Cumulonimbus on Clay | Five Letters to a Difficult Place

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The University of Montana

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CUMULONIMBUS ON CLAY

FIVE LETTERS TO A DIFFICULT PLACE

by

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Cumulonimbus on Clay: Five letters to a difficult place.

This collection of essays set in Georgia, the author’s home state, explores both the troubles and charms she and her friends and family find in living there. As she attempts to reconcile her love of the Southern landscape and culture with her concurrent bewilderment and displeasure at the way the state sees itself growing and functioning in the future, she realizes on more than one occasion that to live in Georgia is to live among very particular layers of historical, social and political contradictions.

Character sketches of the author’s friends, relatives and acquaintances serve to illustrate and dramatize environmental challenges faced in the state, including population increase, ecosystem and watershed degradation, and suburban development. Photographs taken by the author embellish the text.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks also to Bryan Nuse, who keeps my plants straight.

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* All photographs accompanying “River Life” were taken by the author on or near Georgia rivers.
INTRODUCTION

On a warm April evening last week, I was shopping at the Orange Street Food Farm in Missoula, Montana, when a middle-aged couple ambled out from behind a bank of potato chips and started toward me, leaning together on their cart handle, talking quietly about menus. The woman’s name was Gail, and I knew her, but hadn’t seen her in several years: she was still tall and olive-skinned, and her eyes, as always, handled everything around her like a pair of hands—roaming, collecting, sorting behind dark-rimmed glasses; she had, I noticed, begun coloring the gray out of her hair. Gail’s companion was fair and mustached, smiling, ball-capped, with the colorless skin that we Anglos achieve by the end of a long, sunless Missoula winter. As they drew up to the island of fruit where I stood selecting apples, I rotated away, to inspect a pile of unripe avocados and strained to hear her ask him whether he wanted any oranges. He made a quiet, dismissive sound, and when their cart finally squeaked off down the condiments aisle, I turned to squint after them. They were roughly the same height, and she leaned into him as they walked. He seemed a bit mild, I thought, but maybe I was just comparing him with Matt.

Though Gail and Matt never married, they lived together in a little house on Cooper Street in Missoula for many years. Matt was a favorite teacher of mine, and since he died four years ago of heart disease, I have thought of Gail many times, but never imagined her dating again. This, of course, is an injustice we execute against the widowed: for them our hearts drip like oil-filled sponges, but we are forever reluctant to allow their return back into our world of hope and appetite. I must forgive Gail, and will,
but it is difficult to imagine replacing Matt with anything else. He could have been difficult to love—I don’t know—but he was easy to admire.

The day I met Matt—a sunny, smoke-scented day in September when I was nineteen—was also my first day in Missoula, my first day hitchhiking, and my first time arriving in a place knowing no one and having nowhere to go. Matt and I had corresponded over the summer—he wrote to me about what to pack for the course he was teaching and how to get in touch with classmates if I needed to, and I had his letters of instruction in my pocket when I stepped out of the airport doors, hitchhiked the six miles into Missoula, found his office (which was empty), curled up under the desk, and fell asleep. I had flown in from Atlanta, and several hours before dawn on the east coast that day, my mother had driven me to the airport, given me a hug, and nudged me, swaying and befuddled, toward the wide, white swath of the Delta ticketing counter. By the time I got to Missoula, I was sleepy, dehydrated and nervous, and the underside of Matt’s desk seemed a good and natural place to take a nap. When someone in his office found me sleeping there an hour later, Matt was called, and he drove over to pick me up. When he got out of the old green Suburban, he was laughing his high, easy laugh. He was a giant man with sharp, glittering eyes and a wild red beard haloing his jaw. He took me back to his house, which was small and smelled of Indian spices and laundry detergent, deposited me on the dusty back porch, and, in the foreign gold and blue light of that Montana afternoon, I crawled into my sleeping bag and slept.

Matt had a thing for Missoula, Montana.

“Missoula, Montana. Center of the Universe,” he’d say—sometimes for no reason at all—as he drove around town with me in the passenger’s seat, scanning the rows of
Norway maples and faded casino fronts as we rumbled past. Matt said it as if it was true, as if he dared me to supply a different answer. I didn’t have a different answer when I was 19, or when I was 22 when I helped him teach the course I had taken from him three years before. I didn’t have a different answer yet when I was 24 and got the telephone call telling me that Gail had found him dead in the living room on a May afternoon. I didn’t have an answer for him when I left Georgia at 26 with my boyfriend and two cats and a U-Haul trailer in tow behind the truck, headed northwest to see what all the fuss was about. Now, at 28, after two years of wilting frost, endless summer evenings, and long, strange views in every direction, every season, I think I am ready to give Matt an answer.

Home, I suppose, is what you know. Matt knew Missoula’s spiny, weeded hillsides and tree-stubbled mountaintops, and he loved them, each in its own way. He probably looked forward to the lilac blooms in mid-May and to driving down Main Street at just the right time, so as to see the neon sign of the Stockman’s Bar glowing, backed by a gilded pink sunset. Most likely, he had driven down the wide Bitterroot Valley on a spring morning, where the 93 highway cuts through lowland marsh, and seen Red-winged blackbirds perch and call on shedding cattail shoulders. I’m sure his toes froze together in his boots sometimes in January. He probably liked it that way.

Living in Matt’s Center of the Universe, I found out what I love about Georgia, like the walks through light gray woods in my shirtsleeves in February, searching out tumbled foundations and bowing chimneys and butter-colored daffodils, planted 100 years ago by a new housewife. I love the orange, sticky nectar of early morning on an empty Georgia highway. I love long, brown rivers and the birds I recognize by song.
love the supple cadence of voices in sweltering lunch buffet diners, and the electric wind before a lightning storm, and the way a stray dog looks crossing a railroad track against a curtain of underbrush, vine and hardwoods, all leafy, green as serpents. I love all these things because I know them.

I wrote these essays about my home on pale winter afternoons in Missoula when the air outside reached through the storm windows to drill bolts of cold through my hands as I typed. I wrote these on blessed spring mornings like this one, while a blue bottle batters itself against a breezy window screen. I wrote these because I missed my home in every season. Through writing, I realized I found the Center of the Universe when I went looking for Matt’s. The following pages are what I know now, at 28 years old, and what I would have Matt know, were he here to tell about it.
The Father of Modern Ecology drove a white Ford Taurus. He owned two of them: identical but for the wear. The one he picked me up in the day we met was "the grocery-getter," and he handled it as if its last trip to the supermarket was quickly approaching. The other, he explained, was driven exclusively on the highway, for trips of 100 miles or more: to Atlanta and back, for instance.

"That's very scientific," I said from the passenger's seat, and regarded the consequent silence nervously, watching the bare limbs of February trees pass over the windshield.

"It's practical," he answered after a minute. "And science should always be practical."

I met Dr. Odum in 2001, when he was eighty-eight and a half. I had done some reading beforehand, or tried to. I checked a book out of the library: *Fundamentals of Ecology*, by Eugene Pleasants Odum, a yellow, coffee-stained volume emblazoned with the sort of geometric emblem favored in the 1960's. I leafed through it the night before our meeting and woke up the next morning with my face lying in a figure entitled "A Compartment Model of Biomass Change in a Grassland Ecosystem." As I lifted my head from the book, I was confronted with a mathematical equation, stark and meandering on the page: triangles, fractions whose primary participants were, to my knowledge, members of the alphabet, a symbol I vaguely recognized as Pi.

That book I used as a pillow was the first Ecology text ever written. In it the idea of the ecosystem was pioneered, because of it the concept of Ecology gained popularity with the scientific community and the public with astonishing swiftness; and through it
and various other publications and international awards, Eugene Odum became something of a legend.

I was without a background in the sciences, but also without a job, the winter after I graduated college. The former problem proved less of an obstacle to being considered for employment in a scientific field than one might expect. I knew someone at the Institute of Ecology at the University of Georgia in Athens whose compassion for my condition led him to suggest me for the job of caretaker of Dr. Odum’s property in Ila, a little town just north of Athens. This friend called me on a rainy morning:

“What would you think of managing a little research station for the Institute’s old director?” he asked. “The rent’s free and all you would have to do is open and close a gate when scientists drop by.”

I had just moved into my parents’ house after 5 years of college in a far-away state. It was morning and my father was in the kitchen blowing his nose and listening to the robot in the weather radio: “Mostly Cloudy In. Dah-loon-ee-gah. Temperature. Thirty Five. Degrees.” I sat on the edge of the bed in the guest room with the phone to my ear and stared at my shoe collection. I noticed it had been neatly lined against the wall.

“I would certainly consider it,” I said.

“Great! How much do you know about Ecology?”

I made an uncertain noise. “I dunno. a little?”

“He pretty much invented it. Get his book. He’ll pick you up at 11:30 Tuesday. And he likes to eat in the cafeteria—he’s very old.”
On the appointed day I watched from the window as the white Taurus eased up the driveway and Eugene Odum levered himself out of the driver’s seat. As he made his way around the car, I first noticed that he was a small man, slightly built by any standard, but as I met him on the walk and shook his bent, purplish hand, I realized that although he was thin and hunched, he was unused to and impatient with his physical state. I heard later that he had once been an accomplished athlete—taller, stronger, more agile than he now was—and there were clues that these vanities had been grudgingly surrendered. There was a good-natured arrogance in his gaze and way of speaking, but he walked with a painful, deliberate spryness, and in his voice was pitched a battle: a great mind versus a tenacious waver. It was a strange effect: a bent little man, walking stiffly, as an old dog walks, always picking up his feet an inch higher than was comfortable, and constantly looking up sideways to catch me with pale, watery eyes and a pithy word of instruction.

He was raised in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, he told me as we drove. (He in the driver’s seat, I in the passenger’s. My offer to drive had been flatly and almost scornfully refused.) His father had been a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, and from a young age, Eugene was interested in birds. In junior high school, he and a friend wrote a naturalist’s column called “Bird Life in Chapel Hill” that ran in a local newspaper. In his twenties, he studied zoology at the University of North Carolina for his Bachelors and Masters degrees and then went on to the University of Illinois for his doctorate. Ecology was a young science in the 1930’s and only a handful of researchers at that time were working under the supposition that the ecosystem is the basic unit of nature, and biological diversity makes these systems work. This was the idea that
compelled Eugene Odum, and Illinois was one of the only schools in the country that would allow him to take this sort of holistic approach to natural sciences.

After taking a job at UGA as a zoology professor in 1940, Dr. Odum fought to make Ecology a required class for biology majors:

“When I was starting out at UGA, we were drawing up a curriculum of required courses for Biology majors. I suggested Ecology be required, and I was laughed out of the room. Later, colleagues started coming into my office wanting to know what this ‘ecology’ was!”

In 1951, the Atomic Energy Commission accepted his proposal to monitor the Savannah River Site, a nuclear weapons plant in South Carolina, just across the Savannah River from Georgia. The AEC wanted to know whether the plant affected the area’s flora and fauna, and they gave Dr. Odum 300 square miles of property to create a laboratory, off-limits to the public and completely self-contained.

The Savannah River Ecology Laboratory was set up, and research projects began, but if ecosystem Ecology was to become a recognized science, something else was needed: a textbook. Dr. Odum and his brother Howard, who was at Yale getting his PhD in zoology, began to set down the fundamentals of the science—not just for students and professors, but for everybody. It was first published in 1953, and for 10 years it was the only text in the field.

Driving to a cafeteria on the UGA campus, Dr. Odum talked about his life. He was an active storyteller, and spent long moments eyeing me for dramatic effect. I spent most of my time nodding and pressing hard on my imaginary passenger’s brake pedal.
“Let’s say, you’re an ornithologist, I’m a dendrologist and that gentleman there is a soil entomologist.” He turned his head and gestured to the roadside where a team of orange-clad prisoners were collecting garbage. I glanced quickly, feeling sure he didn’t notice the traffic light appear over the rise of the hill. I didn’t know which gentleman he meant, but none of them looked particularly like the entomologists I knew. “You could study birds for a lifetime and really know something by the end. But you wouldn’t know as much about a bird or its place in the ecosystem as you would if you had talked to us about what we knew.” He thumbed at the backseat to indicate the entomologist we had left behind.

“Organisms cooperate in an ecosystem the way humans cooperate in a community. What we need to do is concentrate on understanding natural systems. This planet is our supply depot, but it’s also our home, and you wouldn’t know that by the way we’re acting, would you? ”

I nodded and then shook my head, lost for an answer and unsure of whether an answer was even expected. I will admit I felt a bit feeble buckled into the Taurus with the Father of Modern Ecology at the wheel, telling me how things were. There was something so different from, but not incommensurate with, others I should have been able to compare him to. As a result, I didn’t know exactly how to act. He was old, of course, and I was very young, but I was used to being around elderly people: grandparents, neighbors, family friends. He was southern, too, as was most of my family. In many ways, he was like the other southern men: authoritative, polite, animated storytellers. He was talking, however, about a science I generally associated with long-
haired professors in running shoes or environmental non-profit employees with Patagonia pro-deals.

