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South An Errant Geography

Mary M. Taylor

University of Massachusetts Amherst, marymcduffietaylor@gmail.com

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SOUTH
An Errant Geography

A Thesis Presented
by
DUFFIE TAYLOR

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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M.F.A. Program for Poets and Writers

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SOUTH AN ERRANT GEOGRAPHY

A Thesis Presented

by

DUFFIE TAYLOR

Approved as to style and content by:

James Tate, Chair

Dara Wier, Member

James Haug, Member

Sabina Murray, Director
M.F.A. Program for Poets and Writers

Jenny Spencer, Chair
Department of English

ABSTRACT

SOUTH

An Errant Geography

SEMPTEMBER 2015

DUFFIE TAYLOR, B.A., HOLLINS UNIVERSITY

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor James Tate

A collection of poems.

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BURAS

Nelly left days ago and we have not found her. She carries so much wool in her pocket. The pockets at home are not near as suitable for long walking, the long walking I enjoy on days when the sun sets too early or late. If that doesn't happen, I usually swim off the end of my pier. I never take the inner-tube but if it is morning and the birds are out, I will take the crab trap. Lugging a crab trap uphill I too often wish for rain. Rain could come to us at any season but for February only clouds come low. When dinner is ready, we don't hear a bell or footsteps. Small whispers while scrubbing our plates with brine water. Nelly would always speak in a way that had nothing to do with me. She would always dry her hair in the shadow of the door. Back and forth back and forth she climbed carrying bedsheets or brooms or colanders of white plums. Outside spicebrush grew, hair for our dolls. Inside asparagus lay limp on our plates. Things would be left always it seemed. Coins in a ribbon case, keys in a clothes hamper. Avocado and yogurt and honey mixed up in a paste inside the fridge. We bought a sheep hound for the days we had to leave ourselves. We bought it for the days we heard voices in the walls. We bought it for the green and white that would happen in winter. We bought it for Nelly's delicate fingers. My shawl. The pier sagged after the first storm. It was more red mud. We were so tired huddled together with amber in our glasses. That was the honey locust. Our food was simple. Trains brought it across the river in veins. A big wheel would turn. She would yell, jump, jump! I could see little faces in the seaweed. I saw spades on the way back to the cellar. I saw feathertails. Higher than pine needles, my lungs would burn. And sometimes, on the back porch, we would tell stories.

NATCHEZ

I saw ankles turn as the rocker moved. I could smell the distance between cypress and cypress and swamp gum. I heard footsteps late on the floorboard. Low agonies across the hall for many years. For a while it was the little white wagon and difficult latch. New Year's Eve was swept by dust. We never forgot the sudden bones it left. She froze bacon and a little venison. The coffee boiled over. We ate late, too late. My tooth chipped on the cold tile. He pointed and said, rats. We saw a small, firm body and buried it. From the graveyard, we heard moaning.

CLANTON

We were west of the large crowds. This was before the great gold rush. Women were warned to secure the corncrib. I had seventeen children. Even when available, there were scarcely few mourning loved ones. Those that made laws were hesitant to shift the tax burden. Governor Johnson had an answer, as everyone seemingly did. Blacks certainly had no monopoly on power as the invisible empire controlled city politics. I was not content to step aside but in such timber frameworks tensions did end.

BOAZ

God meant Alabama to mean a white man's streetcar. We do not trust you with the reins. By Christian advocate, do you mean an empty sleeve in a Democratic coat? Many women resume lives interrupted by war. We are part of the consumer demand that is, relatively, unshaken.

MOUNDVILLE

We met in three conventions, far more insidious in theory. They said, these are the farmers, all poor and forlorn. Actually, we were farming in a climactic distribution of red murrain. That was Moundville then. We were on guard for potentialities that pushed yeoman out of developing. And yes, we were farmers but had good dirt of our own. We had transitioned out of cattle into the culture grain-fruit. This was far more than just a budding localism, this was the sandy bottomlands of our age.

CONECUH

My hiding place before it became a wooden palisade wall. Before it became his turn at wildcatting. Before it became transactions of feldspar. I watched them through the creeping fig, counting their rag money. I mixed a little orange flower rose water, but I didn't pour it anywhere, it was just a thing I kept. I whistled all day on Good Friday but no one noticed. He was like the dusk stained fields. I heard him say, Where are you going? He walked past the currant bush and the river bluff into the water. My wedding was grey and a hawk that never left. But you can get tired of gleeful sayings.

MARION

They gave him tools, and left him to live or die. The land, they said, was fever-ridden. They were fooled, they were always fooled, but this time they had the low-hanging mists. The man was free in the swamp gas. When they saw he was thriving and healthy and fat, they came back again.

PEMBROKE

On either side, the porches were magnificent. With lips firmly compressed, she sewed our aprons. The wrist moved like a metal thread. She threw a stone at my heel. At night, the dogs circled. I was born with hair drawn smoothly around my temples. I had meant to deliver her letter. It was a wandering I intended. It was a rope but I had wished for a cutlass. I held onto the sides of the boat as it rocked. There were no angels. I still remember the sound of belt buckle. Of the wind, never.

SANIBEL

This was the unclean place full of blood. There were baskets and baskets of hooks. We spent ten years and it amounted to 500 shekels. We took refuge in a cave, but like everything, it was unsecret. He loved us like depths. He loved us like bodies on a tree for the kites to eat. Later we wondered how light had been created. I did what my sister had done.

FALMOUTH

Past the river wood, we skin the furs. The blue smoke spoils us after the flatlands. To feel it further, we cast off our clothes. Nolan shines like an emerald body. Cold comes finally like a superior promise, and we use what we have done in this place. We warm to our memories, as our mouths once, the squirrel taste. Stars look down at us from high shelves as we sleep off the part we had forgotten. The next day it could have snowed. The next day we could have eaten pears. Then, the Uruguayan came.

PALMDALE

Two dram shops. A few tanneries for our timber culture. No suitable lack of field hands. A host of men, particularly newspaper editors. Homes to school ourselves in vague and impractical theories. Whores, on the port's east end. Next to the shipbuilders, adequate heat. Wax work, particularly at fairs. Magazines. A livery.

DAMASCUS

In a region more isolated than those struggling with cotton so we find ourselves. The area is flatter and doesn't suit our family. We are largely ignoring our neighbors to combat western growers who wish to add cotton to our struggles. There are three reasons why living here is foolish: We are crazed to work. We are excellent cherry pickers. We have cold, hopeless nights and care for them a great deal.

BOONVILLE

Doctor MacDowell ruled our town. He was a real knee-bender. That's what people would say when rumors surfaced he wanted to apply chemistry to farming. I called him that to his face because I was brave. I was standing next to a white heifer. That gave me a little bit of clout, but still he said, Oh, don't be sorrowful. Steadfastly, the great primary truth continued.

LEARY

We couldn't believe it when our peaches rotted in the ground. This was the day of the ox fattening. We had just had two very similar wars. When George saw the hoarfrost, he sent Laura Anne Kroft to pick up Charles M. Shelley. That was one rough buggy ride.

REBECCA

I was in *that* town. When mother died, I said, Peace to her, best of women, and hauled her off to the undertaker. James Marbury was one of us. So was Ed Schlotz. Every vote we took won by the narrowest of margins. The narrowest was our vote for readmission into America. In August we voted to add national bank notes to the circulation. Marbury raised a stink. He was our leading Unionist and no friend of J.T. Webb. Scholtz, the peacemaker that he is, tacked on amendment after amendment trying to smooth that cocksucker's passage. To little effect, however. If my mother had been alive, that never would have happened.

MULLET KEY

It is distressingly insignificant here. As history goes, we were a rock that only after a very long time became an island. All day long we read the American Literary Critic Stanley Fish. We don't care about him at all, we are just developing responses to his words and recording them in our daybooks. Sometimes we carry them around in our cape pockets so he doesn't feel alone.

SALT BAYOU

Very salty. Several rare instances of alligators eating passersby, usually jogging, usually women. Cases of sore tongue, anal fistula. We were exposed to beautiful amounts of artwork. Our loved ones were our significant others. As might be expected, if you had a color variant of the mineral beryl, you were as good as dead.

WAVELAND

Water is rising. It happens very suddenly along the shoreline. Even so, we were at a little at a loss during last year's storm surge. Some people brought out rulers and measured the size of the walls. Others called a neighboring parish, because that's what you do when you don't know, you call a neighbor. People held parties as a way to mask the general swelling anxiety, but reports as to their size and frequency were grossly exaggerated. It is true to say alcohol was eventually banned, and at no point were we united. In hindsight, we should have shored up the levees or at least stayed away from shipping channels. We assumed death would take longer, but in reality, it was like a few hours.

