-home life keeps only tenuous connections to people. The source of Mason's reserve becomes clear when the narrative reveals how he lost much of his vision. While he was fixing Tabby's CD player, she unexpectedly turned on the power to the device, severely damaging his sight. Mason seems to choose a positive attitude about the injury; "Insurance supplied the major expense. So what did it matter in the long run? Sight-damaged people went successfully through life. It was well known" (62-63). Yet the cocoon of emotional and physical distance he has built around himself suggests that Mason has not completely recovered emotionally from the accident or his divorce. Though Mason does not bear Tabby ill will, he keeps her at a distance, which likely plays into her feelings of guilt for the accident.

20 Mason's reserve is challenged when Tabby runs away from her mother's home to his. Hesitant to even ask why she has arrived at first, Mason eventually learns that Tabby does not like the man her mother plans to marry. Mason's emotional control is revealed when the narrator notes: "He was a little bit jealous [to learn of the engagement]; unavoidable, he supposed" (63). Mason cares, but he intellectualizes his feelings so that he can choose how to respond. Despite this fact, the isolation he chose early in the story proves not to be a healthy long-term solution. As Prenshaw argues, in Spencer's later novels, "the autonomous will devoted solely to the separate self will not sustain life" (*Elizabeth Spencer* 162). Yet his mature ability to choose his response to his emotions does, in some ways, serve him and his family well.

21 Mason's ability to make a thoughtful choice is helpful when his ex-wife and her fiancé, Guy Bowden, come to retrieve Tabby. Mason has enjoyed getting to know the teen again and, when she wants to stay with Mason, he takes her side. During the discussions, Mason has a moment alone with his ex-wife, who explains how good Guy is to her. "Now was the moment to say, *So you think I wasn't good to you*. But he didn't. He'd

had enough of that. What is separation, together or apart, but one long silence?" (69). Mason's restraint allows him to move past resentment and find a more peaceful way to deal with his ex-wife, even as he moves beyond passivity to stand up for his daughter. Mason's acceptance of the separation is a choice, as is going after his daughter and his dog, Jasper, when Tabby flees following an argument with Guy.

22 When Mason finds Tabby, he acknowledges not fighting for her during the divorce because he tired of arguing with his ex-wife. When Tabby accuses him of not wanting her, he replies: "'That was then . . . This is now'" (72). His passivity has been a calculated retreat, but he is changing his perception. Thinking about his work in genetic statistics for the hospital, Mason reflects that the figures under his special microscopes "arrived sometimes in complex pairs, wavered and spread apart; at other times they approached, hesitated, then matched up and marched together. He checked results and tabulated conclusions" (71). The behavior of the figures echoes Mason's experience of the complex pairing with his ex-wife, plus the tentative reunion with his daughter. By the end of the story, Mason asks Tabby direct questions, though he still regards inquiring as something "dared" (73). When the pair arrives back at Mason's house, they find the missing dog, Jasper. Tabby exclaims, "[h]e's come home!" (73) and Mason responds, "And so have you," (73). He is utterly delighted when Tabby does not disagree that his home is now hers. Moving beyond passivity allows Mason to reconcile and create a home with his child.

23 Mason's personal past and its consequences are inescapable; he cannot undo his past marriage or his near blinding. He does, however, experiment with ways to respond. His somewhat understandable withdrawal and passivity teach him control but isolate him. When Mason begins to emerge from passivity, asking questions and speaking up for his daughter, he starts to repair a relationship that Tabby needs to have healed and that Mason wants more than he realizes. As Roberts indicates, in "the Spencer canon . . . the human individual is a communal animal" (32). As his relationship with Tabby evolves, he becomes closer with girlfriend Marsha, suggesting how one connection leads to another. Mason illustrates that not acting is as much a choice as action and is sometimes desirable; however, the choices that lead to peace and positive connections are the ones he must pursue.[4]

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24 Like Mason, Margery in "The Rising Tide" struggles with her response to divorce and parent/child relationships. Her divorce is almost finalized, and Margery has started teaching business composition at a nearby university. Her soon-to-be-ex-husband, Willard, whose cheating started their path to divorce, makes excuses to communicate with Margery, working up to asking for a reconciliation. As Margery mulls over their relationship, however, she simultaneously steps into a more diverse world through her daughter and her teaching. Most notably, a non-traditional student who is ethnically Indian, Sabra Blaine, draws her into conversations and his life.