Winston Churchill once said something about a Conservative man under 30 having no heart, and a Liberal man over 30 having no brains. Dr. Odum was both the brainiest and most liberal 88 year old I had ever met. I couldn’t imagine him having a conversation with anyone even remotely like himself. Whether it was his ideas, his self confidence, or his frustration with the state of things that had allowed him to transform a few people’s tiny idea into a movement, I don’t know, but it was the same thing that separated him from everyone else. Consequently, I was a student to him—everybody was a student.

This became all the more evident to me at the UGA cafeteria, where we sat at a wide, round table, full of Ecology graduate students and professors who listened with crumpled foreheads as Dr Odum spoke of the University’s misguided attempts to bring Ecology to the people through landscaping. We had parked on campus in front of a faded sign reading “ODUM” and walked to the cafeteria, on our way passing a small grove of scruffy pines recently erected between two parking lots in a patch of coarse, yellow grass. A sign on a pressure-treated post stood near the sidewalk:

**Longleaf Pine/Wiregrass Ecosystem**

*Native to the coastal plain of Georgia, these forests have all but disappeared due to hundreds of years of fire suppression, logging and clearing for agriculture....*

Dr Odum had been talking as we walked, but stopped, mid-sentence, as we reached the trees. He bent back from his waist to survey the messy pine crowns and then hunched far
over, dragging a foot through the grass, and chuckled grimly, shaking his head. “These don’t belong here. This is just silly ”

In the cafeteria, he interviewed each of the diners about whose idea it was to plant longleaf pine and wiregrass between the Ecology and Forestry School parking lots. Nobody knew. He went on to explain that although there were a few stands of longleaf pine on the Georgia piedmont, the ecosystem in which longleaf and wiregrass were found together, and where their relationship with fire, wildlife, weather and a thousand other ingredients, created a unique ecosystem was, in Georgia, found only on the coastal plain and not here in the northeastern piedmont. I was probably the only person at the table who didn’t already know this, but the scientists nodded contemplatively. A graduate student—a tall man with a tic who studied rodent behavior—offered to investigate the misplaced plants. To this day, the trees, the grass, the interpretive sign remain in the fat wedge of ground between the lots.

In the 1940’s, Dr. Odum and his wife Martha, who died of cancer in 1995, bought several hundred acres of land near Ila and named it Spring Hollow. There was a cabin where they and their two boys vacationed. They had chosen the property because it was its own watershed: dozens of springs surfaced on the hillside below the cabin and formed a small creek.

“Nobody in 1942 was looking for a watershed!” We were driving to Spring Hollow from the cafeteria and he turned his neck and grinned toothily at me from behind the steering wheel.
“I told the man I wanted my own watershed, and explained the thing to him, and he said ‘Yes sir, I think I know what you’re getting at,’ and he took us around—Martha and me—for months. We kept on looking at places—beautiful places—but none of them was its own watershed. I would say to him, ‘Mr. Slaughter, this one’s nice, but it’s not a watershed,’ and he would say ‘No, I reckon not, Dr. Odum, but I thought you would like to see it. It’s got a creek on it, see?’

“When he finally showed us this one, and I said it would do, I thought Mr. Slaughter was going to kiss me.”

We got out of the car in front of a gate blocking a road leading back into a dense wall of hickories. In addition to the watershed and the cabin in the woods, the Odum property included a dumpy, yellow house close to the road, across the street from a line of chicken houses. From this house now issued a stream of dogs of all sizes and descriptions, followed by a fat, limping elderly man in coveralls and a NASCAR cap. We parked and hounds swarmed around the car, baying and heaving their heads and paws onto the hood, smearing their jowls on the windows. I opened the door a crack, and they jammed their noses into it, snuffling heavily and whining. Several of them were missing eyes, and the smallest was dragging a hind leg, limp as a pork chop. The old man approached the car too, waving his arms angrily and yelling the dogs off the car with a battery of lusty threats. He was a sturdy man with a rosy, pock-marked face, but his most remarkable physical feature was his left earlobe, which was dark red and not attached to his head, but hung from a thin piece of cartilage about halfway up his ear. As he hobbled through the pack of dogs to Dr. Odum’s door, the earlobe twisted and bumped against his neck.
“Hello, Mr Donaldson.” said Dr. Odum though the hullabaloo. “I see you’ve collected a few dogs.”

“Oh, these ain’t my dogs, Mr Odum,” said Mr. Donaldson, as he teetered uneasily amidst the snouts and fur and teeth. “They was left here mostly. That little brown one’s mine, but I can’t take her to the seniors’ home with me. I figure she’ll do for herself. They like bein’ in the pack like that.”

Mr. Donaldson—“Champ,” as he introduced himself to me—was going to live in a retirement home in Royston with his brother-in-law, “on account of his bum leg.” Dr. Odum was trying to find a replacement for Champ Donaldson, and I was the first prospect. Champ’s job was to live in the yellow house and make sure no one was driving down the dirt road to the cabin or building deer stands on the property. From the sounds of it, Champ was also supposed to be recording weather and temperature data, but his great, tangled eyebrows rose in genuine astonishment at Dr Odum’s inquiry into how this project was going: “No, I reckon I haven’t been doing that ‘tall, Mr Odum.”

Once out of the car, the swarm of dogs lured away by a truck passing on the road, we walked around the house, and I wondered if I would be a satisfactory replacement—or reclaimant—in the wake of Champ Donaldson’s tenure as caretaker of Spring Hollow. I decided I wouldn’t. There was a discussion about who would feed the dogs, who would clean up the pile of old tires behind the house, who would haul away the disintegrating carpet, plywood and asbestos shingles moldering under the house. The place stunk of chicken manure, the yard was spotted with dark, flame-shaped motor oil stains, and next to the water oak beside the house, several cans of latex paint lay rusted and leaking on the ground, victims of past target practices. As we surveyed the house and grounds, Dr.
Odum became increasingly vexed, but Champ remained cheerful and ready to answer any question: that was his nephew’s mess under the house, the neighbor’s tires, he didn’t know who dumped most of them dogs, but they would find somebody to feed them. Dr Odum’s smile became tight-lipped and his eyes hooded. He began to look tired as he shuffled through the house behind Champ’s heavy limp, noticing burn marks on the walls near the gas heater and the hole in the kitchen floor, punched straight through to the red clay crawl space.

As we left Champ and the house, the dogs sprinting down the gated road after the car, Dr. Odum turned to me and asked if I could read a mercury thermometer. I said I could.

“Good. I want whoever runs this place to collect phenological data twice daily. There’s a thermometer in the shed. And a clipboard.” He retained that tight-lipped look, though now that he was out of the house—and away from Champ’s cheerful, backslapping blamelessness—he seemed more irritable than overwhelmed.

We got out of the car at the bottom of the road, where sat a log cabin with a wide front porch. We walked behind it into a quiet wood full of tall, naked hickories. He scuffed down the trail for a bit, gruffly pointing out ground pine, greenbrier, and little brown jug as I followed, feeling a little tired and disgruntled myself. At the bottom of the hill, he stopped in the path, and I looked up from my shoes and over his hunched shoulder to see a group of fifteen cardinals feeding on seeds in the trail: soft brown females and scarlet males, all with brilliant jewel-orange beaks. Some of them skipped into the air at our approach, but fluttered back to the ground when we backed up a bit.

“Cardinals,” he said.
I nodded, “They’re pretty.”

“Beautiful,” he corrected.

I decided that day that I didn’t want the job at Spring Hollow, but for several weeks I kept in contact with Dr. Odum: he came to dinner at my grandmother’s, I visited his house and he showed me his garden and gave me a book of Martha’s paintings, I drove with him to the property to show a few scientists around who might be interested in setting up experiments. Champ Donaldson moved to Royston, but the dogs remained at Spring Hollow and grew very thin. On my last visit, the littlest one with the bum leg was missing.

A few months later, I took a job at the Institute of Ecology as a field technician, and I saw a lot of Dr. Odum, though as time passed, he seemed not to recognize me when I said hello in the hallway. His was a corner office with glass walls, and I could see him in there most days, working at a small Apple computer monitor with a glowing green and black screen. He was working on the 6th edition of *Fundamentals of Ecology*. In the foyer of the building, there was a bust carved in his likeness with a brass plate affixed to its base: “The ecosystem is greater than the sum of its parts.” He was something of a local celebrity—all in the newspapers and university publications, but I wondered if anyone in Athens knew what Eugene Odum meant when he said “the ecosystem is greater than the sum of its parts.” I wasn’t sure I knew exactly, but it felt good to say it, like an incantation or a Hail Mary.
On a sweltering August afternoon in 2002, I met Dr Odum in the copy room, greeted him a little vaguely, and took a seat on the paperclip table. He was wearing a pair of shorts and the air of intractable purpose he assumed whenever he conducted business around the office. As I waited behind him in line for the machine, I examined his legs in the baggy shorts, hitched up high with a belt. It struck me that I had never seen his legs or any quite like them before: they were thin, purple and potholed; dark nets of vein and large, shapeless liver spots peppered their surface. I thought to myself that those looked to be the oldest legs in the world. And as he left the room, I noticed he shuffled less spryly than he did the day I met him. He looked to be the oldest man in the world.

I remember that day because it was the last time I ever saw Dr Odum. A couple of days later I heard that a friend had found him in his garden. He had been working and had fallen. He died gardening on a sunny Saturday, a month before his 90th birthday.

After his death, a friend of mine in Athens made little Eugene P. Odum buttons, about the size of a quarter: a photo of Dr Odum’s grinning face, with the earth from space behind him. They are kitschy—a little silly—but not disrespectful in my opinion, so I wear mine from time to time. The button goes generally unnoticed, but sometimes people ask who the old man with the world is, and I tell them, "He was a scientist." If I’m in the mood, I tell them he was the Father of Modern Ecology. People respond with a nod of reverent, almost embarrassed recognition, as though they had known it all along, but had temporarily forgotten. Because of Eugene Odum, we are all born with the word ecology on our tongues.
II. THE UGLIEST COUNTY IS HOME

Once, after I had been working for Mary in the fish lab for a couple of months, she swung her office chair around, leveled her silver dollar eyes at me and said,

“Jesslyn, what are you doing here?”

Though I am not necessarily the world’s best employee, I am an uncommonly sensitive one, and this nearly broke me. Mary caught me slouching against her office doorframe staring out the window behind her, waiting for her to finish an email. When she asked this question, I stiffened, flushed, and began combing my memory for why I was standing there, dawdling in her doorway. Before I could collect my thoughts, she spoke again, this time using a softer tack:

“You liked living out West, didn’t you?”

I nodded, relieved, but still a little bewildered. I had graduated from college in Arizona a few months earlier, and this was the first job I had ever had that I didn’t relinquish when school started back in the fall. I hadn’t planned to move back to Georgia after college, but now, somehow, my intended two-week visit had extended to eight months. I didn’t know what I was doing there, and, frankly, I was a little sensitive about it.

“Then why did you move back home?”

She knew I had been living with my parents. I shrugged. “Because I came home to visit, and was too broke to leave again.”

A muscle in Mary’s face jerked into a grin as her narrow hand struck the desk: “That is a terrible reason!” she shrieked. I was still standing in her office doorway, and at this eruption, I edged back a pace. Glancing down the hallway, I saw John, the
building’s computer technician, pause in his approach and begin fiddling with his keys. He was a nervous sort of man, and terrified of Mary

“Let me tell you something,” she said, waving me to the chair beside her desk, a smile still wrinkling her cheeks. I obeyed, but by the time I faced her from the seat, she was leaning toward me, looking as sober as a highway patrolman. “I’ve wanted to move away before—to Alaska or maybe Seattle—but things get complicated. This place ropes you in...especially when you’ve got family here.” She sat back in her chair and lowered her eyebrows thoughtfully: “How old are you?”

I was 23, and I told her so.

“Are you really?” She looked as if I had told her I had been raised in a yurt in central Mongolia.

“Yes,” I said, “people were still having babies in 1978.”

Mary repeated the date and shook her head, pressing her lips together as if she had just caught me telling a colossal lie, but in a moment continued with fresh vigor: “I think you should move somewhere interesting. I can lend you some money. Where do you want to go?”

Mary has a unique talent for believing all of her ideas—even the contradictory ones—so entirely that she delivers her words like glass paperweights, each one heavy with color and dazzling significance. I knew her for over a year before I realized that she is always trying to convince the people she likes to move away. Similarly, even though she and Bud have been happily married for nearly 30 years, she tries to persuade every fiancée in her path that marriage is folly and theirs is doomed to failure. She and Bud never had any children, and, though I suspect she might have wanted some, Mary throws
up her hands in exasperation each time she hears about a baby on the way. “Well, there’s 20 years down the toilet!” she says, and then corrects herself: “Twenty years, minimum.”

Of course, I wanted to go somewhere—every 23 year old wants to go somewhere—but Mary was offering me money to do it. In those days, I was cultivating the manner of a no-nonsense, Whitehouse press conference reporter.

“Mary,” I asked, “are you firing me?”