NEW ORLEANS

If you wish to be buried, you must leave this place. We have a single gold sarcophagus, and our lambs always come first. This isn't science, but it's biblical. One must preserve one's priorities when lives contain so many years. Our life expectancy is somewhat higher than elsewhere, and we believe that's because we're fishers of men. Not everyone is blessed with such water. This is the funny thing about the whole thing: we were originally a merchant's ruse! You should see how they look at us now though. Such river envy.

CLANCY

Come on in, we're air-conditioned. Next to Dillingham Feed & Seed, vacancy upon vacancy. Young father with grease on your chin, you are most welcome. We have 23 French women, all with yellow fever unfortunately. There is Ahaya, the cowkeeper. There is the man that cleaned Jenkins' ear. There is Arthur, he's facing charges. There's Lehora, with whom I begrudgingly share a feed trough. All our women are healthy in the most important sense. There is the town illustrator; he keeps to himself mostly. He could be a poet for once I overheard him in line at Dillingham Feed & Seed. I think he said, The cows were mine the night they followed me over the hills.

DUBLIN

That was the night that outshone the moon. Everyone remembers it, even poor people. Even those that forgot the coming of the first steamboat. My father was stern when he said, Soon there will be a wringing of hands. I kept looking at my calendar feeling unsure. There were no howling dogs. There were no horseshoes. I felt stupid and scared to pray, so many times I had been disappointed. I went out on the sidewalk to see if anyone shared my stupid feeling. One lady holding her stomach passed in my opposite direction. I walked up to a tree I knew, the most solid thing I could think of. That's when the thing happened that so many insist is a lie. Even to this day, after books have been written, it still remains unmentioned. Of course, philosophers may think what they want, but I was nine years old, with remarkably good eyes.

MARIETTA

Before the Sope Creek paper mills, before the Great Locomotive Chase, before Sherman's March to the Sea, before they stole the engine and the car behind it, before those 3,000 graves, before that blasted Anti-Defamation League, before Kilpatrick set the town ablaze, before George Winters and James Waller, before the Western and Atlantic Railroad, before the merchant of terror knew anything about horse racing, before Dr. Cox and his cocksure "water cure", before twenty one men spent the night at Dix Fletcher's, before tanyards became thriving businesses, before Zachary Taylor ever came from Washington City, before Jacob Parrot won the medal of honor, before twenty-two spies boarded a train in front of a hotel, before Benjamin Parks stubbed his toe on a gold nugget, before any white man ever won a land lottery, before Leo Frank was lynched at 1200 Roswell Road, we as Choctaws rather chose to suffer and be free.

HOUMA

Get a goat in the yard, you've got the whole town talking. Get one in a cane field, you've got nothing short of political turmoil. You know that Haddock girl's collecting stones, putting them all over the yard in horizontal rows? Calls them her St. Augustine Tables. Whatever. When I heard Herrin killed 18 hogs at the Walker Place, I said, Oh lord, here we go. Day before yesterday he sent up some lard and spare ribs, presuming to smooth things over. Marianne said he was 2 hams shy of a square deal. I told her she'd be wise to tend her goats. And she would too. That woman's got goats everywhere, all over the place. For God sakes, she puts them in poems.

VERNON

I'm going to clear this up right now. Joe Moore is and was a bald-faced liar, and how his racehorse ever got mixed up with the likes of Vernon, I'll never know. That man went bankrupt on racehorses, the county hauled every last one off that land before he had yet to take his last breath, yet folks are still talking about that fool as if he had something to do with our legacy. A racehorse? Please. Then, I hear they're saying we were at the store drunk. We weren't drunk! And why in sam-hill would we name this town after a mule? That's worse than a racehorse, by God. What kind of drunk are these folks talking about? I'd like to get into it a time or two with Paul Suthers, yet for Thelma's sake, bit my lip. Then a man stops by the house today talking all about how we had named our town after a fine American Naval Officer from Durham, North Carolina. He even had gall to ask if he could top off his tank with my gas can. Took me about two seconds to tell that Yankee to get the hell off my property. Course Thelma wasn't too happy about it, but that's beside the point. About time a man's honor prevent him from compliance.

PEIGNEUR

It was a royal fog. They found the oars. No they didn't. They thought they found them, and we led them to believe it. What they really found was driftwood. People delude themselves in water, as if it's not that 40,000 acres. He came up to me after, as if I could return something alive to him. He still does.

PORT GIBSON

If you have grievances, take it up with the War Department. We have no free populations. We bemoan our northern portion. We thought it simple to conclude few men deserve such vessels. It's simple, isn't it? Those that don't have backs, and those that do are using them.

CAMDEN

Watts returned home, finally. You would think he would have brought money with him. He sure brought plenty of ideas. First thing he says, Mama, I'm free as a Silverite. I said, Well, honey, that ain't that free.

SAVANNAH

We keep our doors dead bolted. We are wise as Solomon. We have 2 million pounds of deer. We live off the land, by Sherman's estimate. Sherman has his days, and I'll leave it at that, on account of that Christmas gift. I hate when people look at us and say, railroads, railroads, railroads. Ahem, we have a river. Not to mention the public drinking policy.

OPELIKA

Here you can exchange a pig for spirits, no questions asked. We have other problems however. Beefsteak is unlucky. Plums, an injurious indulgence. We're plumb-out of split-bottom chairs. If only we could trade them for puncheons. Last month they declared us a milltown, and women were whipped shirtless in the streets. Now and then a housewife ventures outside to visit a stranger. What nerve, we womenfolk think. It's like openly courting the sun in land-loving days.

DUTTON

I can keep soberer than any man in these localities. That's what happens when you live with the clay eaters. Don't ever breed with a water bucket near the door. She will come out wide as a Banyan tree. Currently she sleeps on a shelf wrapped in bearskin. With such a child, there is no higher ground.

JOPLIN

The wind caught up in the trees. We branded the smaller herds. There were thousands. He held the barbed wire in his hands. For a while, it held. For a while, they were efficiently managed. Little of us would work outside of winds. Then the wind caught fire.

MOBILE

An architecture without porches is threatening to invade us. What next, warm drinks, wool clothing? Luckily we are south of the Canadian winds. Luckily our river systems are capable. They have run so far to reach us, at least 300 leagues. In some not so distant day a western land could receive European industry assistance by virtue of our canal. I still don't know if what we want is the right thing if we eventually end up losing. Or end up loving what we've lost. If we forget what never happened on the veranda. If we never love the flax petticoats we wore. If we give up the iced tea.

SELMA

Sunday we rose to the sound of digging. Cotton burning for miles along the picket. Bale upon bale, air choked with resin. Peter never slept. He went with the others to throw whiskey in the river. Before he left, I cut a button from his coat. You might die, I thought. It seemed like something I should do. Whiskey had never been thrown in the river, never. With the dawn, I wrapped some dry bread and climbed the roof to watch the red glow from the foundry, the roar of engine burn. Below pig mouths slapped noisily against the grain, against all human wandering. Everything might die, I thought, this rusk, these pigs. But I was just a girl. I had no idea what I carried.

FANNIN

We may, by the end of ten years, be living in a frame-house. For now her face turns westward. We have traveled so many places where splitting shingles was as common as whistling. Here the sound is marled, like a sap that rises. We are known by the National Weather Service, but only for ill-kept cattle. How this wounds her into wanting more than our means. Sometimes I think the luxury of a window wouldn't be enough. Sometimes I think if I raised my bridle-hand, but I am not my father, and I am not her father. I still remember the day I came back from the years without her, and she looked at me from across the fence line, as if waiting for a true sign.

BIRMINGHAM

Look at that assassination house on wheels. Remember the days when danger was something stable? Now we must reckon with electric light, automobiles. Whatever happened to going out in the catalpa orchard to watch the caterpillars eat? Whatever happened to taking a cane knife to a venomous snake? I can't stand city voters. We have enough on our hands with unionists and rioters and women's organizations. We have enough on our hands with educated blacks. Puerto Ricans. Catholics.

LOWER PEACH TREE

In 1913, we sent out a flood of telegrams. Thank God the Red Cross paid attention. It was more than just telegraph poles and gas mains at stake. People were involved, questions of immortality raised. Suburban houses were submerged up to their eaves. And that business died some found equally sobering. People forget how hard it was to secure good insurance then. They only remember the parts they want to remember. For example, they don't remember that we lived in our excrement, that we accepted compromises most would find abhorrent. They don't remember the stacks and stacks of mud-ruined furniture. They don't remember the naked man hurtling through our dining room window. Or if they do, they forget what he asked or how immediately, how sweetly he asked to be lent a pair of trousers.

