Lights and Shadows

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**LIGHTS & SHADOWS**

2000

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Editor’s Note

I was sitting outside of my coffee shop the other day, watching a guy paint. He was visiting from Mobile, and had been coming into the shop every morning during his vacation. I watched as he painted a portrait of one of my customers. I was very impressed by the quality of his work, and it was obvious he was very talented. The next morning he was back, only this time he wanted to talk about Nicole (the girl he had painted the day before). He asked all sorts of questions about her, and he wanted to know if I thought he was wasting his time. He wanted to know if I thought his chances were good.

“Good for what? I asked.
“Do you think that I will get some, or am I just chasing rabbits?”
“What are you talking about?”
“Am I just chasing rabbits?”

I then realized what he was talking about. He was trying to get Nicole to sleep with him. The pit of my stomach started churning, and I thought I was going to lose my latte. Here sits this guy painting for no other reason than to impress a girl. I had to go inside and cool off. As I sat inside thinking why that whole situation pissed me off, I asked myself a very important question.

“Heath, why do you write? Do you do it to impress people, or do you do it because you really love writing?”

I like to think that art and writing, of any kind, are very similar. Both start with a basic idea, and it is the artist’s job to transfer that idea to the page or the canvas to share with the rest of the world. I have written most of my life, and I felt that I was a decent writer. Then I took a class on creative writing, and I discovered the discipline that is involved. Now my love for writing has become a passion. Like most people I enjoyed reading a good book. However, now I consume books with an unquenchable thirst, and I understand the sacrifice the writer has made.

My true love, as far as writing goes, is poetry. I realize I didn’t have a clue when I started writing poetry. I thought I could write down what I was feeling, rhyme a few words and I would have a poem, and that was it; it wasn’t that hard. I never considered revising a poem is a must. Artists start from a sketch, and writers from a draft. When I look back on the poems I wrote a while back, or when someone shows me a draft of a poem, I think “Wow, that needs a lot of work.” I don’t think there are bad poems, only unfinished drafts. I know I have the tools to be able to sit down and write a poem. Not only that, but my poetry is at a new level. I know it is not where it needs to be, but I know that I can get it there with a little work.
Writing now has a new feel. I have a passion for words, and I don’t care if people like it or not. I know why I am doing it. It is not to impress anyone, and I don’t have to chase rabbits — so to speak. I understand what makes good writing good, and I know why bad writing is bad. Writing is not about shocking people, or just telling a story. As writers, we don’t tell people something — we let them experience it. Art is about the experience. It is not about impressing people. Unlike my talented artist ‘friend,’ who was painting for sex, I know the secret. We must look at art, whether it is a painting, a poem, whatever, and we must experience it. And that is what Light and Shadows is about. It is not just a collection of art created for a magazine. It is an experience, a glimpse at the world through eyes that are normally shut to the rest of us.

— Heath Haddock
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My Grandmother Vomits at the End of the Cotton Row,
Wipes Her Face, Looks Back at the Sun, and Starts Again

to Lynn Frost, my friend

Rounded shoulders and dull
eyes discourage conversation,
move me away several
years too early.
I was hoping to sell the farm,
ot lose it by default
like Lot's wife.
So, while the Death Angel
looks in vain for blood
on my door posts, I gaze
on tiny tits of acorns
forming on an ancient oak
tree shading the rotting roof. Time
will separate the farmhouse and place
its forward lean on walls, leaving
the stones on a lone chimney
blind to their destiny. The hole
beside the root cellar gapes,
frozen in clay with steps leading
down like gums stacked in a mouth
too smooth and thick to eat. Simple
pleasures once lay inside this clay:
turnips, potatoes, and molded shoes.
Boxes of last year's empty jars waited
for next year's peaches and kraut.
Now, the force that through the green
fuse drives the flower, drives
me from my dwelling like
Lot's wife, knowing, wishing.
Prisoner in the *Time Life* Collection

Traps in an old
World woods,
Catch aboriginal
Meat fat in lore;
This one’s seduced
By his wish to live.

My eyes can taste
His tart raw
Heart, made visible
By deadly hate
In waist deep water
On a glossy page.

Their helmets and guns,
His cloth and skin,
Ideologies’ chance.
To win is art
For me, reality for him.

---

An Elegy To Essie McRae

The house has no stoop, where her image, pressing the door, blurs from blowing rain. Watching, I feel the coldness of her dress, curving to fit wet on her spine, and know that her fingers grope inside a cracking leather purse; that she grapples for the key between papers and change, like she finds a meal under spring potato roots.

Worn heels pop, wood on wood, as she walks to the middle of the room, and pulls a cord that gives life to the shade over half a window pane. She can’t smell that the gas burns thin when her children spend the night, that the gauge counts biscuits fried chickens and sweet potato pies.

Her five senses are faithful and kind, as expectations are all half-price, white Easter shoes are bought in July. So, she asks the Lord for daylight. Her wayward husband has made his choice. “Poke his eyes out, split his brains with a plate,” She speaks kindly to me as she cuts the pound cake.
Jose Quervo Remembers

Margaritas and small shot glasses
Bring back glory days.
When I see the salty drink
I think of a girl named Tequila.
We were not best friends,
But she always shared her chips —
Sour cream and onion
from her Care Bears lunch box.

Ten years have past
But always I think of her
When I see someone
Lick the salt, slam the shot,
And slurp the lime.
They step off the train into the sun, women with their loaded duffel bags, brightly covered heads, and men with their diligent faces.

Brown shimmers under the sunlight. A woman’s red scarf glows as she carefully walks down from the train.

Where is the noise? These people are not heard. Even their children are silent in their own world, curiously watching their silent caretakers. They stand there like duffel bags waiting to be carried to the next destination.
Under the Coal Miner's Trance

His eyes draw me
in a dark place
alone
among blurred
figures.
An amber light steals their
privacy
leaving them naked.

His eyes
those sacrificial eyes
invite me in and force me
to look beneath the filth
and into his soul exposed
with no privacy, yet
he invade mine.
Jesus hasn’t been seen yet.
An old man, a young man, and
a saved woman
stand in the river,
while a lady
holds his cross
in the current.

The water matches the sky;
only a slight movement
reveals its greenness.
The men hold this
saved woman’s hands tightly,
unaware of their red sashes
waving in the river.

They wait for Jesus to come,
so the saved one can see,
but they shield her eyes,
with two cloths:
one black, one white.

They haven’t seen Jesus
but she has.
Life and the Biscuit Dough

My mind was filled with color as I slept. Such brightness amazed me in all its splendor. The world of my mind was alive with brilliant colors as I slept in the small twin bed with its ragged quilt pulled snugly under my chin. Just a boy, I was warm and despite the chill of the morning, I was at peace.

I swam in color until the morning began to tug at me from beyond my dreaming mind. I liked to be in the place of dreams much better than in the world, but reality insisted, so I had to oblige. I rolled over onto my back as my eyes opened and the small room swam into focus. The bedroom adjoined the small kitchen, where I heard a noise. As I looked into the kitchen from the bed, I saw her.