25 Willard and racial intolerance are paired up throughout the story; in one discussion, Margery notes that Willard begins to use "his Southern small-town voice, which she had once liked so much until she had actually listened to what it was saying" (94). What Willard is saying during that conversation is that their college-aged daughter is dating a Mexican young man, and Willard is worried. He states: "He [the boyfriend] may be

okay. It's only that pretty soon we'll have the whole family crowding around. I know the type. It's just as well not to monkey around with that sort" (94). Margery's own hesitant steps into an ethnically diverse world are hobbled and speeded by her dance towards and away from this near-ex-husband.

26 Margery and Willard's daughter, Elise, is intrigued by diverse individuals and cultures. She hosts a party at home that includes her boyfriend Carlos, Margery's student Sabra, and students of various ethnic backgrounds. Though Margery spends much of the party in her room, Elise pulls her out to see a spontaneously engineered entertainment. Cheerleader-esque guests form a standing human pyramid; when the red-haired girl on top starts to topple, "Arms rose up to her, brown, black, and white. Hands caught her by the ankles and she steadied. Everyone clapped" (99). For Margery, who had reported feeling "unsteady" (77) as the divorce finalization nears, discovering stability in friendships and community provides an alternative to returning to the philandering ex-husband. Impressed by the sober celebration and respectfulness of Elise's guests, Margery's attitude toward the young people and the larger world seems to open up. As Prenshaw argues of Spencer's earlier protagonists, Margery "has freed herself from both the easily refused demands of social convention and the more compelling demands of the beloved" (*Elizabeth Spencer* 68). Like Rob in "The Wedding Visitor," she has found a community, this one non-familial, to steady her.

27 Though Margery has felt like the betrayed loser in her marriage, Sabra recasts her experience as a victory. Near the end of the story, Sabra congratulates Margery on her divorce: "Some seek many years for endings, but never find. But you—you succeed!" (101). Willard's affair and attitudes are not things Margery can change, but she can decide how to react. Pairing the divorce with the introduction of inclusive attitudes allows the audience to agree that she may be becoming a better person by moving away from a broken union. Rather than being the abandoned spouse, Margery chooses a life that goes towards a more complex and welcoming world than she had imagined.

28 Though Margery moves away from her recent past in "Rising Tide," Emily must deal with the past overlapping on the present in "Blackie." Divorced Emily Marshall has married widower Lawrence Hafner and become the contented mother figure to his three tween-through-college-age sons and his elderly father. Suddenly, Emily's ex-husband, a former heavy drinker, claims to be dying and requests her presence. Emily goes and is happy to see Tim, her biological son with her first husband. Though Emily does not regret the divorce, she remembers the good parts of the past and enjoys watching her son and his father play music together. Meanwhile, the Hafner boys worry that Emily will not return but instead pick her first family over them.

29 Emily does return, but their lives change in unexpected ways. When her ex-husband dies, Emily invites Tim, her wandering musician son, to come stay with her new family. He does eventually show up, but Emily's stepsons are openly hostile to Tim, resenting him much like Boyd resents Edward in "Return Trip." One night, the boys damage Tim's prized instruments and injure him as they run him off the property; Emily only sees Tim by chance when he sneaks back to get an instrument dropped during the escape. Though Tim asks Emily to leave with him, she decides to stay with her husband and his family. The decision is not easy; "when she heard the car start and pull away, some of her went with it" (166-67). She plans to keep in touch with Tim, but also reveals to Lawrence what his adored sons are capable of doing. Like the boys, Lawrence feared that Emily would leave the family. She does not, telling him that the "'honest ones have

to stick together.' She smiled encouragement, knowing they had entered a new chapter. She had had, after all, so much practice" (167). Compared to the start of the story, the family members are located in roughly similar physical locales; however, their relationships and perspectives of each other have changed radically.

30 Emily's situation, though partly of her own making, is not completely in her control. She could not control her ex-husband's drinking, so she left and made a new life. While she chose Lawrence's family, and is happy with them, she is disturbed that they do not welcome Tim, seeing him as a threat to her continued presence. Her past bursts into her present life and the two are difficult to merge. Once reconnected with Tim, she wants him to stay part of her life, though she will not discard her current family to make that happen. She spends much of the story struggling to balance her loyalties to current/past and current/recent families. Sally Greene argues in the "later stories" that "Spencer has tipped the balance away from the easy, harmonious resolution of domestic discord toward more of an open-ended recognition of the difficulties her characters realistically face in changing social contexts that have made 'connectedness' increasingly elusive" (90). While "Blackie" does not offer closure, it does give hope for improved, if imperfect, relationships.

