

To Preserve and to Renovate:
Essays on Atlanta, Family, and Memory

An Honors Paper for the Department of English

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For Paula Popowski: A matriarch who faced the world with resilience and a warm smile.

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And to my family: thank you for your willingness to give me fodder.

“It is to space—the space we occupy, traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination—that we must turn our attention.”

- Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*

“In any case, this country, in toto, from Atlanta to Boston, to Texas, to California, is not so much a vicious racial caldron—many, if not most countries, are that—as a paranoid color wheel. [...]. And, however we confront or fail to confront this most crucial truth concerning our history—American history—everybody pays for it and everybody knows it. The only way *not* to know it is to retreat into the Southern madness. Indeed, the inability to face this most particular and specific truth *is* the Southern madness. But, as someone told me, long ago, *The spirit of the South is the spirit of America.*”

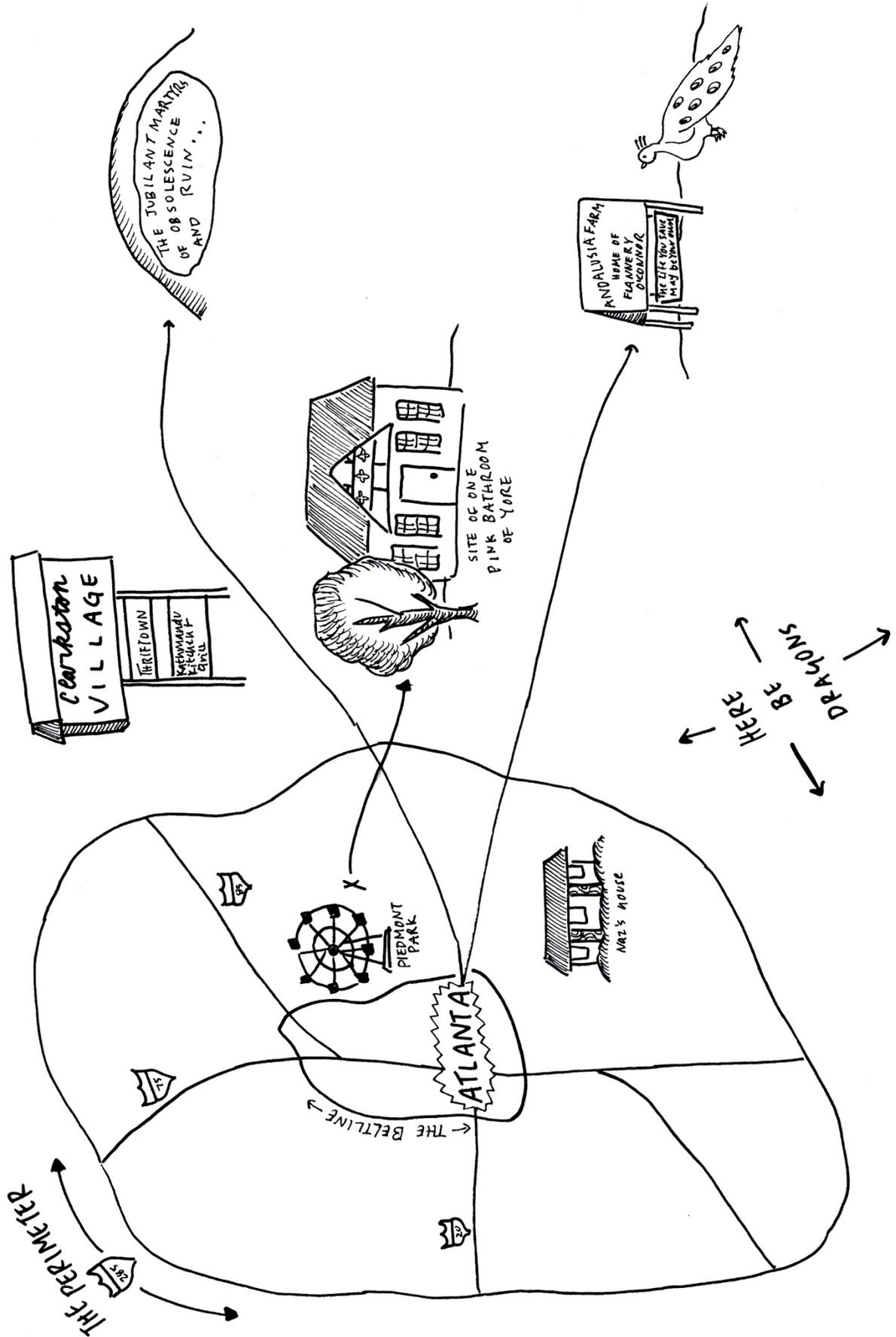
- James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*

“To know oneself is to know one’s region. It is also to know the world, and it is also, paradoxically, a form of exile from that world.”

- Flannery O’Connor, “The Fiction Writer and His Country”

Table of Contents

Map.....	vi
Preface: Lost and Found.....	vii
An Elegy for the Pink Bathroom.....	1
To the Boonies and Back Again.....	10
Temporary Edifices.....	22
Set in Stone Mountain.....	34
The South's Ellis Island.....	49
New Pavement, Same Loops.....	71
Works Cited.....	81



Lost and Found

There is a certain kind of mystery that compels my friends and me towards one of our favorite games. When we are looking for an easy escape from the enclosure of our campus, we'll all gather around a computer screen and pull up a program called GeoGuessr. The game makes a random Google Street View scene from an unknown location around the world appear on our screen. Willingly lost without leaving our seats, we click around, attempting to discern where on earth we may virtually be. There is a certain pleasure in getting the answer right: one of us might find the street sign in Portuguese that lets us know we are in Sao Paolo. Sometimes, though, we can't tell if we are looking at the Saskatchewan territory or Siberia, at Australia or Angola. In those moments, all of these disparate sites in our world feel vaguely connected. Though there is also something unsettling about them. We look through the portal of our screen at a place that is surely important to someone, though we will never get to know it in its fullness.

Recently, I have often found myself searching for Kaluszyn, Poland via Google Maps. My grandparents grew up in Kaluszyn: a small town a few dozen miles east of Warsaw, noted for its formerly robust Jewish population and its manufacturing of flour products and prayer shawls. In a library carrel thousands of miles away, I have traversed the streets of Kaluszyn through my computer screen. I have strolled by colorful rows of houses on what I imagine to be quiet streets, and have sped by a cemetery with countless graves topped by concrete crosses. Once, I encountered a sandy beach full of sunbathers, though I have never been able to find it again. If I

had come across this landscape on GeoGuessr, I wouldn't have been able to place it as the home of my ancestors.

My grandparents fled Kaluszyn as young adults, when they were roughly my age. Amidst the Nazi killing sprees of their neighbors, they left homes to which they would never return. They survived the genocide with stories that have attained the standing of myths in my mind. My grandfather helped instigate the Warsaw ghetto resistance and escaped from a concentration camp; my grandmother boarded at a Catholic convent and obtained false papers that bared a Christian name. They did not know each other then, though. My grandmother had grown up within a prominent Kaluszyner family, the one that owned the flour mill. My grandfather's family did not hold such high status. The two met as displaced persons in Germany after liberation. They married—thinking, maybe, that they were the last two Jews left alive, we often joke—and made the long journey to America together. Decades later, when they delivered their testimonies for Holocaust documenters, they could retell the convoluted narratives of their various getaways and lucky breaks with incredible specificity. I could map their routes with timestamps. Yet even when I grasp for the details, their Old World feels so separate from the place I've called home.

I have a penchant for maps of all kinds. On road trips I have filled the backseat of my car with stacks of maps I've picked up from visitor's centers in western Pennsylvania and east Texas and North Carolina. I love hand-drawn maps, too; especially ones my friends have made to help me understand places important to them. Those maps—made with personal scales and keys, perimeters of their own understandings—hold a kind of intimate ownership over a place. I like to

tack all of these maps up in places where I can see them. Through looking at this geographic wallpaper of mine, I have realized that maps are much more than the navigational tools they propose themselves to be. In their particular combination of abstraction and specificity, maps are beautiful. Maps allow us to get lost and find ourselves again. Maps can, too, ground our memories in place. They can also remind us of how little of the world we really know.

This project is an effort at map-making. Through writing, each of these essays takes on the adopted home of my family: Atlanta, Georgia. In some instances, I attempt to see Atlanta as a stranger might, looking at my home via the camera atop a Google car. At others, I sketch *my* map of Atlanta and the region around it, trading objectivity for my own method of assigning significance. I want to marry these visions: of outsider, of insider; of historical and personal. A negotiation between all of these modes of interpretation is needed to make sense of a place.

It has taken me time to realize why I am so drawn to the pixelated version of Kaluszyn. I see now that it is a closed map, full of mystery. I want to know it because I can't. Kaluszyn was lost through an ethnic cleansing, lost to me through the forced leavings of my grandparents. Despite this loss—or, because of it—my family has rooted itself in a new place. We have taken on the foundations of Atlanta, of the South, and of America as our own. In our new home, we have found a map open to us. Though I have come to see the invisible enclosures, the boundary lines that mark the space.

In our moves across these lines—lines between places and cultures and eras—we must always reckon with the pull to maintain the old and to make anew. To preserve and to renovate. To draw

a map through which I can make sense of my own life, I must delve into the tension between looking back and moving forward.

An Elegy for the Pink Bathroom

My parents will talk about how they both grew up in homes with pink bathrooms. How their parents preserved those homes like museums to themselves: all those tchotchkes populating the shelves, all of the unsmiling photos of those ancestors from the Old World, all of the dust settled deep into the crevices of the couches. All of these small artifacts were trophies to their parents' triumphs of longevity. My parents talk this way with their eyebrows raised, mouths creeping up at the corners, a proverbial backward-glance: "How far we've come," they seem to say. They have forgone the cracked pastel enamel, the peeling floral wallpaper of their youths. They have provided us with newness.

My parents raised me in a city just as fixated on remaking as they are. I grew up in the capitol of the South, a place that touts a phoenix rising from the ashes as its emblem: Atlanta, Georgia. Families and places so occupied with renovation can prompt amnesia, can turn the past—a lineage, a history—opaque. But there are moments in which the pink bathroom presents itself as a portal of sorts. A means to seeing that process of creating novelty within an old structure. For, sometimes, we find vestiges of the past amidst all the remaking.

*

When my dad was in the third grade, his nuclear family upgraded from their Sears-Roebuck baby-boomer abode to a ranch house they had commissioned. It was the mid-1960s in

Martinsville, VA: a county seat just above the North Carolina border, nearing its all time peak in population and enjoying the prosperity the nylon factory brought to town. My father's parents ran a small department store in the town's main drag. Ted's, it was called, after my grandfather, the son of a Lithuanian immigrant who had established the town's first synagogue. Zelda, my grandmother with a New Jersey spirit, kept the books. The two had lived through the Depression as kids, and anxiety about money and the comfort it provided pervaded their home.

The new ranch house had three bedrooms, two baths, a kitchen and a living room with a set of World Book Encyclopedia on the left side of the shelf. The family had picked out all of the rosy lavatory fixings on a big trip to Greensboro. The boys used the pink bathroom. Its tile was a mosaic of salmon and flamingo and coral. There was a toilet-paper cover fashioned like a ballerina, in essence a Barbie wearing a crocheted skirt with the roll stuck up under it. In the pink bathroom the brothers would bathe the boxer, Honey, who once followed my dad to school and sat under his desk, and let rip a fart that sent middle-schoolers into hysteria. My dad learned to shave in the pink bathroom. He would, maybe, spend nights praying to the (pink) porcelain god; after all, he was the kid who'd sneak booze into high school dances. He would help his mother get the sliding door to the shower back on its track when it ran askew. Of course, "she could never figure it out herself," he says.

