KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH TONY M. GROOMS

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TS: Tony, we always begin by just asking people to talk about when and where they were born and just a little bit about their background.

TG: Okay. I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia, as I've said many times, in the shadow of Monticello.

TS: Thomas Jefferson smiling down on you!

TG: Well, some people think he's still smiling! But I grew up in Louisa County, which is about twenty miles outside of the city of Charlottesville in a very rural environment surrounded by extended family. I still go back there and in every aisle of the grocery store I run into someone who is related to me. I was just there this past weekend and the same thing happened. One of the clerks said, "I know you. You're related to . . ." and then she named the ancestral tree, and figured out where we were on the branches.

TS: What year were you born?

TG: I was born fifty-one years ago last week.

DY: Happy belated birthday.

TG: Thank you.

DY: Or belated happy birthday!

TG: Nineteen fifty-five.

TS: January of '55.

TG: Yes. My father tells me that there was a great blizzard on the night that he took my mom to the hospital, and he didn't know whether or not he would make it. So there was a little excitement.

TS: Where was the hospital?

TG: The hospital was the University of Virginia Hospital in Charlottesville. Of course, he had the eighteen miles to go, and I suppose in those days there was no

interstate; so it was the US Route 250, which is hilly and it's Piedmont Country, so in the winter there are icy roads and that kind of thing. I guess they had a little adventure getting there. I'm a first born, so it was new to them as young parents.

TS: Of course, we're Piedmont here too, in north Georgia. It's part of north Georgia.

TG: I've never been very far from the Piedmont, or from Route 29 [laughter].

TS: So, you grew up not far from the University of Virginia, but in a very rural area. Was your father farming at that time?

TG: No, my father always fancied that he was a farmer, which meant that I grew up with pigs and chickens, and a lot of vegetables that needed picking and hoeing, and whatnot. My grandfather, my father's father, was actually a small farmer; he had a few head of cattle.

TS: Did you know him?

TG: Oh yes. He died when I was nineteen. They came from a farming tradition—the place is changing now; some of the farmland has been developed into housing.

TS: Right, did they own their land?

TG: Yes. There's still legatee property there from my great-grandfather's generation, and that needs to get straightened out I suppose.

TS: How they got a hold of the land, and so on?

TG: I don't know that. That's been a mystery to me. I actually have an aunt, who is ninety-nine years old, and she has not divulged that kind of thing; and when I've asked her directly, she said, "Nobody wants to know about that old stuff" [laughter]. So when I saw her this past weekend, I kind of sneaked one in on her; and she told me a little bit about her schooling, which was interesting. She has not had an interest in talking about it. Though in my father's generation, I have an aunt who has told me a lot about the family, and she has learned it from the older generation. So, I do know a little bit about the history, but I don't know how they acquired land. On both sides of the family they were land owning and small farmers. It's country that is primarily cattle, although it abuts to horse country. It's also very colonial in outlook**.** Green Springs, which is a national historic site, I believe—there are different distinctions of national historic place, site—but this is a district of plantations that date back to the 1730s. My family has had some association with that, as I understand; probably enslaved on one or more of the Green Springs plantations. The church that my grandfathers, both grandfathers, belonged to is Fosters Creek Baptist Church. My understanding from the church history I read, and I think my aunt still has the booklet—of course the church is still there and is still a functioning church, so someone there probably has the

history—but as I understand it, the congregation was originally slaves from a plantation that Patrick Henry had some association with. I don't think that he owned it at the time, but he might have been there. Patrick Henry moved around a bit, but at one time he did live in that area.

TS: Oftentimes, they moved their farms around whether they moved their plantation house around or not; simply because of the poor agricultural techniques, and they would exhaust one field and move on to another.

TG: The Green Springs area is one of those geological special places. Apparently the soil has been very fertile for a long time, and I don't know exactly why, but there is a website that talks about that.

TS: So what did your father do?

TG: My father was a refrigeration mechanic at the University of Virginia Hospital. He did not have a job when I was born. He had worked at different things; in some ways kind of an adventurer early on, working in West Virginia on the railroads, as a cook. I can't remember what other things he did, but at one point he had a motorcycle, I know that. My college friends admired him a great deal for [it] [laughter].

TS: By the way, what's your father's name?

TG: My father's name is Robert E. Grooms.

TS: What about your mother?

TG: My mother's name is Dellaphine Scott Grooms. If I should go to my county now, they would say, "Oh, you look like a Scott."

TS: How about that? What's the "M" in your name for?

TG: Myron.

TS: Is that a family name?

TG: No. My father's sister, who was childless at the time and loved children—and still she's kind of like a second mother to me—named me, in negotiation with my mother. My name was supposed to be properly Anthony Myron Grooms. Why the Myron, I only can imagine, is that Aunt Alberta [Grooms Ford] was living in metro New York at the time, and probably heard the name there—it's a good Jewish name. The Anthony got shortened to Tony, so legally my name is Tony. My mother says that, "Well, your grandfather had a friend named Anthony, who was a drunk, and I didn't want him to think I had named you for him." The man was a drunk, but I'm not sure whether she was pulling my leg or not [chuckle].

TS: Well, I noticed in the catalog, they have it listed as "Tony M. Grooms," but on your book, *Bombingham*, you've got it "Anthony Grooms."

TG: Well, I experimented, as I think a lot of writers do, as what to call myself. It's part of finding an identity as an artist. I always thought that "Tonys" were Tony Curtis and Tony Randall; and it wasn't a serious enough name for an author, although there are quite a few authors with that name.

TS: What was the image you wanted to project?

TG: I wanted to be slightly more serious. At first I was TM, so my earliest publications out of graduate school, I'm TM; but people kept writing to me, "Dear Mr. or Mrs." and so I decided I really needed to have a name.

DY: I always feel like somebody's hiding something when they have those initials, don't they? Sort of blocking you getting in there.

TS: You went to public schools and in Louisa County, did you say?

TG: Louisa County.

TS: You went to public schools, and I know you've talked to our class about this before when we were discussing your books, and they want to know how much is first-hand knowledge and so on; but in your book, *Trouble No More,* your book of short stories, you've got a short story about a kid that goes through the Freedom of Choice. Why don't you talk about your own educational background?

TG: Well, I've been really lucky. My parents weren't terrifically well educated, and in talking with my aunt you see the system that wasn't really designed to educate blacks very well. She said that they walked to school and they could only get three months of education a year, up to sixth grade. Of course, this was 1915, that she was talking about. My father, I think, had a very similar kind of background. My mother got a little further along, but she didn't graduate from high school. She was a very young mother, and my father was nearly thirty when they married. I'm lucky in that around the periphery of the extended family, there were highly educated people—college professors and a medical doctor, and we always heard about them. They were related to my father's mother. Since I've been in the profession, I've actually associated with two of them, but mostly with the one who is in English. This same aunt that I'm talking about, who is ninety-nine, Aunt Nettie—I guess it's a Victorian name—she and her husband used to board teachers; so by the time I started first grade, I knew the teachers very well.

TS: What's Aunt Nettie's last name?

TG: Morris. She would be Nettie Dickerson Morris.

TS: So they boarded teachers.

TG: They boarded teachers, and in particular two. One from Philadelphia, who was the first grade teacher, Mrs. [Rosa] Hawkins, also known as "the Hawk," had a reputation of being a bit mean, and she was a bit psychotic, I think, in some ways [laughter]. But they were good teachers and very dedicated in a system that was not very supportive of them. Before I started school I had already learned [since] my mother had taught me reading and writing; and the expectation was that I was to teach my sister, who was two years younger. From the beginning, I guess I've been reading, writing and teaching. I started at the Ferncliff Elementary School, though it was not located at Ferncliff [laughter]. But the Ferncliff School has an interesting history in that—again, going back to Aunt Nettie, her choices of schools were the Ferncliff School or the Bells Crossroads School. She said that Ferncliff was closer, but she preferred Bells Crossroads, so they walked, I guess, probably about three miles to get to that school. The Ferncliff School burned, and for a long time my mother's grandfather, George Parrish, advocated for the building of a new school for blacks. He worked very hard to get that done. Just before I started school, there was a new school built. As I said, it was built to be inadequate. [There were] five classrooms for seven grades, and no amenities, except bathrooms, but no library, no cafeteria.