ATLANTA

This city could go on forever. Because, in fact, there are an endless number of trees to name our avenues, and enough heroes to fill our streets. If you need to see through this benighted neighborhood, look to the lamps we have kindled on our doorsteps. Look to the boy in pantaloons singing. It is not always a sad song, this place. And not so different from your urge to be wild and wanton. You have been here once, I promise. I saw you sitting under a lintel. I saw you sitting in the rain.

CRAWFORD

I'm suffering by Flint River. We will never reach the Mohawk. I have done so many things I regret. I regret moving, I regret leaving you. We have stayed here too long, weeks and weeks, waiting for water low enough to cross. I remember the days when it was enough to sift flour for sweetcakes all afternoon. I don't know what I was thinking about, I don't know if I was thinking. I think I was thinking, we will soon arrive at the place where rivers are older than ridges. Perhaps I was just a cat rutting in the wind. I hate to think of it that way, Laura, but perhaps loving is a kind of ambition, glorious not for what it is but what it can never be when it is lost.

CANAL POINT

That was a severe winter. We pursued them by their hatchet strokes. I heard their voices at night over a fire. They made my job easy, sending smoke signals. At last I was old enough to kneel between them with the palm basket, feeling the cloth as it rose and fell with each hand. Hah, they thought I was ugly and old, and there I was, beautiful, startling, smelling the fire that grew red dust on their necks. I was never loyal, not once. I went right back to Efta and lay between her thighs. We made sounds together in spite of sleep. We talked about the ways sassafras could send them to their dying clothes. We laughed and laughed, thinking, what do you know of the roots we eat, the bark we wear? Still, it was not all for Efta. I was like a boy sent out to fetch pine nuts returning with firewood. At last, Efta sensed the disparity in our knowledge. What do you know of the moon house? she chided. Have you bled in water naked and cold? Soon the weather was calmer, warmer. In the mornings I delayed, drinking hickory milk. One morning I didn't say goodbye to her. When I caught up to them, they were praying to the Toya with some kind of limestone ornament. They had dressed themselves in deer fur and bell-like stockings. I did not care for their fire in this weather. I walked past and they called out: You, you, Matron of the Night Ash, but it meant nothing. Hah, I was young again and a lake of green clouding stood before me. I took off the scarlett bark, exposing my beauty to the water. Naked and cold I bled across its body, never once seeing the other side.

PORT ST. JOE

St. Joseph Bay is on the right side of the Cape San Blas. It is navigable for a long distance until it drains into an endless number of mouths. Here no wind can be felt, only incessant rain. Here, they hate pearls for the sake of oysters which they love and never eat. You say, how could oysters exist without wind? How could someone hate a pearl? I've asked the same questions myself, both to scientists and romantics. To some fur-trappers too, Portuguese or otherwise. Beautiful male sunbathers. Little girls, grief stricken. These were the kinds of people I consulted. I received answers and would receive more, it is to be presumed. I've chosen to end my inquiry, however. For the sake of oysters, yes, but also for my father, who would not want me to be long-winded.

ISLAMORADA

I wish for a man, six feet tall with a child's face. He will lay with his feet toward the fire, and rise with a four-year-old ox by his side. I will not eat his *Pampanos* for any price. Did he want the candleberry myrtle that grew along the seashore? Or did he want her, the hands that carried it to him? Today we attach silk grass to wooden hooks and walk along the burning sand. He tells me elk is found in higher latitudes, as if I knew no Spanish fisherman from Havannah. Two girls wearing trumpet vines approach, the shortest one's sweat visibly beating. They offer us oil from a shark's liver, but he insists the ox cannot be sold for less than forty-one shillings. My face is red with shame. Surely this man cannot protect me from a falling top-mast or a lonesome dampness. I can easily see his roes of black drum are no different from the Spaniards' caviar, that I have once again been deceived by a childish face. I turn to the girls while he and the ox pee in the oak scrub. I say, If you kill this man, I will walk with you at least to the plains of Diego.

PENSACOLA

Oh yes we are too. A man with silver hair loved a girl and she walked into dangerous water because she had mistaken his love for a kind of indifference, which happens here, and in other cities. Suicides aren't really common enough to do studies about, and evidence has shown that if one studies things too closely, one falls in love like God with us. Or fathers, their daughters. Or nuns, their pen pals, who are inmates. Here, we do not let inmates out of our jails, but we do let others inside to stay like a hotel. In truth, it's sort of like a nudist colony in there. But it's not because people are horny, it's because they are poor. Even the disgruntled nuns must abide. They have fallen in love, you see.

MIM'S FERRY

If you want to know something really scary and heart-throbbing, you must return to the 1812 census. That was our year. It felt like the world's light was shining down on us. It felt like everywhere else was just stupid Mars or the unfathomable abyss that lies at the bottom of all our oceans. I was not there, but reading dusty, old records in a small-town library is unto another place. Like looking out a long red window full of pain you can feel that is not yours. Of course, it's up to you, all of this. Small town libraries really don't have many rules. You can go in there and sleep. You can argue with books in your head during opening hours. But holidays are disappointing, because they won't let you in. And there are many: Veteran's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Memorial Day, Columbus. There's really a lot more days than that I'm afraid, and I meant what I said when I said you can't go in. Your only choice is to check out a book and read it in your own dusty home.

TALLAHASSEE

This is how virtuous we are. We found fault with Mayor Jeremiah Moore, not for his politics or Presbyterianism, not for his race or skin color, not for his grandson born out of wedlock, not for his questionable stance on the Armenian genocide, not for his spitting in the face of our military, not for his removal of homeless people from benches, not for his allergy to Penicillin, not for his tryst with a reporter from the New York Times, not for his desire to have breasts, not for his refusal to celebrate National Pina Colada Day, not for his support of Gay Marriage, not for his advice to Rosalind Baker, or the black eye he awarded her at one of his over-the-top Hawaiian pool parties. We found fault with him solely for the caution he displayed when it came to funding our local Animal Shelter. He said, and I quote, “It is my opinion every feline ought to be licensed and vaccinated, but as far as funding for the Animal Shelter goes, there are, at present, other priorities.”

BROOKSVILLE

Another mystery pregnancy is rocking our world, and Jesus died oh so long ago. Can I help that I didn't want my baby anymore? You look at me like I am a monster, but she looked at me like that. And I could not get rid of her whereas you can throw me in jail or turn off your TV screen. That's all I meant: to turn off my TV screen. I don't like scary movies, and I didn't know it would be a scary movie, I thought it would be a beautiful *Casablanca* romance with a little bit of hard-core fucking. I would have settled for some kind of sentimental *ET*. Pregnancy is such a lottery, such a painful, painful lottery. You have to love everything you get.

GARDEN CITY

After our lunches, we have nightcaps, and go strolling around the flower border. Once we were intimate like loosely bound paper. Now we are cradling our heads between our shoulders. This is so not good. Look at the fear you have in your eyes for the man with the newspaper! Did you see how awkwardly you stumbled into ordering a beignet? Sweetheart, what are we doing? I don't want to live in a land full of nightingales! Delphinium! Delphinium, please, take me away from this place. Say goodbye to us in order for me to say goodbye to us. Say goodbye to us before goodbye to us becomes something else. Like nightingales, not even sad anymore.

PALM BEACH

Someone built a lighthouse and we decided to stay. Our pottery was crap. Some widow came here after her husband died. He was a chump with some kind of money-- steel money, mob money, oil money, orange money, who gives a shit, he lifted her into a lifeboat through a window, and that was that. We did not bring coalsacks to the courtyard but a dude brought his Listerine. Once we sat behind a six tiered sugar-white cake inside the grand ballroom of a giant wooden hotel, awarding slices as prizes to dressed-up black dancing couples dubbed "cake-ists" by us, millionaire cocksuckers that we were. "Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay!" Yeah, we still are. One morning at a breakfast table a housewife serenely announced she was leaving these coconut plantations and orange groves for the prospect of marrying the Czar of all Russias. She was promptly committed to an asylum. The geriatric husband married a 30-year-old orphan and move into a pillared, marbled gold palace people compared to a garish railroad car. Every night his new wife threw that day's dress in the garbage. Meanwhile, he was downstairs, wishing he'd bought a shack. 1917 was kind of historic. Two rich sick thugs were sitting outside the wood hotel asking themselves what they wanted to do with their millions. The dying fat one said, "I'd build something not wooden and paint it yellow." So that happened, which was stupid. Some lady wanted to build a house like a Thailand temple with a bunch of blue and white porcelain elephants and yellow lemon tile everywhere. So that happened, which was stupid. The wooden hotel died eventually, rotted to the ground. As did the Astors, the Vanderbilts, the Lamberts, the Flaglers, the Goulds, the Stotesburys, the Gates, the Wanamakers, the Bradleys and a whole lot of other motherfuckers. Of course, some were in debt by then or had left the area due to medical problems. We're still around though. This sand's got business possibility. Gas, oranges, condo building. Some cheap Russian labor. Salt of the earth, isn't that what they say? Oh yeah, fuck the Kennedys.