*

My mother's home had three bedrooms, two baths, a kitchen and a living room. There was a set of World Book Encyclopedia on the right side of the shelf. The pink bathroom belonged to her

parents; the hall bath was green and belonged to the four kids. My mother preferred the pink one. She understood nosiness as a strength of hers (“don’t write this,” she says), and would look through the medicine cabinets for some boon of knowledge. It was like memorizing her siblings’ yearbooks, or reading my Uncle David’s love letters. My mother considered it all communal property. Her snooping was an educational enterprise, as is mine.

My mother grew up in Charleston, S.C.: land of debutante balls and slave markets turned artisan stalls, where the smell of salt suffuses everything. Her parents had traversed the Atlantic aboard the General McCrae in 1949 and docked in New York Harbor on Thanksgiving Day. They had taken a train down the coast, and had watched black passengers move to the back car once they crossed an invisible line south of Washington, D.C. My grandparents—who had survived racial genocide and recently become white—stayed rooted in their seats. Sometimes, in the following years, they’d have picnics sitting around the memorial to the Confederate Defenders of Charleston on the Battery. My mother and her siblings would climb around its base, taking breaks to eat bologna sandwiches. There is a photograph of my grandparents standing in front of the monument: my grandfather wears a tight-lipped smile; my grandmother covers her face with her hands. I like to think there was a voice in my grandmother’s head saying *Oy, gevalt*, but probably she was just shielding herself from the wind, blowing off of the ocean she had crossed.

The kids all went to college, supported by the income of Henry’s: the furniture store my grandparents ran, named for their father. Henry worked up front. He was a former peddler who’d moved up in the world. Paula my grandmother, kept stock in the back. The two kept this shtick

up for three decades, in which time they learned English by diligently watching Presidential debates and the Ed Sullivan show.

When my mother would visit home after time away, she could see the disrepair. The water pressure was bad in the pink bathroom, reducing the stream to a trickle. The glass door of the shower stall would fall off its hinges when anyone opened it. “Daddy didn’t believe in maintenance,” my mother says, even though her parents had the means to pay for repair. As soon as Henry died, Paula bought all new furniture.

My mother never did find anything of intrigue in those cabinets. But later Paula told my mother that Henry had stashed cash behind the floor-to-ceiling mirror in the pink bathroom. We’d have to destroy the mirror or pry it off with a crowbar to get to the money. “Survivor instinct,” my mother tells me now. No one ever saw that cash, even after we sold the house away and moved my grandmother to a nursing home in Atlanta. There, she lost her memory gradually, as I got older. We guess the stash was upward of a thousand bucks.

*

The shared experience of a pink bathroom says more about midcentury American conformity than anything particular about my parents’ childhoods. A Google search of 1950s pink bathrooms reveals a proliferation of ads for tile and toilets: think white mothers with plastered smiles toweling off children with equally plastic expressions. “No waiting in line when you have two American-Standard bathrooms!” promises one spread with a pink bathroom up top and a

green one below. Kohler and Kohler shows a beaming daughter in front of her own sink, who has allowed “bathroom emancipation” for her lucky parents. One informative flyer bearing a rose-hued shower stall promises: “Beautitile can make your dreams come true.”

Pay for a bathtub with monthly installments; purchase an entrance to the white American middle class. How this must have enticed my forebearers. The emergence of the pink bathroom phenomenon coalesced with that moment when Jews could subsume into America’s ever-shifting definition of whiteness. “As with most chicken-and-egg problems, it is hard to know which came first,” writes Karen Brodtkin in *How Jews Became White Folks*. “Did Jews and other Euro-ethnics become white because they became middle-class? That is, did money whiten? Or did being incorporated into an expanded version of whiteness open up the economic doors to middle-class status?”

The fact of their pink bathrooms affirmed my grandparents’ entrance into the white middle class of America. The pink bathroom—with all the imports of financial comfort and racial power it implies—is a window into the rising rungs of an American hierarchy.

*

My father studied money. He took classes in college about commerce and finance and became fascinated with Keynesian ideas and Reagonomics. He worked in banks in small places: Winston Salem, Tulsa. He competed in triathlons; he drank, always, too much; he acquired more and

more clients. He convinced his boss to open an office in a city just as invested in investment as he was: Atlanta.

My father had come to Atlanta on a buying trip with Ted as a kid, and had reveled in the uniqueness of the place: such a big city so much closer to home than those centers of Northern industry where he had visited his mother's many siblings. My father had known for a long time that his own rising could lead him to Atlanta. There, he found a pre-Depression-era house with good bones and a screened-in back porch. What else did he find but a pink bathroom? It was an original in that old house, set between the two bedrooms, a choice of the first owner whom he knew nothing about. My dad would sit on that toilet and forget where he was. He'd be transported back to his twelve-year-old self, to that conventional house in a town that, by then, had lost its factory and and so many of its residents who had survived off the industry. All via the time machine of a pink bathroom.

*

My mother thought moving to Atlanta would be "provincial." She had pondered staying in D.C. where she had moved after college and looking for jobs in public radio. She dreamt of Boston, a far off place she'd never been, surely suffused with cobblestones and intellectual prospects. She even considered moving back to Charleston, but when one news organization there told her she would have to work as a receptionist before moving up to any other position, she threw out the idea. Then the position at the media conglomerate opened in Atlanta, and there she ended up at the local TV station, analyzing data, not quite the dream, yet not so far from it. She played

softball with her coworkers; she took long, long walks; she dated, some. It wasn't until two different friends approached her about a guy from Virginia who'd done well in wealth management, or something, that she'd gone on that blind date at Taste of New Orleans—a restaurant that doesn't exist anymore—and maybe then the two of them had talked about the World Book Encyclopedias and the retail stores named for their fathers. Maybe they connected over the other Southern places they called home, small compared to the city where they now sat: a city that, in all respects, renounced provincialism. My mother would soon see the pink bathroom in that bachelor pad waiting patiently to become a family home.

*

I grew up in a home with a pink bathroom. When I think of my pink bathroom now, I feel that smooth pink tile underfoot. I can see the cabinet under the sink with the extra toilet paper rolls that you could just reach while sitting on the toilet, and the tub where I took baths with my brother under the window made of glass bricks. I see the finicky lock that would trap house guests, their knocks from the inside punctuating their pleas to escape. Yet so few of my memories enclosed in the pink bathroom really feel like mine. They have been transmitted through the photographs of us in that tub pasted into the albums housed in the next room, or through the stories of house guests who circle back, years later. Such is the quality of trying to recall things I can't quite remember, on my own terms.

Our pink bathroom was situated in a home inhabited by serial renovators: the epithet with which my parents jokingly refer to themselves. They have renovated the house half a dozen times over.

A new kitchen when I was seven, with a double oven and a chrome refrigerator built into the wall. New bedrooms fashioned out of the attic for us, the biggest on the block. A basketball court paved over the grass out back. A paint job outside that brought with it new landscaping, big ceramic pots planted with seasonal flora flanking the front door. My parents have become wedded to “keeping things fresh.” They have installed flat-screen TVs in so many rooms, even one that we store in the closet to bring out onto the porch on summer weekends. They have accumulated their own tchotchkes on their travels, small sculptures and paintings they have picked up on vacations to places like New Mexico and Montana. I have spent a lifetime unwittingly observing my parents adjust to their new class. I have seen them become accustomed to resorts and posh restaurants, all set against their childhoods, when they could hop on an inventory trip for an exciting change of scenery or eat KFC as a treat. They had lived under the roofs of parents who were transplants of their Old Worlds: who had recovered from the Great Depression, survived the Holocaust. My parents have risen. What I wonder is this: what is lost in that act of rising? What texture of their lives will I never get to know? Do I even really know them?

A contractor once told my parents that the pink bathroom was a period piece; that they shouldn't rip it up. They didn't for a long time. The remaking was gradual. At first, they updated the countertop in the pink bathroom, and later they'd put the glass bricks in place of a rotting window frame. Ultimately, though, my parents couldn't resist the opportunity for a refresh project. When I left for college, they stripped up all of the pink tile, tore out the matching wallpaper, removed that fussy lock, and laid in something new in that old container.

The project was still nostalgic. They had fashionable black and white subway tile laid on the floor and had a claw-foot tub installed under the glass bricks. They put up paintings of old cars they'd found on a trip out West across from the sink. All for the sake of remaking.

*

One day, my mother and I talked on the phone about the pink bathrooms of yore. She was in Atlanta, I was up North at school, and she was laughing at all of the metaphors I have attempted to load in such a banal place. But she played along. We are co-conspirators in our symbolic scavenger hunts, nowadays.

She told me about something she'd found in the pink bathroom we all shared, when she first moved into the house. An old box of Kotex sanitary pads. It was a relic belonging to one of those previous owners. My mother carried the phone into the bathroom, same old bones, and peaked inside the cabinets. Snooping in her own domain. What did she find but that dusty little box?

"Here it is!" she exclaimed in celebration of her small finding.

To the Boonies and Back Again

Driving out of Atlanta always looks the same, no matter the direction we are headed. If my family and I pull out from under our carport in Morningside, we will see the type of street where small white children play in the sprinklers on well-fertilized lawns. Where we live, white hippie grandmas boast Black Lives Matter signs wedged into the gravel beside their transplanted cacti, and one particular white neighbor has a framed Make America Great Again flag hanging inside above her television, which my mother and I have hypothesized is signed. If our journey entails driving north, we will likely pass a homeless person—never the same one, almost always black—who lingers by the onramp to the expressway. If we are driving south, we will become the only white people we see after crossing Ponce De Leon, where Monroe becomes Boulevard. If we are driving west or east on I-20, the slow movie outside the window will take on a similar narrative progression. There will be billboards for Chic-fil-A and Coca-Cola and airlines that fly out of Hartsfield-Jackson; there will be strip malls and mega churches; there will be subdivision upon subdivision with col-de-sacs that we like to believe are more manicured than the semi-circle street where we live. Once, my dad got a kick out of a T-shirt that showed a scarcely detailed map of Atlanta, where, beyond the Perimeter, a speech bubble emerged from a serpent saying: “Here be dragons.” This is how we Atlantans conceive of our environs. Past the Perimeter—the interstate highway that circles the city, that one lives either “in” or “out”—we find the boonies.

Once, when I was home for the summer, I convinced my mother to take a day trip with me to said boonies. I—the bookish child, the one who sought out Northern intellectualism only

to find my fascination pivoted back toward Southern enigma—have a penchant for the literary excursion. My first year of college, I slept within the same four walls that sheltered Henry Wadsworth Longfellow from harsh New England winters. I have strolled many a time by the house on Federal Street where Harriet Beecher Stowe penned *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I have stood by Big Ben in the rain, recording the sounds of the “leaden circles dissolving in the air,” conjuring up Virginia Woolf putting words to those reverberations that keep time for the Londoners all scuffling on the streets. And so, on a Thursday in August of 2017, my mother relented to my arm-wrangling. We got in the car and headed southeast. We set off for Andalusia, home of that elicitor of the mysterious and the weird: Flannery O'Connor.

“What draws you to Flannery O'Connor?” my mother, who has never read O'Connor, asked. Her eyes were on the road.

“Well,” I said.

I first read O'Connor at an elite northern institution which my parents paid for me to attend one summer in high school, so I could put the experience on my college applications to other elite northern institutions. At this institution, the instructor flung a story in front of us whose setting was the very place I was priming myself to leave. I was to read “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” In response, I wrote something meager about what being “good” means to O'Connor and talked in my creative writing class about narrative tension and the grotesque. A girl who hailed from a prep school in Nashville raised her hand and told us that one *cannot* understand O'Connor without understanding *Catholicism*. I do not understand Catholicism, nor the story, nor O'Connor, still. But my lacking comprehension does not belie my mystification, nor does it belie O'Connor's ability to haunt me.