Mary, I think you should know, is a striking woman—I believe most people who know her would agree. She is sapling thin with the open, hungry face of a child grown too quickly into adolescence: her mouth is over-broad and elastic, her nose too small, her eyes especially large and widely set, and she has the translucent skin you rarely see in anyone above eight years old or younger than eighty. When she was thirteen, she had scoliosis, so the doctors put a metal rod in her back. As a result, she has a drill sergeant’s posture, and there is a stiffness in her gait and gestures, which I hardly notice unless she laughs.

Mary’s laugh is a noiseless affair: her shoulders begin to quake, she moves one hand to her eyes, and her mouth spreads and jerks. Once she starts, Mary can’t stop laughing for anything—not for Ella Fitzgerald, not for her favorite celebrity doctor, Andrew Weil, and not even for Jimmy Carter, which is saying something. I had never seen Mary laugh in earnest until the day I asked her if I was fired. She sat smiling blankly at me for a few seconds, and then the shoulders started going, her elbow moved to the desk, and the hand went to her eyes. There are a few people I know who can entirely resist laughing along with Mary, but I’m not one of them. We sat there.
incapacitated with laughter for a solid five minutes, both glassy eyed, Mary jiggling upright in her seat, I melted over like an old candle. Finally, Mary caught her breath:

“Jesslyn, honey,” she said. “You can stay here as long as you want. It’s your funeral.”

I laughed like that was the funniest damn thing I had ever heard.

There are 159 counties in Georgia; only Texas has more, but it is also 4 ½ times bigger. Georgian counties were named after assorted white men called Colonel Somebody who, as far as I have gathered, generally wore handlebar mustaches. The counties themselves are small, irregular polygons with toothed edges on one or more sides: meandering streams form their borders. I was raised in Georgia, for the most part, and when a native asks me where I have lived in the state, I answer Polk County, Floyd County, Meriwether County, Rabun County, Clarke County. It is useless, in a state in which Dewy Rose, Nickville, Hard Cash and Elberton all share a postal code, to specify a town until the county has first been established.

In addition to the 159 counties, there are 99 different ecosystem types [strictly, Wharton’s ‘environments’ are not always exactly ‘ecosystems,’ though some of them certainly are – others are defined more by their plant communities or geology instead] in the state, according to a survey and review conducted in the 1970’s by Charlie Wharton, then a professor at Georgia State University in Atlanta. In his book, *The Natural Environments of Georgia*, Wharton describes both aquatic and terrestrial environments from spring-fed streams in the Blue Ridge Mountains to Carolina bays and limesinks on the coastal plain. He distinguishes between the “Pine-Hardwood Xeric Ridge Forest” of
the rolling Piedmont and the “Longleaf Pine Upland Forest” of the shallow hills near Thomasville in the far south. The list of natural environments in the table of contents is astounding: needlerush marsh, brackish marsh, oyster reef, wet cliffs and outcrops, cypress savannah, cedar glades, boulderfields, shrub bald, Coosa flatwoods, evergreen heath bluff, dwarf oak forest, dune meadow type, and the list goes on and on and on. Wharton’s book is regrettably out of print now—my copy was Xeroxed from the University of Georgia’s excellent library—but it reminds of what a diverse place it is, and yet relatively small. I like talking about Georgia in the terms of counties and “natural environments” because it seems cozy to me, somehow creating the illusion that there are only as many places to go in Georgia as one could visit in a year, and it is possible to know them all well enough to talk about them.

However, despite what fascination or comfort I find there now, I never felt this much fondness for the place when I was growing up. The Georgia of my childhood was hazy and boring, littered with crumpled pine cones, populated almost entirely by cows, privet, and stray, mangy dogs. In the summer, objects far away wobbled in the heat; in the winter, they faded dully into a tired backdrop of hills and sky. There always seemed to be an insectile buzz in the air, and being outside always itched. There were ticks and mosquitoes to contend with, and poison ivy so belligerent that carelessness in the woods boiled into a blistered, weeping rash around my ankles. Every place I ever wanted to go was forbidden by someone on the grounds that it was “too snakey.”

Georgia has also been a perennial source of embarrassment in my life. August in the state is feverishly hot, and so it was always the month my mother chose to cram my sister, best friend and me into our Honda Accord and escape north to Maine, Canada,
New York or Connecticut, where she knew people with vacation homes. As a result of these trips, I found my mother had many more friends than I ever gave her credit for. Before we left, she would flip through her old address books and systematically telephone people she knew (or had known) along our route, catching up for about an hour before securing us a place to stay for a night on the road. She wasn’t picky—sometimes we would stay with an old college friend, sometimes it would be an elderly couple she sold a horse to sometime in the 1970’s. Occasionally these friends had children of their own, and I vividly remember being hurried off by both hostess and mother to a cold, carpeted basement in Maryland where my sister, friend and I played Nintendo in silence with a boy two grades older than me, who asked, after about half an hour, “So, you’re from South Carolina?”

“No, Georgia.” I answered for the three of us.

“I’ve been there before,” he said, still staring at the screen, jerking the controller from side to side. “Drove through it on the way to Disney World. I hated it. It’s like the most boring place I’ve ever been to. Aren’t there a bunch of transvestites there? A guy at school told me Georgia’s got a whole lot of transvestites.” He went on looking at the screen, tugging at the controller, and we stared at him like cows at the door of a slaughterhouse. I was 12, and I didn’t know what a transvestite was, but I recognized disgrace when I heard it, so I secretly added “transvestite” to the long, long list of reasons to be ashamed of the Peach State.

In fact, even after I left Georgia at 18, changed my driver’s license, registered to vote in Arizona, where the scenery and general population impressed me rather more than it did at home, Georgia tripped me up with some regularity. For instance, when an
acquaintance found out where I grew up, he or she would invariably wince and tell me some horror story about being stuck in Georgia. The fact is, very few people who travel to the state really want to be in Georgia in the first place. For many, the only time they’ve ever spent there are the 8 hours it takes to drive on I-75 from Chattanooga to Florida, which, I’ll admit, is a trip that I sometimes have felt would be expedited by getting out of the car and pushing. More likely, though, an accidental visitor to Georgia has spent some unknown number of hours waiting in the Atlanta airport, remodeled before the 1996 Summer Olympics, ostensibly with the intention of becoming the Center of the Universe. A very drunk business man I once sat next to on a flight told me that after people die, their souls are sent to the Atlanta Hartsfield airport to wait around. “I eat right,” he said, “I work out, I go to church a couple times a year Send me to Boston, Charlotte, Minneapolis—hell, send me to damn Denver for all the hell I care, but by the time I’m dead, I hope I’m done with the Atlanta airport.”

It never occurred to me to tell these people that they should give Georgia another shot—that they would really like it if they had a look around, beyond the airport runway and the I-75 corridor. For instance, I can’t think of anyplace I’d rather spend a day than canoeing the Flint River in June when the shoal lilies are in bloom and the tall, tender Justicia bends into the boat, brushing my face with new purple blooms. Even when I lived in Arizona, I secretly yearned to eat dinner on my parent’s front steps on a summer evening, listening to the cicadas give the night over to a lonesome chuck-will’s-widow. But a lazy day of canoeing and the song of a ground nesting goatsucker are perhaps not enough to interest the masses. The fact is, in spite of the 159 counties and 99 natural environments, most of the state lacks the blue-gray mountain vistas that commonly draw
people to Tennessee and North Carolina, and there is very little shoreline to visit compared to neighboring Florida and South Carolina. Though the city of Savannah tried
to dye the river green for St. Patrick’s Day in 1961, it didn’t work, and with this scheme
died the roots of any exceptional wackiness of the sort that made so much money for
New Orleans. Stone Mountain, the self-proclaimed “#1 Destination in Georgia” and the
largest piece of exposed granite in the world, also birthed the modern Ku Klux Klan in
1915, and bears the three acre “Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial Carving,”
depicting Robert E. Lee, “Stonewall” Jackson, and Jefferson Davis on horseback, hats
clutched to their bosoms. The $250,000 used to start the project in 1923 was raised for
the United Daughters of the Confederacy by the KKK. Now, each summer, there is a
laser show on the wide lawn facing the mountain, and during the grand finale, the three
horsemen spring to laser-colored life to the tune of “God Bless the USA,” and at the
end—just before the fireworks—Robert E. Lee breaks a sword over his knee to the
raucous satisfaction of the crowd.

Regardless of my shame and humiliation over the particulars of my home’s
geography and cultural history, few people in my new Arizona life actually knew very
much about Georgia, or cared to. However, those who did know something were rarely
enthusiastic. The mother of a college boyfriend, an outspoken, liberal, bookish woman, a
history buff and 5th generation Oregonian, once asked me why “you people” hated
African Americans so much. I was stunned. Though I had spent four years losing what
drawl I had, learning to make half-way-decent guacamole, and even trying my luck at
snowboarding (and failing with decided flourish), I was, with the words “you people,”
back in my old place in line with the racists, rednecks, debutantes, transvestites and the autistic kid from *Deliverance*.

Mary is a good scientist. She comes by it naturally, I suppose: her father is a retired entomology professor, and her natural mother, though she died of an asthma attack when Mary was a toddler, was also a scientist, though I can’t remember what kind. When Mary met Bud, he was getting his PhD in zoology at UGA, and now he’s the director of the natural history museum there. Mary earned as many degrees as she would ever need at UGA and got a government job as a stream ecologist. She knows about fish.

The Georgia streams are, in general, hit or miss when it comes to scenic virtue. In a heavily populated state, stream buffers are singularly private places, and both people and animals do private things there. Though the Chow seems to be the most common breed of dog in Georgia, it is, without exception, the Rottweiler who will find a low, wet place to die in, and whose corpse I have found, on several occasions, a week later, bloated, fly heavy and half submerged. In the absence of modern conveniences, people often consider a waterway to be the next best thing to a porcelain toilet. Once, in a streamside thicket, we discovered an altar where someone had sacrificed a cat and several chickens to a deity who apparently still goes in for that sort of thing. Just upstream, a concrete overpass announced “Satan is a Pussy.”

My first summer with Mary, we worked in wide, brambly streams, catching fish using nets and an old aluminum-framed, battery-powered backpack electrofisher. The purpose of this machine is to stun fish, but not kill them, by broadcasting a low level electrical current through the water, temporarily paralyzing any vertebrates not wearing
neoprene in a 3-meter radius of the electrodes. I spent the days sweating in heavy chest waders and slogging through shin-deep sand. Kneeling over a five gallon bucket boiling with fish, I worried hours away over the differences between green and redbreast sunfish, black and white crappie, my eyes always darting uneasily to the other buckets where hundreds more of the newly resuscitated gasped and bobbed around a lazily fizzing aerator.

Good scientists are sticklers for protocol, and Mary is a merciless stickler; I have even heard the word “bully” thrown around in late summer, when the streams run in sandy rivulets and the entire population of a creek—predators and prey—can be found living in a single hole under the roots of a beech tree. There is a muscle in her jaw that starts to jump like a piston rod, and she refuses to eat lunch. On these days, during my first summer, nobody picked muscadines off the low-hanging vines or paused to inhale the hot growth and grape candy of kudzu flowers. An hour after the meal was ignored, Mary started yelling:

“Ya’ll! Pay attention! My seiners have got to pick the net up in time—I just saw about a half dozen hogsuckers roll in and swim out while ya’ll were talking! And Shane, watch where you’re throwing that rat tail. It’s gonna hit Junior one of these days and I’m the one whose gonna have to tell her mama you lit fire to her. Now … slide up here behind this root and we’ll try it again.”

However, despite the discomforts associated with heat-addled tempers, weather, wardrobe and strangers’ disgusting habits, working for Mary was fun. There was something so agreeable about scrambling up a clay stream bank at the end of an afternoon and walking through tall, raspy grass to the Suburban, where I could finally
strip off neoprene waders and sweat-soaked pants, change into a fresh T-shirt, and laugh
at Paula’s incredulity that the thermometer in the pocket under her waders read 130
degrees Farenheit. I liked climbing into the shady backseat of the truck with 3 or 4 other
field workers, and cramming potato chips into my mouth as the truck rattled to a start. I
enjoyed looking out over the brushy forests and hazy, fizzled meadows of my childhood
as we drove, the dusty, coniferous smell pouring in from the open window I liked
yelling a conversation over the racket of wind:

“Man, Lamar County must be the ugliest county in the entire state.”

Someone would inevitably disagree with me: no, it had to be Cherokee County,
Gwinnett County, the predictably heinous Butts County The worst was the burned-out
chicken country, and, come to think of it, paper mills stunk like crazy, but had anybody
been sampling in Arlington, down where they call creeks “ditches?” That was the place
the fat lady came up to the stream and offered us bananas—that place, the whole town,
smelled like a gas station bathroom.

We’d cuss the whole state before its water had even evaporated from our hands,
and then doze off to the comfortable jostle of wheels on pale, neglected asphalt.