TS: Right. Is there a Rosenwald school in that area?

TG: No. This was a part of Virginia, not far from the University of Virginia, which is still, I think, the intellectual center of the state.

TS: But at that time, segregated.

TG: Yes, segregated.

DY: And male only.

TG: And male only.

TS: Segregated two ways.

TG: Right. And of course, only about forty miles out of Richmond as well. I-64 goes right through the county, and the county is now beginning to develop; but particularly in those days, it was really no-wheres-ville. Apparently it was more the center of attraction in the nineteenth century when the Green Springs district had a spa that wealthy people came to; but by the twentieth century it was just something you just passed through. It's also funny to go to Charlottesville now, as an adult, and to hang out with the Charlottesville intelligentsia, and to hear them talk about Louisa, because they look upon it as just the most backwards place on earth. "We just can't understand those people in Louisa! They're just so backwards! Of course, dear, you're different because you got out!" But the

county is changing because it's getting impacted by people coming from Washington, which is about 120 miles away; but [it's] right in the triangle, Charlottesville, Richmond and Washington, and for a long time it was really kind of lost. I did have the experience of being in that segregated school, even though it was after *Brown v. Board*, and was there until sixth grade. The thing that I remember most about it, and I think probably any student remembers, is that there were dedicated teachers. I didn't particularly enjoy the "Hawk," but she got the job done. And then my second grade teacher, Mrs. Mason, is someone whom I also had in eleventh grade; and I count her as one of the great inspirations of my life, though not in the second grade [laughter]. And then my third and fourth grade teacher was someone who just died last year in her nineties. In fact, going home I saw her granddaughter, so you never escape these people, it seems. She was a real character, Mrs. Merman Johnson. Tall, generally unkempt, seems never to have had her hair in place, always had this big purse that was overstuffed and you couldn't zip it, and always carried under her arm. She kind of walked with big steps and she had a hoarse voice. I remember she had hairs on her face.

TS: Sounds like you had a novelist's eye for detail even when you were in the third and fourth grade.

TG: Well, she was quite a peculiar person.

DY: Did she scare you all?

TG: She scared the heck out of me! My first encounter with her was really when I was still in the second grade. I was cutting up, and she came up behind me and whacked me on the butt; and I remember, even today, she said, "Sitty downy, sitty downy" [laughter]! I guess that was baby talk, or something, but it was more of the surprise of it that scared me. She just scared me to the nth degree. Then, I had her in the third grade, and I was still afraid of her; but by fourth grade I had gotten used to her, and I recognized a couple of things she did, given the fact that she had no resources. One of the resources she had, in fact, the only library she had, was a set of *World Book Encyclopedias*. Mind you, this was the 1960s and these were 1930s issued. She would say, "Go to the encyclopedia," and this was standard assignment, "find an article and do a book report." So we did a lot of reading and writing and that reading was really very explorative. The other thing she did that was interesting, was that we had our Virginia history-book, which gave a very biased view of Virginia History; [and while] never countering directly that view of history, would also tell us about Maggie Walker, the black banker, the first woman banker, and Frederick Douglass, and all these other figures that, interestingly, when I moved to the white school, we never talked about—well, obviously, we never talked about.

TS: Teachers probably didn't know about them.

TG: Probably didn't.

TS: They should have known about Fredrick Douglass, but Maggie Walker?

TG: I don't know what they knew actually, but Johnson stands out as someone that I remember as being encouraging. I wrote my first short story in her class. As I like to say, I got my first severe criticism, as it was all very sloppily written. I was in the mad rush of inventing and when I showed it to her, of course, it just wasn't up to standards in terms of punctuation and spelling, and all that. She just said, "You can do better than this," and handed it back to me rather roughly. I was so disappointed because she hadn't seen the vision [laughter]. But I do remember her as an inspiration early on. After that, the Freedom of Choice came, and I've been remembering more about it recently. I know that my parents wanted the best for us, but I'm not sure how willing they were to risk us to get it, and this was my sister [Robin E. Rucker] and myself. But there was a woman named Alberta Guy Despot; for a while she had a school named for her and she was a black educator and kind of a leader. She was a very nice woman and very, very much respected. She went around and talked to parents; and she saw my parents as good candidates to put their children into the white schools, and so they did.

TS: Why were they good candidates, do you think?

TG: Well, I think because I was held up to be a good student, and Robin was a good student too, although she was never quite as ambitious as me, I think, in terms of her studies. But she was a solid "B" student.

TS: Did it help that your parents owned their own property, and that your father worked in another county?

TG: Possibly. The Freedom of Choice came from the state of Virginia; it wasn't the most socially progressive institution.

TS: Which county was it that absolutely closed their schools for seven or eight years?

TG: Prince Edward County. There are a couple of different "Princes" around there, but Charlottesville did too. It was before I started school, so it was probably mid-fifties. I don't think Louisa ever did. It's so isolated in a way that these issues were not prominent issues, and there was rarely a challenge to the system, because everybody knew everybody, and everybody kind of knew what was supposed to happen, and when and how it was supposed to happen.

DY: When you say the system, you mean the Jim Crow system?

TG: Yes, Jim Crow. But even on top of that the general aristocracy, and what a lot of people don't realize is that whites were ranked in the aristocracy, too, so there were the big landowners. To this day, I only know their names. I don't think I ever met any of them, and we didn't go to school with their children. As far as I

knew, they didn't even have children, but I'm sure they must have [laughter]. Charlottesville is dotted with all these private schools all up in the mountains, and I'm sure that's where they were. The aristocracy in our public schools were the sons and daughters of lawyers and doctors, but the real wealth was not represented in public schools. Anyway, we made that change, and I remember pretty well; and it wasn't, looking back on it, such an awful experience. But as a kid, any time someone throws a spitball at you—and calls you names—is pretty awful. But the thing that really made it a good experience, again, was that we had good teachers. We were kind of lucky in that the teachers were young and idealistic, and many of them—I remember let's see, I'm trying to count on my fingers, well, [in] the first group of teachers that I encountered, only one, of four, was kind of invested in the system. But she never in any direct way made you feel uncomfortable; she was very professional about it, but I did get the sense that she would have preferred not to have had me in her class. But she never said anything mean to me. My brother, when he came the next year, had a bad experience and my parents took him out of the school.

DY: Were you all riding the bus to get there?

TG: Yes, that was the worst part.

DY: I think I remember you talking about that.

TG: That was the absolute worst part.

TS: What is your brother's name?

TG: My brother is Arnold, and again, this is a name coming from Aunt Alberta, Arnold Grooms. He's six years younger, so he was only in the third grade when he made the change, and my sister was a fourth grader, I was a sixth grader. I found my teachers to be generally very supportive and engaging and welcoming. The principal of that school was a guy named Mr. Hoover. He was tall and bald-headed and no-nonsense—this is a place of education and that's that. I remember when we would have to go to report the kids on the bus who were just getting out of hand; we were just covered with spit by the time we got off the bus. A lot of it was because the bus driver was a teenager himself, and he was going to the high school. So we went in and a few minutes later it was settled. You don't throw spitballs on that bus. After that, there was less trouble. We still got names called and stuff like that.

DY: How small a minority were you?

TG: At first it seemed that there were lots of black kids there, [and] I don't remember exactly when it happened; but at some point I found myself being one of two black children in my particular class. In the entire sixth grade, I'm trying to think, but I really think there were only a couple of others.

TS: That stuck it out?

TG: Yes, that stuck it out.

TS: This is about 1967?

TG: This is ’67, so ’67 through ’70 was the time that I was in the Freedom of Choice.

TS: So Freedom of Choice was still in effect as late as 1970?

TG: In ’70, came the mandated integration and that was a big year, a big change. And what’s confusing to me also, because for three years I’d been with white classmates and had friends among them; and then suddenly, here comes an influx of black students so that 50 percent of the school was now black and it was during the time of the Black Power movement.