“Well,” I said to my mother, “I don’t really get O’Connor. But I like that she writes about things that aren’t pretty. No *Gone with the Wind* shit. She has how I see things.”

My mother raised her eyebrows and nodded. “You said there are still peacocks there, right?”

“Yes,” I said.

That day, on our drive out of town, I thought of John Wesley in “A Good Man” declaring from the backseat: “Let’s get through Georgia fast so we won’t have to look at it much.” The drive was mundane. Occasionally, there were truck stops and barbecue joints and roadside fruit stands, but mostly we saw either forests or fields. We passed places with names like “Social Circle” and “Hard Labor Creek State Park.” I called up visions of old white or black ladies circling a quilt and chain gangs building masonry bridges over streams. When I looked up these places later, I found out that the former was named for an incident, according to Wikipedia, in which a group of townspeople offered water to a weary traveler, who said, “This certainly is a social circle.” The latter was a posh campground replete with golf courses and horse stables. “With so many ways to relax,” the website says, “it is ironic that the park’s name is thought to come from slaves who tilled summer fields or American Indians who found the creek difficult to cross.” My mother thought she had gone to the state park on a sorority retreat once, but she couldn’t remember for sure.

For miles, we watched a rectangular behemoth the color of spring honeysuckle flowers emerge from the horizon, bellowing smoke into the sky. Up close, we saw the signs: Lake Sinclair. Here sat a *Deliverance* brand of lake, man-made—as all lakes are in Georgia—with a monstrous hydroelectric plant sitting on the road. Georgia Power claims it is “the largest non-governmental provider of recreation facilities in the state. If you’re in Georgia, chances are

you're not very far from a Georgia Power lake or park." Where the corporation once destroyed homes to both funnel power back to Atlanta and create places for city kids to play, it blew up the power plant a month after I drove by it. "What sounded like a series of fireworks was the small explosions causing the plant to explode," I read in a local news report. I marveled at all the layers of destruction and remaking one site could hold. The place still has 400 miles of pristine shoreline property.

"I used to come out here with a boy named Bill from grad school," my mother said. "His family lived on the lake. The matriarch was this woman they called Big Mother. She was the type of woman who'd look down her nose at me and say without saying out loud:

'You're...Jewish?'"

"Did you ever bring Bill home?" I asked.

"No, I never brought home any boys who weren't Jewish. But Bill was a real character. He was writing his Master's Thesis on *Birth of a Nation*. I used to say he had an eight-track mind, and when he was working on that paper, he'd whip himself into anxieties. Once, when we were at the lake, I asked him if he'd ever thought about getting some professional help, for his head. And Big Mother got all flustered and looked at me and said, 'But that might go on his permanent record!'"

We laughed. "Like anything gets to be *that* permanent," she said.

*

In 1975, Alice Walker wrote an essay like this one. "Beyond the Peacock: the Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor" details a day that Walker visited Andalusia with her

mother, after Walker realized that, decades earlier, she and O'Connor had lived within minutes of each other on Highway 441. In college, Walker had read O'Connor incessantly, rarely thinking of the difference between O'Connor's identity and her own. When Walker soon discovered that there were black writers whom she "had not been allowed to know," she put O'Connor away, and picked up Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larson and Jean Toomer.

Later, Walker planned a trip to visit both her old home and O'Connor's. It was twenty-two years after the Walkers had moved away, and ten years after O'Connor's death. Walker set out to see what she might learn from this literary excursion. "To this bit of nostalgic exploration I invited my mother," she wrote, "who, curious about peacocks and abandoned houses, if not literature and writers, accepted."

When the two arrived at their old home near Eatonton, Walker and her mother found a "No Trespassing" sign and a gate beyond which they saw only muddy pasture. While Walker hesitated with trepidation, her mother opened the gate. The two walked through pines and wild azaleas to find their old house, barely left standing. The Walkers stand there, remembering. "I remember only misery," Walker wrote: "going to a shabby segregated school that was once the state prison and that had, on the second floor, the large circular print of the electric chair that had stood there; almost stepping on a water moccasin on my way home from carrying water to my family in the fields; losing Phoebe, my cat, because we left hurriedly and she could not be found in time."

The only solace Walker found "in a life of nightmares about electrocutions and lost cats and the surprise appearance of snakes" was the field that stretched from her home to Milledgeville, a field that "represented beauty and unchanging peace." Just beyond the field, she realized, is O'Connor's place.

*

On Highway 441, my mother and I passed more forests and more fields, dotted by the occasional string of half-occupied, half-abandoned convenience stores. We saw one home with a big front lawn that boasted both a tableaux of Peanuts characters and a Confederate flag on a pole, planted in the ground. Somewhere around the time that we began seeing signs for the Auntie Bellum trail, a white billboard on stilts appeared at the edge of the trees along the road. “Andalusia Farm: Home of Flannery O’Connor,” it read. A small plank hung below it, with red text that proclaimed: “The Life You Save May Be Your Own.”

We turned down a red clay road with an open gate, and at the end of it we saw a big white house with a front porch lined by rocking chairs facing a pond. We drove around back, where we saw a dry water tower and a quiet barn and an empty sharecropper’s shack. All were set back far enough from the road that we felt surrounded by forests and fields. By then, the secluded place was a true house museum. Andalusia would be adopted by the local college that O’Connor had attended days after my mother and I visited.

When we walked inside, we saw Flannery O’Connor’s preserved bedroom to our left. The doorway was open, but roped off. We craned our necks to peer inside. There was a double bed that O’Connor slept in, with a gold crucifix hanging on the wall beside it. There was a desk, facing inward, where O’Connor had caught the light from two windows. She had written there each morning after attending mass in town. There were her crutches, and her radio, and a fireplace. There was peeling wallpaper. It all smelled like a closet full of coats that had been closed for a long time.

A docent wearing a T-shirt with a silhouette of O'Connor's face on it greeted us cheerily. "Where y'all from?" he asked with a middle Georgia drawl.

"Atlanta," my mother and I said in unison.

"Just down the road," he said. "Most people come from farther."

We nodded.

"Ms. O'Connor lived here for the last twelve years of her life," the docent told us. "She'd already gone up north to start her writing career. She got her Master's at the Iowa Writer's Workshop and was part of an artist's colony in upstate New York. But then, in 1952, she got systemic lupus erythematosus, and she had to come home to Andalusia. Her daddy had died from lupus a few years back, and so her mama, Regina Cline, took care of her here. Flannery lived for seven years longer than they'd thought she would. Her Mama helped her up and down those steps, helped her type when her arms got tired. Let her get all those damn peacocks. Flannery died when she was 39 with no kids of her own, but she raised near 100 birds. Like daughters."

The docent made sure my mother and I took a copy of a hand-drawn map of Andalusia before we began to wander. On it were references to O'Connor stories. The text "Main Barn—is that the Bible salesman on the hayloft ladder?" was written near a drawing of the milk processing shed. Next to Highway 441, with a northward arrow, as the caption: "To Eatonton, Atlanta, and other pernicious places. This is where Nelson Head learned for the first time how the world was put together in its lower parts." Beyond the bounds of Andalusia was the expression, written in cursive: "Here be dragons, and plenty of them."

My mother insisted that she take a picture of me on the wide white porch, in a rocking chair, to keep with her when I left town in a few weeks. Then, we circled the house, separately. While I paused at every marker indicating a mention in an O'Connor story, my mother lingered

near a set of canisters that would have held sugar and salt in the kitchen, rounded things with silver lids. “They’re just like mama’s,” she said.

*

O’Connor and Walker are deeply concerned with mothers and daughters. In their stories, mothers are tied to setting and to home: they are part of the landscapes and the frameworks to which their prodigal daughters can return. I think of O’Connor’s characters Mrs. Hopewell and Joy in “Good Country People,” and I think of Walker’s Mama and Dee in “Everyday Use.” Both of these daughter characters insist that their mothers call them by new names on their visits back from some unspecified “away.” Joy prefers the harshness of the name “Hulga;” Dee insists on being called “Wangero Kewanika Kemanjo.” It is clear that Joy-Hulga and Dee-Wangero have gained educations that surpass those of their mothers. It is clear, too, that they have flung themselves into worlds beyond their homes, and have changed with time and distance. We see the evidence of these changes in what these characters choose to call themselves on these returns home: names of their own decision. They eschew the language that their mothers have assigned them in favor of their own.

The lines O’Connor and Walker might draw between their fictions and their realities are thin. I think of Regina Cline as O’Connor’s caretaker; I think of Walker’s unnamed mother who came along for a ride at the will of her daughter. Both authors had mothers that they used as benchmarks to measure their intellectual development and their geographic exploration. Just as perimeters determine the shape of spaces, so too can mothers give an edifice to time. From our

mothers we can situate ourselves in historical moments, in class statuses, in modes of thought. Against our mothers we, daughters, measure our own growth.

But so much relies upon how we are nourished, too. Our growth is not contingent upon our mothers alone, but is reliant on class, on race—on place, and mobility from it and within it. So much hinges on hard work and even more on chance. I know that I have been given so much, unearned, to support the growth that I've undergone. I think sometimes about what one could do with half of the resources I've been handed; with half of the love I've felt. It would still be a bounty.

I am not Joy or Dee or Hulga or Wangero. I am Carly Gail Berlin, daughter of Martha Popowski Berlin, daughter of Paula Kornblum Popowski. My mother and I are prodigal daughters who have been allowed to return home, but my grandmother never got to be one at all. She left home in Poland when she was eighteen, and her family was murdered weeks later. When she came to Charleston with an affidavit in 1949, she sowed the seeds of a white, American, upwardly mobile family, a family that never quite replaced the one she lost. She filled those canisters with sugar and salt, as my mother does now.

The month after our trip to Andalusia, I flew back South to watch my grandmother get lowered into the ground in a plot an ocean away from where her own mother never received a proper burial. Before the ceremony, a childhood friend of my mother's pulled me aside and put a hand on my shoulder. She looked at me and said: "You get to go farther than your mom did. Do you know that?" I couldn't say anything. I nodded. An hour later, I shoveled fresh dirt onto my grandmother's grave, as is Jewish custom. First, I used the back of the shovel, to show reluctance, and then placed a full two scoops on top of the plain wooden casket, meant to

disintegrate into the earth. I handed the shovel to the next person in line, and we all shoveled until the grave was full. Over her plot, I imagine, green grass will grow.

*

When I think of our visit to Andalusia now, I think of my own giddiness there in contrast to Walker's frustration. When Walker visited Andalusia, there was no docent, only a caretaker who looked after things. She walked up to Flannery O'Connor's door and knocked. At that moment, she did not think of O'Connor's illness, nor her writing. She must have imagined herself knocking on the door of a plantation mansion. She wrote of that moment: "It all comes back to houses. To how people live. There are rich people who own houses to live in and poor people who do not. And this is wrong. Literary separatism, fashionable now among blacks as it has always been among whites, is easier to practice than to change a fact like this. I think: I would level this country with a sweep of my hand, if I could."

She called out the difference that race has made in the lives—and afterlives—of black and white artists. In Mississippi, there is a house museum much like Andalusia for William Faulkner, but "no one even remembers where Richard Wright lived." This, however, was bearable to Walker. "What comes close to being unbearable," she wrote, "is that I know how damaging to my own psyche such injustice is. In an unjust society the soul of the sensitive person is in danger of deformity from just such weights as this. For a long time I will feel Faulkner's house, O'Connor's house, crushing me."

Walker shifted to her mother, who believed that, because O'Connor died young from illness, God had shown His judgment. She said to her daughter: "Well, you know, it is true, as

they say, that the grass is always greener on the other side. That is, until you find yourself over there.”

“But,” Walker replied, “grass *can* be greener on the other side and not be just an illusion. Grass on the other side of the fence might have good fertilizer, while grass on your side might have to grow, if it grows at all, in sand.”