I worked for Mary for four years, and then I left Georgia—not because she finally
convinced me to do it (though she did lend me a sum of money larger than propriety will
permit me to disclose), but because I believe there is a natural rhythm to a person’s
comings and goings, which I try to follow as best and as gracefully as I can. Georgia is
the center of the universe to me, despite all the fault I can find with it. These days, I am
trying my luck in a far outpost.
Perhaps Mary should have allowed herself to leave sometime, but as the facts stand, she married Bud at 20, built a little brown cabin near the Broad River, watched her parents wend into old age, worried over their health, and now, since Dot died, she keeps her dad company. I know she would never leave, though sometimes I wish she would—just long enough to write a strange zip code in the return corners of her letters and feel homesickness pinch like ill-fitting shoes.

I live in Missoula, Montana, now—a college town settled comfortably and scenically in a deep bowl of golden hills and glittering mountain peaks. Aside from the cold and short, cloudy winter days, I have nothing to complain about, though I sometimes do. After two years of living here, I still miss home.

When I told Mary I was moving to Missoula, she smiled and told me a story about the summer of 1979—the year after she got married—when she and Bud drove here in a University of Georgia van, all expenses paid. Their ride had a false plywood floor in the back, under which were packed about a hundred boxes full of jars of fish preserved in formaldehyde: a gift from one University professor to another, I expect. They took their time driving and camped out in the mountains near Denver and soaked in the Boiling River outside of Yellowstone. They got to Missoula and hung around for a while. She told me about the glorious 15-hour summer days and the sparkling Clark Fork River whose banks were haunted by the perfume of black cottonwoods. When they were good and ready to go home, they did, filling the false bottom of the van with cases of Ranier beer—enough to throw a big party every night for a year—and they bootlegged it all home, to the welcome and warm gratitude of their friends.
“We decided to make the trip every summer,” she said. I was driving the Suburban home from a stream in Haralson County, which had just been proclaimed Ugliest by someone on grounds that I cannot remember. It was raining lightly, but a thunderhead was stacking up in the southwestern sky. Mary was in the passenger’s seat, her field notes on her lap, and three other technicians were asleep in the backseat.

“Did you ever go back to Montana?” I asked, looking sideways at her from behind the steering wheel. She made a clucking noise with her tongue and waggled her finger at the road ahead of us. I turned back and waited for an answer.

“I’ve never been back. I think Bud went for a conference one year.” She shrugged, and turned a page in her worn, green-bound field book. I asked no more about it. I sensed something forlorn in Mary’s voice, and was thinking about it when she touched my shoulder, “Jess, Pull over!”

“What?”

“Pull Over!” she repeated, the timbre of her voice rising impatiently.

The sleeping technicians in the backseat were pitched forward as I braked and swerved to the side of the road. Newly awakened and cranky, they scowled as Mary sprang out of the car with her binoculars and field book in hand and charged down the hill. Before her lay a field of red mud, newly exposed by an assembly of giant, yellow machines, now sleeping, and we watched as she jogged a little way, stopped to look through the binoculars and jogged a little farther. Finally, she called up to us,

“Somebody get my cell phone! There’s not a silt fence on this whole place. Jesus Christ! I’m calling Paulding County!” There was something else about “this mess going
straight into the Etowah River,” but I didn’t catch it because she had broken into another jog.

One of the technicians turned to me and smiled.

“Mary loves this shit,” she said.

I smiled at this and turned back to watch Mary’s slim, upright form, now small in the distance, skitter and tack across the mud field as another technician ran out to meet her with the phone. It was an ugly place, an ugly day, but watching Mary, I loved it too.
III. LOVE LETTER TO ATLANTIS

Before I started grade school, my family lived in the northeast corner of Georgia, in the town where *Deliverance* was filmed. It was very rural then—perhaps a two hour’s drive to the city. I had heard of Atlanta, but I had never been there. I had a book about the ancient, sunken city of Atlantis, which told the story of a mermaid, but I was most interested in the illustrations: colorful underwater markets and wide avenues lined with plumes of kelp were surrounded on all sides by the glimmering sea glass ramparts of the city walls. My admiration for these pictures was compounded by my understanding that the beautiful Atlantis was the capital of my state.

I was out of kindergarten before I ever saw Atlanta for myself. My mother announced on a Tuesday morning in July that we were going to Barnum & Bailey’s circus in Atlanta on Friday, and over the course of that week, my emotions vacillated wildly between ecstasy and glassy-eyed panic. Over and over, I pictured my mother driving our blue Chevrolet into the surf at the ocean’s edge, and on down the road to Atlanta, where there would be seaweed forests and flocks of silvery fish and only the heavy hum of water all around.

I don’t remember much of the circus except that I was harassed by a clown on stilts. Strangely enough, though I recall many of my expectations of it, I don’t remember being surprised that city of Atlanta was entirely above water. Perhaps it didn’t end up being so much different from my idea of it after all.
As it turns out, Atlanta is a green, undulating city, lousy with water oaks and golf courses and small, irregular spaces, seized, while no one was looking, by renegade privet and kudzu. A few of the older neighborhoods seem to have latticework roofs, held up by giant hardwood sentinels wearing shaggy trousers of English ivy. In the middle of the city, the canopy of the 65-acre Fernbank Forest filters sunlight like broken shutters, throwing bright, quivering starbursts down to the forest floor and leaving the rest in shadow. In summer, the people on the street move slowly, deliberately, as if wading through a force more substantial than air. In fact, during the humid months, Atlanta positively shimmers through the untold gallons.

That summer of my first visit to Atlanta—1983, that must have been—was the year the drought began in Georgia. It turned out to be a dragon of a drought, and most summers, it turned the grass in the highway medians to sharp, brown stubble, which the Department of Transportation mowed anyway, out of habit, I guess. But with all the groaning about watering restrictions, I don’t remember anyone in Georgia saving their bath water for their gardens like my grandmother in California did, or turning off the water in the sink while they brushed their teeth.

“It’ll start raining again soon,” everybody said. But the drought from my childhood went on and on. I grew a set of adult teeth, learned to drive, graduated from high school, and went away to college. When I got back, everyone was still talking about the drought.

It seems unreasonable, but when someone asks me what I would wish for if I could have anything—anything at all—I always say the same thing: I wish to see Georgia, the way it
was before the American Revolution. My sister tells me that this, in addition to being impossible, is the most pathetic thing she has ever heard of. Her censure, however, doesn’t bother me because I am pretty confident that her fondest wish has something to do with discussing poetry with Christina Rosetti while modeling for a Pre-Raphaelite painting, both of which are also impossible and hopelessly nerdy. But however silly or unreasonable my wish may seem to others, I keep wishing it each time I cross the bridge over the Oconee River or close the back gate on my mother’s pasture to walk up the steep, hickory-shaded flank of Lavender Mountain. It is a romantic longing I usually only feel for men and orphaned babies. It makes my eyes feel hot, and my chest feel as if a soggy bath towel were wadded up in my rib cage, dripping water into the dish of my pelvis, pooling in my knees, seeping out the soles of my feet. With startlingly few exceptions, my crush on the state of Georgia exceeds nearly every human infatuation I have ever had. Its greenness, its insulating humidity, its warm, domestic smells and temperate storms of birdsong freeze my tongue over like a rusted car part, and I find I cannot talk about Georgia—its history and the uncomfortable truths of its present—without making jokes I don’t mean, without rolling my eyes at things that horrify even my fingernails, my blood, the china splinters of my bones. When I say I wish to see Georgia before the American Revolution, I mean the Tallulah Gorge before it was dammed, the Piedmont before the cotton boom washed its rich crust into the Atlantic Ocean, the swampy pine forests of the coastal plain before the cougars, wolves and giant pocket gophers were hunted out of living memory.

One of the earliest—and certainly the most comprehensive—accounts Georgia before the Revolution and the 1793 invention of the cotton gin (which overhauled the
landscape of the state in the matter of a few years) was written by the son of Philadelphia botanist John Bartram, who was commissioned by the King of England to explore Florida in 1765. On this trip John brought his 26-year-old son William, who was a good botanical artist, but had no head for business. William loved Florida and entreated his father to invest in an indigo farm there, so that he could manage it. This experiment failed miserably, however rather than return to Pennsylvania, William tried his hand at surveying the coast of Florida, but his ship wrecked in a storm. He returned to his father’s house in Philadelphia, defeated and nearly empty-handed, aside from a few botanical drawings he had made during his time in the South. These drawings were sent around to wealthy plant collectors, one of whom liked them enough to agreed to pay the young man’s expenses in another expedition to Florida. In April, 1773, two years before the beginning of the Revolutionary War, William Bartram stepped off a schooner in Savannah, Georgia, and into a wilderness of passionflower and rattlesnakes, Seminoles, alligators, vultures and moths.

Though William Bartram was commissioned to explore Florida, he spent much of his time in Georgia, working along the eastern edge of the state, and across it, into what is now western Alabama. Very near Athens, where my father’s family lives, Bartram found a forest of Sequoia-sized black oak, some of which he swore to be eleven feet in diameter at breast height. A few days later, he came across an acre of red, yellow and white marled clay, exposed, he expected, by buffaloes, and kept clear by deer, horses and cattle. It has since been posited that animals came to this place to cure stomach aches, as the clay held high levels of the mineral kaolin, used today in Kaopectate and other stomach remedies.
I have gone looking for these places—the giant forest and the “Great Buffaloe Lick”—on winter days in Athens when there is nothing much to do. According to Bartram’s coordinates, the forest was in Talliferro County, but all that is there now is the town of Crawfordville, Interstate 20, and a memorial to the vice president of the Confederacy. As for the “Great Buffaloe Lick,” it was forgotten until the 20th century, when Bartram’s book enjoyed a surge in popularity, and since 1934, at least four different geologists, naturalists and geographers have erected signs claiming that this is where William Bartram stopped that day in the summer of 1773. I have heard that the lick was built over by Georgia Highway 22, or that a Wal-Mart is planted there now. I, at any rate, in my idle Sunday drives, have found no trace of it.

William Bartram’s Georgia is gone now. He departed Savannah in November of 1776, went home to Philadelphia in the thick of the Revolution, spent his father’s last year at the old man’s bedside, and, fifteen years later, published a book he called Travels, which includes “Observations, Accounts, Anecdotes, Descriptions and Conjectures” about the places and people he met along his route. Travels also includes Bartram’s distinctive illustrations: queer maps and spindly flower stalks topped with leaden blossoms, the lumpy-chinned King of the Seminoles in profile, eyes rolling, spear clutched in a baseball pitcher’s grip, and grimacing animals of all sorts—Bartram could make a dragonfly grimace. I love these drawings and his comical habit of representing a crab and a hummingbird on the same plate, a cardinal situated on a branch and a fish hovering in midair, both animals staring in alarm in the same direction, off the page. There is a portrait of William Bartram which I also love, painted from life by American artist Charles Willson Peale in 1808, when Bartram was a white-haired old man. His
eyes are clear blue, his skin pink, lips very thin, and at his breast is an untidy sprig of three star-petaled flowers, whiter than the old man’s hair, whiter than the light reflecting off his forehead and his ship’s prow of a nose, whiter even than his snowy cravat. He looks like a kind man, a thoughtful man, like St. Francis of the flowers.

Not long after Bartram left the state, Georgia began clearing land for cotton. The middle of the state was ideal for the plant, both in climate and soil type; however, the seeds were difficult to remove from the usable fiber. The invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney changed all this. From 1793 to 1801, Georgia’s cotton production increased exponentially, and in order to pick and process all this cotton, white Georgians bought black slaves as quickly as they could file off the ships from Africa. With the War of 1812, America was cut off from Britain’s cotton supply, and the demand for Georgia cotton increased, as New England built textile mills and the state of Georgia laid rail from towns to rivers, and eventually from farms to major shipping ports. Since this time, cotton has remained among Georgia’s main exports, despite setbacks like the Civil War and the boll weevil infestations of the early 20th century.

It is difficult to say what Georgia lost in two centuries of cotton. William Bartram provides only clues in Travels. For instance, a shrub with a broad, white flower, which he and his father named the Franklin tree after their friend Benjamin Franklin, was found on their first visit to the state, and they brought it back to Philadelphia with them in the form of live plants and seeds. The Franklin tree was never again seen growing wild in Georgia, or anywhere in the Southeast, but the propagated descendants of the Bartrams’ plants survive in gardens around the world. Cotton is a nutrient-greedy, annual crop with shallow roots. The clearing of cotton farms in the 19th century allowed for massive
erosion all over the state due to the removal of large, stabilizing trees. Georgia’s top soil ended up in its streams after a few decades, and its streams became gullies to accommodate the runoff that used to filter quietly among deep roots and earthworms. Who knows how many species have gone the way of the Franklin tree in these 200 years? Bartram’s book is not long enough to tell us.

There is a place in South Georgia—near Jimmy Carter’s home, I think—called the “Little Grand Canyon,” which includes a network of deep, red gullies, carved out over the years by cotton farm runoff. Tourists travel here to have their pictures taken at the canyon’s precipitous edge. It is beautiful I hear, though I have never seen it. Someone once told me it would be silly to go all the way to Arizona when the Little Grand Canyon is in our own state. What, after all, is the work of millennia to the work of a few decades? Each, I suppose, is impressive in its own way.