TS: The Black Power movement did reach Louisa?

TG: In a way, primarily through the pop culture. So the bully from the black school shows up now in the integrated school, and, you know, “What are you doing over there with those white kids [chuckle]?” And of course, it had been three years since I’d been with the black friends as schoolmates. Though again, because so many of them are related to me, I knew them from family. But still that was the kind of uneasy feeling, not being sure which side of the line to stand on—because there was definitely a line there. How do you step through this kind of maze where if you walk one way you’re an Uncle Tom; if you walk the other way you’re, I don’t know what, but you’re not with us.

TS: You’re Huey Newton or something.

TG: Yes, something like that. But the other thing that happened too was that there was stratification within the school; so that in the college-bound program, again, I would find myself one of very few blacks in the classroom. So in some ways, once the bell rang I was kind of back into the segregated school again.

TS: That’s kind of been a critique of integration, hasn’t it, that with tracking, oftentimes, you have an integrated school where the classes are still segregated.

TG: I found that mostly to be the case, particularly when it came to math class. And the same kids, interestingly, who made the Freedom of Choice change, again Morrises, and they’re not blood relatives, but they’re related to Aunt Nettie’s husband, so we kind of grew up with the Morris twins. I was supposed to have a romance with one of them, though it was hardly a romance. We couldn’t go on a date unless her sister had a date too, and her sister could never get a date [chuckle]. Anyway, they were the same black kids from that school, the ones

who tracked along with me for the most part. There were some others, but familiar faces all the way through.

DY: Tony, one of the things that I've heard more and more, is that when black children were moved to white schools that what they lost was the history and the culture that they would get from their black teachers in their black schools.

TG: I would say that's true. We certainly did not get black history until probably ninth grade. Again, this is because after the federally mandated integration—and that black history came primarily from a white teacher. He was, again, someone who was idealistic and put that content into his class in a kind of a muted way; you still had to be very careful. I don't think that the school board was really interested in having a lot of black history; it wasn't the thing that was done.

TS: I'm sure they didn't push it.

TG: No. But I think his name was Levin, and he was one of the more progressive teachers.

DY: Were they coming from the north, or were they coming out of the University of Virginia and just coming out to the area?

TG: Yes, that was kind of the tract, from the north to the University of Virginia and then into these kinds of schools for a few years. Usually they didn't last very long because the pay was bad, and I think there were restrictions that they couldn't abide with.

TS: Haven't you said it before that a number of these idealistic teachers were the first women to go to the University of Virginia?

TG: Well, certainly among the first women, if not the first. I forget exactly when the University of Virginia allowed women in, but it was the late '60s I think.

DY: It was, at least, the late '60s.

TG: So in '68, two of the teachers I had were women from the University of Virginia; so it was probable that they were certainly in the second class, if not the first class of women to come through.

DY: I bet that was fun [laughter]!

TS: Pretty good stuff for a writer to experience all of that. If everything had gone smoothly you wouldn't have anything to write about.

TG: That's true. You know, they say, why are all the great writers from Mississippi and Ireland and places where there is conflict. Happy stories aren't interesting.

Again, in those days, too, I was kind of aware of the change that was going on, but I didn't really have the broadest context for it. It was primarily because I was a child, and it was primarily what my parents wanted; and of course, I did what they told me to do. Then I found my place. I found my friends and I knew which people I could hang out with, and which people didn't want me around, and which teachers I could trust. You learn that kind of thing as a matter of survival.

TS: We had the Martin Luther King holiday earlier this week; how was that treated in your school in '68 with the assassination, and so on. How did they handle that in your school?

TG: Well, mostly it wasn't talked about. There was always kind of a buzz and derogatory talk about the Civil Rights Movement. [President] Johnson, in particular, caught a lot of flack from people who didn't like him, but this was on the school bus. In the schoolroom itself, I can only remember one comment that stayed with me, because I liked the teacher a lot and, generally I thought that he was a progressive teacher, but he was talking about Martin Luther.

TS: "The" Martin Luther?

TG: "The" Martin Luther, the theologian, and then he said, "Not this fool, Martin Luther King." That stung me that that teacher would say that kind of thing, because at home I was getting a lot of, well, not a lot, but certainly enough of the Civil Rights Movement to know a little bit about what was going on; primarily from television and through magazines that came to the home, and talk. My father's father and Aunt Nettie's husband, Uncle Phil, Uncle Philip Morris, were great loud debaters, usually making the same point, but seeing which one could make it loudest. My father was always privy to these, but he never really said much. He just kind of agreed, because he was of the next generation and he wasn't supposed to talk when adults were talking, even though he was in his thirties or forties by then. But there was always that interesting talk at my grandfather's house; and we would go there almost every day, certainly until the mid-'60s, but we'd go to watch the news. But even after we had a television, and we didn't get a television until after the Kennedy assassination—I think that was what prompted us to get a television—because my grandparents had a television, and they were a little less than a mile away.

[TAPE OFF BRIEFLY]

TS: You were talking about your grandparents having a television, but you didn't get one until after '63.

TG: After Kennedy's assassination, I guess because there was such interest in it, my father finally decided that we needed to have a television. We were running about a bit, and I remember being very disappointed that I couldn't see the funeral; because I had a cold, and they wouldn't let me out of the house to go to my

grandparent's house to see the funeral. So my mother and I listened on the radio. Television really played a large role in bringing the events, even though we could only get three channels. People can't believe that today. We probably got more news in fifteen minutes than people get in twenty-four hours today.

TS: Right.

TG: So the point being, is that I had a context for King from home—we certainly weren't getting it in school—and so when the teacher called him a fool, I felt very betrayed in a sense because this was a teacher who liked *Star Trek*, which I had never seen [laughter]! Even though by the time the comment was made we had the television, but I think it competed with a soap opera called *Peyton Place*.

TS: *Peyton Place* was a soap opera?

DY: Exactly!

TG: I think it was a soap opera!

TS: I didn't know they made a soap opera out of it.

TG: It was after nine o'clock anyway, so at nine o'clock we went to bed, and I suspect that bedtime was set because . . . .

TS: Oh, I think there was an evening show.

TG: The risqué show came on, so this teacher was very involved with *Star Trek* and, of course, kids liked that. I guess the only thing, when King was assassinated, I remember there were some jokes going around about why was Coretta Scott King like a spider? Because she's a black widow. That kind of thing. The one thing that interestingly shook up the town was that there was a memorial march for King. My mother worked at a textile mill that was located just across the street from the school, and she was a part of this little march—there were about twenty women. And I remember the build-up to it was as if the Watts Riot would have occurred in downtown Louisa, which at that time may not have had a stoplight. But things went on. As I remember my mother said they left on their lunch break; and they walked probably twenty minutes in the few blocks of downtown, silently, and then returned to work. She said that the streets were empty, and there was no real big deal. We were in school, so we didn't see it, but the build-up to it was as if the world was going to end that day because these women were marching.

DY: She might have taken a risk, too, doing that. I'm sure there was no union at that mill.

TG: No, there wasn't. That's why that mill was in that town. There's another factory in town, as well.

TS: Were you parents under any pressure to take you out of the Freedom of Choice School?

TG: If they were, they didn't let us know. As far as I could tell, there was no official pressure. The only pressure that I knew about came from my grandmother, my father's mother; and she was very, very cautious, and I think she just saw this as something that the children ought not be involved in. When I was in Boy Scouts, we had a Boy Scout jamboree, which was to be an integrated affair in Charlottesville, and I can remember very well preparing for it. Actually it was Cub Scouts, it wasn't even Boy Scouts. We were preparing for it, and so forth, and I remember my grandmother saying to my father that we shouldn't go, "because they'll just kill him!" Then she had a little speech with me, too, of how to be careful, and stick with your parents because you could just go there and get killed. That was what she thought. This was a woman who had lived in the Bronx in the '30s. She had interesting aspirations, but [was] never able to fulfill them. She was very interested in fashion, but was essentially a country wife, a farm wife. Though, in the '30s when things were hard, she took a job in New York City as a waitress. But if any grandchild went any place it was a major event. You can't go. One of the funniest things was when my mother got her driver's license and was driving about by herself; I remember one lecture was, "Dellaphine, take Tony with you." I was five or six. "Take Tony with you." "Why?" "If you have a flat tire, you need a man with you" [laughter]. I was hardly a man, but that was kind of the rule in her imagination.