As my mother and I made our way back to the car at the end of our visit, we stopped at a wire enclosure near the parking lot. There were two peacocks inside it. My mother and I laced our fingers through the fencing and watched the big, weird birds hop around their cage, on this property where they had once roamed in droves.

“Let’s wait to head back until they open their tails,” my mother said. And so we waited.

Walker concluded her essay, “Beyond the Peacock,” with the image of a peacock preventing her and her mother from leaving Andalusia. It stood in front of their car, strutting, showing off its tail.

“Peacocks are inspiring,” Walker said to her mother, “but they don’t stop to consider they might be standing in your way.”

Walker’s mother responded: “Yes, and they’ll eat up every bloom you have, if you don’t watch out.”

The peacocks before my mother and me never unfurled their “galaxies of haloed suns,” as O’Connor liked to call them. We got back into the car and pointed ourselves toward home. We moved along a map with no Perimeter nor boonies nor dragons, but a cartography only of fertilizer, and of sand. Soon, we pulled up by our front lawn, where my parents had planted a red maple on the corner by the street when I was born. Over the years I’d watched it grow. Now, it is tall enough to send long shadows in different directions.

Notes:

Much of this essay is drawn from Alice Walker's essay "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor" in *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*. Other references come from Walker's short story "Everyday Use" and O'Connor's story "Good Country People."

Temporary Edifices

As a kid, I'd ride my bike around the perimeter of Piedmont Park to test my budding freedom. My mother and I would walk down Monroe together, and, once crossing the Art Deco bridge that spans the dog park, I'd have some semblance of independence. With my helmet strapped snug under my chin, I'd peddle around Lake Clara Meer, speeding by its border of graffitied benches and its flocks of Muscovy ducks with their red, fleshy heads. I'd take a spin around the meadow, across 10th street from the Henry W. Grady High School football stadium, and would linger by the playground near the intersection of Piedmont and 14th. In the park, I discovered a new version of myself: alone on my bike, away from my family, I became an observer of my environment and the inhabitants of it. I might watch a group of homeless men gather around the grill at the base of the stone balustrade encircling the Active Oval, or may note teams of drag queens playing kickball, or could see theater crews setting up the scaffolding for Shakespeare in the Park. The young introvert—the nascent writer in me—relished this time to take in my surroundings.

I always knew to pause at the pre-determined oak tree up the steps from the community garden. There, my mother would catch up to me, dog in tow, so she could keep track of where I was. We'd give each other a nod—a signal of our agreement, a small compromise between my autonomy and my inevitable position as daughter—and I'd keep on riding.

One day I pushed hard on the compromise. My little brother had come to the park with us. I was probably nine; it was summer time, one of those Atlanta days when one can hear the low-simmer of the heat, can see it rise in waves from the pavement. At first the three of us stayed

together. When my brother fell off his bike in a tangle of small limbs, though, I took off, alone, past the fields and the lake in my familiar wide circle. When I came upon the oak tree by the steps, I slowed, ready to stop at its base. But my foot didn't leave the peddle. I kept moving, motivated by a decision beyond my own logic and comprehension. I crested the southern edge of Clara Meer, in pursuit of completing a second loop. I felt the thrill of knowing that no one knew where I was.

It didn't take me long to realize that my breach of the compromise would come with repercussions. I wasn't sure how I'd find my mother and brother again. A summer camp counselor in a neon shirt found me anxious near the parking deck, thinking I was a camper gone rogue, no doubt. He encouraged me to rejoin the group. I told him curtly not to worry about me as I sped away.

I will always remember my mother's expression as she saw me riding towards her, retracing the perimeter. She was sweaty, red in the face, and somewhere between livid and intensely relieved. She had spent the last ten minutes cycling through all of the horrors that might have happened to me, in her mind. "Never, ever, do that again," she scolded. We left the park, joined at the hip, headed back towards home.

*

Even before Atlanta was burned, the city was a place founded on change. First established at the confluence of three major railroads in 1837, the settlement was initially called "Terminus." It wasn't expected to become much of anything; it was simply a junction at a logical crossing point of the sub-continental divide. But businesses situated themselves along the

railroads, trusting the promise of movement to bolster their young economies. A city was born. Terminus was renamed “Marthasville” after the governor’s daughter in 1843, but when that designation sounded too provincial, the city was again baptized as “Atlanta.” The name was an homage to the Western and Atlantic railroad that ran through town. It was a celebration of industry and mobility.

Atlanta served as an important nexus for the South’s cotton trade. So much of the slave-tilled cotton from plantations across the Deep South passed through Atlanta’s rail hub. The city, too, was a stronghold of the Confederacy. Yet then came General William Tecumseh Sherman on his March to the Sea in 1864, along with the Union soldiers who took Atlanta under siege and set the place on fire. Georgia’s governor sent a militia officer to assess Atlanta’s damage. The officer spent the better part of a week methodically mapping every house left standing in Atlanta. Cue a *Gone with the Wind* film still: burning edifices, a wooden city engulfed in flames. Within a half-mile radius of the city center, 400 out of 3,600 homes remained. Atlanta became the capitol of Georgia after the war. With this move came an opportunity for rebranding. The official seal of the city changed from an image of a railroad locomotive to an icon of the phoenix, an emblem of remarkable recovery. “Although other Southern cities had suffered equal devastation during the war,” writes historian Harvey K. Newman, “only Atlanta chose to use the experience as a way of promoting itself.”

Self-promotion like this defines Atlanta. At times, the city has endorsed itself as distinct from the region around it. At others, Atlanta has positioned itself as the pinnacle of all things Southern. Despite the shifting negotiations between the city and the region around it, Atlanta has remained constant in the volume of its promotions. For so long, it has sought attention from the world beyond.

One famed Atlanta promoter was Henry Grady: *Atlanta Constitution* editor, noted reconciliationist, and proponent of Southern industrialism. During his “New South” speech of 1886, Grady harkened back to an absent and aged aggressor. He declared: “I want to say to General Sherman—who is considered an able man in our hearts, though some people think he is a kind of careless man about fire—that from the ashes he left us in 1864 we have raised a brave and beautiful city; that somehow or other we have caught the sunshine in the bricks and mortar of our homes, have builded therein not one ignoble prejudice or memory.”

I want to say to Henry Grady: Where did the ignoble prejudices and memories go, then? Were they incinerated, too? Did the white people of your time believe that the South, that Atlanta could leave the past dead? I want to say: memory does not work like this.

*

Henry Grady is credited with devising the original idea to host a world’s fair in Atlanta. He wanted to solidify the city as the center of the New South, and he hoped to prove the New South’s worth on the international stage. He also wanted to entice Northern industrialists to invest in Atlanta. Grady would show all who looked that white folks and black folks could work together in Atlanta to achieve the common goal of capitalist enterprise. He epitomized the “Atlanta Spirit” that Newman has written of: the “militant expression of Atlanta’s personality—forceful, aggressive, intelligent, harmonious, with an abundance of that requisite indispensable in man or city—sleepless initiative.”

Though Grady died in 1889, his successors sought to stage an event that would rival even the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago two years prior. Chicago’s fair had commemorated

the 400th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the New World, and had been replete with Beaux Arts marvels and urban planning feats. Admirers had deemed it the "White City": an entire landscape of neoclassical edifices and ethnic exhibitions that would stand only for a year. One loyal dispatch from *The Covington Star* in March of 1894 deemed Atlanta "not only the 'Magic City,' but [...] unquestionably the most 'plucky city' in the south." The author went on to declare: "It will give us pleasure to see the exposition equal or eclipse the Chicago fair, and we know Atlanta will leave no stone unturned to beat the 'Windy City' affair single-handed and alone."

Plans to put on the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition commenced. The event was posed as a way to draw Atlanta out of the national economic depression of 1893. Funds had become so low in the city that the annual business of moving the cotton crop—which continued even after slavery—was threatened. Atlantans understood that, though the prospect of mounting such a large scale exposition could bring potential prosperity to the city, putting on the exposition would require capital. During the final days of 1893, the plan for the exposition was widely announced through the *Atlanta Constitution*. "IT IS ASSURED," the headline read, "The Great Cotton States and Sub-Tropical Exposition was Started Yesterday, When Over Three Hundred Prominent Citizens Met in Conference." The full front-page spread detailed the gathering of city leaders that commenced planning the exposition, "with a verifiable boom." The author declared that this combination of business forerunners and elected officials "would be certain of success; and this particular enterprise—this grand exposition in which every man, woman and child in Atlanta is interested—could not possibly have had a more auspicious beginning than the enthusiastic and unanimous endorsement of that meeting." Yet underlying this confidence existed the doubt that perhaps the "Atlanta spirit" could not hold.

The planners of the exposition had to scramble to get the money. City council gave \$75,000; the Exposition Company, a group of private citizens, raised \$134,000; Fulton County donated the labor of its convicts, who completed \$100,000 worth of grading and dirt moving to transform the designated site, Piedmont Park, into a grounds fit for this large enterprise. When business leaders realized the fair required greater financial support, they introduced a congressional bill for an appropriation of \$200,000 for the construction and operation of a federal exhibit at the exposition. These leaders acted with a savviness tinged with racism so common in Atlanta history. They decided that Congress would more likely support this funding if the planning commission included African Americans. Thus, they recruited African American leaders to work towards their own ends. Booker T. Washington and two bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church ventured to Washington, D.C. and met with the appropriation committee. The bill was passed. Cotton States could go on.

As a sort of concession, the exposition planners invited Washington to be a keynote speaker. On a sweltering September evening, Washington delivered the first speech given by an African American man to a largely white audience in the South. He rode into Piedmont Park in Atlanta in a three-hour parade of carriages to celebrate the opening day of the Exposition. That very same day, a Civil War reunion took place 150 miles north at the Chickamauga battlefield, where the uniformed men of the Blue and the Gray shook hands in stiff reunion. In Atlanta, a band played the “Star Spangled Banner” before Washington took the stage, and the audience cheered. But when the band played “Dixie” next, the crowd “roared with shrill hi-yi’s.”

Washington—born a slave—began his speech by thanking the organizers of the Exposition for acknowledging “the value and manhood of the American Negro.” To the white Atlanta businessmen who made up that directing committee, Washington said that this

“recognition [...] will do more to cement the friendship of the two races than any occurrence since the dawn of our freedom.” The stuff of this friendship was business. Washington was surrounded by the Electricity Building, the Machinery Building, the Georgia Manufacturers building: a whole grounds boasting Atlanta’s industrial prowess in an attempt to woo northern capital. He declared: “It is well to bear in mind that whatever sins the South may be called to bear, when it comes to business, pure and simple, it is in the South that the Negro is given a man’s chance in the commercial world, and in nothing is this Exposition more eloquent in emphasizing this chance.”

Washington is oft remembered as The Great Accommodator. He encouraged African Americans to seek progress through technical work rather than through political aspirations. “Privileges that will come to us,” he wagered, “must be the result of severe and constant tribute than of artificial forcing.” That white crowd must have roared with hi-yi’s at the idea: they need not respect the implicit privileges of their fellow citizens, but had permission to wait for African Americans to prove themselves. Surely, these white folks cheered as Washington lifted his hand to the masses and uttered that most infamous line: “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”

It was W.E.B. Du Bois who deemed Washington’s speech the “Atlanta Compromise.” Du Bois considered the “friendship” Washington espoused a concession on the part of African Americans, who Washington suggested should not push for the right to vote, nor seek a liberal arts education, nor retaliate against racist behavior. Washington considered his tactic one to appease the white Americans to whom he spoke. It was a compromise that he deemed necessary with those who had so recently—and unwillingly—granted his people freedom. Civil War historian David Blight writes that Washington became the new champion of the reconciliationist

vision of the war, which eclipsed the emancipation narrative. Blight argues that Washington's rhetoric was "rooted in the strange but beguiling dream that economic progress would render remembering unnecessary."