I don’t read the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* very often, mostly because I live in Montana now, but also because my mother complains about it so much. “I miss the *Washington Post,*” she moans over the phone. “You can tell a lot about a city from its newspaper.”

Mom grew up in D.C., whose population is smaller than Atlanta’s, but where they take their headlines seriously. Today, for instance—March 24th, 2006—the *Post* homepage reads as follows: “U.S. Imposes Belarus Sanctions,” “Immigration Evolves Into Election Issue for 2008,” “Protest Turns Violent in Paris.” On the other hand, the big story in the *AJC,* “Bye-Bye, Pie,” is about an elderly Powder Springs woman whose homemade fried pie business is being shut down by the State of Georgia because her
kitchen hasn’t been inspected. The front page also reports that the Atlanta Falcons’
coach has signed a new contract, there was a violent murder in Fulton County, and
“Lawmaker Showered with Gifts” is an expose about a State Representative who was
recently thrown a wedding shower by a bunch of lobbyists. In an interview, the
Representative remarked, “it must be a slow day in the news.”

A friend of mine from high school, who is currently working on her Masters in
stream ecology at UGA, got a letter to the editor published in the AJC last year. Jane
picked up the paper one Thursday morning last March and read an article called “Gone
Fishing for the Georgia Aquarium,” which reported that the administrators of downtown
Atlanta’s new attraction (which was still under construction at that point) were having a
hard time acquiring permits to collect the species of marine fishes desired for the
exhibits. The reason the article gave for all this red tape was that numbers are down in the
Atlantic Ocean, due to commercial overfishing, and several fish species were mentioned
as being particularly tricky to wangle. Two of the threatened, and therefore
bureaucratically stubborn, species were the red and vermilion snappers.

Jane read through this and then turned to the “Living” section, which is where you
can find interior decorating ideas, stories about children surviving leukemia, and contests
for the ugliest yard. The front page of “Living,” Jane told me later, “was a snapper
showcase.” There was a big, expertly photographed Caribbean fried red snapper filling
the center of the page, drizzled with some kind of sauce and hedged in by tropical flowers
and figurines of cuddling parrots.

Jane’s letter went like this:

Dear Editor,
The *AJC* is not helping the new Georgia Aquarium with its permitting problem by featuring a deep fried, threatened fish in the “Living” section. Hopefully the aquarium will manage to educate the public about the importance of responsible fish harvesting, in spite of all the contradictory information found in one issue of this publication. An excellent source for regional information on the best choices for seafood consumption can be found at the Monterey Bay Aquarium's website.

Jane sent these sentiments off to the editor, who edited them (taking out the bit about the Monterey Bay Aquarium) and ran Jane’s letter a few days later, sticking it at the bottom of a long register of opinions concerning where we should be able to post the Ten Commandments and whether we should furnish high school students with laptops. It is strange to me, therefore, that the Executive Director of the Georgia Aquarium found out how to contact Jane—and that he bothered to go through the trouble in the first place.

I don’t know much about Jeff Swanagan, except that he helped Bernard Marcus, the co-founder of Home Depot, turn a humongous pile of cash into the biggest aquarium in the world. Managing a $290 million construction project along with the logistics of transporting two moving-truck-sized whale sharks to Atlanta from Taiwan must have bored this man to tears because he found the time to ransack the *AJC* and to find Jane’s letter in its murky corner of the Monday edition. On Tuesday, Jane found the following in message in her email account:

Dear Jane:
Are you the person who wrote an editorial to the *AJC*? Would you like to talk with me about aquatic conservation?
Jeffery S. Swanagan
Executive Director
The Georgia Aquarium

Jane was delighted to talk with him, and told him as much in her reply.

Nothing ever really came of this: Mr. Swanagan wrote back promptly, saying that he would call in a few days, but in the meantime, he knew of a couple of UGA professors
she could talk to about fish conservation. He suggested two professors in her department—professors she already talked to about fish conservation nearly every day of the week. He didn’t call in a few days, or ever. “Just like a man,” Jane sighed when she told me the story later.

I am not a conspiracy theorist at heart, but on hearing about Jane’s interaction with Jeff Swanagan, I jumped to all sorts of conclusions.

“Jane, it sounds like he’s hiding something,” I said.

“I doubt it,” she replied.

“Well, why would he bother doing anything about your letter unless he was worried about bad press? But if he was worried about bad press, why would he contact you personally when he could have answered your question in a more general way by responding to the paper? And what does he even want to talk to you about anyway? Your letter didn’t make me think you needed someone to explain aquatic conservation to you. I think this guy’s feeling guilty about something.”

I expected Jane to jump in here, but she only shrugged, clearly uninspired:

“Beats me, Nancy Drew,” she said. “He’s probably just busy.”

So, I didn’t talk to Jane anymore about what was going on at the Georgia Aquarium, which opened last November to considerable ballyhoo. The aquarium is now in its fifth month, and has been visited by over a million people—in fact, it welcomed its 1-millionth guest 98 days after opening. I have never been, though I cruised by once in January to see the line for the admission booth wrapping around the block. For $22.75—more than a lot of people are willing to pay these days to see Bob Dylan in concert—visitors can ogle more than 100,000 species of marine and freshwater animals, some from
a tunnel at the bottom of a 6.2 million gallon tank. The building itself is 500,000 square feet. To put the size of this place into perspective, Chicago’s Shedd, the world’s second largest aquarium, only has 20,000 species and all of its tanks together hold 5 million gallons. (The combined volume of Atlanta’s tanks is 8 million gallons).

I don’t pretend to know anything about Jeff Swanagan’s personal demons, but it occurs to me that the issue of aquatic conservation is something of a stumbling block for the Georgia Aquarium. Critics have been shaking their heads over its conspicuous dearth of educational signage, as well as the fact that most of the exhibits feature animals that rightfully belong on the other side of the world—or at least in the ocean 5 hours away. A visitor might walk around the aquarium all day and go home without the soul-burdening inconvenience that comes with hesitating over the red snapper on the dinner menu, while maintaining perfect ignorance of what lives in the streams and rivers of Georgia. Jeff Swanagan, no doubt, has borne the duty of explaining away most of this censure, and has evidently been working at it since last year when he responded to Jane’s letter. It seems the mission of the Georgia Aquarium is to show people what they could never see on the Georgia Piedmont—to provide education via a vacation to an exotic place. In an interview with the Atlanta-based CNN.com in January he maintained that,

The people who live inside the country tend to know the least [about aquatic sea life]. They may never have seen dolphins or sunsets over the ocean. So it’s exactly the reason why an aquarium needs to be the middle of the country, to educate the citizenry.

In an interview with the AJC in January, Bernie Marcus, the aquarium’s benefactor, hinted that they would eventually focus more on conservation, but “for right now, we’re just trying to take care of the crowds.”
Marcus and his wife Billi gave this behemoth “gift” to the city of Atlanta as a gesture of gratitude for supporting the Home Depot stores from their inception in Atlanta in 1978. However, beyond spending a birthday dinner in the Monterey Aquarium sixteen years ago, Marcus admits to having had very little interest in aquariums prior to donating the money to build this one. He wanted to give Atlanta something nice, and even a man who doesn’t care much for diamonds knows that they’re a pretty safe bet with the ladies.

Aquariums are hot these days, though risky. Cities across America have recently sprouted spangley new stadiums, Halls of Fame, and high-end shopping malls, but an aquarium is a jewel coveted by any sluggish downtown. Aquariums are enormously expensive, but can attract more year-round tourist traffic than any football stadium, NASCAR museum or promenade, which generally attract more locals than tourists. Just the presence of an aquarium can give a city a facelift, an ego boost. On the other hand, if the aquarium is built and goes under, it often takes the city with it. The past decade has begotten a rash of aquaria in American cities; Baltimore and New Orleans fared very well with theirs, Denver and Duluth’s flopped extravagantly. It seems America might be reaching its aquarium saturation point, but that didn’t stop Bernie Marcus from building his.

Unlike the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which was given to the down-and-out fishing town of Monterey, California, by David Packard (co-founder of Hewlet-Packard), the city of Atlanta needed an aquarium that would, as Marcus has pointed out, allow people to forget they were in Atlanta. Since its opening in 1984, Monterey’s aquarium has pumped $250 million a year into the California economy, and $179 million of that money stays in Monterey County. The mission of the Monterey Bay Aquarium is to
educate visitors about the ecology and threats to the habitats of the Bay and outlying Pacific Ocean. The aquarium itself is built on a bit of scenic, rugged coastline; when visitors to the aquarium weary of viewing the jellyfish and sharks indoors, they can walk outside and watch the wild otters and seabirds for a while. Atlanta, on the other hand, is landlocked, and, as Marcus told the AJC, "we didn't have the beautiful natural view a lot of these places like Monterey had, so we had to work harder." This meant Atlanta had to spend a lot more money ($290 million to Monterey’s $55 million—$134 million when you adjust for inflation), cast farther for interesting specimens, build bigger, and put on a Las Vegas-sized show. To hell with educational signs.

One might ask why Atlanta needed the world’s largest aquarium. After all, business is booming, or so they say: it is one of the fastest growing areas in the country, and the excellent Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga is only a 2 ½ hour drive north of the city (with the Tennessee River there to provide regional focus). To look at a population graph of Atlanta over the past 10 years, you would think there was a gold rush going on. The metro Atlanta area, which took up 16 counties until recent decades, has run to the west like an egg dropped into an uneven frying pan. The metro area now encompasses about 28 counties, and has only the insubstantial Alabama border to keep it from bleeding into Birmingham. The population of the Atlanta has nearly doubled in the past decade, and the people keep coming—mostly moving to the outskirts where the rent is cheap and houses are being built at the speed of sound.

But for all this activity, a new aquarium, a gold-domed capitol building, acres of patent-leather skyscrapers, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention headquarters, the World of Coca-Cola museum, and more stadiums and shopping malls than I can keep
track of, Atlanta is dissatisfied. It hosted the 1996 Summer Olympics and got Centennial Park out of the deal, and yet downtown Atlanta doesn’t feel lived in or prosperous or happy with itself. Perhaps it is because the AJC and the local television news shows, when not running stories about pie bakers and wedding showers, focus on murders, rapes and burglaries, and people from the suburbs are afraid to go downtown at night, afraid to ride MARTA—the city’s train and bus system—even during the day. Beneath the pep-rallying, southern hospitality and air conditioning, Atlanta has an inferiority complex. It wants to be noticed, visited, taken seriously. Maybe the world’s largest aquarium will do it. Maybe it won’t.

This is my dilemma: Atlanta and I have different wishes for the state of Georgia. While I want to know what Georgia was meant to be, Atlanta wants to cover up what Georgia is. That is how a city becomes a major city. It pains me to know that Atlanta thinks so little of itself that it feels the best it can offer a tourist is a view that is not its own.

You should know some things about Atlanta: specifically that it is a relatively young city and that it was never meant to be a city at all. In 1837, a couple of railroad surveyors planted a stake on a ridge seven miles east of the Chattahoochee River, and named that stake Terminus: the end of the line. Dahlonega was all the rage back then, because of the gold, and they couldn’t ship cotton out of the middle of the state fast enough, so the State of Georgia sponsored the Western and Atlantic Railroad line, laying track from Chattanooga, Tennessee, into the bush of the Piedmont—the Middle of Nowhere—in an attempt to settle north Georgia while the settling was good. Terminus was situated at
mile marker zero, and a little town sprouted around the dead end of the railroad tracks. Nothing fancy

By 1846, two other railroad lines had connected to the Western and Atlantic, and Terminus had become Marthasville, in honor the governor’s daughter, and then the name was changed two years after that to Atlanta (“Atlantic,” for the railroad line, but with a feminine feel), in order to brand the town with the new depot the Georgia Railroad Company had built there. By 1861, the year Georgia seceded from the Union, Atlanta’s population had grown to nearly ten thousand residents—mostly merchants, railroad men and black slaves.

During the Civil War itself, Atlanta was a hub of war materials manufacturing and transportation, which is the why Sherman, in his famous March to the Sea, worked Atlanta over with such memorable care and attention. At one point during the war, the population of the city swelled to around 22,000 people, all working in factories making everything a Confederate soldier would need, from canteens to cartridge boxes. When Sherman marched through, every factory, machine shop, and railroad building in town was demolished by engineers, and then burned. This all happened in 1864; only 21 years before, the tragic city had been just a railroad spike in the woods.

Atlanta was rebuilt with all the indignant fervor and moxie one expects from a child whose block tower has been demolished by bigger kid. To honor its contributions to the Confederacy, Georgia moved the state capitol from Milledgeville, at the fall line where the Piedmont meets the Coastal Plain, to Atlanta, up on the bluff overlooking the Chattahoochee River. The Chattahoochee is now the smallest waterway in America to support a major city.
Most big cities got to be that way because there was some natural benefit to where they were: consider, for instance, Chicago, New York, St. Louis and Portland, Oregon. These towns grew because they were originally ports on major rivers, or in protected harbors, or both. Atlanta is not a port—the Chattahoochee River is small, shallow and far away from where it unloads its waters into the Gulf of Mexico. Because Atlanta was established as a railway junction, even in its early days, its needs were always supplied by the railroad.