TS: At leased somebody was with her and that was probably what she was thinking. Who's going to bother a woman with a child?

TG: Well, I think it was so I could fix the car [laughter]!

TS: Oh, she thought you were going to fix the tire?

TG: Well, that was her. In some ways, she was a great independent spirit; but she didn't want other people to have that independence; she wanted to protect them. So she was the great nurturer of my family. At her funeral, I was really moved when all these messages came in from places I'd never heard of, people I'd never heard of; and they all said essentially the same thing that at some point my grandmother had been very encouraging to them, very nurturing of them, that she had taken them in at a certain point. These things had happened long before I was born, things that even happened after, that I never realized to the degree that she had that influence on people.

TS: Well, let's see, it's 1970 when you graduated from high school, I guess.

TG: ’73.

TS: Okay, I’ve got my dates wrong.

TG: ’70 was the general integration. ’73 was the graduation.

TS: So you graduated in ’73, and you went to William and Mary after that, the College of William and Mary. Did they give you a scholarship to go there, or how did that come about?

TG: I got a little bit of help, a little bit of a scholarship. That was kind of an interesting thing, because I had dropped out of the human race by then, along with a girlfriend. I was the editor, or co-editor, of the high school newspaper, and she was the editor of the yearbook, so we got to go up in the balcony of the auditorium for study hall; and we would get up high enough so that we couldn’t be seen from the front where the teachers were, and snuggle [chuckle]. She was someone who was very much into the Woodstock scene, and so we would hide up there and talk about things like the Vietnam War and being hippies, which we weren’t; and fantasize that we could be, and so we made a pact that we would drop out of the human race and just go and be love children, or whatever. But the truth of the matter is that even though I was having this—and it’s kind of a pathetic thing to realize now—it was the best preparation that Louisa County could give to its students. It was the double whammy of segregation and being rural, but it wasn’t a great preparation. Even though I was having a college track preparation, I really wasn’t thinking much about going to college; I didn’t have any models for going to college. There were those people on the periphery, who were my grandmother’s cousins who were professional people; but by and large, boys from my county went to the Army, and the Army was seen actually as a great step up [chuckle]. I remember, actually, a friend of my dad’s had a career in the Army, and I always thought that my mother admired him more than she should have; because he lived in Europe, of course, it was on a base in Germany or something. And when he came home he drove a spanking new car; it was all shiny and the dust didn’t seem to stick to it, and she would always say, “Oscar this, Oscar that.” But that was the model, and the Vietnam War had been in my head since the seventh grade; so I thought probably that’s where I would go, that would be the way to get out. I wasn’t that much for farm work, not real farm work. You know, the gardening and feeding the pigs, I could do that okay; but really getting out there, and growing hay and that kind of thing, so that was kind of where I thought I was going to go. Then I went to Boys State, which is a program that trains students in government. In Virginia, it was run by the state police and had a real military-like atmosphere.

TS: You got to go see the legislature and stuff like that?

TG: Actually we didn’t do that; we were at William and Mary, we were basically there, but they didn’t take us up to Richmond. I had seen that on another school

trip. I'm not sure if we saw the legislature in action, but I did see Douglas Wilder.

TS: What was his position at that time?

TG: He was a legislator, and he had Henrico, or one of those counties.

TS: He became governor not too many years ago, I guess.

TG: He became governor from 1990 to 1994, and now he's mayor of Richmond. But then he was kind of a rising figure in Virginia politics.

DY: Didn't Elizabeth Taylor hook up with one of those Wilders?

TS: No, it was John Warner.

TG: Yes, she was with Senator Warner. He's still there in the Senate. He'll be there as long as Strom Thurman, I guess. And Liz has gone off to some other thing. But Boys State was kind of a military model [in] that they wanted us to march around and have our beds a certain way; but it was also college experience for me. And it made college seem accessible in a way, and it also made it seem fun; particularly because my troop wouldn't march, we were all the hippies**,** and we had guys playing Country Joe and the Fish on their guitars and singing anti-war songs. But at the same time our group excelled; we did all the government stuff and all the academic stuff, but we just wouldn't march. Our troop guy, whatever he was called; he was so angry with us. The "goody-two-shoes" who marched, even though they hadn't scored as high, they got the prize. I remember very well a guy I traveled with, who was the son of—both parents were doctors in the county, so they were kind of the county professional aristocrats. He was a straight A student, but rather sickly, and he had gotten sick when I was looking for him at the end. And this guy, who was an official of the college, said, "Help me move these typewriters, and I'll take you to the infirmary." It was on the other side of the campus. So I helped him, and on the way, he said, "You want to come to college here?" I said, "Like that's going to happen," because I had no means to come to college here. He said, "Well, Boys State, that's a sure in at William and Mary." And he got me thinking about going to college; it seemed suddenly possible. Then I started getting a lot of college catalogues through the mail and that kind of thing, but William and Mary just seemed possible. So I wrote to probably the only black administrator there at the time. It was almost like a letter that you read at the Atlanta University Center, where people are writing, "I'm a poor child, and I'll walk to the college, and I'll work as a janitor if only you'll give me an education." It wasn't quite that pathetic.

DY: Do you still have that?

TG: No.

DY: Of course you don't.

TG: This was days before there were really typewriters. I think we had a Sears something or the other. And she wrote back and encouraged me, and so I applied. The rest, as they say, is history [chuckle]. But William and Mary presented a big challenge for me academically because I was used to being the smart kid; and if I read it once that was enough, because I could always get an "A." Part of it was that the competition wasn't that strong, but also part of it was that the challenge wasn't that great. The resources there in Louisa weren't that great and the expectations weren't as high, as of course, they were at William and Mary. So, the first year there were two challenges, the academic challenge and of course, connected to that was the social challenge—and that was being released from this rather protected environment. It was the '70s, so lots of things were going on of interest and there was a lot of experimentation; I think I was probably very typical of a college student in the '70s. But I had to learn how to discipline myself, and it took a year and a half or so to kind of learn that. But I did follow my voice when I was there, and I was writing; I had gone to become an anthropologist. And how that happened was, I had a construction job the summer before I left for William and Mary; and the guy asked what are you going to study, and I couldn't think of anything really, I really didn't know, and somehow anthropology came up, and I thought that was what I was going to do.

DY: Looking at the piles of dirt around you or something!

TG: Maybe! I think what it was, was that there was a little corner bookstore in Charlottesville across from the university and they had these Rinehart series of anthropology reports. They were kind of academic and a little dull, but they were also interesting, you know, different peoples and folklore and that kind of thing. I would borrow a couple of those and scan through them, so I think at that time I thought that cultural anthropology was probably something I could do, or would be interested in. Then this guy encouraged me further because he had a big stack of those books, and he said, "Oh here, read this!" Like twenty of these little books, and then I could read them all. So, I went off to be an anthropologist, and was discouraged almost from the beginning. I met with my advisor who basically called the group of us stupid [laughter]. William and Mary had this complex, and the complex was called University of Virginia. It had to be the toughest; it was trying to establish itself somehow. Even though the claim was that it was the first college chartered in the country, even before Harvard, it had always played second fiddle to Harvard, and then way down the line from the University of Virginia. Thomas Jefferson kind of snubbed them and created the University of Virginia, and William and Mary struggled for a long time.

DY: Even though he went to school there, didn't he?