The old lady blended the flour and the buttermilk carefully in order to maintain the consistency of the dough she was preparing. She stood over the small table with her hair tightly woven into a bun which crowned her small head. She kneaded the dough thoroughly, as if the preparation of the dough would ultimately affect the taste of the biscuits.

Her face was heavily wrinkled and there was a large hump in her back, which was frightening to look at because her body was twisted into a shape resembling Igor, the mad scientist’s assistant. Her hands, which worked the dough with such care and precision, were small, frail, and speckled with dark blotches. She was much shorter since her back had begun to fold upon itself, but she still tried to stand as straight as the hump would allow her. She wore a faded blue dress, which clung loosely to her withered frame and a white apron over the dress in order to block the small clouds of flour that invariably billowed up from the dough as she began the biscuit-making ritual. She had put on her yellow house shoes to keep her feet warm as she made breakfast. She cast a glance into the small bedroom. I smiled at her lazily and she smiled back. She returned her attention to the dough. She cocked her small head slightly to the right as she continued to work the dough with her small wooden rolling pin. I stretched in all directions, contorting into different positions on the bed, which sent needles of sensation throughout my body. I sat up on the edge of the bed, and looked up to see the woman beginning to cut the biscuits from the dough on the counter with a small metal cutter. She looked so frail and old, that I feared she would give out at any time and fall to the ground, but knew at the same instant that she would not. She focused on the biscuit cutting, smiling all the while. She glanced in my direction, and noticed my open but sleepy eyes.

“Good morning, my dear boy,” she said from the kitchen. She continued to work on cutting the biscuits.

“Morning,” I replied, sleepily. “Can I have some biscuit dough?” I asked, as I made my way slowly to the bathroom.

“Well, I suppose a little won’t hurt you. Be sure to wash your hands, dear, and I will save the scraps for you.”

“Okay,” I said as I walked into the bathroom. This room was like the rest of the small place where Mel lived. The whole place was a house which had
Life and the Biscuit Dough

been split to form two apartments; on one side was Mel, and on the other was a little old lady named Ruth. Everybody called Ruth “Mrs. Ruth,” and her son lived across the street with his wife and two daughters.

This was the way it had been for as long as I had been coming to visit Mel. She and Mrs. Ruth were not related, but were very close. This was probably due to the fact that they relied on one another a great deal, but they were also good friends because they shared this place. I thought about this a bit longer, but my mind quickly returned to the bathroom in which I now stood. It was very small with a shower/tub combination, a toilet, and a sink. The rug was badly faded, as was the yellowing wallpaper. Some flower or other had been on the wallpaper originally, but many dark stains and spots were now its chief design. The bathroom was clean, but very worn from years of continual use. It was just off the bedroom, and the living room occupied the front part of this side, while the kitchen was the single back room of the apartment. A tiny place according to some standards, such as a friend of mine whose father was a doctor, but obviously enough for Mel. She was such a bright woman, she could have been happy anywhere she was, and I would have been happy to just be there with her. I began to wash my hands as I heard Mel from the kitchen.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied. I squirted some soap into one hand and began to wash my hands anew.

When I walked into the kitchen, Mel was just sliding the bread pan with the round portions of dough into the oven. She closed the door, standing as straight as she possibly could, but still looking painfully hunched. The mad scientist’s assistant closed the oven door and looked back approvingly at me. I looked to the counter and there were my prizes: the triangle-shaped leftovers of the biscuit dough! I put each one into my mouth, enjoying the gooey taste of the raw dough, and then took my seat at the breakfast table. The kitchen was only slightly larger than the bathroom, and it included cramped counter and cabinet space, the sink and appliance area, and a small eating table slid into one corner. As I looked around the room, Mel brought a glass and a pitcher of freshly brewed sweet tea to the table. I poured myself a glass as Mel took the seat next to me, allowing the biscuits to cook in the oven across the room. She worked on preparing some molasses and butter, mixing it together the way I liked it so it would be ready when the hot biscuits were done. I knew the words that were to follow.

“How are your mom and dad doing?” she asked, not looking up from her mixture of the molasses and butter.

“Well, they’re the same,” I responded,

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied. I squirted some soap into one hand and began to wash my hands anew.

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“How are your mom and dad doing?” she asked, not looking up from her mixture of the molasses and butter.

“Well, they’re the same,” I responded,

“Are they at home much?”

“I guess. As much as always.”

“Is your dad being good to your momma now? Are they still fighting like they have been, or are they better?”
"They fight a lot. Sometimes I wish I could just leave and go and live with Pa-paw and Ma-maw, but I don’t think Momma and Daddy would let me. They just always fight with each other and I don’t even know why they fight.” I was feeling less interested in this conversation with each word.

"Is your daddy drinking like he always has, or is it less?” She looked up from her mixture, but only for a brief moment.

“Well, I don’t know really, but I sure do hate it when Daddy drinks a lot. I hate it when he fights with Momma, too. I especially hate it when he hurts Momma ... I hate it really bad. Sometimes I think I hate him, Aunt Mel, but I know that ain’t right. I just don’t understand,” I said, as a tear made its way down one of my cheeks, which made my cheek tickle, so I wiped it away quickly.

“I bet those biscuits are just about done, so you take them out of the oven, but you be sure to use both pot holders, so you won’t get burned, okay,” she said, raising my chin from the table, “okay, son?”

As I went to retrieve the pot holders from their home in the drawer beside the sink, I smiled a great smile. I liked it when she called me son; I liked it a lot. The biscuits were nice and hot as I set the pan on the eye of the stove, and the morning sun beamed through the windows of Met’s small kitchen. The bright blaze which filled the kitchen made me remember another bright blaze.

The trailer burned so brightly in the darkness that neighbors from over a mile away had come to witness the tragedy. There were shades of yellow and orange from the flames as all I had ever known was consumed before my eyes. My mother and little brother stood beside me as I watched the hungry flames devour all my things.

The fiberglas underpinning began to burn, sending thick black smoke billowing into the air. I could see the smoke rising, even though it was late at night. I looked at the trailer and wondered what this event meant to me. I wondered where my father was, and why he didn’t put out the fire before me. My mother began to cry, so I cried too. All I was wearing was underwear and a simple white T-shirt.

The fire engines arrived on the scene, loud sirens announcing their arrival from some fire station far away. The fire engines sprayed water into the mouth of the hungry fire, but it simply used the drink to wash down the meal it had made of my things. I tried to get closer to the burning trailer, but the heat hurt my eyes. I moved in as though I could somehow undo it, or perhaps take my father’s place so no one would realize that he was missing. I watched the flames as the fire engines backed off, unable to put out the fire in my home. I noticed my own fire engine, which was battery-powered and moved on its own power, at the corner of the blaze. Its plastic had begun to melt from the heat of the flames.
Vacation Bible School Fishing Trip, 1982

While a story was being told about the one that got away, the parents handed over their sons’ lunches. A crow, black teardrop against the morning sky, fell cawing.