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I have imagined what it may have felt like to navigate the temporary city of Cotton States. I may have sat at the top of the Phoenix Wheel, looking down at the grounds below. I could have seen Lake Clara Meer, the basin of which Fulton county chain gangs had excavated in the previous months. I may have pointed out ornate structures built to represent the states of the union—and groups considered as subsets of the union, women and "Negros"—all to be torn down in the months following the exposition and sold as scrap. I could have noticed the Midway, with its "ethnographic" exhibits, putting German and Chinese and Indian people on display in line with the "Animal Arena." I may have discerned Buffalo Bill performing his Wild West Show, trafficking in stereotypes of native people. And I could have seen the Old Plantation, which showcased African American actors as slaves. With neglect to the Negro Building adjacent, which displayed the educational achievements of African Americans since the Civil War, an *Atlanta Constitution* article concluded that the Old Plantation was "'the most complete all round representation of the colored race possible to conceive.'"

I have tried to conceive of how important Atlanta must have felt in that moment. Festivities at Cotton States had only commenced after the President of the United States had sent an express message from the White House. Visitors from all over the country had poured into town. I have attempted to hear those words of the dedicatory ode wringing in my own ears: "And

the New South, brave-risen from the past, / Wears on her brow the diadem at last!" As a white visitor, I must have felt pride in my city, my region. I might even have admired the progressivism, the will to place history squarely in the past.

I may not have known that, then, Georgia led the nation in the greatest number of lynchings. Only four years later, Ida B. Wells-Barnett—the African American journalist, feminist, and leader of an 1890s anti-lynching crusade—would publish her seminal *Lynch Law in Georgia*. In this record of nine lynchings “in the Center of Southern Civilization,” Wells-Barnett wrote that “The real purpose of these savage demonstrations is to teach the Negro that in the South he has no rights that the law will enforce.” Her purview extended beyond the South, however. Wells-Barnett instigated a famous protest in 1893 in Chicago against the exclusion of African Americans from the World’s Columbian Exposition there. She sat beyond the boundary of the White City and handed out pamphlets that, as she put it, stated the “facts concerning the oppression put upon the colored people in this land of the free and home of the brave.” I wonder what Well-Barnett made of the racial politics at play at Cotton States. She staunchly opposed Booker T. Washington’s conciliations, and instead promoted a campaign for full, uncompromised rights for African Americans. At the Chicago fair, she had won the small gesture of a single “Negro Day.” In Atlanta, she may have appreciated the Negro Building: it, at least, stood with relative permanence. Though it would so soon be lost to memory, too.

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Atlanta’s more recent history is full of temporary edifices, full of promotions. There was the Georgia Dome, such a novelty in its day, torn down to make way for the bigger and flashier

Mercedes Benz Stadium. There was Centennial Olympic Park, built 100 years after Cotton States but very much for the same purpose: to put Atlanta on the world stage. Atlanta's story is so wrapped up in this boom-and-bust boosterism. The narrative so often has a racial undertone. Gentrification around the stadiums has irrevocably altered the racial and socioeconomic makeups of the populations that live around them. In 1996, predominantly black homeless folks were given one-way bus tickets out of town so those attending Olympics would not see them. George Chidi, a black journalist-activist who is the Social Impact Director at Central Atlanta Progress, told *Scalawag Magazine* in 2018 that this 1996 move “was a stain on our honor, and it's one we haven't forgotten. It's burned into the psychic memory of the city.”

These processes are all linked, and occur with little regard for the past. Yet they are so informed by history. The “Atlanta way”—the notion that the city is so focused on business that issues of racism do not come to the fore—has endured for decades. “The city too busy to hate.” Of course the hatred, though often subtler than in other corners of the South, is entwined in the business, too. Even if the past is largely invisible, it is still present. I wonder what Atlanta, what Marthasville and Terminus, might have looked like before they were leveled. What a little city on the railroad that profited so directly from slave labor may have felt like. And I think of William Faulkner's famous adage: “The past is never dead. It's not even past.”

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I have grown up thinking of myself as an Atlantan; not a Georgian, nor a Southerner. Such is the case for so many of us that grew up in cities like this: blue islands amidst seas of red. Yet there are moments when that all collapses. I remember when a black man was found hanging

from a tree in Piedmont Park in July of 2016. It was the end of the week when Alton Sterling was shot and killed by a police officer in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Philando Castile was shot and killed by a police officer in a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota. People took to Twitter with vehemence. Some called out the banality of the hanging, deeming it another modern-day lynching. Others proposed that the Ku Klux Klan had carried out the action, pointing to the exceptionalism of the case. When Atlanta area police deemed the death a suicide—though a particularly creative and charged one—many responded with skepticism. “Black men don’t hang themselves from trees in the South,” one Twitter user said. I looked on from up North. I felt so angry that the ugly South had reared its head in Atlanta, in a place I had tried to think of as better than the region surrounding it. My frustration was steeped in my own inability to see Atlanta, to see the South, in the context of America. As Ida B. Wells-Barnett wrote, “Our country’s national crime is lynching.”

Now, when I traverse Piedmont Park—having gained a fuller independence, with time—I’m usually alone. I look around me for vestiges of Cotton States. I circle the perimeter that is so engrained into my muscle memory, and pass the lake full of those weird ducks and the field where I once sat atop a Ferris Wheel at a spring festival, looking down at the sprawling mass of home below. I pass the oak where I used to pause for my mother on all of those bike rides, and the tree of the suicide hanging, another event so quickly forgotten.

All that remains of the world’s fair at Piedmont Park is the stone balustrade encircling the active oval. Once, I paused there, at the set of steps near the gazebos and the grills. I called up an image of Washington standing before me, with his palm outstretched. The stones he stood upon are old and warped and nondescript; there are no historical markers around. You have to know what you are looking for. Yet the small remnants endure.

Notes:

Information on The Cotton States International Exposition was drawn largely from Harvey K. Newman's chapter "The New South Era, 1880-1900" in *Southern Hospitality, Tourism, and the Growth of Atlanta*, Theda Perdue's *Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition of 1895*, and the digital archives of the *Atlanta Constitution*.

Set in Stone Mountain

I had one collection, growing up: a trove of penny-presses I'd gathered on family travels. Whenever we went to a memorial or park or museum, I'd search for the uniform low-tech machine of the penny-press: little more than a plastic box with a set of gears inside, designed to transform my standard-issue coin into a unique memento for safekeeping. I would convince my parents to fork over a penny along with the quarters needed to fund the impending metamorphosis. Then, I would slowly feed the coin into the slot and spin the crank, waiting with wonder. Through some abstracted process involving heat and force and time, my treasure would emerge anew. The pressed penny would bear the embossed image of a lion from the San Diego Zoo or the silhouette of Yellowstone's Old Faithful. I would add it to my booklet designed for kids like me: it was full of small slots just the right size for my transformed coins. Eventually, I accumulated so many penny-presses that I had to jam two or three into the place meant for one. The booklet, thick with the boons of my national scavenger hunt, had a laminated cover bearing a majestic bald eagle Photoshopped before an American flag.

Recently, I have been thinking about one penny-press that I acquired close to home. The coin is stamped with the image of three Confederate leaders: a tiny likeness of the colossal Confederate Memorial Carving at Stone Mountain, sixteen miles away from where I grew up. The Carving bears Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis atop their horses, in profile, holding their hats over their hearts. I can envision a young me approaching a penny-press machine. Coins in hand, I look through the list of options for my penny's remaking. I could have picked a design of a Georgia peach, or one of the gondola that goes up and down the mountain. I

can't recall, now, what drew me to the image I chose; surely my lack of knowledge that these three men had fought to uphold the institution of slavery played a part. But the idea that this significance was lost on me scares me, now. Wouldn't my parents have nudged me on this at the time? But then I remember that my father almost drafted a coffee table book of small town Confederate memorials around the South as a side project when he was a bachelor. His own act of collection—though, thankfully, more pressing commitments got the best of him.

I haven't seen my booklet of penny-presses in a long time. I have asked my mother to look for it, though she thinks I might have told her to throw it away the last time we purged the house of my old toys and school notebooks. My lost souvenirs are calling on me to remember, I think. They beg me to confront the stakes of my forgetting.

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In 1869, Francis Tichnor, a poet from Jones County, GA, first proposed the idea to create a monument at Stone Mountain. Tichnor questioned in the unexceptional verse: “May we not mate the mountain and the man—/ The granite dome and the great Georgian?” That granite dome had served as a gathering place for the residents of the Piedmont region for millennia, before the creation of the state of Georgia, before any premonition of a white man's conquest. It would soon become the canvas for the largest war memorial in existence.

Tichnor's proposition gained traction in 1914, when William H. Terrell, an Atlanta attorney and son of a Confederate veteran, proposed the construction of a monument at Stone Mountain in an editorial for the *Atlanta Constitution*. Terrell asserted that Stone Mountain proved the ideal location for such a memorial because of its proximity to the center of the former

Confederacy: Atlanta. He also stated, with gusto, that such a memorial “will be here without change, except such as may be made by the hand of man, so long as the world shall stand.”

These declarations caught the attention of Helen Plane, a member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. She commissioned the acclaimed sculptor Gutzon Borglum to survey the site and discuss plans. Borglum proved an ironic choice: he had recently achieved national fame for his sculpted head of Abraham Lincoln, and would later design the Mount Rushmore National Memorial. In 1915, however, Borglum fully dedicated himself to the task at hand. He eschewed Plane’s idea to carve a hundred-foot-high face of General Lee on the site, proclaiming that it “would look like a postage stamp on a barn door.” Instead, Borglum imagined a frieze depicting hundreds of Confederate soldiers marching across the sheer gray mountainside, led by full-bodied representations of Generals Lee and Jackson and Confederate President Jefferson Davis. He wanted the figures to appear so lifelike that they would seem to move across the surface of the stone. He began carving General Lee at once.

So much of this grandiose talking proved a waste of breath. The frieze never came to fruition. Borglum clashed with his bosses over politics, and when they fired him, he smashed his clay models with an axe and fled to North Carolina. Lee’s head was blasted off the rock. The face of the mountain would see carving efforts in fits and starts for decades to come. A succession of sculptors brought their vision to the stone, and so what remains there today is a hodge-podge of all the imaginings grafted on that granite. Each of these visions declared the Confederacy heroic. All of these sculptors competed to solidify the glory of the lost cause in the collective memories of viewers for decades to come.

I have poured over all of this documentation circling Stone Mountain, and for what? I have leafed through the botched plans to hollow out niches around the periphery of the mountain

and the blueprints to build a reliquary for Civil War mementos at the summit. I have pondered the proposals of Augustus Lukeman and Walker Hancock, Borglum's successors, and I have looked at the photographs of these sculptors standing upright in the gigantic ears of the villains they carved in stone. I feel so often the need to search for the subtle insidiousness around me and in the places that I know. At Stone Mountain, though, the sinister is loud and huge. It is the obviousness of the whole enterprise that I find dizzying.

I have found myself continually drawn to Borglum's sketches: the memorial he proposed that exists only in the archives, now. In addition to his frieze, Borglum proposed to carve into the mountain at its base, in order to create a hall beneath the dome dedicated to the white women who had secured his employment and who sought to preserve the memory of the Confederacy throughout the South. From the outside, visitors would see a columned façade below the carved Confederates and beyond a large reflecting pool. Inside, they would find a hall of records: an intimate, womblike space, intended for intimate contemplation. A massive, shrouded figure would be displayed at the center of the space. A composite, this sculpture would stand for the archetypal Southern woman. She was to be called, simply, *Memory*.