Another aspect of Atlanta that sets it apart from other major American cities is that it—along with much of the rest of northeast Georgia—is built on a granite batholith, the largest one in the world. The Atlanta area is speckled with the evidence of it: Stone Mountain, Panola Mountain, Arabia Mountain and Pine Mountain represent just a couple of this giant’s toes. At any rate, granite is a watertight substrate, and so Atlanta’s impermeable underpinnings provide nothing in the way of ground water for the city.

After the Civil War, I doubt whether anyone ever gave a thought to where Atlanta would get its water; back in those days, the population was small enough that they pumped directly from the Chattahoochee River. It wasn’t until the 1950s that anyone suggested anything different.

The Chattahoochee River is reborn every day in the mountains of northeast Georgia, and flows from up above Poplar Stump Gap, through the city of Atlanta to Alabama, where it forms the border between the states for 436 miles until it meets the Flint River at the Florida state line. From there, the Chattahoochee and Flint form the Appalachiocola River, and it is a short run to the Gulf. The length of the Chattahoochee is impounded by thirteen reservoirs, many of which were built and are managed by the
Army Corps of Engineers. The uppermost of these reservoirs is Lake Sidney Lanier, was named for a Civil War poet who few people read these days, but I suppose his name lends whimsy and a certain lyric edge to a rotten idea. Of course, in Lanier’s day, the Chattahoochee was a river and not a series of pools. Dying from tuberculosis in 1877, Lanier wrote these lines about the Chattahoochee River, on whose banks he supposedly languished, fancying its progress to the sea.

Out of the Hills of Habersham,
Down the valleys of Hall,
I hurry amain to reach the plain,
Run the rapid and leap the fall,
Split at the rock and together again,
Accept my bed, or narrow or wide,
And flee from folly on every side
With a lover’s pain to attend the plain
Far from the hills of Habersham,
Far from the valleys of Hall.

The Chattahoochee, with its 13 large reservoirs, isn’t splitting at many rocks anymore. It has other jobs: generating hydropower, controlling floods, being drunk by the people of Atlanta, to name a few, and the Chattahoochee can’t do all this without people’s help.

Georgia has no natural lakes; the soil type and topography are wrong for it. Instead, we have streams—streams of every description—streams painted on our maps so thick the whole state looks blue from a three pace distance. Until 1956, when the Buford Dam was built about 40 miles northeast of the city’s center, and Lake Lanier began to fill with the cold headwaters of the Chattahoochee, the land that is now submerged had people living on it: they grew cotton on the riverfront farmland, Mr. Shadburn ran a ferry across the river, people went to school, the grocery store, the post office. Those who refused to sell their land were given fair market price for acreage below 1,076 feet and
their land was condemned. Nobody had any choice but to move. It is the way it goes with these things.

Because the Chattahoochee is so small in north Georgia—a trickle, really, compared to the giant it becomes by the Florida line—it took Lanier three years to fill entirely. The project was unpopular with some people in its day because of the sheer impracticality of it. The dam, however, was a pet project of the popular Atlanta mayor William Hartsfield (for whom the airport is named), who wanted a major water control project on the Chattahoochee upstream from Atlanta, to provide flood control and a little bit of hydropower for the city (around 250 kilowatt hours per year). There was even rumor of dredging the length of the Chattahoochee: when the dam was built, the mayor of Apalachicola, Florida gave Atlanta a 1,000-pound anchor inscribed “The Port of Apalachicola salutes the Port of Atlanta.” This dream, thank God, was never realized, and although the Buford Dam still provides some power, its primary purpose now is to supply Atlanta with most of its drinking water, which was never intended by anyone, as far as I can tell.

Lake Lanier is also a local hangout and tourist destination, known for the “Lake Lanier Islands” water park, shellacked golf courses and swarming marinas. It sparkles like a field of diamonds on the Fourth of July, when the crowns of the bank trees ripple emerald and tan, and the sun’s reflection off the water glazes everything with a hard, white leather shine. The black green waters feel warm up top and cooler at your toes. There is always the echo, the easy lull and crescendo of outboard motors and drunken lake laughter.
However, I have known Lanier in summers when the water is much too low for the speed boats and skiers. The lake is lined with red clay, and in these dry years, the collapsing, needle-thick banks topple into endless ochre mudflats where I have seen the skeleton of a rust-eaten old Packard sunbathing in a crowd of the past decade’s Christmas trees. These trees make great kindling, and sometimes you can see them burning at night as you drive over a bridge spanning one of the lake’s waterless tentacles, a circle of teenaged boys swaying and hooting around the pyre.

But as much as Atlanta loves Lake Lanier, sometimes Lake Hartwell to the east is full when Lanier is not. Allatoona will generally do in a pinch—it’s close, anyway, though smaller. Georgians treat the dewatering of Lanier as they might hurricane damage on their favorite Mexican beach. It’s a shame, but perhaps it was time for a temporary change of scenery anyway. Georgians, if nothing else, are optimistic.

There has always been a healthy sense of competition between Georgia and its neighbors. I remember people telling Alabama jokes when I was a kid, and I told them too until I realized there was absolutely nothing wrong with Alabama that wasn’t also wrong with Georgia. Florida got less flack because Georgians rely on Disney World and Panama City Beach for escape and entertainment, but the football rivalry between the Florida Gators and the UGA Bulldogs is one step away from involving car bombs. There is a bar in Athens called The Gator Haters.

In 1990, however, the interstate rivalry intensified, and the states scuffled, which is to say, Alabama and Florida sued the State of Georgia over the water in Lake Sidney Lanier.
The state of Georgia might not have gotten very much rain during the 1980s and 1990s, but it had one thing going for it: it is rich in headwaters. Of the state’s roughly 30 rivers, all but a very small one begins within Georgia’s borders; some of these eventually flow out of the state, while others empty into the Atlantic Ocean. However, tradition and common courtesy in the eastern states dictate that if a river starts in your state, or on your property, this does not mean you are allowed to suck it dry before your neighbor can use it. Back in the 10th century, after the Normans wrestled the British Isle from the savage Anglo-Saxons, King Henry II decided to create a unified “common law” throughout the country. I don’t know how long the “riparian doctrine” has been included in British Common law, but the first Pilgrim to set buckled pump on Plymouth Rock brought this untidy, stochastic set of rules with him. The riparian doctrine politely suggests the following:

1) That anybody whose property abuts a water source may make reasonable use of it.

2) If there is not enough water to suit the needs of all potential users, ask the King, and he will assign water allotments proportional to the amount of land owned by each potential user.

3) Water shall never be transferred out of its nascent watershed.

Once the western American states finally got their acts together, it became clear that this loosey-goosey approach to water allocation was not going to work out—there just wasn’t enough of the stuff to go around. The West worked out a system called “prior appropriation” in which the first person who put a river’s water to “beneficial use” (which includes feeding it to a cow or watering a non-native plant, but not playing in it or
watching it flow downstream) would have the right to his share of water for perpetuity. We will call this person the “senior user.” Anyone who came along later, wanting to put some water to beneficial use could do so, but he would be called the “junior user,” and during low-flow years, might have to watch the senior guy watering his fields and cows while he watched his crops wilt and his cattle go thirsty. The junior user’s only consolation was that there are other guys who woke up even later than he did, and would have to wait for him to take his water out before they could claim theirs.

The benefit of having one’s livelihood dictated by prior appropriation is that at least you know what to expect. In the East, the riparian doctrine is generally considered more of a guideline than a law; the degree to which individual states uphold this charter has not been decided by the higher courts. This means each state has made up its own set of water laws, and therefore the rights of users vary from state to state. This is generally not a problem in the Southeast—water quality has often been more a source of contention between states than water quantity—but with the drought in the 1980s, along with the Atlanta’s rolling out the red carpet to anyone who wanted a cheap place to stay, quantity became an issue.

If you want to build a dam in this country, the Army Corps of Engineers is the agency for you. It has constructed and operates untold number of dams in the Southeast and around the United States. The Corps is responsible for most of the Chattahoochee’s thirteen dams as well. Until the drought in the 1980s, water in Georgia was cheap, abundant and barely even regulated, so these dams were officially used for power generation by Georgia, Alabama and Florida until the drought, when Georgians started getting worried—especially those around Atlanta, where it is difficult to drill wells.
Atlanta and surrounding towns started petitioning the Corps with requests that a portion of Lake Lanier’s water being used for hydropower be reallocated for water supply in metro Atlanta. The Corps reviewed these requests, and in 1990, approved Atlanta’s taking 500 million gallons per day out of Lanier. Alabama and Florida’s resulting litigation over this decision was to be expected, considering they were in the middle of a drought as well.

Alabama and Florida claimed that the Corps was playing favorites with Georgia to the point of undermining their rights to the waters of the Chattahoochee. Though neither state drinks Chattahoochee water, they both need the flow in the river to be high when it reaches them. Alabama built the dams along the Georgia border in order to power the eastern half of the state, and Florida’s economy relies heavily on the Chattahoochee’s waters ending up in the Gulf’s Apalachicola Bay, which is a very productive, if sensitive, oyster and shrimp fishery. The two states sued on the grounds that the Army Corps began issuing contracts to Atlanta area water supply providers without first evaluating the impacts that lower flows in the Chattahoochee would have on downstream states, hereby violating the National Environmental Policy Act.

I don’t think the Army Corps of Engineers or the State of Georgia saw this coming, and so Georgia made a deal with the two other states: every new water reallocation application would be frozen, along with every piece of litigation, until the three states could agree on a fair way of divvying up surface water between them for the next 50 years, while protecting the “water quality, ecology, and biodiversity” of the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint Basin. The Corps ordered a comprehensive study of the ecological and sociological conditions of the ACF (including the Apalachicola Bay).
The wedding license was signed by all three state legislatures and ratified by Congress in 1997. There was a brief, passionate honeymoon, but the union didn’t last.

Within five years of signing the compacts, after numerous deadline extensions and near agreements, and with the help of an army of professional mediators, the ACF negotiations dissolved. The states just could not agree. Interestingly, Alabama ended up siding with Georgia on many of the issues. It uses the Chattahoochee primarily for hydropower, and the state did not require as much in the way of minimum flows as Florida did. Florida, however, could not submit to Georgia’s insistence that it needed nearly full flexibility in how much water Atlanta removed from Lake Lanier at a given time. Florida requested that Georgia sign agreements stating it would both guarantee minimum flows at the Georgia-Florida state line and assign limits to how much water it could remove from the Chattahoochee. Georgia’s last offer was to sign one or the other, but not both, arguing that the state needed flexibility in order to provide the growing city of Atlanta with the water it requires, now and in the future.

The ACF compact expired without extension in August of 2003, due to the squabble between Florida and Georgia, but also because of Georgia’s obvious sense of entitlement to the waters within its borders. After the negotiations dissolved, Alabama Governor Bob Riley released this statement regarding the failure:

I will not sacrifice Alabama’s water resources and our economy to satisfy Atlanta’s growing thirst for more and more water. Unfortunately, it became clear during these long negotiations that Georgia’s only priority was to obtain the maximum use of the waters in the Basin while requiring Alabama to absorb virtually all of the negative impacts of Atlanta’s uncontrollable growth. It is not in Alabama’s best interest to continue extending negotiations that have no hope for success.
Though Southerners have a reputation for being almost preternaturally polite, they also have a long and well-documented reputation for bitter feuding. I know nothing of Bob Riley aside from what can be extrapolated from this statement, but it puts me in mind of the Hatfields and McCoys. Southerners are pleasant, no doubt, but if a family has been in the South long enough, it is likely that one or more of their ancestors were penal colony inmates at one time.

When I first heard about the 8 million gallon aquarium that was going in on the dried up Georgia Piedmont, I wondered how the idea sat with Alabama and Florida. I wondered what Bartram would think if he knew Georgia had grown to a size that required us to spend water on credit, if he knew we were importing penguins and beluga whales when we already have alligators and oyster catchers.

Atlantis might have been a myth; Plato wrote about it in 360 B.C., placed it just outside the Pillars of Hercules (which are now called the Straits of Gibraltar), and even then, he dated its inundation by the Atlantic Ocean at around 9,000 years before his time, though there is some argument that he meant 900 years. No one has ever found evidence that Atlantis ever really existed, though not for the want of looking: even as I write, there are two well-funded, unrelated teams of respected scientists cruising the Mediterranean, looking for the lost city. In 1910, American psychic Edgar Cayce maintained that Atlantis was a highly evolved civilization, located in the Caribbean rather than the Mediterranean, in which people flew around in ships powered by crystal energy. He also predicted that a part of Atlantis would rise in the 1960s, and in that decade, a “road” was
discovered in the sea near Bimini Island in the Caribbean. Geologists say it is merely a natural underwater rock formation, but Atlantis buffs had a field day with it.

Plato described Atlantis as a beautiful, prosperous island city, ruled by the gods of the sea. The city was built in concentric rings, and a series of moats and high walls plated with brass, tin, and a mythical precious metal called “orichalcum” separated the neighborhoods from one another. The Atlanteans, in their time, conquered the Mediterranean as far as Egypt and central Italy, and had set their sights on Athens when a series of violent earthquakes and floods befell the island of Atlantis, and in a single day and night, the island was devoured by the sea.