Fishers of men led the young pack through barbed wire fences and lassoes of briars that stole the little league caps from their heads. A procession of cane poles and glossy rods followed the serpentine trail through maple shade and pools of light, snagging branches that whipped the face of the next person in line.

Instead of lying on their couch watching Mr. Rogers tie his shoes, the children marched across a fallow field. At the stream, the cold water seemed inviting.

Along the bank, their feet struggled through a drift of loose stones. Their soles lost grip, ankles twisted and sent tiny palms to be pierced by rocks sharpened by the water.

The children’s fingers stirred the aphoristic aroma of decay into the humid air, grasped straining muscle and ran it through with the point of a hook.

The leaders pointed to slick logs that sheltered sunfish. Lines lightly splashed. Fish blindly opened their mouths and swallowed, because death spasms attract fish.
Eclipse

Kamikaze darkness swooped down from the blue blackening the treetops.
A charcoal wave engulfed the green pasture, surged up the grassy hill, and drowned me in cold still air.

Summer birds went to roost, and the rusted wasp crawled under the shutter. Crickets climbed from the damp around the foundation and shrieked in the night that had come much too early.
Enough, Almighty!

In June of 1997, my father, a preacher, contracted Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as "Lou Gehrig's disease." His is one of the most rare cases; the disease started in his mouth and throat, ending his preaching career. ALS is fatal.

Oh Sovereign Lord, enough!
Good men (and the last wave by I'm afraid) should not suffer and die in this world while others suffer and die on their way to the next.

Enough, God of Elijah!
What holds your sword in its sheath? What restrains your hand from being outstretched to the needy?
Nothing, Lord, nothing.

But oh God, I know!
I have seen how You work. You make the greatest good grow from the rotten silt of the darkest evil. Glory from death, greatness from desertion, great Jehovah.

But still, Ancient of Days!
But still, heed my impatience and deliver Your man, my father from the talons of the dark lord. And what, Yahweh?
What is at stake but the reputation of Your own name?
Boy-Warrior Fantasies

To Jason Goodman

I remember, Jason, that we fought them all: The Decepticons, Gremlins, the dark lord Vader (We did not know then he should be called Sith) And what cloaks did we wear in battle? We wore the flowing robe of Luke Skywalker leaping from one playground slide to another, a 4-foot drop to hot Texas gravel our gaping abyss. We wore the mighty and glistening skin of Optimus Prime, the noble leader and 18-wheeler, merrily transformed into K-Mart bicycles traversing the bourgeois concrete jungle. And we wore, when evil raised its head, the ancient spurs of the Old West cowboy or the forceful badge of the TV detective. The threat was always my brother, my dog, the neighbor-kids, something to scurry about dry back yards in the parched Fort Worth air.

I often wonder, Jason, who you became. I often wonder if you liked Episode I.
Bridget

“Thirty-three years ago my soul slid down a bent cosmic ray and I was born in a mortuary in Manhattan, Kansas. I used to think it was a mistake, that the trickster shoved me into the wrong plane of existence, but I was being prepared. I had a very normal childhood, smelling embalming fluid amidst the sounds of whispers, sobs, and ‘How Great Thou Art.’ My father was the funeral director and my mother the pianist for the Methodist Church. We lived behind the funeral parlors in a sprawling gray Victorian house with turrets and tunnels and secret places in a small Midwestern college town where football and tornadoes were the main conversation. It was preparation.”

Bridget tossed her straight brown hair off her face and looked at her small audience. She was sitting on a stool at Starbucks in Greenwich Village, her poems folded in her lap.

“Were you a witch?” asked a man at the near table drinking a latte. “Did you tell me once that you were a witch?”

“I told my Girl Scout leader that I wanted to earn a merit badge in witchcraft. She sputtered and spewed, but my audacity earned me the respect of my giggling peers. Then the warty old woman scolded me for being smarty and tattled to my parents. After I apologized, Mother took me to the Methodist minister for counseling and prayer. Dad was more concerned about how his daughter’s interest in witchcraft would reflect on his business.”
“But were you a witch?” he pressed.
“Not a witch.”
“Then what?”

* * * * * * * * *

Bridget skipped past the Manhattan Mortuary sign in the front yard and around to the family’s entrance at the side of the towering gray house. “Hey, Dad, guess what?” she said, bursting through the door and almost colliding with her father in his daily dark suit and striped tie. “Guess what I did!”

“Shhhh, honey. Be quiet.” He put his arm around her shoulder and gazed over her head down the wallpapered hallway to a knot of people in another room. “All the front parlors are in use,” he whispered, “so I laid Miss Hattie Bronson out in our living room. How about being a good girl and making yourself invisible for me?” He patted her shoulder as he walked away.

“I won the spelling bee, Daddy. I won the city spelling bee for the eighth grade.” She plopped her book satchel into a kitchen chair and opened the refrigerator. Her mother was away teaching piano lessons at the Methodist Church this afternoon.

Through a side window, she spied her father walking the Bronson family to their car. Bridget tiptoed toward the family living room. There were visitors in the front parlors but no one in the living room right now, no one except Miss Hattie, who was lying in her coffin, looking like she’d fallen asleep wearing her ruffled Sunday dress, Miss Hattie who scolded disrespectful children. Bridget cut her eyes toward the distant mourners as she strolled to the piano and let her fingers drop to the keys. “The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the worms play pinochle...” She slipped out before getting caught.

Bridget roamed the labyrinthine halls and stairways of the enormous Victorian house, examining once again its nooks and niches. At the landing on the stairwell to one of the turrets, she curled into the window seat and gazed at the late afternoon sky. A sliver moon hung against a cold blue background, a maiden moon, too early, too distant to spill its light on Bridget, but she could hear it call her name.

Lying back on the old quilt she had stashed there many afternoons ago, Bridget closed her eyes and listened. The winds chased themselves around the eaves of the mortuary and its turrets, singing out a hollow song. If she listened really hard, she could hear the winds gather up the breath of the dead downstairs and join them with all the spirits who had rested in this place. She relaxed her body, let it go limp, then slowly exhaled, sensing her breath touching the winds of the spirits. She could almost hear their conversations, could almost join in, almost...