TAMPA

Our finger canals are chock-full of fecal matter. In August, our shoes turn blue. A flower is something boring and old. Snow is a miraculous festival. Oh September, Oh hurricane. Blonds are as common as cockroaches. Intellectual activity we like to keep at bare minimum. Church picnics can get mighty rowdy. Retirees can last a long time, if they're careful. We have a Latin or Jew for your every pilgrim father. Like you, we arrived sort of like a violation. It didn't end there, so to speak. Guava seeds arrived in the mouths of mockingbirds, etc. Our patron saints were born in bars. Children played a vital role in our cigar factories. We've moved on to retail and finance, where they're slightly less helpful, so we send them to school instead. Twentysomethings love us, we're still deciding. Our urban areas are full of passenger traffic from cruise lines. We are living in a biotic extreme you cannot even fathom. You're jealous of us because our vote counts. No, it *really* counts.

NETTERVILLE LANDING

We are ornery per se, but not hard won. Hernando de Soto came first and contributed nothing. Nothing. We knew horses were superior to people long before his muddied our sawgrass. De Soto was really a sheepish character, fashioning lances from ash trees and such. His men waddled around in stiff velvet suits, stole a hog or two, but beyond that, weren't much trouble. An annoyance, to be sure. "Apalachen!", "Vive Louis!", "La bas Espagnol!" they bellowed, tripping over themselves in the forest. Yet for all that unintelligible screaming, not one returned with a partridge on his back. We did what we could, putting them up for a night, filling their bellies. We lent them blankets when they said they lost all their clothes. They came back and back and back. Finally, we gave them a woman in exchange for a looking glass, though it was less a transaction than a parting gift. Or perhaps, an act of pity.

ST. FRANCISVILLE

It wasn't till Bienville came that we realized the hardline spirit of republicanism. That man was a butcherer. He ruined our rocks ramming his barge against the coastline. So did his friend Iberville. Both kept blabbering on about river-gods pouring gold into our ears, which seemed to us, if anything, an exercise in futility. On one project, the two worked as a sort of tag-team, beheading 80 heavily pregnant women and ripping the noses off nearly 150 infants. They did this with such painstaking precision, such backbreaking care, there must be a reason. What else could justify the woman with a mustache being spared as the natural choice to sew the fleur-de-lis onto all their flags and clothes?

TIFTON

We keep black sheep of good families confined in sordid places. Reasons are varied. Some say principle, others hygiene. Louis, we smothered with a cloak. We had tried a cow patty, a hen house, an ironing closet. We entered him in a cockroach eating contest (he refused). We put him in front of a tail rotor blade (he dodged). We tried to toss him in the town sewage tank, but we fell in before he did, limber fellow. He was no black sheep though. More like bad apple.

ORLANDO

We run out of shower curtains like old folks run out of toilet paper. Our police are kind, if not weary. We've forgone traffic lights in favor of conviction and common sense. We must commonly make decisions between the general public aesthetic and people's lives. We realize this is what morality is, however that doesn't make it any less unpleasant. Surprisingly, watching a field of flowers drowning can be as devastating as a drove of children. Call us old-fashioned, like a Tampan did yesterday, I guess as a way of patronizing us for taking our problems so seriously. Of course, Tampans live in a wasteland by comparison. They have at least as many weirdoes as Fort Lauderdale, maybe more. Most days we do brave our beauty with a certain degree of forbearance, yet other days lack the same fortitude in our souls. We catch ourselves quietly wishing we didn't have to live in a Sophia Loren, that we could live in a Myrtle Weltzer instead. We would like people to come here and at least be surprised. Like Tampa, no one goes there with the idea anything beautiful will happen. Or if we were more audacious and arrogant, that would help. I know it seems a bit silly, but most of us have the expectations of Job. We kind of just wish it would happen already.

WHITE SPRINGS

The statistics are in. Doctors have concluded. People are talking. The state vouches for the salubrious effects of our climate, particularly. While elsewhere you may be improved, here you are fully restored. Rest assured, you will leave this 455 mile stretch of sunshine, pop. 808, randy as the day you were born. Doctors are nowhere to be seen. CVS and Walgreens have fled in embarrassment. Medical students walk around confused. Nurses have been foreclosed upon, our hospitals now their homeless shelters. All you see when you walk by are shuttered windows, and the occasional shamed-face peeping out at us from the shadows. 99% of our unemployed are hopelessly educated. They harass you with their medical charts, shouting fancy Latin words. We laugh, laugh, laugh. If you're interested, the following maladies are cured within 5-7 days of residency: hay fever, gonorrhea, gout, lupus, rickets, gangrene, asthma, tongue cancer (stick it out), male pattern baldness, abnormally large ovaries, abnormally large breasts, homosexuality, Type 2 diabetes, cyclic vomiting syndrome, scurvy, insomnia, melanoma (surprisingly), Cotard's syndrome, anorexia, opiate addiction, pedophilia, lung cancer, rosacea, gum disease, halitosis, walking sickness, amnesia, bedwetting. Others take up to two weeks or, if female, perhaps a month: hand tremor, night terrors, Urinary Tract Infection, love of books, hypertension, excessive sweating, heartburn, virginity, acne, Mad Cow Disease, acid reflux, and, strangely enough, the Bubonic Plague. As to various mental deficiencies, I'm sorry, we can't help you. I purposefully did not mention arthritis, because there's been a bit of debate about that. *Arthritis Today* still has a small clinic set up, despite a measly clientele. Most are naive out-of-towners or defensive subscribers. I don't wish to add fuel to the fire necessarily, but did I mention I'm 102, happily taking dancing lessons?

STANDING PINE

In our town, there are no book covers by law. This is not a law we made, but one the town has fastidiously abided by for over 50 years. We even have an article in our town constitution outlining the rationale behind it. Even so, this law continues to generate a great deal of speculation and criticism from outsiders. Calling us “backward” and “antiquated”, they insist we are a people “still enslaved to a fundamentalist mountain ethos rooted in grandfatherly superstition.” According to our grandfathers, we are neither however. As our constitution states “this law has been enacted as a means of ensuring the soul of a book, i.e. its contents, will be, at all costs, preserved, invulnerable to adulteration of any kind, up to and including all immodest and/or provocative embellishment and adornment.” In fact, prior to this law, as my own grandfather Jeremiah Stevens relayed to me, the book cover *was* the book. People literally never read beyond it, or if they did, they never did so *purely*, but always with an eye out for the secret they felt they’d already discovered. “No matter the integrity of the bookmaker,” our constitution reads, “a book’s beautiful exterior irremediably diminishes and dissuades readers from an honest pursuit of beauty within its contents. By virtue of its outlying vestment, the book itself has already been deflowered, as the rose-colored glass cannot help but alter and infect the thing it contains.” To that end, I would further add that my grandfather Jeremiah, one of the law’s founding fathers, whispered these words to me on his deathbed: “No ideas but in the thing itself, amen.” Such an honest man he was we did not bother with a coffin but surrendered him pristine to the wilderness. To honor him, this upcoming June, we are passing another law, banning titles and translations.

WETUMPKA

I swear to God, Montgomery. Take one more brick from a building in this town. I dare you.

MILLEDGEVILLE

When space becomes an issue, we must choose sorrow over our joys, though no sorrow of ours trumps that which lived in the bones of William Tyner. Hence, out of pity and a sort of wide-eyed incredulity, we allot this brief space to telling of his doleful tale. It must be said, however, that Tyner did little to help himself. To bed and wed an ample-waisted woman the likes of Mrs. Tyner, then just as soon desert her for the sake of a snake-hunting expedition, without so much as a waiting rifle by her side, is nothing short of engendering one's house to devils, or, worse, red men, who prey upon this civilized woodland like the great beasts of the biblical age. And so it was at the abode of Tyner, where all manner of untold horror occurred within minutes of the master departing his threshold. Of this, we cannot imagine, as we consider that we must, it being relayed to us straight from the mouths of babes. Or one babe. Strident little Noah, of three short years, who watched from the hollows of a tree as his mother was summarily scalped and ravished, scarcely before she had time to drop her darning needle. And into these pearl-white ears, murder continued to reverberate. The brains of brother Ellis bashed to bits against the wooden ark, sister and sister tied and drug away to some Coweta town where these Beelzebubs live, and where these innocents would presumably still be, were it not for the Christian benevolence of an Indian fur trader, who managed to swindle the eldest girl from the din of these savages. The youngest, unfortunately, he was unable to secure. She remains prisoner and slave to this day, unless the fantastic rumor of her escape somehow proves true. Word has surfaced that she was nearly burned at the stake when pried from the jaws of death by an old Indian woman, who, then, with provisions, canoe, and good directions, sent her packing down the shores of the Chattahoochee. Let me be clear, I do not deny the hand of Providence even in an Inferno such as this, but this kind of red-handed deliverance, I'd be fool to believe.