TG: He did. But he didn't favor his alma mater. If you can create your school in your own image, why not? You can have it just down the street, you can go out on

your balcony and look down and see it; and know they're studying the things that you want and whatnot. But in many ways I could have easily been discouraged, because I was so susceptible to discouragement in those days. They said, "Look to your left, look to your right, in four years two of you won't be here," that kind of thing. So right away, being called stupid didn't do a lot to make me want to be in that guy's class. Though I did all right in anthropology; except I realized at some point that it was dull [laughter]. I couldn't care less about kinship systems and which kinship system applied to what. At a certain level it was interesting, but I didn't have a passion for it. I was taking theater courses and writing plays and getting praise; and I ended up with all these theater credits, and took a theater degree, and that was how that happened.

TS: You didn't go straight into graduate school from there I guess, did you?

TG: No, I was lost for a little while, in part because I had a degree in a subject that I knew I didn't have an interest in. I'd been in an acting troop, and that was just completely nerve-wracking. I really didn't like actors' communities that well. The main acting community at William and Mary was very Shakespearean, except that they would do a modernist play now and then, usually Harold Pinter or Lorca, but that was it. In the alternative group we did, I've forgotten the playwright; but it was a play about the comic Lenny Bruce, so it was wild and risqué and funny, and it was fun. But I just didn't want to make that commitment. I felt very bounded by this troop; they wanted me to be with them all the time. All of my friends were business majors [laughter]. I don't think any of them had a degree in the humanities, not even historians.

TS: Why do you think you sought those kinds of people out?

TG: I think it was just personalities. Most of these folks were folks I had met in my freshman year; and we just kind of ended up living together, and so our personalities worked. I was the artist in the group. But interestingly, as the artist in the group, I was also the house manager [laughter]. If the bills were going to get paid, I had to do it. Even though they were business majors they weren't very good with the business. So in the theater group they would ask, "Where were you last night?" "I was with my other friends." "Well, you can't have other friends; you're part of this group." I didn't like that much, and I found out that I worked best as a writer working alone. Not that novel writing isn't collaborative in a sense, but it's not as collaborative as playwriting. At the end of undergraduate school, I didn't know what to do. The first thing I did was to take a California trip with one of my buddies. We had to take a road trip, and my idea then was that I would go out to San Francisco where there was a girlfriend—not a real girlfriend, but someone that was more of a fantasy girlfriend than a real one—but we would live with her, and eventually get into San Francisco State where there was a playwriting program. But by the time I got to California the woman had gotten married and moved to Canada [chuckle]. We couldn't find a job, and ended up back in Washington where I waited on tables for a while. I really did just ask

myself, "What are you good at? What is it you want to do? What can you do?" I thought it would be something with writing, that's what I had been doing all along; that's been consistent all the way through. So, I started taking courses at the Northern Virginia Community College—some creative writing courses—and met Dick Bausch, Richard Bausch, the novelist, and his twin brother, Bob, the only identical twin novelists in the country. It was Dick who said to me, "Come to George Mason, we're starting a program there." I remember so well saying, "Graduate school? I don't think I can do graduate school." And he just looked at me and said, "But you're a writer." It was the way he said it, it was the emphasis—today they say, "Duh!" But that was the emphasis, like what do you mean you can't come to graduate school? So I did, and it was one of the best experiences of my life. I worked, at that time, at a graphics shop where we produced newsletters, primarily, so I was kind of working with magazines and things and that was fun. And then later, I worked at a newspaper doing ads, actually, so kind of a creative outlet there; and went to graduate school at George Mason. It was a very nurturing time, and I'm still in touch with those people. In fact, last week I was in Washington for the PEN/Faulkner "Writers in Schools" program, where I saw, again, one of my teachers, Susan Shreve, who is a novelist, and also Stephen Goodwin. Steve said a funny thing to me. I'm not quite sure how to take it, but he has kind of a patrician demeanor about him; and he said he taught *Bombingham* in his class. I was really pleased that my teacher is teaching my book, and he says, "Well, I'm sure you agree, but when you were a student here, I didn't think you had it in you to write something like *Bombingham*." Well, I was a student! Maybe it takes a little while after training, so I don't know how to take that.

DY: Sounds to me like he was saying that you were a different person.

TG: I'm not sure. I think what he was saying is that he didn't think much of my writing [chuckle].

DY: Oh that's funny. I was just thinking about the nature of *Bombingham,* and what it takes to write a novel like that.

TG: Well, the way I read it, it was a critique of my writing at that time. But, anyway, it was a good experience, being at George Mason.

TS: So you graduated from there in '84, and it's ten years before you came to Kennesaw, so what happens in that next decade?

TG: Well, a lot, but professionally, mostly teaching. I'd like to say I've taught in every college in north Georgia, which isn't true; but it seems I've taught in a lot of them. I came to Macon in '84 because I was offered a full-time teaching job, and the job market was very, very tight then so I felt very lucky to get it. It was really a very wonderful experience starting off there.

TS: Which school in Macon?

TG: This was Macon Junior College. Now it's Macon [State] College. But it was a very supportive atmosphere for a new teacher; there wasn't a lot of academic fighting. That year they had an interim president, so maybe that had something to do with it.

TS: The school hadn't been there that long, had it?

TG: I think it had been there since the '60s [chartered in 1965]. A lot of those folks are still my friends, and they were very welcoming to me. I felt very much a part of that academic community, but not much a part of the Macon community. And that's really my own fault because three months after I moved to Macon, I met Pamela in Atlanta, and so that was the end of Macon.

DY: You were burning up the road to Atlanta every day, then.

TG: Yes, and the Maconites couldn't understand why.

DY: With all that good music there, why would you leave?

TG: Exactly. "Atlanta, well that's a big city, but this is Macon! Why are you going way up there?" "It's only eighty miles it's not that far." But in the next two years I learned far more about Atlanta than I knew about Macon, because in Macon I was practically just there for work. I had a couple of good experiences there. I met John Oliver Killens and drove him around for a while.

DY: What was he doing there? Was he working, teaching there? Or did he just come to visit?

TG: He came back on a Georgia Humanities grant just to spend about a month in Georgia, and at least two weeks of it he spent in Macon, where he was born, and he gave workshops. And I was his designated driver in this second-hand, rattling Datsun that he could barely fit into [chuckle]. We had to put Mrs. Killens in the back. It was kind of an embarrassing car to drive a prominent writer around in, but it was really a good connection for me to be with him. Then I got married in '86, and moved to Atlanta, and at first didn't have a job; my wife was worried about me, she thought she had a bum.

DY: Was she practicing law then?

TG: Yes, she was practicing law then. She said, "I was wondering"—I took a job at McGuire's book store—and she said, "I was impressed, because I thought that having been a professor"—I was really more of an instructor on one of those limited contracts— she thought I might not settle just to be a clerk in a book store. But I wanted a job; I had come from a tradition where you worked, and you

just didn't hang out. But soon after I got the McGuire's job, Clark College [Clark Atlanta University] called, and I started at Clark College.

TS: I didn't know that.

TG: I taught there two years, and then following Raymond Andrews, whom I had met in Washington—he was a friend of Dick Bausch's—and the first time I met him was probably about '81 maybe, and he was very much an influence on me.

TS: We've used his books in class too—*The Last Radio Baby* and *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee.*

TG: He was living in New York, and he used to come down to Washington maybe twice a year to give a reading and hang out with Dick Bausch and others.

TS: So you knew him from then.

TG: I think in fact the same year I moved to Macon, he moved to Athens; and we eventually connected again, and then he would come very often to Atlanta where his family was. His mother lived in Atlanta, and his sister, but he didn't want to stay with them because they wouldn't drink beer, he said [laughter]. So he could drink beer with us. Then when I started working in Athens, and that happened because I went to a program when the University of Georgia re-printed his books. And I was talking to Coburn Freer, I didn't know Coburn Freer from anybody then, and the question really was would Ray Andrews make a good teacher. He was a great influence on me. I think he would have been a great teacher. And then Freer followed up with a letter, asking if I would be interested in coming to Georgia, which I was. Clark was okay, but they didn't have a writing program.

DY: What's the date here, Tony?

TG: This would have been '88, I think. I started there in the fall of '88, if I'm not mistaken.