* * * * * * * * *

Fifteen stops on the subway from Bridget’s one-room apartment over a grocery store in the Village is the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is a massive stone building with room after room of exhibits open to the public. Tucked away behind
and beneath the public rooms are the warrens for
the staff.
Yesterday she was in a basement helping to unpack
Celtic artifacts that had been unearthed during the
late 19th century, crated up and stored, forgotten
actually. Jewelry, weapons, ritual objects.
"These are glass beads!" another archivist ex-
claimed, gently fingerling an ancient necklace
through latex gloves. She was a full-bodied woman,
about fifty, wearing wire rim glasses.
"The Celts did glass beads long before the Greeks
or Romans," said an intern dressed in jeans.
"Many of the pottery vessels have a Greek look to
them," a man said. Bridget hadn't seen him before.
He was wearing a brown coverall with "Joe"
stitched on the pocket. Must be with delivery or
insurance.
"That's because the Celts traded with the Greeks,"
she answered, rummaging deep into the excelsior
for the next object.
"Did the Greeks get as far north as Ireland?" asked
Mae Lin, picking straw from her black hair. Mae
Lin was a co-worker, an archivist who specialized
in Polynesia.
"No, the other way round. The Celts occupied
northern Europe from Spain to the Danube at one
time," Joe in the coveralls said.
"Yuck!" exclaimed the intern, holding up a human
skull for all to see.
"It's a drinking cup," Joe said, "See, it's been gilded
on the inside. They practiced a little human sacrifice
here and there."
Who was he, Bridget wondered.

"Now I'll be afraid to reach into the next box,"
said the other archivist, "scared of what I'll find."
She plopped down on a folding chair to take a
break.
Bridget was hushed. She was staring at a
bronze tablet she'd just pulled from the excelsior. It
had three interlocking figures at the top, the one on
the left a female wearing a crescent moon head-
dress; the one in the middle a male holding a sun;
and the one on the right, a male with a sun head-
dress. There were two columns of characters, side
by side, over the remainder of the tablet, and one of
them looked to be old Greek. She didn't recognize
the other.
"What have you found?" asked Joe.
"I'm not sure," she answered.
Queen Bee wasn't the least curious. Bridget
stood before her now in her office, cradling the
tablet like a baby. Queen Bee, Mrs. Todd, was chief
archivist, a position she had guarded for twenty
years. Bridget first reported to her while doing
graduate work at Columbia toward her degree in
ancient philosophy. That was seven years before she
was hired full-time. Mrs. Todd sat behind her desk.
Her gray hair was wound into a beehive, her head
the apex of her cone-shaped body. She had hardly
glanced at the tablet.
"My dear, you've discovered the mistake of
some careless archivist. That's all." Her chair
squeaked as she shifted her weight. "Someone who
mislaid a Greek artifact in a crate of Celtic trea-
urses." She shook her head back and forth. "That
didn't take place under my tutelage. No sirree, we
take care. We follow procedures. You know that, don’t you? Now you just return that Greek tablet to the Greek curator and put your mind back to the Celtic display. I’ve heard the new chairman has a keen interest in the Celts,” she said with a pinched smile and dip of her chin.

The next morning Bridget found a stiff leather journal tucked in with the axes and adzes. As soon as the tools were delivered to the exhibit chamber, she took the journal to her desk and began to read. It was written by hand with pen and ink and dated 1897, its author a respected archaeologist. He had translated the ancient Greek, and Bridget was mesmerized by the story that was unfolding.

That’s why something with Greek writing is packed away with Celtic artifacts, she thought. The Greek tells a Celtic story ... a virgin birth story that pre-dates the Bible version by nearly 1000 years, yet is so similar. Yes, yes! It’s another connection ... it’s the spiritual truth! Could it be that the other set of characters are Celtic? If so, they’d be the earliest written Celtic in existence. Eureka. ... Eureka!

She stood up at her desk and did a little dance, then looked for a co-worker, for somebody to tell. All the cubicles in archives were empty. She checked her watch, 5:30 p.m. Quickly she locked the journal in a drawer, gathered her shoulder bag, and dashed for Queen Bee’s office down the narrow back hall.

The office was locked, lights out. Damn, I must have just missed her. Bridget scribbled a note and stuck it in the doorframe. “Mrs. Todd, I need to see you first thing in the morning. Big News!

Later that evening, Bridget reached with one arm back over the headboard of their bed without looking and straightened the print of Leonardo’s Last Supper before laying her head on Chris’ chest. “So it’s the Rosetta stone of the north,” Chris said.
“Hmmm. Close.” She smiled. He was teasing her.

“Glad I was here to help you celebrate.” Chris often worked nights. He had one more year of residency at Memorial Hospital.

“It’s part of the plan,” she said.

“Your plan?” he asked.

“Our plan.”

“Then tell me.”

“The tablet tells the Celt story to explain the world ... the truth revealed once more.” Chris was silent, so she continued. “The same story occurs in many cultures. Don’t you see? They all connect. All religions are one, all truths universal.”

“Uh huh,” he said.

Bridget sat up in bed and turned to face him. “Hear me out. The Celts worshiped a virgin goddess who gave birth at the winter solstice to a son who came to restore light to the world,” she emphasized each word, “but he was cut down, sacrificed, in his prime at harvest time. The Greeks had essentially the same explanation of the world, as have some other cultures. The tablet could well be the oldest written record of this tale. It’s definitely older than the Hebrew account in the Bible,” Bridget explained. “The goddess was even called Miriam or Mary, for God’s sake.”

“So you think Jesus was being reincarnated?”

“Yes. There’s always the savior figure.”

“Bridget, that’s primitive man trying to explain summer and winter, crops and harvest, the sun, all those things. Why wouldn’t the explanation be

similar in different cultures?” Chris shifted about to get more comfortable.

“That’s my point. The truth is universal.”

“And the truth is ...?” he asked.

“The balance in all things. The sun, both sun and son, is born of the darkest night; light is restored to the world, and the world flourishes. Then the harvest comes, the son is struck down, and the light wanes into darkness again, before the cycle repeats. Don’t you see?”

“I see the explanation of natural phenomena,” Chris said.

“It’s balance. Balance of the mind, body, and spirit. Just like light and dark, both are necessary for the proper function of the universe. They are opposing principles, but complementary rather than antagonistic. Like you and me.”

“Yeah, how’s that?”

“You are the sun to my moon. We are part of the plan.”

“I see,” Chris said. “Good luck with Queen Bee in the morning.” He pummeled his pillow.

“Chris, this isn’t really new to you, is it?” Bridget asked, putting her hand on his arm.

“I don’t think about it.” He turned over, pulled the sheet up to his shoulders, and said goodnight.

Bridget wasn’t sleepy. She pulled on her bathrobe, walked to the window, and stood in the light of the moon.
The next morning, she sat in the straight oak chair in Queen Bee's office, with it scooted close to the desk, both arms rested on the desk, her fingers in fists, and repeated her points. The journal lay open, turned toward Queen Bee, who was leaning back in her chair, her black smock straining at the buttonholes.

"If the journal interprets the tablet correctly, then it shows that a virgin birth/savior story is the same even to details in several cultures across a wide span of time and global distances. We've seen overlaps and influences between cultures before, but this is immensely important." She stopped to gauge Queen Bee's reaction. Interest. Skeptical perhaps, but she was listening, weighing Bridget's words.

"The tablet may very well be the oldest written version of this story in existence."

"That's a broad claim, you know."

"No less than the next: it could be the key to an even earlier Indo-European language."

"A giant key on the keychain of the past?"

Mrs. Todd straightened in her chair. "Now, let me pose some questions to you and let's look at this realistically. Then I need to finish my report for the director. We have a staff meeting this morning. First, what do you know about the journal?"