AUGUSTA

Our laughing gas party was postponed due to Elijah's untimely death, so for want of better amusement, a dozen or so of us gathered along the riverbank to watch Sally Longstreet's brother blow himself to smithereens. Would that Elijah had been there to see it, had not his fondness for horses got the best of him. So much has to do with a mother's training, I dare say. The same proverb could equally apply to William L. As a boy, he'd tuck himself away in a henhouse for nights on end, conjuring up contraptions with little more than spoon and cornhusk. And, indeed, this was all twirling around my mind as the man posed such a question to the shoreline: "What merry hearted fellows will accompany me into the untrod waters of steam propulsion?" There were no takers, but this scarcely daunted William who, clad in thigh-high boots and feathercap, trudged out alone to his awaiting cataclysm, anchored feet away in the oystery waters. Ah, poor William. It didn't help that he had pandered to our small-town reverend's sympathies, until, at last, the good man kowtowed to his pleadings for a public audience. Ladies on every pew let out a deep-throated sigh the Sunday morning William ascended the pulpit to wax on in great length as to the genius of his latest contrivance. I confess I would have humored him, and were it not for my catching him once in his grandmother's silk twill and cotton stockings, surely joined him aboard that rickety wood monstrosity. Some ventures, however highfalutin, are worth risking life and limb. Sadly William's wasn't one of them, though when he seemed to steer the thing merrily upstream, I followed him in a skiff, just to be safe.

PANAMA CITY

I don't know how we've managed to pull this one off but our married women are shrews and our divorcées knockouts, if that makes any sense. In all honesty consider a prenup. It's gotten to be such a problem we've outlawed long aisles. Buyer's remorse can creep up on you, and every inch counts. Inches have commonly come up divorce proceedings. After so many photographs, you realize all evidence is strange. I saw a woman in a bikini top with impossibly bright knees. I know we all have knees but these were really kickass. We both looked at each other and shrugged. How else could we respond to such impossible attraction? Oh God, and then there's Martha. When she left Larry, it was as if every shingle fell from the roof. It was as if I had written her into my own beautiful novel and she was playing every bit the part. You know the part. Not the hero. Not the hero's wife. Something a bit edgier like the woman in pantyhose I defended when I was a lawyer. But I was never a lawyer! I mean please. I have morals.

ELBERTON

This town was in the midst of an identity crisis. We believed T.D. Jakes was really T.D. Jakes. We believed T.D. Jakes was not really T.D. Jakes. He was T.D. Jakes, he wasn't T.D. Jakes. This is what happens when young men leave their mothers and go as far southwest as New Orleans. We hear nothing for years from the scoundrel, then, one day, a letter from jail, stained in plum juice, penned in atrocious scrawl. We handed it to Loretta, who took one look at the postmark and tossed it into the wood-stove. "My son would be here tending pigs," she said, matter-of-factly. That's the last of T.D. Jakes, we thought, or so we thought, but then frog-loving weather comes, and the grasses grow higher than a hound's tooth, and in saunters a man with rolled up trousers and grass between his teeth, shaking hands at the general store, asking for mama. Well, we sent little Albi for Lorretta but, from the washboard, she wasn't to be moved. "My son would be here tending pigs," she said, slamming the door, sending Albi a-trotting. Well, that left us in one hell of a pickle. With no firm direction from kind or kin, we were on the verge of fistfights and hair-pulling, when Watkins suggested it might be time to break in our courtroom. We asked Sheriff to tie up the imposter til we got hold of Judge, whom, we rightly guessed, was off drinking somewhere. Promptly a posse's ordered, but in the meantime, word spread through the county like syphilis, so that by the time we fetched Judge from a cypress pond, the courtroom's packed tighter than a hog pen, with folks lining the road 100 miles east all the way to the courthouse steps. The only person not around was Loretta. First thing Judge did, after guzzling a tall glass of water, was demand she be summoned, so we send little Albi back again, but she doesn't get past the door this time, though we know she'd been there alright when we saw the black eye and crumpled little note. The judge told her to read 'fore the court, but little Albi's so shaken up, Judge had to do it himself. The note's, if anything, matter-of-fact. "Only time I'll be seeing any man by the name of Jakes again will be with the good Lord himself or at the wrong end of a rifle." Signed, Loretta D. Jakes. Well, Judge says, wiping his eyes on a handkerchief, I guess that leaves Willie. Willie, who knew Jakes well-nigh well and still had some scores to settle, sprung from the back pew quicker than a water moccasin, plowing right over Ms. Haversham, and halfway to the docket before bothering to button his waistcoat. Once inside, Willie took a good long alligator look at the man and said, "Oh yes sir, I'll testify, that's him alright." Seeing as no soul in the history of Elbert County had ever crossed Willie P. Peterson, we all assumed the case open-and-shut, until, that is, Sue Bell Jones stood up, and in a fit of divination or insanity, offered her sweet wonders to the prosecution. What happened next is harder to describe, but people were switching sides faster than jackrabbits, and we'd like to swore we'd never make up our minds until, at last, in the fifth and final hour, Judge ordered the exile unshod, stripped, and shorn, and sure as the ladies swoon, suddenly, we all knew.

PLAINS

Bull Wainwright owned a chain gang. Tim Christie sold rum. Nell Andrews got around. Susan Anthony sewed curtains. Elijah Winters fucked a horse. Joseph Bedsole staged plays. The Virgin Mary, a.k.a. Marybeth Fieldstone. M.B. Waters, Narrator and Jesus. Ivan Bedsole blew off a bridge. Xavier Livingston died. Peter Castleworth seemed too smart for his own good. Gaylord Steinbeck called himself a firebrand. His son, Leroy, a hero. His daughter, Addie, a drunk. Jake Billingsley got caught with a condom. Augusta Wells hid with her lover in a sand-dune. Missy Waters fell in love with a building. Joseph Cornell, that man was so crazy. Because it was September, he insisted we enter his wigwam for a feast of honor. We walked inside to find a pair of collapsed dollhouses and a pyramid of burning bird cages. He asked six of us to form a foreign relations committee, gave us a marble cylinder and told us to go out into the pasture and fill it with cow manure. When we returned, he promptly accused us of lunacy, then ordered we stand aside while he wrapped himself in electrical tape. At last someone, whose name I forget, had the nerve to ask what all this meant. Thimogona, he said. Nothing more.

HATTIESBURG

We have not a single beautiful woman here. Not a single one. A shame for we love copulating. And we are straight as square dancers, leaving us no alternative. Like you, we are beholden to our hormones, our cocks habitually rising. Bear in mind, this is no small feat! The other kind, the ugly women, are everywhere. Sitting in movie theatres. Lounging on street corners. Littering grocery stores like plagues. Popping bubblegum in wet white tees. Walking to pick up your quinine pills, lo and behold, you're overcome. The droopy swaying hair, a tremendous boob in plain sight! It's almost too much. They are so ugly they seem to be taunting us. They seem to say, you must fuck us or else! And they don't even say it to our faces. They look straight at our cocks and say it. And like clockwork, our cocks rise and they giggle oh so powerfully. This is a sad tale, even for our offspring. It seems comeliness has been confined to the Y chromosome. Our sons are perfectly handsome. Our daughters, perhaps worse than their mothers. Hideous, yes, but braver. More than happy to betray what little genes we gave them.

AIKEN

You want to go to Charleston? That's 27 days sitting pretty on a pack train. More than 40 on the backside of Joshua's mule. The trip used to be shorter when Joshua's hair was shorter, but now we have to tack on ten minutes every third mile to find his hair and reattach it. Sometimes it gets stuck inside the planks, and I have to pull and pull. Joshua doesn't help. He's too busy smoking catalpa beans or cornsilk. That dangerous? I asked him, watering down the butt of the mule. It was day 25 and a rough-go of it for all our hides. We were held up at the Georgia border all morning by a man named Rupert Hemingworth. "Call me Rupert," he said to Joshua, and spit. Well, Joshua wasn't having it. "Who in sam-hell are you, a lawman?" "Nope," he said crassly. "A slave catcher. Here we only have one lawman. And she's a woman. An empress. Mary Musgrove's her name. But don't call her that if you want to leave here with your loins. Call her Coosaponakeesa." Joshua was rubbing one of his hair attachments, thinking the man would say something else. But the man didn't say nothing. A good minute passed of us all chewing our tongues, then he said, "I'm waiting." "On what?" said Joshua. "You a smart fellow, ain't you?" Rupert said. "Well, you won't pass this set of planks unless I have me a bottle of rum, some red calico, and the name Empress Coosaponakeesa from your lips." "That so?" Joshua said. "Yup, that is so." "Well," Joshua said, and spit. "I don't take orders from slave catchers. Nor Georgians. And certainly not a half-breed." God Almighty. That set us back two bottles of rum and ten extra days. Not to mention I got branded, Joshua lost all his hair, every last of our 299 turtle eggs was poached, and even if do we do make it to Charleston, I scarcely believe we can carbolize a child in such condition.