The lessons of Atlantis to the Republic, as told by Plato, are to be grateful for your own riches, be nice to your neighbors and don’t be greedy. Perhaps these mandates go against all that is Human, perhaps we cannot love the options we are given. Perhaps we must always wish for the impossible.
A few months ago, my friend Avis called me from the interstate in Marietta, Georgia, to ask how long it had been since I had seen the movie *Smokey and the Bandit*.

“Oh, a while,” I said, though I couldn’t really remember ever having watched it from beginning to end. It played on the Atlanta TV stations constantly when I was a kid, but I always had trouble distinguishing it from episodes of *The Dukes of Hazard*.

“I rented it last night,” she said, “—hold on a second.” In the background I could hear a screaming chain of sirens, the deafening raspberry of a downshifting big rig, and, for a moment, Avis’ one-sided negotiations with a vehicle she referred to as “Lady.”

After a minute, she came back: “sorry, there’s a wreck up here. Anyway, *Smokey and the Bandit*...did you know it was filmed here, around Atlanta? On country roads. back when there were some. And do you know that I cried last night watching it? I must be the only person in history who has cried watching *Smokey and the Bandit*.”

“That’s probably true,” I said.

After all, *Smokey and the Bandit* is a comedy starring Burt Reynolds, Jackie Gleason, and a 1977 Special Edition Pontiac Trans Am. The movie’s only casualty is a Texas patrol car. However, it was filmed almost entirely in the Atlanta area during the late 1970’s, before the land rush on the region began in earnest, and it occurs to me, that if anyone I know has weeping rights to *Smokey and the Bandit*, Avis does.

Avis and I both grew up in north Georgia during the 1980s; she was born in Marietta, about an hour’s drive southeast of Rome, where I lived. Though we are not old friends, we find a lot to talk about in our childhoods and local history: for instance, in his march from Tennessee to Atlanta, Sherman set fire to my town only a few days before he
torched her’s. We remember funny local superstitions together, like the one observed by our fathers and grandfathers that dictates that a knife must never be given, but paid a quarter for (or else the relationship between the giver and receiver will be severed), or the more obscure doctrine that if you regift a feather, you will drown within the week.

Though I consider myself a Georgian, I have very little historical tie to the state. My father’s family is from Virginia and moved to Athens, Georgia, while Dad was still nursing. Mom is a shameless Yankee: she pronounces “deluxe” and “buffet” with a French accent, arguing that they are French words and we should respect their heritage, even when ordering a cheeseburger. In addition to this, I grew up a long way from Atlanta, and the only thing that changed in my neighborhood while I was a kid was that the Scarlet Oak in the yard of our rental house got a disease and some men showed up one day to chop the limbs off it.

Avis, on the other hand, comes from a family of Germans that settled Marietta sometime in the 1780s, and she still lives on a little corner of the 40-acre parcel her father’s family was given by Uncle Sam after the Civil War. For his whole life, her great grandfather carried his rifle through those government-conferred woods and into downtown Marietta, hunting squirrel on his way there and back. Her grandfather walked the same path to get to work every day—he owned a corn mill just outside of town. Avis played in those woods until the day in sixth grade when she got off the bus to find 38 acres of the land cleared of trees, replaced with tractors mired in red clay, bulldozers sliding around on clay-packed treads, and flatbed trucks loaded with logs and stained with the clay that will always embarrass someone who has known the land fully dressed. That year—1985—Avis’ grandmother sold all the property, but the two acres she and
Avis' family lived on, to a developer in order to afford a divorce from her second husband. The marriage had been a church arrangement, and she had been waiting twenty years for an opportunity like this. Within a couple of years, her grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, grandpa’s corn mill became a CVS pharmacy, and the houses started going in.

“I can remember standing in my house in the same places I stand now, back before Grandma sold the land,” Avis told me, now sitting in traffic, five miles from her house, which she moved back into two years ago—the summer she turned 30. “There were trees and a creek, and you could see turkeys and deer from the windows. Now there are just hundreds of houses—I barely even see the people who live in them. I guess the reason Smokey and the Bandit gets to me is that I remember when Georgia looked like that, and it doesn't look like that anymore.” She sighed. The bass of a distant car stereo played too loud sizzled through the phone receiver. “It seems silly, but I honestly believe that Georgia was a better place in the '70s.”

I think this is the first time I have ever heard someone mourn the passing of the 1970s, and I told her so, adding—

“My grandmother would call you a Progress-hater.”

Avis laughed. “Maybe I am.”

“Progress” is something of an obsession with my grandmother. She loves the subtleties of old and new, is animated by them, in the same way that other people’s lives are spruced up by scrapbooking, astrology, Star Wars trivia or a good fundamentalist religious sect. Gigi grew up in Floyd, Virginia, a town which sits atop a damp, chilly mountain and lacks any convenient approach, even now. About once a year, she asks
someone to drive her “home” from Athens, Georgia, the town where she has lived for 65 years. She goes “home” to do “work” on the house she grew up in and still partly owns: a picturesque, if blighted and bee-infested, old farmhouse that shudders feebly when a screen door slams or the toilet flushes. This house and the land it sits on provide a temple for Gigi’s worship; she can see no wrong in it, even when the well pump bursts and the rosebud wallpaper crawls off the wall like a slime mold and the bees in the chimney bumble so loudly that two people sitting together on the musty horsehair sofa in the living room have to shout at each other to be heard. Gigi will suffer any inconvenience or discomfort, even now at 88, just to walk around her mother’s house, doing the chores she did, touching the same worn doorknobs, the same enamel pans and piano keys. If something is missing, Gigi knows it: once she caught Uncle Lee, a close family friend, smuggling a Cadillac trunk full of quilts out of the house, and Gigi had a fit:

“Virginia,” Lee pleaded, “they’re going to rot up here. Let me take them back to Athens to have them fixed up.”

“Nonsense,” Gigi said, and didn’t let Lee back to the farm for three years.

While at home, Gigi also likes to visit the neighbors, most of whom are cousins of some order. I remember one of these neighbors in particular because Gigi talked about him to other adults in the sort of whisper that made me pay attention. We visited this man only once, fifteen years ago, and as we approached his farm, Gigi began to shimmy around in her seat, bidding my father to slow the car, as if we were drawing up to the emerald gates of Oz. Leaning in to Dad’s shoulder, she whispered,
“Ed Phleggar doesn’t believe in Progress. See,” she paused and nodded down what looked to me to be a perfectly normal dirt lane, “he won’t even let the County pave his road.”

I am certain Ed Phleggar is long dead—he was an old man when I saw him—and I bet his road has been paved by now. The day we visited him, knowing what I did, I expected someone abnormal, sorcerous, but found only a blinking little man in blanched overalls. He was friendly and very nimble for his age, hopping in and out of the truck to show us the new calves and the view of the Little River from his hayfield. He and Gigi talked about the health of people they both knew and his son drove up on an old tractor and shook hands with my dad. None of this seemed out of the ordinary, and I probably wouldn’t have remembered the day at all if I hadn’t known that Ed Phleggar was a Progress-hater. During that visit, I felt a peculiar brand of curiosity and guilt that I remembered from a field trip in the third grade when I found out my best friend, who was Hare Krishna and a vegetarian, was so nervous about going into McDonald’s that she chose to sit outside on the curb next to a statue of the Hamburglar rather than come in and watch the rest of us excavate our Happy Meals. Something about her firm, disconcerted reluctance made me consider my McNuggets as I never had before. I still ate them, but I considered them, just I considered pavement for the first time at Ed Phleggar’s.

Gigi, I think, is about as politically magnanimous as old southern ladies come. She can forgive and justify my uncle Bob’s building condos as readily as she can overlook my voting for Ralph Nader in the 2000 presidential election. I have seen her carry on a red-hot romance with a set of ten Clydesdale-sized antique chairs like the ones her uncle, the country doctor, had in his dining room when she was a child. However, I
also know that she is irresistibly attracted to anything made of slick, white plastic—especially if it has George Foreman’s name on it, looks like a spaceship, or appears less durable and more likely to give the user Carpal Tunnel than any one of the dozen pepper grinders she already owns. I wonder about this: how Gigi can love both sides of Progress with equal enthusiasm, tenderness and sincerity, while Avis, who is 55 years her junior, can’t seem to get over the 1970s.

I rented Smokey and the Bandit a couple of weeks ago, though I wasn’t sure I was going to like it. The very name of the movie recalled the summers I spent sweating a damp spot into the sectional sofa at my dad’s house, cranking the channel knob on the tiny color TV. Every so often, I rotated past the image of a soaring Trans Am or of Burt Reynolds in a tomato colored shirt, his dark mustache dripping down the sides of his mouth. It is difficult to please a ten-year-old girl suffering from Georgia heat and bent on being bored and lonesome and dissatisfied with everything, and Smokey and the Bandit never provided a cure for my August funk. Maybe it looked too much like what I saw outside my sliding glass doors: the pines and baking cars, the distant cumulonimbus stacked into a white haze—the whole, boring scene poured and set in the bright cement of an overexposed filmstrip.

For those who managed to miss the movie, Burt Reynolds plays the Bandit, a renegade truck driver who takes a bet to drive his semi to Texas, pick up 400 cases of Coors beer, and smuggle the cargo back to Georgia in 28 hours. Back then, it seems, Coors was illegal in Georgia, and I’m not sure what would happen to you in Atlanta if you were caught with a can—not to mention a whole truckload—of the stuff, but the
studio couldn’t very well have the Bandit smuggling cocaine or illegal immigrants, so Coors it was.

In the movie, the Bandit doesn’t drive his fabulously gussied-up 18 wheeler (it’s got a bandit holding up a stage coach painted on the side of the trailer)—he gets his dopey friend Cletus to do it. Instead, he drives a decoy— the Trans Am, resplendent in black, with gold trim and the “screaming chicken” on the hood. In Texas, the Bandit picks up a runaway bride, and they are forthwith pursued all the way back to Georgia by her jilted groom and his father, a Texas sheriff (aka “Smokey”) played by Jackie Gleason. The rest of the movie is a big chase scene in which Smokey’s patrol car is completely destroyed, while the Trans Am floats around like a carpenter bee.

Not every scene was filmed in Georgia—a lot of the stunt work was done in Ojai, California—but even when the action of the movie takes place in Texas or Arkansas, I recognize the tall, undulating canopies and rusty cut banks of the Georgia Piedmont. I identify red speckled sourwood leaves in the love scene, and the ashen pavement of Georgia Highway 316 during the police chase through the big rig convoy. I know those farm ponds, those muddy sloughs and roadside wetlands, attracting squad cars like prehistoric animals to a tar pit.

There is a scene in which a police officer (claiming to be in Deeson, County, Arkansas) talks on a CB radio in front of some scrubby pines and a brown painted sign reading “Distinctive Brick Homes—Willow Bend—Clayton County’s Finest.” Clayton County, Georgia, just south of Atlanta, is one of the smallest counties in the state, but it is now among the most densely populated, thanks to thirty years of relentless development. The last time I was in Clayton County, every intersection was crammed with lustrous,
fastidiously designed real estate billboards, packed in the medians like campaign signs
during an election year. The hand-stenciled signs were gone, like much of Clayton
County itself, like the whitewashed roadside fruit stands and Burt Reynolds’ poured-on
blue jeans.

It is the same all around north Georgia: where kudzu once blanketed a farmyard
and cows munched in hazy pastures, now luxury SUVs glide along newly-minted asphalt.
Where Avis used to poke around in the rustling woods, discovering tumbled stone
foundations and wild turkey feathers, now she finds acres of respectable housing. She
drives forty miles to law school in downtown Atlanta each day in a sea of glossily lit
signage, an ocean of fussed-up block buildings, crammed with all the slick, white plastic
Gigi could ever want.

It occurs to me that Gigi knew Clayton County—knew all of north Georgia—long
before Avis or I ever did. In fact, in her living room hangs a large watercolor of a
dilapidated barn in shades of rust and gray, sitting in a copse of trees where a sloping
meadow swells up to a roughly shaded crust, the lip of a dirt track. My Aunt Sally
recently told me that the barn was painted by a friend of Gigi’s, on an outing they took
together sometime in the 1950s.

“That barn was just across the street from where Perimeter Mall is now, wasn’t it
Mama?” Sally asked Gigi as she and I stood before the painting in the dim underwater
light of Gigi’s living room.

“Oh yes,” Gigi said, looking over her reading glasses from her chair by the bay
window. “That was such a day! Mary Ellen and I drove all the way out to DeKalb County
because we heard a man had some Holsteins we could paint, but when we got there, the
fence had been torn down and there was just that old barn, so Mary Ellen painted it and I walked around in that pasture. I think she painted me in, if you look hard. That little road is the Ashford-Dunwoody, if you can believe it! What a beautiful day that was...