"It's the work of Archibald Edgarton."

"How do you know it's his work? Do you know where he was or what he was doing in 1897?"

"No, I don't," Bridget conceded. "You're right. But we can substantiate the authenticity of the journal right away. Assuming it's genuine ... "

"No assumptions allowed."

"OK, I'll go now and research Archibald Edgarton's work." Bridget stood to leave.

"And I'll keep the journal. Maybe I'll find time to look at it later," added Queen Bee.

Bridget was back with the information within an hour, a written copy with dates and sources. Archibald Edgarton led a team who unearthed objects from a peat bog in Britain in 1897. The objects in the crate were part of this find, according to the label on the crate and corroborating sources. The crate was packed in 1901 and had not been opened since.

"Fast work," said Queen Bee, the journal still open on her desk. "The more I've thought about this, the more I'm certain that if Archibald Edgarton really wrote this journal, it would have been filed with his papers. What you've come upon is likely a fraud, a hoax." She let out a sigh. "Bridget, you've done well with your research these few years you've worked here, but your inexperience is showing. You are overstepping, you're leaping to conclusions. Such broad claims could open us to ridicule. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Now let's properly refile it all, and I'll note what was found and where it has been placed."

Bridget sprang up and walked behind her chair, pacing like a cat. "Yes, it must be authenticated," she said, stabbing with both fists as though she were pounding on a table. "The tablet has to be dated, the
writings studied.” She struggled to keep the pitch of her voice from rising. “So let’s turn it over to the appropriate scholars ... now. It’s too important to pack back on a dusty shelf for another hundred years.”

“I appreciate the intensity of your commitment to this work,” Queen Bee spat out the words. “Now I have other work to do.”

The conversation was over.

Bridget stewed all the long way back to her office, teeth clamped, jaw set tight. She grabbed her jacket and tromped out. She had to get away, get outside, find a place to explode.

Winding her way through a maze of corridors and stairs, she finally came to the courtyard, a sculpture garden with benches and green plantings, a quiet place to sit still. It was a bright day, still crisp with early spring, and its breeze felt soothing to her face.

She could hear the cooing of pigeons and soft voices from the lunch kiosk at the far end of the courtyard, then footsteps of someone in a hurry. It was Queen Bee, near the kiosk, a mountain in motion, ducking across the courtyard to her meeting with the director.

Bridget spotted a gray pigeon circling one of the statues. She wished the pigeon would ... the pigeon flapped its wings and rose high into the air, then dive-bombed old Queen Bee, scoring right on top of her beehived head.

Bridget sat very still, pondering what had just happened. Then she quietly returned to work.

At midafternoon she walked a tray of Celt bangles and beaded necklaces to the chamber where the new exhibit was being assembled, which was closed to the public. Bridget entered from a side door and was surprised to see the museum director showing some man around the room. The new board chairman. Yes, he was said to have an interest in the Celts. As they drew closer, Bridget overheard their conversation.

“This is all quite preliminary,” said the director, “but knowing your interest, I phoned you right away. It could be quite exciting. Mrs. Todd told me about the discovery at our staff meeting today.”

Bridget’s ears perked up.

“Yes,” he continued, “she said one of the young archivists unpacked the tablet and journal and was just going to file them away. If Mrs. Todd hadn’t recognized its potential, it might have been lost to us again.”

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Bridget slid into a seat on the subway. She had been standing a long time, jostling, hanging onto the overhead strap, listening to the whirr of the train speeding over the tracks. The crowds had thinned out now. The car was almost empty, just a few other weary souls, only they were hurrying home. She let her face rest against the window and gazed out into the black walls of the tunnel. Sometimes the subway was her white horse, whisking her from one place to another; sometimes the wind playing with her mind. Tonight it was her river, her life-giving
underground river, and she was a cork bobbing in its current. She wondered where she was, hadn't noticed the name of the last station they passed through. It didn't matter, she always found her way home eventually when she rode like this.

Home. Back in Kansas, back in high school, senior year. It was spring then, too. She wrote the senior play, and it was good, good enough to win first place. Everybody roared and cheered, gave the cast curtain calls and red roses for Mary Beth, Mary Beth with her gold curls and pouty red lips. No one even nodded her way.

There was a new moon that night. It followed her home to the mortuary, and she stared at it out her window until her parents were asleep. Then she slipped into the backyard and stood naked under the oak tree, the tree’s limbs filtering the thin light of the moon, the light bathing her in its white glow. That night the winds gathered her breath and she rode with the spirits to mystical places. It lifted her beyond the stars and floated her back to earth. She felt in balance with mind, body, and spirit.

The whirr of the train, yes, it was the sound of the wind, the wind lifting her now, letting her float, restoring her balance. She was at her station; it was time to go home.

Chris was standing at the window, waiting. “Where have you been? Do you know what time it is? Don’t tell me, you’ve been riding the subway again.”

“Yes.”

“That’s dangerous, Bridget.”

“It’s comforting.”

“Not if you’re mugged. What happened this time? Didn’t it go well with Queen Bee?”

“No.” Bridget slipped off her coat. “She said I was inexperienced and overstepping. Then she told the director it was her discovery.”

“That was nasty of her. I’m sorry.” He reached out to take her in his arms, and she walked toward him. Then he added, “But spending hours riding the subway doesn’t help anything. It’s not smart.”

Bridget stopped where she was.

“What is it with this riding back and forth on the subway, Bridget? I don’t get it. What is it? Are you some kind of troll, some creature that lives under bridges and in subways because you’re neither here nor there?”

“I’ve been in between.”

“In between?”

“Yes. Becoming.”

“Becoming what?”

“A spiritual being. An instrument of the universe.”

“Oh, shit, Bridget. Will you stop talking like this? It sounds crazy.”

“We’re both spirits, Chris.”

“I’m getting enough of this spirit stuff, Bridget. You’ve gone overboard.” He reached out to her, “Will you come with me to the hospital? Talk to somebody there?”

“You’re a healer. That’s why I chose you.”

“Then let me help you.”

“You’re the sun to my moon, Chris. We’re part of the plan. You feel it, too, I know you do.”
“Oh, shit! Shit! What I feel is tired of bumping heads with Jesus in The Last Supper when we fuck. Tired of all this moon and sun and universal spirits shit. I’ve had enough, goddammit!” He pushed past Bridget heading for the door.

Bridget slipped her coat around her shoulders, then opened the window and crawled out onto the fire escape. The night was still, the full moon high overhead, a mother moon. It was time. She stood with her face raised for a long time before the winds picked her up and sailed her across the sky to the music of the stars. When she returned, she heard the white horse clomping on the pavement out front, coming toward her, and she claimed the power.

* * * * * * * * *

One month later the opening of the Celt exhibition coincided with the reception for the new board chairman. It was a gala affair in the evening, after the museum had closed to the public. All the chambers except the Celt exhibition chamber were roped off; the entire wing had been closed all day in order to make ready for the party.