*

The first time I learned about collective memory was in an Art History class about visual culture and the Holocaust. It was my first year up at school. We read Halbwachs, and my classmates groaned at the opacity of the French philosopher. I searched for a seed of something. Memories are encoded in social institutions, Halbwachs argues; grounded in religion, in family, in place, our memories are never purely ours. This idea both comforted me and worried me. I

could ground so much of my life story in Judaism, in my family, in Atlanta. In a sense, collective memory connotes community. Yet Halbwach's theory also seemed to suggest that the flow of stories in my mind that felt so dear to me—like my grandparents' survival narratives, or my own comings and goings from home—were not truly mine.

I see now that our memories are always informed, always corrupted, by our involuntary—or willed—search to contextualize our pasts. In *The Collective Memory*, Halbwachs writes that “We appeal to witnesses to corroborate or invalidate as well as supplement what we somehow know already about an event that in many other details remains obscure.” Returning to Halbwachs now, I see that he has his finger on the way I understand the past. For it is possible to know something *somehow*, but recognize other details as carved away, manipulated even, with time. I must appeal to witnesses, in the many forms in which they may come. Souvenirs; documents; memorials; monuments. The words of those who came before me. All dispel the opacity of the past.

Sometimes, the collective memories I hold—that of the Holocaust and that of the South—seem misaligned. In other moments, they merge, chillingly.

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On Confederate Memorial Day in 1913, a thirteen-year-old girl named Mary Phagan was found dead in the basement of the Atlanta pencil factory where she worked. She was white and Christian and her family had moved to Atlanta from the country in pursuit of financial gain. With shoddy evidence in hand, Atlantans pointed to the factory superintendent—Leo Frank, a Jew born in Texas though bred in New York—and accused him of murder.

Atlantans celebrated wildly at Frank's conviction. For each of the twenty-five days he spent in trial, a crowd cheered as the prosecutor entered and exited the courthouse. Frank's lawyers sought an appeal from the Supreme Courts of the state and the nation on account of the excessive public interest invested in the trial. The courts dissented, though two U.S. justices noted that the trial occurred in an environment of hostility: "Mob law does not become due process of law by securing the assent of a terrorized jury." When Frank's sentence was commuted, Atlantans were furious. They rioted in the streets. Governor Slaton declared martial law. When his term ended several days later, he boarded a train out of the state, not to return for a decade.

Rather than receive capital punishment, Frank was to remain for the rest of his days at a prison camp near Milledgeville. He was a member of a chain gang. A fellow prisoner slashed his throat with a knife, but he survived. Days after the commutation, 75 men who called themselves the Knights of Mary Phagan met at the girl's birthplace and gravesite in Marietta, GA, north of Atlanta. They vowed to seek revenge upon her death. They set off for Milledgeville, armed, and abducted Frank from the camp. They transported him back to Marietta, and there, they hung him from an oak tree.

In the aftermath of the terror, half of the Jewish population of Georgia fled the state. Those who stayed hid in their homes, withstanding a boycott of Jewish businesses in the area. Likely, they found out about the crime through a photograph taken to commemorate the event of the lynching. Onlookers stare straight at the camera, thin-lipped. One man cranes his neck above the others to get in the shot. A newspaper account states that watchman posted up around that oak tree. They guarded it from the "souvenir hunters" who they expected to encroach.

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On a stifling July day in 2017, I wound through the exhibits at the Atlanta History Center. One wall bore a timeline of Atlanta history, using artifacts to tell the story of the city. There were a series of events in the narrative that make me pause. One was the lynching of Leo Frank in 1915. A blurb noting the “anti-Northern and anti-Semitic tenor of his trial” accompanied a photo of Frank and his wife, Lucille Selig, at the Fulton County Superior Court. Frank’s arms were crossed, and his expression blank with resignation. The next plot point was from the same year: The Revival of the Ku Klux Klan. The blurb read: “The popular film, *The Birth of a Nation*, and the Leo Frank trial inspired Atlantan William J. Simmons to re-establish the Ku Klux Klan. Although the white supremacist group existed in several forms since Reconstruction, the revived Klan was also anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, and anti-immigrant. On Thanksgiving night, Simmons and 16 other men climbed Stone Mountain and lit a cross proclaiming the Klan’s rebirth. Klan members routinely rallied at Stone Mountain throughout the 20th century.” Above this text was a drum, maker unknown, painted with an image of a hooded horseman adorned with crosses that resemble the Confederate battle flag. Encircling the canvas drum were the words: “The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan; Yesterday-Today-Forever.” A memorial to last as long as the world shall stand. I had never realized that the lynching of a Jewish man in Atlanta had catalyzed the reinstatement of the modern KKK. And I, too, had never known Stone Mountain as the Klan’s founding site.

Later, I scavenged for the details, and the chronology clarified around them. In 1915, Helen Plane suggested to Gutzon Borglum that “the Ku Klux Klan which saved us from Negro domination and carpet-bag rule [ought to] be immortalized on Stone Mountain.” This never came

to fruition, likely because others with a stake in the Confederate Memorial Carving wanted to keep their Klan affiliations in the dark. That year, some of the same men who hung Frank would burn crosses and beat drums atop the mountain to bring the Klan back into being. After a hiatus during World War I, in 1924 Borglum ceremoniously revealed the original completed head of General Lee to wide acclaim. Rabbi David Marx of Atlanta's Jewish Temple—where Frank had been a member—gave the opening remarks at the unveiling, praying for God's blessing upon the Southern people represented by General Lee's giant bust on the mountain.

This was when Borglum's relationship with the Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial Association soured (SMCMA). Miscommunication over technical problems and funding sources delayed further carving, though the most damaging quarrels occurred over politics—overt, and covert. When money had been short, Borglum had suggested the SMCMA consider a fundraising offer made by a professional solicitor and chief recruiter of the national KKK, though several members of the association rejected this idea, for fear that the memorial would be viewed as a Klan enterprise. The 1924 election of President Calvin Coolidge exacerbated tensions between Borglum, a Republican, and SMCMA leader Hollins Randolph, a Democrat, though their divisions ran deep within the KKK, too; Borglum, Randolph, and Sam Venable—owner of the Stone Mountain property—all aligned themselves with competing national Klan leaders. After Coolidge's election, Randolph channeled his frustration at his presidential candidate's defeat toward his own adversary in national and Klan politics: Gutzon Borglum. The SMCMA fired Borglum in 1925, amidst allegations of Klan membership on both sides. And so Borglum smashed the models, relinquishing *Memory*, giving way to full-fledged sectionalism over his own paltry reconciliationist agenda.

It was around this time that President Coolidge approved a Congressional action to authorize an official government coin bearing renderings of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Future mayor Ivan Allen wrote in 1929 that the creation of this national token was “the most superb example of chivalrous consideration to fallen foes that the world ever saw.”

National criticism and lack of funding hindered efforts to finish the carving in the following decades. It wasn't until 1961 that the memorial would near its completion. That year, reinvigorated by the start of the Civil Rights Movement, Georgia Governor Samuel Marvin Griffin spearheaded a new memorial commission in an effort to complete the Confederate memorial. Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale notes that Griffin aimed to “ground the white southern present in images of the southern past, a sort of neo-Confederatism, and to halt nationally mandated change in the region.” He wanted to demonstrate to the nation that “‘progress’ meant not black rights but the maintenance of white supremacy.”

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The scholar of Holocaust memorials, James Young, has written that we must examine “a memorial in process, the ways in which a memorial's shape is determined as much by its own coming into being as by the ideals that first inspired it.” For the Confederate Memorial Carving at Stone Mountain, the maintenance of white supremacy—the memory of the Confederacy on the surface and of the Klan underneath—is gouged in the stone. These memories are not fixed, though. The process continues.

In the wake of the atrocities in Charleston and Charlottesville, our nation has engaged in debate over how to address Confederate memorials. Many a think-piece has pondered the fate of

the Stone Mountain colossus. Headlines from the past few months are revealing. *The Washington Post* presented “Stone Mountain: The ugly past—and fraught future—of the biggest Confederate monument,” while *Smithsonian Magazine* questioned “What Will Happen to Stone Mountain, America’s Largest Confederate Memorial?” A *CNN* headline offered, “At Georgia’s Stone Mountain, hikers try to rise above its racial history.” While state senator Lester Jackson may introduce a resolution in the Georgia state government to establish a study on Confederate memorials in the state in 2018, for now, the carving remains fixed in place, by law. Many have expressed vehement desire to leave the Confederate Memorial Carving alone. When mayoral candidate Stacey Evan’s stated that, at Stone Mountain, we should favor “honor[ing] the past without memorializing hate” in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, commenters reacted flaringly: “Y’all are starting another Civil War over a Civil War...have we learned nothing from our history? There is no one alive who was a slave or a slave owner. This carving should be an example of how far we have all come”; “Are you going to erase the whole existence of history?”; “If you take away one person's history you better take away everyone’s.”

A plan to carve the band Outkast in a Cadillac next to the Confederates gained traction online. Though the artist considered the idea a joke, noting that many Georgians would serve as worthier additions to the monument, he said that ““Outkast would piss off the right people.”” Big Boi, evidently, loved the thought, though the carving has not come to be. Besides a brief discussion to place a freedom bell at the summit—harkening to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s line, “Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia,”—no moves have been made to reckon with the iconography on Stone Mountain.

Kara Walker has taken a stab, though offsite. In 2015 the artist revealed her panorama that mocks Lee, Jackson, and Davis. It is called *To the Jubilant Martyrs of Obsolescence and*

Ruin, and was originally displayed as part of the exhibition *Go to Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First*. Walker spent her teenage years living in the town of Stone Mountain, and describes her move to Georgia from California as the moment when she “became black.” *Jubilant Martyrs* lays bare all of the insidiousness that is whitewashed from the Memorial itself. Surrounding the horseman are a pile of dismembered limbs, on top of which an apparently female-bodied person with braids feasts upon a drumstick; numerous animals and humans, stabbed with swords; many sexual encounters; the profile of Martin Luther King, Jr. The panorama does not offer any single reading; it resists a linear narrative. Instead, Walker proposes a simultaneity of stories, whose unifying factors are visual form—black silhouette on white background—and violent, grotesque content.

Walker has said that “history is a genre.” It is a genre that she turns on its ugly head. Rebecca Peabody, a scholar of Walker’s work, wrote that Walker “provides an opportunity for viewers to confront the architecture of their favorite collective fantasies [...] and to consider what is at stake when those fantasies are granted cultural immortality.” Walker has done so for Stone Mountain, though I wonder: who sees her work? Will anyone venture out to Stone Mountain park, ogle the Confederate Memorial Carving, and then traverse back in town to the High Museum—where *Jubilant Martyrs* will soon live— to see Walker’s reckoning?

After my History Center visit, I drove out to Stone Mountain for a day hike. Driving east from home, I passed Decatur, with its hip town square, then Clarkston, a refugee resettlement area, and eventually, after crossing the Perimeter highway, I arrived in the town of Stone Mountain, Georgia. After passing through an entrance lined with Confederate flags, I drove along Robert E. Lee Boulevard and Jefferson Davis Drive before finding a parking spot. I laced up my hiking boots and began walking. I was surrounded by the most diverse group of hikers I’d

ever seen on a trail, which makes sense, since the county where the park is located is majority black. I overheard one older black woman say that she walks up Stone Mountain every weekend.

Standing on top of the mound of granite, I looked back at the skyline of Atlanta emerging out of the haze. The rock below me was pockmarked with small craters and carvings from decades past. One read “Marx=idiot”; but which one? I imagined men in white hoods burning crosses where I stood. I held the fact of their ferocity in me while I looked around at all of my fellow hikers, all of us shifting, in some way, what this place means. I thought, too, of how 70 years after the lynching, the state of Georgia had again touched the Frank case. In 1986 the Georgia State Board of Pardons and Paroles wrote that “without attempting to address the question of guilt of innocence,” it would grant Frank a pardon, “as an effort to heal old wounds.” Wounds stay carved in time, though. Memories hold. Down where the mountain curved towards the ground under my feet was the triptych of pillagers that dwarfs even the monument at Mount Rushmore.