DY: So Coburn Freer had been chair in the English department for a while then?

TG: I don't know how long, but he had been.

DY: He was there when I was there.

TG: He didn't last long. He was very unpopular.

TS: Benny Andrews, wasn't he on the faculty?

TG: I don't think so. At least in those days he was, I think, some place in New York; I want to say Queens College [CUNY, City University of New York], but some

place in New York; so his being connected with that faculty came later, probably after Ray's death. But they had the house there, the studio in Athens, or just outside of Athens, and I used to visit there occasionally. Ray had his little room in the back that was also his writing place; though he used the entire woods to write in, wandering around through the woods.

TS: Did you learn anything about writing from him?

TG: Yes. The thing about it is that it's not just technique. People can tell you things about technique and explain that to you, or you can read about it; but the more important things for a writer really have to do with building confidence, and qualities of discipline, and learning how to persist as a writer. This is what both Dick Bausch and Raymond Andrews taught me. One of the first lessons that Raymond taught me—I can remember sitting down at George Mason. He was my workshop mentor or whatever. We were supposed to have a conference together, and I asked him, "Do you think my writing is *black* enough?" Because this was still kind coming out of the '70s, where the question was, are you a writer or a black writer, which today we look at and say, well, how silly is that? He just looked at me and said, "Don't write for your mama." And then he went on to explain, you really have to have a sense of your own voice; and you can't be controlled by expectations of audience. The audience in a sense has defined you. It's not that you're ignoring audience, but you don't have a voice if you're always trying to mold your voice to the expectations of some idea of what someone else wants.

DY: That's a good life lesson.

TG: Yes. Even though I suppose at some level I might have known that, hearing it come from him—and I think that's often the way it is when you have some authority saying you're on the right track, or get on the right track, even though you know you ought to have been there—it carries a certain weight and pushes you in a certain direction. So I remember him for that and for other things too. Of course, there would be behaviors that I wouldn't want to model, but by and large, he was very influential in helping me develop as a writer. I always did enjoy talking to him about history, and learned a lot about the history of Georgia in particular. Being a Virginian, of course, I thought that Georgia probably didn't have a history, but hanging around with Ray I learned differently. He was also a worldly person; he had traveled particularly in Europe and he worked for an airline for a while.

TS: Wasn't his wife from Switzerland?

TG: I never met her, but she was Swiss and an opera singer. So, he was a great influence. We used to ride together a lot, from Athens to Atlanta, where he would hang out at the house. And he had other friends too, in Atlanta, a white couple

within walking distance from my house; so he would spend a night with us, and then a night with them, and a night with someone else.

DY: You must have taken his death hard; I know Mary Hood did.

TG: Yes, it was hard. And it was one of those things where you question how you could have prevented it, and that kind of thing.

TS: Was that in the early '90s that he died?

TG: '91, November of '91. I was at the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts], then doing an Arts Administration fellowship; and Pamela called me, and another person, Tamela Thomas, who was a librarian, and a friend of Ray's had called her, and it just turned my world upside down. Just before I left—I left to go up there in August—he was at the house; and we were trying to build a house then, and just had this very distressing meeting with the property owners. We had almost finished designing a house for this odd piece of property, and now they wanted to take it away from us. Pamela was very upset, and I remember coming in—Ray was sitting and having a beer and watching TV—and saying to him, "You know Pamela is kind of upset, and so, "Please, excuse us." And he said, "Okay," and that was the last interchange we had with him. He went some place else the next day, and the next week I was off to Washington, and then a few weeks later he was dead. I do remember that it was very warm, and he was wearing a turtleneck; and I think it was a shirt that Pamela had given him, and we commented, "Aren't you warm in it?" And he said, "Oh, I've had a little surgery, and I just want to cover the scar." But the rumor was that he actually had a tumor that he was covering up. But anyway, it was also a great mystery, no one really knows what happened, or why, not even Benny. If Benny knew, he didn't tell us, but he was asked. I didn't ask him directly, but other people did. So that was another lesson, I suppose. It's interesting, also, to see how his works have been received since his death, and I really think an author has to be here. Dead authors can't give readings.

DY: That's a wonderful point, I mean, to think about his reading now from those works which would just be wonderful.

TS: So you had that NEA experience; how many years were you on the faculty at UGA?

TG: Five years, I believe.

TS: So you took a leave to go to Washington?

TG: I took a leave to go to Washington, and then I took a leave to stretch out my tenure period. I was coming up for tenure, and I felt a little uneasy about it. I hadn't published as much as I wanted to, and the departmental administration had

changed. I was encouraged by Freer to go to Washington for the NEA, and we were really looking at that as kind of a good thing for tenure, to have a national fellowship. But the new chair, who was [Hugh] Ruppersburg, said, "But it's not creative writing is it?" So, he saw it more as service, and not as scholarship. What it really boiled down to with Georgia, though it was, I think, a milestone in my career—when you work for the flagship university is important, and it was the first time that I really was a creative writing teacher—but it got to a point where I was thinking that there are two problems here: one is getting tenure, and one is having it. I really felt stifled in a lot of ways with the more established faculty on the writing—this is before Judith Cofer was there. Actually she was coming in just as I was going out. But I would say things about AWP for example, the Associated Writing Programs, and they would look at me; and I sometimes wondered if Warren Leamon actually ever heard anything I said. I can only image that he's probably saying, "There's a fly buzzing in my ear. Oh no, that's Grooms" [chuckle].

DY: Warren had his own aspirations and he was very fortunate that Chuck Perry, then owner of Longstreet Press, remembered him fondly as a professor, and published a novel of his.

TG: It was a good novel too; I enjoyed that novel and, generally, I liked Warren, but I didn't see him as someone who was working for the creative writing program.

DY: Warren was working for Warren.

TG: Right.

DY: I mean I was a graduate student there.

TG: Well, now we can talk about people who passed on. I think that was a large part, probably a little less so with Kilgo, though, I think he did have more interest in students than Warren did, but he really wasn't interested in running a program. The real sign of that was that they had the untenured professors run the programs, standing as the directors; and at the end of it when Jim Clark didn't get his tenure, he said, "Well, I felt that I've been the secretary for the program for five years, and that other people have really run it. And this is my reward, and I get booted out." So there was a lot of conflict in that department, and you think that we had a bad time, but there were just many, many factions and it was confusing to me.

DY: It had been that way for years. It had been a highly politicized department for a long time, so people were so entrenched.

TS: So you were looking around at that point.

TG: Well, Ruppersburg and I sat and we came up with a strategy that was to create this gap. If you go on leave for a semester, you get another year.

DY: You stop the tenure clock.

TG: That's the thing, but I needed to work, so I was working at Morehouse [College], and that was when Bob Hill [Robert W.] called me from Kennesaw. To this day I don't know why he was calling me, but he found out that I had kind of loosened myself from Georgia; and he asked me to come up to Kennesaw, and to look around, and I felt home. You know, I think I said in my talk that in some ways I had been making my way to Kennesaw for a long time; because soon after I moved to Atlanta, looking for a job, I called up to Kennesaw to see if there was anything, and Bob Hill said, "Come up, we're doing a reading." And it was Jo Allen Bradham, Don [Donald D.] Russ, myself, and I forget who else, but there was a little round robin of readings; and I felt that was a very welcoming gesture. We can't give you a job, but you can come read for us. And then it was either the next summer, or the summer after that you had a writer's workshop.

DY: The summer writer's workshop.

TG: Dede invited me to participate in that.

TS: The one that you and Sarah Robbins did?

DY: No, this is before that. This was a creative writing workshop in the summer.

TS: Was that an NEA?

DY: No, it was solely out of the department. Tony and John Yow and Jane Hill and—is that the year that Andrew Hudgins came?

TG: Andrew Hudgins and the poet laureate David Bottoms—who wasn't poet laureate then—and a fellow from South Carolina, Ron Rash.

DY: He's turned to writing fiction you know.

TG: Yes, and he's doing very well. I missed him, he did come to Atlanta last semester and I had a class out here that night. I wanted to see him.