Harpists, strolling minstrels, costumed wenches and warriors passing hors d’oeuvres, all greeted and entertained the guests: board members, patrons, donors, dignitaries, and renowned scholars. The staff was present, and those who had a part in assembling the display were on hand to mix with the guests and answer their questions. Schmooze them, thought Bridget. The staff understood who paid their salaries.

She admired the pottery with a former professor from Columbia, then showed an elderly lady using a walker the beaded necklaces. Someone asked if she’d seen Mrs. Todd, and she hadn’t, not the whole day. Funny, they replied. You’d think she’d be here front and center. Yes, Bridget agreed.

She and the conductor of the symphony speculated on the origin of the harpist’s bow. “I think the musical bow preceded the bow as a weapon,” the musician said, munching on a tidbit.

“No, the other way around,” offered a board member joining the conversation.

“But harpists were usually women,” countered the conductor. “Women wouldn’t have conceived of its use as weapon.”

“Some women are huntresses,” Bridget said, and everyone chuckled.

The museum director beckoned her to him. “I expected Mrs. Todd to give the chairman the grand tour, but I haven’t seen her. Could you handle this?”

“Of course.” They began with the jewelry, then on to the weapons. “The Celts invented a device to hold both the bow and arrows. This one held 200 arrows with razor sharp points.”

“I read that they would aim for the eye of a bird,” the chairman said, “that they were that skilled as marksmen.”

“Yes, and their points were barbed. They did as much damage coming out as they did going in,” Bridget said.
“I wouldn’t want to cross them.” He laughed. They moved on to the pottery. A waist-high urn was the most prominent piece, its design quite detailed with borders and figures in black against its terra cotta surface. The director was perplexed, he hadn’t seen it before. How could he have missed such a fine piece? and something so large? “Perhaps it’s a recent addition to the collection,” Bridget suggested.

He knelt down to examine the figures on the urn more closely. “It appears to be a scene of human sacrifice. How astounding!”

“Is that a woman being killed? My God, what a mountain of a woman!” the chairman said. “Do you suppose she was the queen? Is that a crown on her head?”

“It could be her crown, or it maybe just her hair style,” Bridget said as they strolled toward the onlookers at the bronze tablet. One of the onlookers was vaguely familiar. Where had she seen him before?

“Here’s the great mystery,” the director said. He and the chairman had discussed the potential of the bronze tablet many times: that it might be the earliest Celt writing; that it was a virgin birth story much older than the one in the Bible. They were pelted with questions and opinions by the guests, some of whom were aloof academics: Was the tablet really on a basement shelf for 100 years? Were there any other examples of Greek writing on Celt artifacts? How old were the artifacts? How could it be determined if this was a written Celt language? And more. Bridget fielded most of the questions.

“The board is committed to pursuing this discovery, wherever it leads,” the chairman said, and turning to Bridget, asked, “What was your role, personally, in this exhibit?” “I’m an archivist. I helped to unpack and catalog.” “You’re very knowledgeable. Either you’re being quite modest, or we aren’t making the most of your ability,” he said, thanking her for his tour and taking his leave. “That was a modest answer,” said a male voice.

She turned to see ... who was he ... oh! “You’re Joe, the man who helped unpack. I didn’t recognize you in your Sunday togs.” He was about her height, with dark curls and a long nose that fit his face. She hesitated, then asked, “Who are you?” “You might call me a visiting academic, a scholar long entranced by ancient religions,” he said.

“So what would you say about the three figures at the top of the tablet?” she asked.

“Three separate figures yet interlocked ... they speak of the balance in all things.”
A late night rain splattered on the sidewalk outside Starbucks in Greenwich Village. Some chairs were pulled into a circle by the window. Bridget sat on the stool in the center. She wore a black silk turtleneck over loose black pants. Laying her poems aside, she picked up her espresso.

"And are you a witch?" asked the man sipping a latte.

"Not a witch."

"Then what?"

She opened her book of poems and read:

"I am the spirit of the night,
maidens of the moon,
mother of the son.
I am Bridget."
May I Take Your Order?

If my smile seems worn
as you stand across the red counter
at McDonald’s, don’t think I am rude.
Remember this smile has greeted
143 customers since I got here at nine,
recommended supersize fries 64 times,
and assisted in sweeping up after the toddler
who tried to bounce her McNuggets
off the floor. Faded and frayed,
this smile must “have a nice day”
for two more hours before I can
slip it off until tomorrow. I recommend
you accept the one you’re offered,
even if it’s not bright or individual. It’s
the only thing free here, except the ketchup.
The Preacher’s Son

I don’t remember why I kneed you
during the dress rehearsal of the church
Christmas pageant. Or how I sneaked away
to look for you. I called your house,
and you weren’t there so I got you
in trouble. But as I circled that
huge brick building, built in 1831,
I knew that none of it was true.
You weren’t the wild one. I wasn’t the slut.
The stained glass windows weren’t even lit that night.
And when I called your name, and then whispered
that I loved you, you stayed in the bushes —
in the fetal position though the pain was gone.
Still hiding in the holly bushes on Maple Street
by the plaque that shines established in 1831, lying.
Have You Seen the Two Step Queen of Texas in Awhile?

Hiding in the golden corn,
you told me about nuclear physics
and AM talk radio. You dreamed of
building a rocket and having a voice.

And I listening, grasping for
your words, your concepts, your heart.
But you didn’t notice this as your
blue eyes danced unchallenged
even by that clearest sky.
We watched a plane pass over,
paving us a path to Rome.
The sun cast moving shadows
through the swaying stalks that
your little brother parted, spying
as you gently brushed my hair back
into place behind my ear. Years later

I wonder if you’ve cured your restlessness,
if you’re registering the masses to vote,
and if you still remember how our cheeks
ached with smiles as you took me by the
shoulders and told me my eyes sparkled.
The two step queen of Texas for awhile.
The White Spaces on the Page

for the McGehee Man:
"There he goes, one of God's own prototypes — a high-powered mutant of some kind, never considered for mass production. Too weird to live, too rare to die."
Dr. Hunter S. Thompson

Life is a segmented essay. The interesting arrangement and enjambment of events and tragedies is what makes this life so much worth living. The constant shifting and maneuvering of the forces is enough to keep almost anyone on the edge of his seat, like the reader who just could not bear to tear his eyes away from the page — What comes next?

A wise man once wrote, "Everything flows according to the whims of the Great Magnet" (Thompson 95), and I felt this statement to be too obvious to ignore. When we are set adrift in this sea of existence, we are handed no instruction book, no manual or map to guide us along the path. We all walk through our lives with no clue about what lies ahead, just one turn of the page away. Will it be joy? Will it be fortune? Or, will it be heartache?

This uncertainty is what pushes us all along, the hope of always staying one step ahead of the Great Author above, clear of whatever disaster that his pen has prepared for you.