I have only been to Perimeter Mall a couple of times in my life, and there is a reason for that: Ashford-Dunwoody Road is one of the most infuriating stretches of pavement I have ever tried to maneuver. There is a resurfacing project endlessly in the works and a traffic light every fifty yards. The mall is enormous, and does not hug the road, but concentric rings of storefront radiate out from its epicenter, trimming Ashford-Dunwoody on both sides with chains of restaurants and mid-priced box stores. Gigi has been there, I am sure, and when she is there, sitting at a traffic light, sandwiched between a Linens ‘n’ Things and a 18-pump Exxon station, I wonder if she thinks of that day she walked around the sunny, empty pasture while Mary Ellen painted the crooked little barn and sunken road.

I thought of Gigi as I watched Smokey and the Bandit. As the Trans Am sped by rolling pastures, I remembered afternoons I spent with her as a child, when we walked into the field behind her house to visit her granite-speckled Appaloosa. I followed her through the long grass and fire ant hills, along the sagging barbed wire fence, to the edge of the shaded corner of the pasture where Sandman bobbed forward to meet us in his bare swipe of dust that smelled sweet with horse manure. As we walked, I always watched Gigi as she picked her knees up high to avoid the teeming ant mounds, her fine blonde hair lifting and settling in the breeze, and when we made it to Sandman’s corner, I admired her confidence as she pushed stumps of carrot between his lips with a broad
palm. It is in this landscape of low, summery hills that I always picture Gigi, though I know it is not where she pictures herself.

Gigi cries during documentaries about the Trail of Tears, at Christmas dinner when she has had too much rum, and every year when she leaves the farm in Virginia, but she would not cry for *Smokey and the Bandit*, I know, though she lives only 20 miles from where the convoy chase scene was filmed. When *I* think of Gigi, I picture her on the Georgia Piedmont, but when Gigi thinks of Gigi, she is on that high Virginia mountain, where Progress is still a choice to be made instead of a decision made for you. Of course, this is not *exactly* the truth of Floyd, Virginia, either, but it is true for Gigi—and for Ed Phleggar, if he is still alive—and I envy them this.

A few years ago, whoever owned Sandman’s pasture behind Gigi’s house sold it to a developer who built a gas station there. It is big, noisy, always sells the cheapest gas in town, and it illuminates the night with a chilly white glow that makes it difficult to see stars from Gigi’s yard anymore. When I asked her how she felt about her new neighbor, she shrugged:

“I don’t care as long as they build me a privacy fence.” The developers did that, in addition to taking down about 30 tall Sweetgums that separated the yard from the pasture, and Aunt Sally painted Sandman’s head on piece of plywood and mounted it on the fence so that it looks like the horse is looking through a stall window. Gigi clapped her hands when she saw this:

“Oh, isn’t it just exactly like when Sandman was alive?”

I thought about this a moment and shook my head. “Not exactly,” I answered.
I talked to Avis the other day—her car had broken down on the highway, and she was waiting for the tow truck to come.

“I just decided I’m moving into Atlanta,” she huffed when I picked up the phone.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“In my car On the side of the road. This is just stupid, driving every day I don’t even like it at home anymore. Did I tell you about the squirrels? The birds don’t even come to my feeders anymore because the damn squirrels chase them off. We didn’t used to have squirrels. And what’s the point in living forty miles out of town if you can’t feel like you’re living forty miles out of town? I’m buying birdseed for squirrels!”

She wasn’t in a good mood, but when she said she was moving into Atlanta, I believed her. It is too hard to try to love a place that isn’t there. It occurred to me as I hung up the phone with Avis that Gigi is so blessed. though she doesn’t live in the place she calls home, she can go back to it and revel in all the joys and inconveniences that the soggy old mountain has to offer, and then roll her Cadillac back down to the lowlands, smiling at the thought of her warm, convenient house in Athens with its silent chimney, its antiques and plastic pepper grinders, its chickens clucking in the holly trees. What amazing good luck it is to have the perception of choice—a single true, unfaltering thing waiting for you on the remotest mountain in Appalachia. I am glad Gigi will never coast down her rutted, apple-lined driveway to find, as Avis did, a clayflat where there was forest. For her, there will always be home and the truth of the ground anchoring her to the world. It is better, somehow, than watching it on DVD.
V. RIVER LIFE

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

-Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

Four years ago, on an October afternoon in the Monkey Barns parking lot, I squatted on the corroded asphalt, pouring formaldehyde from plastic gallon jars, through a strainer, and into a short, blue drum labeled HAZARDOUS WASTE in black capitals on red laboratory tape. It was warm out, but everywhere around Athens, the summer leaves were looking battered and listless. Behind the odors of oil in pavement and rotten effluent wafting up from the Oconee River—even behind the harsh, rich adhesive of formaldehyde to sinuses—I could smell the spell of summer breaking. I poured another gallon of preservative through the strainer and then picked a thin, gray fish from the rusted basket. It felt stiff and strangely cool between my fingers, almost as if it were giving off its own chill wind. I examined the body briefly, then plunked it back into the jar with the others, gave the whole thing a little shake, and handed it over to Bryan to pour in fresh water. It was just the two of us that day.

I didn’t know Bryan well—he had just started working in the stream ecology lab in July while I was on my honeymoon in Alaska. I got back in August and didn’t have my own project, so Bryan and I ended up working together most days, doing odd jobs around the lab and running errands: there was always PVC and waterproof glue to buy at the hardware store, data loggers to download in far flung counties, the gear shed to tidy,
trucks to drive over to the motor pool for repairs, and fish to organize in the Monkey Barns. The University of Georgia formally referred to the Monkey Barns as the “Ecology Annex,” but nobody ever called it that; the two buildings had been the site of primate experiments in the 1960’s, and many rooms retained their banks of rusty cages and creepy typed notices to graduate students about not forgetting to arrange for the feeding of their test subjects when they went on vacation. The buildings were low, long and grimy, sided with corrugated tin and condemned for everyday use because of high levels of asbestos. They were, however, useful for storage, and so our lab kept fish specimens there, along with other Ecology professors who stored their jars of dead map turtles, aged scientific journals, outboard motors and the colossal skeleton of a Right whale that washed up on the beach somewhere on the Georgia coast, and which stunk to high heaven. There was no ventilation in the Monkey Barns, so more often than not, Bryan and I worked out in the parking lot.

Bryan was a small, quiet man, handsome as a fairy prince, and we got along very well, in a shy, tacit sort of way. We barely ever spoke to one another, but once I came to understand that this pleased him very well—that he was, in fact, at his most communicative when silent—we began to correspond through gestures, the way people do when they speak different languages. For hours at a time, I siphoned formaldehyde off the gallons of dead fish, recently collected from rivers and streams all over the state, and he took the jars from me and poured in fresh water. A week later, I poured the water off the very same jars, and he replaced it with ethanol. Bryan used a kind of sign language to facilitate this process: as I unscrewed the lid from each new jar, he held out a hand to receive it, and if I forgot to pass the lid over to him, he wriggled his fingers so
that his purple nitrile glove squeaked. If I didn’t respond, he sighed, stood, and, with his mouth set in a line resembling an artist’s representation of a seagull in flight, he picked his way through the crowd of opalescent jars, and plucked the lid from the ground beside me. In this, as in all tasks, there was a lot of pointing and whistling to get each other’s attention, a lot of waving objects in the air for the other’s approval. This is how it worked between us, to his comfortable satisfaction and my amusement.

This day in October was unusual because, sitting cross-legged in the parking lot, pouring cold water over dead fish, Bryan spoke. He had been more distracted today than usual, I thought, and had taken to drumming on things with his index fingers: the hazardous waste drum, the dashboard of the truck, tabletops he passed in the hallway, the fronts of his corduroy trousers. I wondered what was the matter, and realized that I couldn’t even guess; I didn’t know a single thing about Bryan’s life, aside from what could be extrapolated from reading the titles of the books he toted around—this week it was a library’s copy of Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, and a month before it had been William Bartram’s *Travels*. The week I met him, he was finishing up *Moby Dick*. Otherwise, I only knew he had grown up around Atlanta, drove a red Toyota truck, and lived in a tent in his friend’s back yard (this last piece of information was gathered by a coworker and dispensed to me on my first day back from vacation). But he was certainly out of sorts today, and I had been fancying he might have fought with his girlfriend or had a run-in with some belligerent drug dealers, but due to a scarcity of clues affirming the existence of either girlfriend or drug habit, I was imagining his mother in the hospital, when he finally said something.
Of course, I had heard Bryan’s voice before; at least twice a day it was necessary for me to ask him a question, and for him to answer it. This time, though, the sound of it startled me because it came unsolicited. It was a deep, mumbling voice for someone so small. This is what he said:

“I’m going to a meeting tonight.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, trying to sound as if I thought it perfectly normal that he was telling me about his personal engagements. I poured the rest of the formaldehyde into the waste container and handed the jar to him. The ambient light was golden and slanted that afternoon, and for a moment, I watched a tulip poplar leaf over Bryan’s left shoulder flop around in a breezy slice of sunlight. He didn’t say anything more, so I pressed, lightly:

“What kind of meeting?”

“Well,” his voice sounded rusty, and he stopped, as if he wanted to leave it at that. He pushed his glasses up on his nose and looked at me. I noticed his eyes were penny colored, and that his brows were straight, creating the look of a prairie horizon separating the landscape of his lower features from his high forehead, where a mole, the same color as his eyes, sat above the bridge of his nose like a moon. I opened another jar of fish and handed him the lid. He took a breath, caught it, and continued:

“Well, I have these friends...um, I mean, these friends and I have come up with this project—it’s a river project.” He paused and I nodded, handing him the jar of fish, which he took, but did not fill. “Well, I know you’ve been to a lot of rivers around here, and I know you know about fish.” He gazed into the mouth of the jar. “I was wondering if you could come to our meeting tonight.”
“Where is it going to be?” I asked. He named a bar downtown where they showed silent movies every Saturday and people drank Pabst Blue Ribbon out of cans.

Suddenly I felt a little nervous. “So, what is this river project?”

Bryan smiled—he was perking up now—and began pouring water into the jar as he answered: “Well, it’s called the Georgia River Survey. A few of us are going to canoe down every river in Georgia next summer. There are something like 30 rivers in the whole state. We’re going to camp on the banks and collect data on the plants and birds and insects we see, and maybe even fish, if you can help us. It’ll be like a snapshot of Georgia in one year. We’re going to talk to people—fishermen and whoever’s on the banks—to see what they know, and we’re going to write a book about it at the end, like Bartram’s Traves.” He paused and screwed the lid on the jar. “You’ve been down rivers before, right?”

I nodded. “In Montana, and once in Alaska—mostly for school when I was an undergrad.”

Bryan smiled. “I’ve only been down the Oconee—almost the whole thing, except we skipped the reservoirs.” He looked at the riparian trees behind me—we were close enough to the Oconee to hear it, had it been making any noise. “That was just after I graduated from college, and it was the first time I ever thought of Georgia as being a real place, real wilderness. I was in Boy Scouts and everything when I was a kid, but we never went anywhere good—anywhere kids would want to go. We went to state parks and threw pine cones at each other and then came back to Atlanta.

“That week on the river, I forgot what music sounded like, I forgot what it was like to need refrigerators and toilets. I got in the car at the end of one week and was
amazed at how fast the car could go. We listened to this David Bowie album, and I thought, ‘this is the greatest thing I’ve ever heard,’ and I went into a convenience store and looked around and couldn’t believe it all—it was so…” He shook his head, and wrinkled his nose. “I mean, I wanted it all—even the crap I usually wouldn’t even think of eating—but at the same time, I could conceive of how much I didn’t need it. How nobody needs it. That trip taught me something about being a person, and I thought to myself, ‘I’ve got to remember this,’ but I forgot it all. I want to go down the river again—all the rivers—so I can remember those feelings. I think they were the most important things I ever felt. Everyone should go down a river once in their lives.”

One of the happiest moments in my life had been on the first night of a two-week river trip, a couple of years before Bryan told me all of this. I was alone in a tiny tent on the Missouri River near Fort Benton, Montana, and it was raining. I slept that night zipped up in my dirty old down sleeping bag, listening to the rain smacking my tent fly with loud, wet kisses that I dreamt were meant for me—tokens of love and welcome from the out-of-doors, from the river, from the live silver fishes in their beds, from the giant white pelicans that circled overhead and slipped by on the brown water like ghosts from the sea. I knew what Bryan meant by wanting to remember these things. I wanted to remember them, too.

I went to the bar that evening, and within the year, Bryan was on the river again. The Georgia River Survey didn’t make their 30 rivers in one summer—in fact, they only canoed three. They were long, sunburned, lovely trips full of sandbar camping and undercooked beans. In their first year, in the middle of my divorce, my mother and I floated the Etowah River with them, and it made me remember how a river can bring you
back to yourself. In their third year, just before Bryan and I moved together to Montana, I spent a week with them on the Altamaha, and it reminded me of how much I would miss my beautiful home.

This year, we will go back to canoe the Oconee River. We are older now, and more of us have jobs and obligations—some of Bryan’s friends have dropped out of the project, others have dropped in—but every year it works. Every year, around November, a letter arrives in the mail or pops up on the computer screen from someone in poor spirits, asking which river it will be this year.