DY: Really a nice person. That was a wonderful group of people.

TG: So, I felt at home at Kennesaw, and it sure was easier than driving to Athens.

TS: Of course, I guess at that time, '94—when did we start the Master of Arts in Professional Writing? Did we even have it that early?

TG: It hadn't been approved; it was in the works. I think it was approved in '95. I think that was the first year of that.

TS: So you're in on the ground floor then.

TG: In a sense, but I think there had been a lot of work for some years, with planning and trying to get the program approved. So, I certainly didn't go back as far as Susan Hunter. I kind of came in on the ground floor of teaching, but I didn't actually envision the program and that kind of thing. But it fit very nicely for me, because one of my frustrations at Georgia was that I saw a need for an applied aspect of creative writing. It was one thing to teach people how to write poetry, and how to recognize great poetry; but then they would be lost in the field with no sense of what it meant to be a poet—no sense of what poetry does, and no sense of who the audience is, and no sense of what the institutions are that support it, so they're just completely lost that way. Bless their hearts. And even Coleman Barks ran a press, but that was not something that they were interested in; and I think a lot of it came from the other parts of the faculty who weren't that keen on creative writing to begin with. It was just a lot of friction; creative writing was certainly the kind of ghetto child of that department.

DY: Now it drives the program. The creative writers that we have are just some of the best in the country. We have a wonderful faculty of creative writers at Kennesaw, and I hope our next director of that program is going to start really showcasing creative writing. Not that you're not already doing that.

TG: I agree. We need to do more. But I've always thought that this was a great staff of fun people who get along, because I've been at places where the writers didn't get along. At George Mason, there were groups in the creative writing, and when I was there, there were only a few teachers; and three of the four were kind of buddies, and the other one, they talked about. So, we had those factions, but that's one thing that I've enjoyed about this program. People have their spats, but they generally patch it up, at least professionally.

DY: I really give Bob Hill credit for that MAPW (Master of Arts in Professional Writing); he came to this institution with a vision. He wanted to have creative writers, and he wanted a program, and we couldn't offer just an MA or an MFA, it just wouldn't fly with the Board of Regents, so he put this together, and it's worked out very well.

TS: Well, you got here in '94, and I guess your *Trouble No More* came out shortly after that?

TG: Yes. It was accepted, I think, in the fall of '94, so it was accepted about the time that I was accepted at Kennesaw. And then it took a year of editing and rewriting, and writing new stories, and came out in September of '95.

DY: And that was La Questa Press?

TG: La Questa Press, which is still going.

DY: Oh, I'm glad, I'm so glad.

TG: It's slowed—well, Kate Abbe, is the owner and publisher, and she's a poet herself and a former bookstore owner; and she has the means to have her own publishing press. The draw back is that in some ways it's kind of a hobby. She's not driven to make a big profit, but she sees herself as someone who introduces new writers.

TS: Tony, your *Trouble No More* is a collection of short stories many of them with civil rights, maybe all of them, I can't remember now, but many of them at least have civil rights overtones or at least of that era and what life was like for African-Americans and so on. Were these entirely new stories for that book, or were these stories that had been published somewhere else that you're putting together in kind of an anthology?

TG: The latter. They were stories that evolved over probably about eight years, and published in various magazines—some of them. But a couple, maybe three, I can't think right now, were created specifically for this book, as other pieces I had were found not to fit. That was probably one of the reasons it took about a year to get it together after it was accepted for publication. But the earliest of the stories actually goes back to about '84 when I first moved to Georgia and had just finished graduate school. As one of my teachers, Susan Shreve said, "Finding my voice."

TS: One of my favorites is one that is actually the picture on the cover of the two young ladies trying to hold a sit-in, in Louisa, I believe, so back to your roots, I guess.

DY: "Food that Pleases, Food to Take Home."

TS: And there's one, "Negro Progress," that's set in Birmingham, like your *Bombingham* book would be, but a lot of those stories are not what the reader is going to expect in a civil rights type story in that the young ladies actually learn a lot about themselves, and about the complexities of life, when they try to hold their sit-in. I won't go into the whole story, but at any rate it didn't turn out the way they thought it was going to turn out.

TG: Well, what my experience has been: When I'm writing a story, I'm in a bit of a fog, because the whole thing is writing the story. I don't think too much about what it means; I'm just trying to entertain myself and get the voices right and the language right and so forth. But then in revising—and I revise a lot—I think of myself as a very, very slow producer of literature, if you can call it literature [laughter].

TS: Yes, you can.

TG: It's written [laughter]. So, I have a lot of time to think about what these things might mean, and what they might do. I think partly that experience that we talked about earlier—the Freedom of Choice experience—being someone who was in a predominately white situation and having white friends, and so kind of being inside the white culture, but an insider of black culture at the same time, has made me see that we can stand on one side and say, "Oh, those folks over there are…" and fill in the blank. But in fact it's always more complicated. People are like that, but then they're not like that, and there are other factors. So, that's one of the things that I wanted to try to convey, is that people have different aspects to their problems, and they're driven by different reasons. And even though their positions might not be ones that ideally we would think of as morally right positions, their roots might not have evolved in locating evil or, you know what I'm saying. They get there by different means. That's part of the complexity of it. Now that we've gotten rid of the more obvious racism and sexism, we're dealing with even more complex issues; because it's really the subtle stuff that people have to think about. It's been interesting to me, for example, to know certain people in the family, who will go nameless at the moment—this is being taped and will go on the website—who I've heard just say the most awful things about gay people. And then having to deal with a son who is gay, and—"Oh, remember all those things you said about gay people? Now there's your baby boy, what are you going to do?" And to see in this case how they've reformed themselves, and to see my aunt standing in my house looking at my cousin's partner, and then everybody—there's this moment of stillness, what will she do? And she walks over to him and gives him a hug, and that's that. So that was a big step for her. People can make those changes and get beyond their prejudices.

TS: How long did it take you to write *Bombingham*?

TG: I think about three and a half years, or over a period of three and a half years. With teaching, I found that I really cannot generate a story and teach. It gets to a certain point—I'm usually pretty good the first part of the semester, but after about mid-term it gets too busy, and it's not a quality time. So, it was written over Christmas breaks and summer breaks, but I think it went together pretty quickly, considering the little bit of time that I had to work on it. And I did five drafts before I sold it, so I guess that was really pretty steady work; but there were long stretches for weeks and weeks at a time that I didn't touch it, just because I was grading 101 papers.

TS: Right. And you had an agent that was taking it around to the different publishers?

TG: Eventually, but not at that time. *Trouble No More* was sold with an agent; she was a local woman who was just starting her agency; but by the time *Bombingham* came around she had dropped me because she wanted more popular work. When I started with *Bombingham,* I started from scratch again, in terms of agents. I just sent it out. Melissa Fay Greene introduced me to her agent, so I

sent it to him; but before he responded another agent responded with such enthusiasm that I got scared. I thought—should I wait for the other agent to respond? And Pamela said, "Well, listen to this message—"because he had left a message on the voice mail—"it was kind of a no-brainer because she is so enthusiastic about your work." So I went with that agent. I'm not sure now if it was the right thing to do, but I do have an agent, a New York agent to complain about! She sold it very quickly, I think. But I found that I'd been spoiled by the small press, particularly La Questa, which was very, very nurturing and very intimate. We emailed almost everyday with the publisher, and she had me out to her house in California twice; and still I email with her, exchanging holiday greetings, and whatnot. But big publishing is like dealing with your insurance company or telephone company or something; you never get an answer and it's not very intimate.

DY: As John Yow will say, "All you writers want to go to New York."

TG: Yes. But I've been thinking very seriously about it lately, New York has a certain cachet, that's for sure, but my feeling is that if they don't bring to the table the resources that they claim to have then you might as well be with the small press. At least you will have the intimacy, and since the writer has to go out to promote anyway. But what I found is that they give you a book tour—it's not very well thought out, because a lot of those folks have never been outside of Manhattan. So I'm saying to the woman who's organizing my book tour, who knows better than I, "Why are you flying me to Memphis and then flying me to some other place in Mississippi, to have me drive to Oxford, when Oxford is just . . . ."