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31 The two remaining stories in *Starting Over* are brief but touching parent/child portrayals with a holiday setting; both feature characters choosing a loving or hopeful perspective. "Christmas Longings" begins with Sonia as a child wishing to be an angel in the Christmas pageant and her sister, Margie, longing for snow. Near midpoint, the story abruptly switches to adult Sonia talking with her skeptical husband, Lester, about that Christmas. Sonia was too tall to be an angel and had to be a shepherd; Margie did not get snow, either. To please the disappointed girls, Sonia's mother made her an angel costume to wear at home, and their father and uncle brought snow back from the mountains in an ice cream freezer. Lester finds the story evidence of how spoiled the girls were, which may suggest his current opinion of his wife. Sonia then says it actually did snow that day, a Christmas miracle. Lester dismisses this part of the story, but Sonia chooses to believe "they were blessed. It must have been true. Sonia would believe it always" (176). The mystical confirmation allows Sonia to accept her own perspective and confirms the presence of mystery in the characters' everyday lives. While Lester sees the story as evidence of parental indulgence, Sonia chooses to see it as evidence of her parents' love for the girls. The facts remain the same, but how Sonia remembers the events indicates that she is not willing to accept Lester's downgrading of her childhood any more than Patricia in "Return Trip" was willing to give up imaginative connections to the past for Boyd. Though she cannot return to the past, she decides how it will remain in her memory and imagination, shaping her sense of self, despite her husband's opinion.

32 While "Christmas Longings" looks to the past, "The Everlasting Light" features a father who projects into his child's future. One day near Christmas, Kemp Donahue sneaks out to observe his awkward tween daughter, Jessie, at Christmas choir practice. He is so moved by the beauty of the voices and the power of the words that he cries. When the wife later wants Jessie to be in a school skit instead of going to choir practice, Kemp supports his daughter, saying she should do as she wishes, similar to the way Mason

supports his daughter in "Sightings." Jessie then relates a story of a mystery man came to choir practice and cried. Kemp imagines speaking with a 40-year-old Jessie who admits that she knew all along the crying man was her father; his wishful thinking suggests that he hopes she knows of the deep paternal love that he cannot verbalize.

33 Kemp finds meaning by reaching back into stories of faith and beauty, but also by seeing the beauty in his dear child, a girl who has disappointed her mother with her absence of physical loveliness. Instead of reflecting on a familial past, Kemp looks to the future, imagining for Jessie a happy life with "a wonderful job or a wonderful husband and wonderful children" (110). He thus creates a future connection to a beloved child with a happy life, fulfilling the dreams and love he has for her. His hope suggests the mystery of life and love that Spencer repeatedly affirms in this collection.

34 The characters in *Starting Over* use diverse methods, such as recontextualizing, denial, and imagination, to connect their pasts meaningfully into their present perspectives. No method is presented as perfect, nor does Spencer endorse any approach or view of the past, as the authors of the Southern Renaissance might. Instead, the characters' aesthetics are shaped by their experiences but also by their values and choices. Selecting a point of view does not change the facts in the characters' worlds, but it does offer a new vantage point that may significantly alter the world they can perceive.

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NOTES

1. William Faulkner famously wrote in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) that "The past is never dead. It's not even past."
2. The ability to negotiate one's reactions and perspectives is reinforced by Seltzer's argument that Spencer continually redefines the meaning of "home."
3. Greene notes a similar rewriting of a family situation, most significantly in "Instrument of Destruction." Seltzer also observes that Rosalind in "Jack of Diamonds" complicates and revises her view of home and her parents' marriage (125-30).
4. Prenshaw writes: "[Spencer's] characters express the universal modern experience of the self torn between a private, self-conscious inner life and a compromised, shared outer life that demands the forfeiture of consciousness or separateness" ("Mermaids, Angels and Free Women" 15).

ABSTRACTS

Starting Over (2014), le plus récent recueil de nouvelles d'Elizabeth Spencer, présente des personnages qui font face aux éléments tenaces de leur passé. Les nouvelles montrent que bien qu'il soit bon de prendre des décisions qui mènent à établir des relations, il est aussi important de mettre fin à une relation malsaine ou de refuser un conflit. Dans certains cas, les connections sont plus personnelles qu'interpersonnelles et les personnages utilisent leur imagination afin de définir leurs relations passées. Les nouvelles de Spencer contenues dans *Starting Over* suggèrent que les personnages ont la possibilité de réagir différemment dans les conflits intérieurs ou au sein de leurs relations.

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