SOCIAL CIRCLE

She makes a sad potash. He makes a mean string bean. Our sweetcake takes the cake. Their strudel is, like, noodle. We breed over clam shells. Just dinner for the apolitical. I let out a tyrant sneeze and get thrown out as fast as the stamp in my pocket. My woman stirs a pot of soap in the middle of a war. It's so difficult knowing that over by the daffodils, a crisis is looming, but oh, look at all this goddamned soap left to stir. And stir and stir and stir. Year by year, I load up my boat with ashes. The war ends, only to find out that every cell in my body comes with a set of instructions. Duh. Right now my dream is to broaden right now to incorporate other identities. No, it's not. It's yours.

AIKEN

You want to go to Mobile? That's a one-way trip. We haven't figured out how to get back upriver, and, between you and me, I'm not sure we would want to go back, even if we did. Absolutely guaranteed, how many times we've heard these words. Anyhow, we'll keep an eye on your soil for ya.

PITTS

If your child can count to ten without wheezing, that's a good sign. I'm not saying you can live here, but it's a start. Second thing you need to do is lash some hickory boughs together, set them on fire, and send them upriver. Don't worry about the wood, it's bountiful, prophet-blessed. I do think it's important to keep in mind that the things you have used to preserve you thus far, here prove inapplicable. Contagion rooms, they're overrated. I was in one for years and left with little. My hope maybe. An apple.

CANOT

It began with the problem of fog. The driver couldn't see. The boat was heading toward the mouth of the waterway, and the driver couldn't see. The waterway was closed to boats, and the boat headed toward the mouth. One of the barges broke. One of the barges broke loose. The boat was pushing barges, and one of the barges broke loose. It hit the bridge. The waterway was closed, and it hit the bridge. The driver couldn't see. He didn't know it hit the bridge. The bridge was a railroad bridge. The barge hit the bridge. The bridge was a swivel bridge. The barge hit at precisely the swivel point. The swivel was welded shut. The barge bent the weld, moving the bridge, moving the rails. The weld bent, instead of breaking. Instead of breaking, the weld bent, and the signal did not change. The rails moved, but the signal did not change, because the weld bent, and did not break. The driver couldn't see. The driver of the train couldn't see the bend, because the train was late. The train would have missed the bend in the bridge that separated the rails, but the train was late. The air-conditioner broke on the train, delaying the train, and the barge hit. The barge hit, because the air had broken, because the train was delayed. The barge hit the bridge and bent the weld twenty minutes late. Because of the fog. Because the driver couldn't see. Or if. If either could see. If the signal had dropped red. If the weld didn't bend. If the air didn't break.

COOSA

Your compass will not find us. We are not an invisible city, we are an invisible river system you are fire hunting through a mental landscape. Some things you see. They are perfectly physical. Birds. A rock ledge collecting itself. Fine crystals of saltpeter. You can touch them, put them in your pockets. A red-throat foraging, that's trickier. In water lettuce, it disappears, reappears, you see it twice with the same different eyes. Your eyes are different and the same. Perhaps they disappear. Perhaps they cease to exist. Someone's eyes are always ceasing to exist. But the bird, the bird is forever. It flies on across the water. Our air holds it in fragile jest.

SELMA

What did I care for the whole battle thing, being in love. What did I care, inside those small walls, for greater walls being set upon, seized. It was as if I were a city with no concern for my country. Such is love while it is being lived. Still, I was not entirely ignorant. I stood quietly by when sent to fetch newspapers. When sent to feed their horses. When sent for Papa's letters. I heard but never, I confess, never without seeking. And what, of all the words attached to voices, was I seeking? The Missouri Compromise, I had no idea what that meant. When they told me Atlanta had burned, I saw it less as a reality than metaphor for our savage lusting. The bodies strewn at Antietam, so unlike that grazing my own under rail fences in swamplight. I imagined all the dead souls in that body. Hair, barely begun to birth, ripe, wayward, uncertain. Teeth cold, mule-white. And walking home with the water tin, feeling the slosh of the pail, the wet between my legs. Shoveling cornbread into my mouth, walking the dug ruts of the road. Hungry, always.

VICKSBURG

Really they killed too many of us for it to be called a civil war. If they wanted to be courteous, they could have challenged us to a duel while our women took tea on the veranda.

We wanted to be clad in elegant uniforms! We wanted to amble meritoriously along the breastwork! How dare they attack a general with scurvy? We couldn't keep him out of the vegetable patch, much less at the head of our cavalry. We didn't come waddling up to Massachusetts asking for turkeys! It's a shame you call yourself civilians with such practices. And the way you treat your lobsters, my God. It's more than just uncivil. It's inhumane.

HESTER

Put the best woman in this town and the best man in this town side by side, there is no comparison. Even with a sex change, so many prancing around in field dresses. It's just plain embarrassing. They walk around as if sniffing out a tundra, as if subjecting auto-mechanics to long division. Just try following them through a revolving door, and see where that leads you. Do you have a pair of long johns? Not a half-bad investment. I wouldn't fuck them from a mile away, and what would I give for a mile in this small town. My cousins tell me my problem isn't geography. My problem isn't time and space. They're well-traveled so I trust them. They go as far back as Mount Sinai, the Elysian Fields. Here's what they tell me: We don't understand the men of this forest, and we don't understand men of the neighboring forest. The men of the mountain, we can't tell them anything. A thousand years of talking, we can't tell them anything. We're still talking. We might be talking forever. Come to think of it, we just don't understand men.

VICKSBURG

Folks in Selma ain't got an idea how we live. Ain't got the foggiest idea. No soldier comes into my house without knocking, daytime or nighttime. Nighttime, he ain't getting through without sawing out the logs. My house is just like a barn, lathe nailed over the cracks. My chimney's pure pitch, pure clay. You may say that's nothing much to shout over but you ain't seen the number of women gallivanting around this here battlefield looking for a husband. I rank as high as anything around. Medical man comes by my tent day before yesterday for an inspection. He walks in and says, Lady, to hell with clean sheets. Clean sheets never kept a soul alive in my life. Feed em, he says. Feed em til they can't complain. Feed em til they're blue in the face. I says back, Sir, it wasn't but a week ago a shell blew right through the rear of my wagon I was driving. One shell, then another. Many a man I was carrying, screaming bloody murder for me to pull the reins. Man sitting next to me's head's torn clean off, my own clothes so blood-soaked you could wring em yourself. Needless to say, on we went.

PORT ALLEN

You have not come here to stand in corners. You have not come here to weep. You have not come to say, everyone dies, but my death was hastened. You have not come to hang by your wrists, a flesh laid open on a tree. You have not come to learn briar rod or cart rope or cow skin. You have not come to be robbed of the hours that belong to sleep. You have not come to lay in your lashes in the lash of sunlight under the piazza. You have not come here to swallow Indian corn boiled in water. You have not come to swallow water before the rain could melt its salt. You have not come here to stand in salt, a boil to the very bone. You have not come here to sleep in a long shed, in cattle stalls, and rise, before sunlight, to milk them in the weeds. You have not come here to see. You have not come here to see the hand of God stretched over you, as I attempt to empty what parts in my hands.

BLACK

I walked blue. They shot out the lights. Like rag. Like rabbit. An egg fell in the hem of night. Your eyes opened. My eyes opened. Like water. Like running. I held to a skirt edge. White wile and no hump, in the despair of blue corn. A shoe abandoned to a stomach of wind. We were forests without lights. We were cordwood on pink snow. Like name. Like crumpling. Hail folded in the wheat.

WEIR

We weren't really the city you're thinking of until about 1794. The cattle talk went on far too long. It was partly a problem of resources, partly a problem of thinking. Were we a little quicker with ten years trying to get back ten years. Were we as quick with adaption and commercial planning. I don't think this would have done anything to the indigo fields we used to run through. But how to define those first few years. Stone stepping into oblivion, cropping against next year's wildfire, seeding cotton on sandy shoals. Reading health reports and wind reports. These aren't anything but stones. I will admit the whole lint seed separation thing kind of got in our crawl. Wanting to be England, that was a waste of time. A lot of what we ourselves were is not remembered in any event. We may have made up the part that was so beautiful. It always seemed to be running a bit ahead of us.