DY: Down the street from Memphis.

TG: Yes. And Memphis is a big city with bookstores there, too. Why am I not doing the bookstores there? She just didn't have a sense of—and the cover of the paperback of *Bombingham* when that came—the editor called me and she said, "Did you see the cover?" I said, "Yes, it's a nice looking cover, but it doesn't look like Birmingham." And she says, "Well, how does Birmingham look?" "Well, it's a city for one thing, it's not—that's the country on the cover." So they seem, in some ways, to be out of the loop to me.

DY: Provinciality of New Yorkers.

TS: How many copies have you sold so far?

TG: I don't know. That's a funny thing to say, but I can't read the report [chuckle]. It's a bunch of numbers in different columns that don't make any sense to me. When we built the house, I couldn't read the contractor's account either. And I'll say, when I write a check to take out money, then you subtract it from the money you have, but you're taking it out, subtracting and then adding it back in,

somehow. I really don't know. When I ask my agent that, she said, "You're doing well, but not gang busters." So I don't know what that means.

TS: You're not on the New York Times Bestseller list.

TG: Yes, but I've been pleased because people like you guys are teaching my stories, and my old teachers are teaching my stories. And I've been around enough to know that there are many writers who write good books, and they just get ignored. It's been a common book at a couple of colleges in Georgia, so this is important to me. I'm not going to get rich writing literary stories. And unless Oprah comes along, probably not going to get famous, so the satisfaction comes in having people read and tell me that they've read my stories. So, I'm really pleased that the books have found a life in schools. The PEN/Faulkner Writers-in-Schools Program—they used it in Atlanta and they've used it in Washington and then colleges here—Gainesville College. I got a message from a woman that Sarah Robbins knows, Mary Helen Washington, and she was happy to hear that *Trouble No More* was being re-printed; and she said that she would buy 200 copies for her students. And I'm hoping she's not meaning in one class, but she said it's for the African-American Lit Class. Wow! That's a big class! But that's wonderful that it's gotten that kind of response.

TS: I wonder if I could just ask you a question or two about Kennesaw State. You've been here now for over a decade and hopefully are going to stay forever.

TG: Not forever, but I'll stay awhile!

TS: Well, for a while. You had said that it felt like home when you first came here.

TG: In many ways.

TS: Ten years later, twelve years later, how would you describe the intellectual life at Kennesaw State?

TG: I think Kennesaw State has always had an intellectual life. We have a bunch of readers and writers. What Kennesaw needs to have more of is a place for that intellectual development. I think we're thinking about it a lot now, but we're so busy that no one has time to slow down and really think about what we're doing with it. It certainly happens that people are shooting ideas back and forth, but in my own case up until recently, and recently has come because I've taken some release time, I've just felt like I've been running about; and if I want to show a poem to Ralph Wilson, I feel guilty because I know he's running about. That's the thing that needs to change here. But I knew when I came here that this is a teaching school, which really means you have a heavy teaching load and you run around a lot. But it seems to me that we also want to be a research institution at some level, in some way. Of course, I think many of us want to do that. But as I've said, I've known people here for a long time—the way the writing program

was envisioned kind of fit my vision of what a writing program ought to be in that it's collaborative, and has all these different tracks feeding into it. I like the collaboration, for example, with history because I find myself being more and more a historian. I didn't find that particularly at the University of Georgia, though, as I said, it was an important place to be. So I feel better and better about Kennesaw all the time, and now it's beginning to look like a university. I've had someone up from Spelman, maybe eight or so years ago, and she said, "It looks like a business park." I said, "Well, . . ."

TS: We've kind of reinvented ourselves with Kennesaw Hall and the Campus Green and so on.

TG: I've been around enough to know that it's beginning to look like a campus with the students and the student housing. I can only see that Kennesaw will get better and better. And now I'm beginning, in my old age, to wish it weren't so far away!

TS: You need to move out here.

TG: That's not likely to happen. You see, Pamela is five minutes away from work. But the highway has been kind to me. It usually gets me out here without much trouble. I spend as much time, sometimes, looking for a parking space as I do driving out here.

TS: Say something about your plans of going to Sweden for the rest of the semester.

TG: For a long time I thought about the Swedish project and then as things sometimes happen, it started to fall into place without my doing much about it. For example, I'd read a book that was interesting to me, and then I met someone who knew someone who knew the author of the book way back when, in Sweden. That's kind of interesting, and he told me a little bit that also piqued my interests a little bit. Then I was on a book tour and was talking to this guy who kept confusing Switzerland and Sweden, as people tend to do, and I said, "No, no, no, it's Sweden." He mentioned the book that I'd read about this American guy who goes to Sweden and that his former history teacher was the guy who had brought the book back, had edited it, and was writing about it. So, I was kind of excited, and he said, "Oh, he's just down the street." So we go there and he has the address to the subject of the book, and so I contact him, so these things start to fall into place. Then I thought about the Fulbright and wrote around and finally found someone in Sweden who was interested in this too. So in about a week and a half now, I'm off to Södertörn, which they've renamed the University of Southern Stockholm. They're very clever. They have an international presence, and then they have a local presence. I'll be lecturing primarily about American literature. They're on a big post-colonial kick, so they want things framed in kind of a post-colonial way.

DY: Everybody's on a post-colonial kick.

TS: What on earth does that mean?

TG: That's what I've been asking myself too. I'm trying to figure it out. But I think I can talk about it in that way. Then the other thing that has happened that is interesting, is that I'm finding all these other Georgia connections too. Other people are coming too. There is a faculty development trip to Sweden that will end up at Södertörn as well. So I'll be there to meet them.

TS: You're going to stay until June or July?

TG: Yes, until late June, with the exception of a trip back here in March to promote *Trouble No More*, republished by the KSU Press and selected for the All Georgia Reads common book program. But yes, it'll be cold. The hard part for me is being away from family. Particularly Ben—I'm worried about Pamela as a single mother.

TS: Ben, you said earlier, is four years old now?

TG: He's four and very active. But somebody put it in perspective for me very nicely and said, "Oh yeah, I've had to leave my children when I've gone off to war." I thought, well, that puts it right into perspective. I'm not going to go to a place where anybody is shooting at me. The Swedes have a reputation of being pretty peaceful, so that just put it right into perspective. This will be fun, and there's no problem that Pamela really can't handle; we're in a neighborhood where people have already said they'll baby-sit Ben. We'll see [laughter]. And her mother is two hours away and her sister too, so she has that to fall back on.

TS: I'm through with questions. Do you have any questions you wanted to ask?

DY: I don't think so. This has been delightful.

TG: Thank you.

DY: Thank you, Tony.

TS: Anything we should have added?

TG: No. I find more and more that I like to talk about myself as a sign of getting over the hill [laughter].

DY: Well, it's a good thing you're interesting [laughter].

TG: Sometimes we're more interested in ourselves than other people are.

TS: Well, the students always want to know how much is autobiographical in what you write; and some of it is, and a lot of it isn't.

TG: A lot of it isn't. It's a mix.

DY: I think it's wonderful that students appreciate your work.

TG: That's been my saving grace in a lot of ways. That's an important aspect of my writing, I think, that it's reached so many students; and I did not have that in mind when I started.

DY: That's interesting. And of course, you're going to reach the people who love good literature and enjoy good literature; but to turn people on to literature is a wonderful thing, and that has really happened to the history students.

TS: I enjoy *Bombingham* better each time I read it.

DY: I do too, I do too. It's a wonderful book, as is *Trouble No More*. I'm glad that'll be out. I understand it's going to have the same cover.

TG: With some modifications. I haven't seen it, but I got an email from Laura [S. Dabundo] this morning that said it was at the printers. So, I haven't seen it. Publishers just don't give you any kind of cover approval; but we talked about it briefly and we decided to go with the same cover since that was available. Kate Abbe was very, very generous. She said, "Just take it."

TS: Great. Thank you very much.

TG: Thank you.

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