On my way back to the car, I passed a souvenir shop. Outside it was a small, transparent box with a crank and gears inside: a penny press machine. A call to transform something virtually valueless into a memory. I checked my pockets, but I had no pennies with me. I kept on moving.

*

The story I tell of my grandmother’s survival is a story of coins. It was 1942 in Kaluszyn, Poland, and my grandmother’s parents sewed gold coins into the hems of their daughters’ dresses, into the soles of their shoes. My grandmother and her sister left home on foot. The Nazis

came a week later and shot the remaining Jews in their hometown. With that hidden money, my grandmother bought her life.

Decades later my grandmother delivered her survival testimony on countless occasions. Her memory is enclosed in all of those digital archives with open access, her trauma legible for the public. Though on her wrist she wore her memory close. She took the last of those gold coins and had them melted down and shaped into the silhouettes of her grandchildren. All of us were the transformed keepsakes of that incalculable equation of chance and will that allowed us to come to be. She'd wear that bracelet always: when she knit all of those quilts, when she made a cholent or a matzah ball soup that tasted like the old world. She loved to ride around the Battery in Charleston; she'd ask to go on a "swing," and would search for the states on the license plates of the cars all around us. Her own practice of collection, her own game of seeing division. There were insiders, there were visitors.

Six months after my grandmother's death, my mother, my eldest cousin and I sat down to write my grandmother's epitaph. My uncles had given their input on the matter. They had both written verbose paragraphs for the tombstone to immortalize her. In an email chain, my mother suggested that we use the word "resilience." The men shut that thought down; inappropriate context, or something. I thought of the shiva after the funeral, when my uncles gathered all of the men for mincha. In their rulebook, women do not count among the customary ten people needed to recite the mourner's kaddish. They distributed the prayer books and began to shut the door, demarcating the living room, where they gathered, from the kitchen, where the women were to make small talk until the men were finished. I was furious. My uncles cornered us into that antiquated archetype of the Jewish woman. A woman who is supposedly so holy that she need not play an active role in *this* life; a woman who performs emotional labor without being granted

full access to grief. My uncles' small concession: they left the space open, so we could pray with them from just behind the doorway.

In the wake of the death, we've experienced other family drama. My grandmother's will designated my aunt as the receiver of a pair of earrings that my mother had long coveted. My mother, the youngest daughter, "still getting pushed around," she has lamented to me. Though my mother knows that her older sister never married, that my aunt does not have a family of her own; that she should not whine. My mother has been given a set of gold coins from the Old World. We don't know if they are *the* coins, or ones my grandmother picked up as a displaced person between the war's end and her journey to America. We suspect the latter: that these coins may be a souvenir of that time when she knew the fact of her freedom, yet still held onto that instinct to gather resources and keep them close. To keep moving forward; to not pause and remember.

My mother, my cousin and I held a kind memory workshop, attempting to summarize my grandmother's life in one pithy sentence. We shuffled words around until we arrived on what we felt encapsulates her, even in its concision. "A matriarch who faced the world with resilience and a warm smile." We sent it off to my aunts and uncles, and everyone stated their approval. I imagine, sometimes, what those who did not know my grandmother will think of her when they pass by her grave. The text they see will be accompanied by a Jewish star, marking her as a survivor. They will read the epitaph set in the stone, and will have a sense of the collective memories to which she is part. But they will never know the full story.

Notes:

Information on Stone Mountain was largely drawn from Robert L. McGrath's chapter, "From Stone Mountain to Mount Rushmore," in *Mountains and Memory*; Grace Elizabeth Hale's chapter, "Granite Stopped Time: Stone Mountain Memorial and the Representation of White Southern Identity," in *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory*; as well as David B. Freeman's book *Carved in Stone: The History of Stone Mountain*.

Other content was quoted from Rebecca Peabody's chapter, "Introduction: Kara Walker, Storyteller," in *Consuming Stories: Kara Walker and the Imagining of American Race*; James E. Young's chapter, "Memory and the Politics of Identity: Boston and Washington, D.C.," in *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*; Ivan Allen's *Atlanta from the Ashes*; and Maurice Halbwach's *The Collective Memory*.

The South's Ellis Island

Author's Note:

When I first arrived at my New England college, everyone asked me where my accent was. Where? Nowhere. This was a matter I had never considered. I hadn't noticed that my parents spoke with subtle twangs 'til my college friends noted this, but that would be years down the road. I'd tell the inquiring peer before me that I'm from Atlanta, with a raised brow for emphasis, and leave off the understood state at hand. Saying I hailed from Georgia felt like a foolish strategy. It also felt like a lie. I would evade any association with the South that my curious classmate implied. The South didn't feel like mine.

As I struggled to transition to college, I couldn't shake how out of place I felt. It dawned on me that I'd come to New England on the odd yet earnest whim of a Northern intellectual fantasy. No one in my family had done this before; I have no close family in the Northeast. A homesickness so quick and suffocating took hold of me that I wondered whether or not I could really weather it here.

That period of doubt didn't last long. I found friends just as invested in deciphering the strangeness of college and the shifting ideas of home we all undergo, and in these relationships I found a new kind of belonging. But it is a time I still return to. It was when I realized how bold—how scary—my decision to move all the way up the coast was. It was a time when I began to think of myself as Southern.

One night during my inaugural New England winter, I made a stride toward this understanding. A group of us were walking from campus to the ice cream shop that gives a discount for each degree the temperature plummets below freezing. I fell in step with a friend of a friend who grew up in Dallas. We joked about the cold and how far it made us feel from home. It was then that she mentioned a “blog” she had been following that sought to convey the complexity of our region, called *The Bitter Southerner*. When I looked the site up later, I found a showcase of stories that both reckoned with the ills of the South and celebrated the vibrancy of it. Much more than a blog, it was, and is, a virtual place: it is a collection of voices and narratives that delve deep into what it means to be Southern in our time. As Editor-in-Chief Chuck Reece has written, *The Bitter Southerner* is “where conversations can begin about how to build a better South from our bitter past.” The publication helped me begin to claim the South as my own.

I spent two summers working for *The Bitter Southerner*, and I consider the staff there family now. Through their mentorship, I have intensified both my reckonings with and celebrations of home. They have been so bold and generous as to give me my public readership. They, too, have prompted the question pulsing behind all of these essays: What do we preserve of the South, and how do we renovate all that necessitates a remaking?

In January of 2017, Chuck and I caught up while I was home from winter break. He mentioned to me an idea that he had to interview a neighbor a week in Clarkston: a small town that sits on Atlanta’s Perimeter highway. All I knew about Clarkston then was that Chuck had moved there a couple of years prior for a respite from in-town rent. But then he began to peel back all the layers of the place, for me. He told me how Clarkston was an early white flight suburb, and how, when

those tenants left, refugees from the world over had moved into the vacated apartments. How, in Clarkston's main drag, he saw Amharic and Somali and Arabic written on the shop windows. How the town was often dubbed America's most diverse square mile.

The idea of Clarkston remained with me when I returned to school. My curiosity grew: what sense of home might those who live in Clarkston feel? How might they think about the American region into which they had moved? How did they preserve within themselves the places they had fled, and what might they sacrifice? It wasn't until after I told Chuck I wanted to take on this project for *The Bitter Southerner*, and after I laid the groundwork for the reportage I would do, that I came to realize the salience of this undertaking as a part of my own story. I saw a vestige of my family in those moving to Clarkston. I thought of my grandparents who had immigrated to the South, blindly, after escaping genocide abroad. Yet I sensed all the breaches in between: all the differences of race and appearance and political climate that constituted a chasm between my personal history and the realities of those I would meet. The project would be an exercise in both empathy and relativity.

I spent that summer wading into the murky waters of writing other people's stories. I often felt like an outsider, a tourist, like I had been granted a season pass to this place that would sanctify my entrance for a few months' time, provide me an allotted amount of anecdotes and inspiration, so I could write something worthwhile by summer's end. I felt paralyzed by my search for the point, spinning myself into an existential spiral: What was I doing? Was I helping these people? Was that not my own white savior complex kicking in? To hide from Chuck, and to convince myself of my own productivity, I would sit at air-conditioned places like the Kathmandu Kitchen

with fresh naan, or next door at the Abyssinia Café with a platter full of injera, and I would write pensively through bites of bread variations my thoughts and feelings on what it meant to be asking those I interviewed to bear their lives to me. Often, I would stroll the aisles of Thriftown—think Winn Dixie crossed with an international farmers’ market—and I would wax poetic, to myself, about the contradictions of a place one can perceive through groceries. Puffed pork rinds; cases of halal meat. Sometimes, I would sit in the back of the public library with a book of Dekalb County history—one that calls those fleeing Sherman’s burning of Atlanta in 1864 “refugees”—or with my computer open to Wikipedia pages of the world’s post-colonial conflicts.

I am not sure that I produced this story in the most ethically sound way. What I do know is that I laid witness to the negotiation between keeping and letting go that describes both the subjects and the setting here. And for this witnessing, I have learned.

*

When Naing Oo came to Clarkston, Georgia, in 2003, he had an envelope hidden in his backpack.

Oo’s family came to Clarkston from Myanmar, the country formerly known as Burma, as political asylees. The envelope, which held his family’s case notes, came from the United States government. To conceal it from Burmese authorities, it was nestled among belongings in the backpack of 11-year-old Naing — whose vision of America came from Hollywood movies, who knew little of why his family was uprooting, and didn’t even know he was carrying the envelope.

Oo, now 27, has little recollection of the circumstances that led his family to resettle in Clarkston. He had lived in Yangon, at the time Myanmar's capital and most populous city. The violence, wrought by the military and by Buddhist extremists who wanted Rohingya Muslim people gone, occurred outside the city, in villages "where the stories don't really get out."

Get out is what Oo's father had to do. He had protested in support of a democratic government, a potentially deadly endeavor given that since 1962 Myanmar has been controlled by a military junta that vowed to track down dissenters. The Oos, also, practice Islam.

Naing does remember that his father lived in New York for three years before the rest of his family came to America and decided to relocate again, to Georgia. His first American memory is of climbing the escalator at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, and having two people convince his family to pay them one hundred dollars to carry their bags. "We got played. That was my first impression of the States." Naing remembers that when he stepped outside that day, he turned back into the airport, shocked by the cold December air. Wide-eyed from jet lag, he recalled his "weirdest first snack." A bag of Doritos and a glass of milk.

During his first few weeks at middle school, a representative of the International Rescue Committee's Youth Futures program took Oo to Cici's Pizza after school. When Oo returned home, he saw police cars and his crying mother outside. "They had no idea where I was."

To meet with Oo, I visited the Atlanta-area headquarters of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), situated in an office park north of Clarkston. Fourteen years after he arrived in America, Oo now works for the IRC, helping new refugees. His job in the IRC's Youth Department is part

of the committee's year-old Connect to Success program, which works with refugee youth who are not enrolled in school and provides them with career-readiness workshops.

Outside his office, the waiting room overflowed with people who had fled persecution and conflict the world over. On Thursdays, the day I visited, people travel from across Georgia to meet with their caseworkers, to discuss citizenship status and green-card acquisition. Recently, the IRC — one of five federally regulated resettlement agencies working in the Clarkston area — has suffered severe budget cuts and reduced its staff of caseworkers. That Thursday, in mid-July, only the first 25 families in the waiting room could be helped.

“It’s a full circle,” he said, sitting in a conference room near his cubicle, wearing a button-down shirt and deck shoes. “As a refugee, my clients get to see that, ‘Hey, this guy is from Burma. He was where I am right now.’ It has been really helpful in terms of connecting with my clients. The lessons that you’re learning are a lot more than you’re giving.”