GRIMES

Animals with a fist to the wheel. Partisan and plain. We wear army gray to a cloud below thistle. The proper venue, we feel, for the greatest hope leaving a grape. We haven't established a clear cornrow. Come here, we say. Go back, Go Back. Such fishy things we tell our children when we, ourselves, are under orders. From God or women in smart navy blazers with silver pendants. With a thimbleful of wool, pitch a tapestry over a stadium. Or: Devise your first sonata in two ribbons and three pins. Honestly, it isn't hard work. It's nothing, really. Just the overwhelming feeling of vastness when hands fall over hands or a boy with a dishrag cleans a movie theater. We were barnacle in the tide of elephant, an author wrote in a novel about us. Critics called the novel superficial and precious, and that particular line, a bit of showing off. Years later the author published another novel, which critics described as "a cleat in the batter's box, furiously scraping."

CLEWISTON

I held dead babies in my arms, asking people, Are these your children? I came across a man who had nailed his hand to a fleeing piece of wood, and so survived. I found an 83-year-old woman sleeping soundly in a steel bathtub. I had touched her, thinking she was dead, when she opened her eyes and asked, Child, why have you woken me? I discovered a dog beside a man whose soul had fled, but to the body, the dog remained loyal. I talked to three of the seven who had survived from a schoolhouse of 69. We were lucky, they said, then politely excused themselves to bury their mothers. There was a stream of water in which another body floated. The man beside me grabbed a stick, trying to snare its neck. That's when I saw the face.

MOORE HAVEN

We took rope and wrapped up our awnings. We turned on the town telephone and talked to a fine, gentlemanly weatherman in Puerto Rico. It always rains, he said out loud, which is precisely what we'd been saying in our heads. Even so, the town criers won the day, and we nailed shut our doors and windows. When rain did come, it was a whole lot more than that weatherman predicted. Glad we didn't listen to that huckster, Joshua smartly retorted. He was the one to suggest we huddle in the kitchen, which we did, until we heard tiles banging against the walls. Joshua put a chair atop the family piano. Wise Father found an axe suitable for breaking attics. Marylou grabbed a door and hoisted it on a rafter. There we sat for a good while, watching everything we nailed stream past us. This is like no rain we ever seen, blind Rebecca said. By then we were nude and blue with roofing paper in our hair. Look! I called out to Rebecca, forgetting she couldn't see her best dress hanging from a pine tree. But it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Rebecca had disappeared.

JASPER

We ran for the water tower kicking everyone in our way. All night the mantle of the lighthouse turned. The mortar squeezed out like toothpaste.

BELL GLADE

They loaded white bodies on trucks in pine boxes. Black bodies, they threw in ditches and burned. In a dump we found out, after 70 years.

VALDOSTA

The deep, slow-flowing river pushes steamboats to the Piedmont. Reins slacken in feathery black light. A rope hangs from a sapling.

FORT CAROLINE

I know you are missing your game bag full of letters, but why on earth do you suppose you left it here, and why do you insist everything here is yours by virtue of the one thing you left? Your visit was welcome when it was a contingency, when you were the strange white God on stilts. When we collected in you and put you away as easily as a shoebox. When, for instance, the fire didn't immediately light or grey clouds gathered strangely at twilight, it seemed your presence could serve as a sort of quieting justification. And at other times, you were a riddle, a curiosity, a question, which we also enjoyed. Now I see, however, that you are none of these things. You were like death. We waited for you until you came and only then we knew we wanted to wait longer. In fact, we always want to wait. We always want you to be an object belonging to us.

SELMA

When I speak of old men and boys fighting to the last, it has nothing to do with Richard Taylor. Richard Taylor didn't escape, he fled: there is a difference. Battles fought for wars that can't be won, battles fought for battles that can't be won: there is a difference. There is a difference between all these things. But it is not that. It is not for that. It is not that refuge, collapsing.

MONROEVILLE

A stem on a branch of my family tree came from North Carolina. A tendril of that stem fought against America in the Revolutionary War. We were Loyalists. I'm not a very loyal person. We were loyal enough as a family though. Loyal enough to get King George to grant us some land in Canada, where we hung out for a while until we got bored. Then we came back. Naturally Americans wanted to know where we were from. Outside Paris, a cilia of the tendril replied. We were ashamed, I think. Maybe that's why we moved to Alabama before Alabama was Alabama. Maybe that's how we got phenagled into playing 18 holes with Harper Lee. 1817 was a sad, sad, sad year for our state. So was 1818. So was 1820.

TAYLORSVILLE

My hurricane was your lunar landing. Your dark hour was my village parade. His saddle and trees were her primetime hotel. Her trees: our endless source of paper. Our trees were Picasso's excuse. His tell that to Gertrude Stein. Our holy mother of God was those two's once reason to live. Its failed execution, their maybe it still is. Their breather, our breather, her baby was born. Her baby was your hit-it-and-quit-it, him, my never ever ending. My no, no, oh hell no, never ever ending ending. As it turns out, his too.

VIDALIA

How was she? I inquired to the man buttoning his trousers. Dry as the Santa Ana Winds, he replied.

CHARLESTON

I curse you Stephen R. Mallory. I curse you straight to your rawbone miserly heart. You call yourself a man of courage and vision. I call you a sea cow in a polyester bow. I call you a maggot breeder in a slime composite. You even had the nerve to summon a land speculator, you arrogant, two-eyed scalawag! I don't give a rat's ass as to your property deed. I will raise a militia and meet you at the state line if I have to. I'll station them in Toledo, if need be. Yes Toledo, if need be! You hard, brown, raspy-eyed mongrel. How dare you call yourself a son of Haiti! How dare you carbolize a child on this coast!

BAYOU GOULA

I find this town a bit snug for my prodigious talents. I lay low, in skulking places, sleeping to sounds of towhees. I have dreams. I dream of starting a college but in vain. I fear God, water, and other truths. An orphanage, I did try. Few children came freely. The ones that did were male, their heads disfigured by giant bags of sand. One lost a leg in the little river. He mistook me for a corpse. I was just sleeping, dreaming. Then I heard a bird call. "Why have you departed?" the bird said. "Had you not corn enough?"

FLORAL CITY

What of the future? As long as there is a demand for citrus trees, I don't see a problem. We are just so relieved not to be grinding corn anymore. Now we learn to swim in pools, what a luxury. Before it was clay holes during wet season. As far as I can tell, everything so far has been named. There are hardly any blind people anymore, and those that are, are easily spotted, thanks to all that clutter they carry around. I heard from my Metamucil salesman that firemen are at wit's end due to an increase in fire-calls. The blind aren't the only folks with clutter. Child aliens have to hide their baggage. So do serial killers, naturally. Psychologists are helping, attacking the problem on a number of fronts. I've been hiding out at in a public lavatory trying to save space. Unfortunately, so has a railroad secretary, who gets his kicks fondling himself mercilessly in a compact mirror. I think he'd be better suited for some kind of aviation.

MOUNTAIN CITY

Here we try to match our thoughts, but the intimacy comes at great cost. Doesn't all intimacy though? People need families. I don't know, really. I do know we could not make our flag look like your flag, as much as we share a fondness for the color green. We are not responsible for so many of our distinctions. We must carry on as best as we can. Sometimes I feel like an invisible riot and hate myself. I try to have thoughts befitting residents of the highlands. I try to care about the ash in the fountain, or own up to my altitude and not breathe like lowlanders. Still, I have a sneaking suspicion that wherever loyalty is can be replaced. That I could be home there.

SEMINARY

Having already elected our parson, we don't know what kind of religious worship we will tolerate. The elections were quite a contest, and frankly, we're exhausted. First there was the ark building championship, no easy game of hopscotch. Our trees had to be real, we had to be sober, the boat had to float. Try that one on for size. And trees, they're not really that much fun. Few people understand them, and we didn't have any of those. To top it off, this is America. The geography makes no sense. These days we just zoom over everything. Mountain, valley, grainfield, peach grove. Zoom. America is over. Did we make it up? Maybe we're talking about transportation, not geography, but frankly, it's getting hard to tell the difference. Not so with arks and trees. They tend to slow things down a bit. Same goes for prophets. We had a prophet, Billy. Billy was our prophet because we didn't know what to call him. Evicted from the insane asylum, nearly assassinated by the town buffoon, this man was serious. He could weasel his way out of every attempt to put him anywhere. Fact of the matter is we didn't understand him to the degree we understand each other and ourselves. That's what makes a prophet a prophet I guess, but who has time for that kind of guesswork. Step one was to get him out of our feed trough. But where could he go? Billy was never cut out for drawing room conversation. He couldn't exactly shoot the breeze. We'd like to schooled that boy's ear off, and never could get the hay out of his hair. Eventually we ran out of rods. Puberty only compounded the problem. Add a penis up-and-running to cantankerous and far too loose and free with the hands. Thanksgiving was ever off-kilter. We thought if we put him at the kids' table, he'd at least keep his hands in his pockets. That lasted about as long as the passing of a plate. We'd barely turned around before that table'd been whittled to a popsicle stick and set ablaze. Billy's calling it an altar. Babies are rolling around on the floor. You may say, how, by the beasts of Ephesus, did this man become our prophet? We tried everything else. Had to put him at the head of our table just so as to keep an eye on him. And, let me be clear: no one kills a prophet unless they're bullied. Go be nice to somebody like that long enough and before you know it, you're walking around without shoes on your feet, talking about arthritis of the soul. Parson was the only other option. Health is everything.