* * * * *

Does life imitate art? Or, does art imitate life?
My grandfather was a masterpiece cut short. The excesses of drink and the pursuit of women caused
his life to end before the completion of the final chapter. He burnt a path through this world as he went. He lived for each small moment that might pop up over the course of any day. He knew that life was capable of dropping you on your ass at any moment, and that there would be no hesitation to do so. Each turn of the page offered him new territory to conquer, a new lie to tell. When I say he lied, I mean it in a different way than most people are used to thinking about. A friend of my grandfather’s once told me, “Thomas wouldn’t lie on nobody but hisself, and that ain’t too bad, I don’t guess.” What a novel approach to lying. These lies were his fiction, the writing on the pages of the book that he wished to leave behind. Women line the pages of this book left behind by the one-time McGehee family patriarch, each one a segment of herself — but with no real connection. This enjambment of female company was a direct result of what I have come to know as the “McGehee Charm.” This is a myth that remains unproven in many circles, but my grandfather was a firm believer in the power of this tool. He tried to teach me along the way, but I could not make the leap — the lack of any real sense of family identity destroyed any chance of connection. But, now some two years after his death, I think I have finally gotten his handle. “Shave your face every day, tuck in your shirt and have your pants pressed, then talk to the women ... you know, tell ’em what they want to hear.” Indeed. Give the reader what they want, this will benefit you in the end, and if you have to lie — do it well.

My father crept through the jungles of Vietnam while students were slain at Kent State University. The pages of his book went unread by a world that was much more than just an ocean away. He served his country, and by doing so missed the birth of his first child — a beautiful girl named Angie. His only connection was letters and pictures that told only one side of the story. He soon returned to the world and battled hideous nightmares — the stories of war re-telling themselves in his mind. The horror of these stories soon caused my father to harden. He remained in an emotional state that hovered somewhere near catatonic for the better part of my life. This hardening manifested itself in feelings of resentment, and swollen veins in his neck. I was often the receiver of one his outbursts, “What in the hell were you thinking? Were you thinking at all?” Each word was more inflammatory than the next. Then rising to a climax with the crashing sound of “use your brain, it’s that lump of shit between your ears, in case you don’t know.” His voice reminded me of Dickens, Poe, and Crane. My naturalistic childhood was shaped and molded by many of his harsh words and actions.

The birth of another girl melted my father’s war-like emotional force field. This time he was the grandfather. Those harsh words and swelling veins were replaced with “aww, ain’t that about the cutest baby you done ever seen?” and “Yeah, I think she likes her Paw the best. She’s smart.” The leap from father to grandfather caused a sudden shift in his
mood and temper. A man of soft, eloquent words and vomit on his collar had replaced the man with a temper that could be triggered by the smallest of infractions.

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My book is the shortest. It reads like any piece of contemporary creative nonfiction. The frequent and uncomfortable interrupting of peace, silence, and mental state — yes, my life has covered many genres. As I leapt from segment to segment, I often took a piece from each tiny scene, and was careful to carry it over to the next one with me, never leaving a segment unconnected. The Great Author’s pen was at times cruel and tasteless, but I have somehow managed to avoid his wrath thus far. I only hope that I can hang on, with all that I have got, and make that faithful leap to the next and inevitable segment. I think Bob Seger said it best, “Oh here I am on the road again, here I am, up on the stage. Oh here I go . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . turn the page.”

My grandfather’s last hours on earth brought two total strangers together, at last. My father phoned me from a pay phone, too drunk with tears to speak. I arrived and found my dad sitting beside my grandfather’s cold bed, brushing the skin on his cool cheeks. My arrival startled my father. He looked up at me with a look that told me exactly how serious it was this time. As my grandfather lay on that cold steel bed, eyes rolled back into his skull, violently gasping for air, a man and a boy got a real glimpse of each other for the first time. We stood on opposite sides of the bed, rubbing the fallen King’s cool, clammy skin. At that moment, we stood side-by-side as father and son for the first time. We spent that night in the waiting room. The loud white walls echoed the dreadful silence that filled the air that night. Even though it was never said, we both knew that we had finally made our connection. My grandfather passed the following day, and I led that frigid box to his final destination — closing the book of a story that had given birth to a new and peaceful chapter for a father and son that had experienced too much turbulence.

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Connection is a valuable commodity, in a story as well as life. We strive for years to make some kind of tangible, comprehendible connection; but many of us fail. Without this connection, we will all be lost, shipwrecked if you will, like Robinson Crusoe. I made my connection through literature, in many ways. Expression was the connection to the part deep inside me that wasn’t quite ready to give in. I made the connection to my heritage through this work and many others. This essay is a small, brief silhouette of my life. The men discussed inside this work are just like the text — three men who are all very different and at the same time connected by the same powerful force. We are all connected by the unspoken, the things that were never said, the white spaces on the page.
The White Spaces on the Page

The next segment of life lies straight ahead. This segment will be my most challenging thus far. I will leap from adolescent scenes to scenes of adulthood. I will marry, raise children and retire to the hills of Madison County with my Casey. Because, some ten years after the storm you can go up on a steep hill in Butler’s Mill, and with the right kind of light you can see the development of my story, a strange sad saga that turned out fine in the end. The work will write itself, you only need to arrange the pieces.

Work Cited
Thompson, Hunter S. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson: New York, 1971
Signs

Coca-Cola. Nehi. Clabber Girl Baking Powder. Pure Oil. Chew Mail Pouch Chewing Tobacco. Signs were nailed all over the old store at the intersection in Martling, Alabama, back in the 1970s. Martling was hardly more than a crossroads atop Sand Mountain in Marshall County. There was a church or two, some homes and a ball field, and the general store at the intersection. The store was a dark red frame building about as wide as two cars end to end and not much deeper. It sat up off the dirt high enough for a dog to walk under and had a tin roof and front porch with a weathered wood floor.

We drove through Martling on the backcountry shortcut to our cabin on Guntersville Lake in those years. The store was a landmark, the place where we made a left turn, which was the only reason to slow up; there wasn’t enough traffic to post a speed limit in Martling. This was before our children could drive, so they had to ride in the same car with their parents, before we knew the children had already been exposed to beer and marijuana.

The narrow road from Martling wound down Sand Mountain, through the state park and past the wildlife refuge. Our cabin sat on eight acres of land that jutted out into the lake. It was a sprawling brick and apple-green frame house with a screened-in porch that stretched its full length, long enough for a hammock at one end, a row of wooden rockers, and a round picnic table for meals. Willows and pines shaded the cabin and bordered the water’s edge; crabapple and pear trees lined the drive from the road to the house, and in the spring they would be so heavy with fruit that their limbs would break. About two miles directly across the water was the cabin my husband’s family once owned, and where we had dated as teenagers.

Every weekend we filled the car with kids, dogs, and enough food to feed a horde of visiting teenagers, and headed to the cabin to play with water toys. We lay out on the dock past midnight watching the August meteor showers; sang happy birthdays and shot skeet. I made a lifetime supply of crabapple jelly from our trees.