LOXLEY

My grandfather was a strong, smart man. He loved to touch my hair in strange places. Underneath, at the nape of the neck, he would roll his only thumb back and forth like a Monopoly Board thimble. Then up the spine of it, behind my earlobes. He told me if I ever cut it he would make me sleep under the bed for weeks with nothing for cover but newspaper. Of course, I cut it, and slept under the bed for weeks with nothing for cover but newspaper. Get that hair in the bath young lady! my grandmother would scream. Of course, the water was yellow. I don't know who to blame for this. It's hard because in the South, everyone believes in self-reliance. Cancer killed my grandfather from the bottom up. It's no easy thing to feel life's got you by the anus. The worst thing about it is everyone holds you responsible. The red meat he ate, my mother said grimly. All the shit he sprayed on our string beans. After that, my grandfather grew quiet in my life. There was a strange thing that dripped into him as he lay. Open the door, he said finally. Then he died.

LYDIA

He pushed the flowers into the folds of my apron. Keep walking, he said. Keep walking. So I walked. Then he said, You will lose all your roses walking like that, dear girl.

KEYS

Where do all the young beautiful genius dancers live? I want to go there. I want to go where you can put an s on milk and no one will blink an eye. A purple eye. I want to go to the peninsula where people seriously question the importance of water. Where they spend every last ounce of energy trying to get rid of it. My lover is not my lover anymore. I could go anywhere, this would be the case. The tightrope would follow me to endless. That is a comfort. It makes the moment seem less connected, the moment I watch a clumsily oversized hand battle a teacup, a piece of silk weave way around a taut neck. The voice thin, monstrous. "The hardest thing is the hope I attached to you. I never got to find out if it was real or not. If you were real. If there was something in you to be loved and understood. And that you suspected not. More than suspected, you assumed to be a certainty. I find that hard to stomach, which you, no doubt, have already guessed." The voice catches, a rasp caught on its own spool. "You walk away with your idea, and I guess I do too, but I don't want it. I don't want the idea. I don't know if I ever wanted it." A peninsula is land surrounded by water on three sides, a mass encroached. The water is also encroached, land and water both. Each are making the other, each with a part dangling free. Water and land hold onto their part, wanting the other's free part. We don't know how long they will stay there, how long they will dangle. If either will succumb to the nearly something it is not. We think it will, but we're never sure. That is a peninsula. Almost.

IDEAL

No leaning grasses. No lights over a harbor. No medallions rubbed in the sweat of a thumb. No walking into town without an idea and a map. Without a wrong map. No letting the street names take you. No suckling those tendencies to wander. No mathematizing smoke trees, no rivering a new west. No lapping up oxygen by the earful. No recanting all those silly ideas you had about the sun's ability to sleep. No reading Geoffrey Hill. No reading Geoffrey Hill. No vandalizing a valley, no martyring an ovule. No rediscovering ways to drink water. No meaning to be what you can't help. No starting to feel like a chemical compound. No moralizing in spite of yourself. No breeding your brains out, pouring salt on salty eggs. No falling in love. No smelling, smelling, and falling in love. No making a fool of yourself. No homing in. No homing in on a hydroelectric imbalance, an ocean scattering light. No touching your hands. No washing my feet. No wondering when, no let's just say. No forgetting, forgetting about air resistance and wind resistance and gravitational fields. And resistance. And resistance. No writing this down on a piece of a tree. No walking away, feeling strangely preserved, as if this were the city you have made it. You weren't there. You never arrived. This is not that kind of place.

MINTER

One must be allowed in the pine barren to masturbate to something secretive.

JACKSONVILLE

After the burn, we had wonderful energy. Lines for bucket brigades were out the door. People were seen sliding on ice! Yellow fever raged, as if with an urge to compete. Old lady Dell caught it reading a letter with a baby on her lap. An ordinance was passed, outlawing letters. Our two iron hand presses were utterly wrecked. Maybe that was from the burn. We turned over all the planks with blood on them, trying to forget it. We hid the pieces of shell in the dirt. Paul Jones steamed up from Savannah, intent on delivering the mail. He was so intent. It was clear we couldn't just sit around sliding on ice anymore. A half-starved cur roamed between fences. A horse woke up, feeling cold. People, not particularly brave, wheeled out an old, condemned cannon and set it at the foot of Catherine Street. I'm sorry Paul Jones. You should never believe a story told by its own heroes. Moss had caught fire, the oak dripping flame.

INVERNESS

Very large quartz pebbles on hillsides. Blue vitriol, black tar. People telling you to be a man. Benefits include: a legal avenue for redress; thirty-three versions of olivine; free ice for shrimp vendors. Low on red ribbon at present. High on social efficacy. As a bit of confusion exists on the difference between transportation and geography, you may want to regard these events as a kernel in a time stream. It will be a decade or more until we find out what sepia is. And yet, we drive without shame.

WATERPROOF

I have so much faith in God's promises. I live between a deck and flooring laid over water casks. That's three feet of space. I have to crouch. The three feet I share with others being made fit for sale. We wait for the great promises. Patience and tenderness and a little bit of medical care. Am I a muse? Economically speaking. Strictly economically speaking. Once I held a king's spear. I carried coal in a cistern. Spittle ran down my thighs and I let it. I let it because my hands were in chains. Bloodhounds follow me to the market. I wear a sign around my neck. It's possible I will do a tremendous backstroke all the way to the Israelites, the Red Sea. Am I a Hebrew visionary? Am I Moses' relative? You better fucking believe I know my Old Testament.

DUCK HILL

We're still wiping the sleep out of our eyes. Our women are ironing our cassocks. Should be about a half-hour until the foghorn blows, but I just saw a construction worker walking by in a Jason mask so really, anything could happen. Our women are ironing our white cassocks.

SELMA

We sang 7,000 in a doorway made for 1,000. We sang Nella in a room with water on the floor. We sang a hallway of mattress. We sang bed-frames for roosting birds. We sang the wind came through the walls. We sang two by two, three breast by three breast. We sang two feet by twenty feet by twenty feet. We sang the railroad bed and the rocks they threw at the white man holding my hand. We sang Franklin Street and Sylvan Street and Water Street and Dallas Avenue. We sang up Alabama down Alabama. We sang Selma to the city of Selma. We sang our upwelling and our downwelling by 500 throats in our one pair of shoes. We sang our stiff rice, our succory. We sang our closet and our cabin and our bus and our back door. We sang a toothbrush in her coat. We sang off sidewalks into streets off streets into parking lots off parking lots into alleyways into ropes into ruts into gutters into swamps into mud into swamplight. We sang we're going to have to walk into the mud a little. By your sandybottom, by your cinnamon seed, by your scratching gravel, we're going to have to walk in the mud a little. Into this February and this March, into the rain and the water, and onto the water, onto the water we knew we couldn't swim. And we walked on the water and we sang the water, we sang the old water to the new water, we sang the water too far gone and dark to see, and we sang beyond the new water, to the water beyond our eyes, beyond their eyes, beyond the club, and the hand it held. We sang, and saw trembling.

FLINT

We stood like salt rinds before the tremendous river. To expect one flesh, and arrive piecemeal. To feel stiff water in the lining of a river's throat. A story to be lost, of which I am fact. In the pause that is left of north. What am I. What am I but a wandering husk.

SELMA

The sun was the sign we sought after the rain. The rain was the sign until it stopped. The rain was the sign when we looked to the sky for the star and could not find it. The star was the sign when we no longer heard the owl hooting. The owl was the sign when we could hear the owl. The owl was the sign before the rains. The rains came from nowhere and stayed. The rains touched our face and our eyes. We were looking for the star when the owl had left. We didn't need the star in the rains. The sun came when the rain stopped. The sun is turning in the sky. It's going to fall! someone yells. We're afraid. We're afraid the sign is with us.