Like the store in Martling, the brick wall of Ray’s Furniture Store in Calera was dotted with old signs when Chip Cooper photographed it for his book, Alabama Memories, in 1989. The photograph is reminiscent of a 1970s pop art painting, a black background broken by the strong colors of the signs. A metal circle in Coca-Cola red with white writing sits slightly off-center and looks much like a bull’s eye, even down to what could be four bullet holes. Shapes of bright yellow, probably part of some giant off-camera word, flank it. Yellow and white signs alternate across the center and edges of the photograph, all warning of speed limits, railroad crossings and traffic lights.

Cooper’s photograph is balanced by the colors, the shapes of the signs, and their placement on the wall, a balance created by the photographer. With his camera, he chose what the focus would be, what would be included and excluded. Though the yellow letters may allude to an off-camera word, Cooper
controlled the boundaries of the photograph, this photograph with its bright red and yellows on black.

About 11 a.m. on the morning of May 18, 1977, an elderly woman carrying bouquets of flowers drove her pickup truck into the Martling Cemetery to decorate her parents' graves. The dirt road wound up the hill and circled behind the graves. Across the road lay the burned and yellow-painted body of a young white man, red blood dried around the slash in his throat, his fingers burned off. A peace symbol was tattooed on his upper arm.

"I'll never forget seeing that body," read the headline in the next edition of the weekly newspaper, quoting the woman. A deputy sheriff said someone made a poor choice in paint, that they poured flammable liquid over the body to burn it, but the paint was a water-base latex, which preserved it instead. No one could identify the man. "If anybody was missing in Martling, everybody would know it," said another deputy sheriff. Neither news stories nor FBI bulletins stirred up missing persons reports that matched the yellow body. Two weeks later in an effort to learn his name, the newspaper ran a picture of the body on the front page, having explained that the body was being kept in a refrigerator. The police believed the man was a drug informant killed as an example to others, killed elsewhere and dumped in the Martling Cemetery. He was buried there in mid-summer by the Methodist minister.

One night when we were returning from the cabin after a weekend of pulling skiers and grilling hotdogs, our son said he wished he had good parents. Good parents were the parents, people we'd thought we knew well, who were offering beer and vodka to the fourteen-year-olds. Later my husband, Frank, was hoisting the ski boat during a rainstorm and was struck by lightning. He didn't appear to be injured. And in September when we arrived with friends to watch a big football game on TV, a burglar had smashed a window and stolen the television set and all the liquor.

Twenty years later The Sand Mountain Reporter did a series on unsolved crimes in the county. Foremost among them was the murder at Martling. To this day, people remember the yellow body in the cemetery, but no one knows his name. According to the news story, someone regularly places flowers on his grave.

Last week I drove back to the cabin, the first time I had been back in more than twenty years. The shrubbery was tall but I recognized the open gate. It was the one I helped put up, the one I could unhinge and swing open from the wrong side if necessary, the one where I found the remains of a joint the night our son and our friends' daughter slipped away during a party. Slowly I drove up the driveway until I saw the cabin. A second floor had been added and the whole cabin was covered in gray aluminum siding, just like a big barn. I looked away and turned the car toward Martling.

There's a speed limit in Martling now and the old sign-covered store is gone. This time I drove down the roads I'd never taken before, snapping pictures with my camera. I rode past rows of mobile homes permanently fixed to their small plots of
land, chickens scratching through the dirt, broken-down cars in the yards. Beside one home was an old yellow school bus with “The First Church of the Last Faithful Followers” lettered on its side; parked next to it was a rusted brown car without doors but with a goat standing on its roof. I slowed to take this picture, then felt that I was being watched from porches and windows. I drove on.

The next road led to the cemetery where the body was found. It was a small cemetery, and I could read most of the tombstones as I circled round and round with the car, trying to spot the grave of the murdered man. I wondered what its marker would say, but I did not find it, not from the car; and I was too uneasy there alone in the cemetery to leave the car’s protection and search on foot.

Today our son owns a microbrewery on the West Coast. The muscles in Frank’s hands have begun to atrophy, a condition possibly caused by being struck by lightning. Our daughter works for Coca-Cola at the Atlanta headquarters, where her office is protected by recently installed bulletproof glass.

I still have a jar of homemade crabapple jelly.
Heath Haddock

The Street Preacher steps out of his '71 Nova with a pink cross and begins the sermon:
"If Jesus Wasn't Real I'd Smoke Marijuana"

I was sitting at the café, when the parking lot preacher started talking about Humpty Dumpty and the sins that made him fall. I listened as he shouted verses from the Bible accompanied by his guitar, which he had painted red like the blood of Christ.

I sipped my latte, watching the clouds, and listened as he tried to convince some guy in a white van that Obi Wan Kenobi was really an ancient demon. I was reminded of the summer, when I was seven, and Mrs. Murphy, my vacation Bible school teacher, was talking about minding your parents when her heart stopped.

The church bus dropped me off and my father met me at the road. I remember the trees, alive with spring birds, sagged as if they knew. We walked through the cotton field and talked about the weather. He mentioned the coming rain, and how it would help the tomato plants.

The asphalt apostle was busy trying to open his umbrella and not drop his Bible. All the while, palms flush to heaven, he yelled for God to give him five more minutes. He gave up and as the rain bucketed, he looked right at me and said that the flood would wash those Satanists and pagans down the gutter. I smiled as he danced in a puddle, singing "Amazing Grace," and hoped that down South, Dad's tomatoes would taste the rain.
On That Deserted Road

to J.B., Jr

You call me nigger and laugh
because you don’t know my name.
It’s just another Friday night.
I shout in your face

because you don’t know my name.
As you chain my hands,
I shout in your face
but you silence me with your fist.

As you chain my hands,
I try to ask why
but you silence me with your fist.
As you bind me to your truck

I try to ask why
the dust chokes me.
As you bind me to your truck
the gravel bites my flesh,

the dust chokes me
as you pull me through hell.
The gravel bites my flesh,
and I search the heavens

as you pull me through hell.
Only the stars know my name
and I search the heavens
looking for an answer.

Only the stars know my name
on that deserted road.
Looking for an answer
you drag me like an anchor

on that deserted road.
It’s just another Friday night.
You drag me like an anchor
and call me nigger and laugh.
High School Contest Winners 2000

Poetry
1st place
Jeremy Frye, Existence
Bradshaw High School, Darlene Montgomery, sponsor.

2nd place
Carey Charlene Harrison, A Single Butterfly
Red Bay High School, Greg McCollum, sponsor.

Essay
1st place
Anne-Marie Joubert, Night on the Balcony
Bradshaw High School, Sandy Murray, sponsor.

2nd place
Beth Brown, Precautions or Punishment
East Lawrence High School, Anita Bowling, sponsor.

Short Story
1st Place
Jonathon Copeland, Sackcloth and Ashes
Bradshaw High School, Darlene Montgomery, sponsor.

2nd place
Beth Brown, Beneath the Lace Tablecloth
East Lawrence High School, Anita Bowling, sponsor.