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For those with a penchant for superlatives, Clarkston is “the most diverse square mile in America.” For folks searching for a regional comparison, it is “Ellis Island South.” For others, it is the “University of America.” For about 12,000 people, it is home.

For decades, Clarkston’s paved roads were few and its goat farmers many. When Interstate 285, which encircles metro Atlanta, was completed in 1969, Clarkston developed into one of Atlanta’s earliest bedroom communities, just east of the I-285 perimeter. In the mid-1970s, Clarkston began seeing its first refugees: part of a wave of 300,000 Southeast Asian migrants

who entered our country, due largely to the U.S. attorney general's parole authority, in the five years following the fall of Saigon. As Congress grasped the scale of this refugee migration, it passed the Refugee Act of 1980 to standardize resettlement services for all refugees entering the country. The U.S. then formally adopted the United Nations' definition of a "refugee": someone who has been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence; who has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

As many white residents fled farther out to more fashionable developing Atlanta suburbs, Clarkston became perfect for refugees, with its hundreds of vacated apartments and access to public transportation, a post office, and a grocery store, all within walking distance. The little city became one of now 190 designated resettlement communities across the country.

And so here came Somalis fleeing civil war, Bhutanese fleeing ethnic cleansing, Eritreans and Liberians, Croatians, and Cambodians, and all who make up the now 100 different ethnic groups who have begun their American stories in Clarkston. Their stories all start with persecution. Some, like Oo's family, are political asylees who have sought protection by submitting an asylum application to the United States, after arrival here. Most, though, are refugees, who have lived in a refugee camp and have undergone the vetting process of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which takes a year, as well as that of the United States, which takes an average of 18 months to two years, as compared with four months in Canada. Before departure for the U.S., all refugees sign a promissory note agreeing to repay the U.S. government for their travel costs. All have worked with one of nine domestic nonprofits—most of which are

religious organizations— with which the State Department works to resettle refugees. Many have participated in literacy and enrichment programming at places like Friends of Refugees, a nonprofit that has worked with Clarkston’s refugees for decades. All enter the U.S. with refugee status, which they retain for 12 months, at the end of which time they are required to apply for permanent legal residency or green card holder status. All are given a small sum of money as a gift, not a loan, and all recipients are expected to live off those funds for three months. During that time, immediately after arrival, refugees who are able to are expected to begin seeking work.

Some 60,000 refugees have called Clarkston, and nearby neighborhoods, their first American home. That’s about 2,000 per year, on average, since 1980. A fraction of a fraction of a fraction of the world’s refugees live — or have lived — in Clarkston. And yet refugees have put this Georgia city on the map.

We like to talk about the “New South.” I spent this summer speaking with refugees who have learned, and are learning, American life in our region. These new Southerners live on this land and have a rare, if temporary license: to know this fraught region without its history, its context. As an Ethiopian man named Hukun Abdulla, put it to me: “We don’t go anywhere. We think this is America. That’s it.” I talked to people in Clarkston about what home means in a place where many come from elsewhere, because that elsewhere expelled them. We talked about living in a city where many did not choose to live, but were relocated by government officials. We talked about how to talk about where we come from.

I began reporting this story as a white liberal-arts college student from Atlanta who thought she knew a thing or two about the South, and about America. I’m writing this, still that woman, with

the realization that I know precious little about anything. Part of this is because when we talk about Clarkston, we're not just talking about metropolitan Atlanta, or Georgia, or the South. We're not just talking about America. As Malek Alarmash, a Syrian refugee who resettled in Clarkston in the summer of 2016, said, "In Clarkston, we can see the whole world in a small city." And, here, sometimes, we can even see the universe.

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In the world of Pat Maddox, God does things like "move chessmen on the chessboard into place," and "pick up the tapestry and begin to weave the story." This holy chess game led her to found the nonprofit Friends of Refugees. Her story, if she had to title it, would be, "The Journey Almost Missed."

As she sat at her kitchen table, Maddox, 79, recounted the moves of the game, the strands of the cloth. She spent her childhood largely in Clarkston, and returned 20 years ago to take care of her aging mother. Then, she saw an ad in a newspaper asking for volunteers to aid Bosnian new arrivals; she saw Iraqi children playing in the snow, wearing flip-flops. With the help of local missions, Maddox began to provide programming for children at a handful of Clarkston's 36 apartment complexes.

"God again instructed, 'Outsource yourself until the help comes,'" Maddox recalled. What became Friends of Refugees — an organization that aspires "to empower refugees through opportunities that provide for their well-being, education, and employment," as its mission statement expresses — originally grew out of the Clarkston International Bible Church (CIBC).

First came a summer camp with a waiting list, then a family literacy program for mothers and children, and later a sewing society which sells dolls in the image of the women who make them. There is a community garden where refugees use the farming skills they bring from their home countries, a career hub where they learn how to write resumes and hold job interviews, and a business accelerator program. In 2005, Friends became an official nonprofit, independent of the CIBC. Susan McDaniel, director of volunteer engagement for Friends, called the organization “faith-based,” and added, “we do what we do because of what God did in our lives.”

I attended a Friends volunteer orientation that McDaniel led. After the initial icebreakers — attendees sharing how they’d heard of Friends — McDaniel walked us through what we might call an empathy training, an attempt to help volunteers understand what refugees go through before arriving in Clarkston.

“Count the people in your immediate family,” she instructed. We were to hold this number in our minds.

“All of these people live in the Atlanta area. Now, another country attacks the U.S. as an act of war. When was the last time this happened?”

“9/11?” someone suggested.

“Pearl Harbor,” another answered, correctly.

McDaniel continued, “Imagine you wake up one morning and there is an attack on Atlanta.

There’s the second amendment, and this is Georgia, so some folks might fight. Most will pack up and leave. So, who has family in another state in the Southeast?”

People offer the Carolinas, Florida (hell no, too easy to attack). We settle on Roanoke, Virginia.

“At first, it’s like a family reunion in Roanoke,” McDaniel said. “But you’re always watching the news to see when you can return to Atlanta. You’re there for a week; things are getting worse. You hope the kids packed the PS4 or some books. Then, it’s two weeks, a month, and you start homeschooling the kids. Then, war reaches Roanoke. Where to next?”

Oklahoma? Texas? (Definitely not; they’d secede.) Next stop: Kansas City, Missouri.

In Kansas City, the banking infrastructure has fallen apart, and you aren’t able to access your savings. Grocery trucks can’t get through, so food is incredibly expensive. You can’t get gas, so you fill up extra tanks as a precaution. You sit in Kansas City for two months. War comes. You decide on Phoenix as the next stop. When you’re almost there, you run out of gas, so you start to walk; you have to leave grandma behind; you sleep in the woods or in abandoned buildings. Another group breaks down the doors to a grocery store and invites you to go with them, and you think, four months ago I had a good job, and now I am a thief. Internet connectivity is spotty, so you trade information with vehicles you see on the road. But, one day, a truck stops and people jump out, and you realize these are soldiers trying to catch you. You, and the remaining members of your family, disperse, all hiding in different places. Later, you don’t know if they’ve been

killed, or have kept on toward Phoenix without you. You continue on. You avoid vehicles. But one day, a U.S. Army truck appears, and soldiers take you in. They drive across the border into Mexico, and they drop you off at a refugee camp, and you get in a long, long line, and you fill out long, long paperwork. Finally, it is determined that you can stay here. There are mattresses on the floor, a heater, a pot, a pan.

“This is your new home,” McDaniel said. “It is a place of refuge, but not a place of purpose.

In founding Friends of Refugees, Maddox has created an organization devoted to helping those who have already arrived in the United States gain self-sufficiency and lead fulfilling lives in a new country. In 2015, Friends volunteers provided 40,000 hours of service for over 4,000 refugees, under seven program areas. These programs saw hundreds of job placements, served 150 children in summer camp and afterschool programs, taught English to hundreds of mothers and kids, filled more than 90 families’ kitchen tables with fresh produce from the Jolly Avenue Garden, created thousands of individually crafted items in the Refugee Sewing Society, and helped launch 16 new businesses through the Start:ME business accelerator. In Clarkston, with the help of organizations like Friends, 89 percent of resettled refugees are self-sufficient six months after arrival — better than the 74 percent national rate.

To the current executive director of the organization, Brian Bollinger, “Being a friend of refugees is not an act of pure charity. It is an act of faith and hope, because when our refugee neighbors flourish, we flourish. When they do not have the opportunity to bring to our community the full force of their ambition, we are the less for it, our families are the less for it, and the city is the less for it. We have faith that they have not survived to languish in our

community. You can't tear apart individual flourishing from that of the surrounding community. Friends is about individual responsibility — but responsibility to the community, not for it. The difference between these is the essence of Friends of Refugees.” Maddox described the purpose of Friends as “relational, to prevent isolation.” She sees the organization as enhancing the lives of refugees and aiding individuals in becoming safe, strong citizens.

For Maddox, this dedication reaches into her own home. In the time I spent at Maddox's place, two summer campers played in the front room, waiting for their parents to pick them up. I could hear their discussion — “on the American flag, white means freedom and blue means justice” — drifting into the kitchen. Two students of Lithuanian Christian College, one from Zimbabwe, the other from Bangladesh, lived with Maddox for the summer as they participated in a Chick-fil-A leadership program. She spoke with delight about how they enjoyed the cookies she'd bought the day before. Maddox's own grown child passed through, saying hello, as she rummaged through the cabinets. Outside this low ranch house on a side street in Clarkston, there were bicycles and a basketball hoop and an Oldsmobile in the driveway, with a black oval bumper sticker bearing simple white lettering, spelling out the name of the United States' 45th president. I had assumed, before going inside, that the car must belong to a visitor.

“I voted for Trump,” Maddox said. “I had gotten tired of our existing government, and everybody got really upset with the ban. It's only temporary until we can figure things out. Because the countries that are banned don't have good governments. They're not vetted well. For the majority, refugees want a safe home. Education for their children. A job where they can produce for themselves.”

President Trump cut the proposed number of refugees admitted to the United States this year by over half. The 50,000 refugee limit, already reached this year, is the lowest ceiling since 1980; in recent weeks, White House administrators have pushed for an even lower bar. These minimal quotas would be held in place if Congress passes the Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment (RAISE) Act. Backed by Georgia's own Sen. David Perdue, the bill, along with its limited admittance of refugees, favors immigrants between the ages of 26 and 30 with a doctorate, a high English proficiency, and a job offer with a high salary. Having won a Nobel Prize or an Olympic medal enhances one's chances significantly.

I would not gain entrance into the U.S. under these guidelines; neither would have Oo and his family, and the refugee families I spoke with would have had significantly lower chances of securing admittance to the country. I was the first to tell Maddox about the new proposed legislation. She said, "I think if they're in danger, they need to come. Bottom line. We've never experienced this in America. I hope we never will."

I have found myself continually questioning the logic of a woman who has restructured her life because of her deep and personal care for refugees, yet who voted for a man who ran, and acts upon, a campaign against them. Clarkston is a place that challenges neat conceptions, and Pat Maddox is a person who holds all of these contradictory stands in her arthritic, yet capable, fists.

Maddox told me that she has two "desires." One is for Friends of Refugees to duplicate itself. However difficult that would be, Maddox said, it would be "worth it. When God's design is that

you give away, it multiplies.” Her second desire — her final note, before wishing me a blessing on my story—is “that no one misses their journey.”

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“It’s hard to get used to being free,” Nathalie Wibabara told me. “It was surreal. Even when I came here, it took me a year or two to really feel like I’m actually free, and that no one is going to oppress me.”

Wibabara arrived in Clarkston on February 17, 2000. She was 18 years old and came with her family as refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Fifty years prior, Wibabara’s parents had immigrated from Rwanda, in East Africa, to the Congo, in the West. In 1998, the Second Congo War erupted between the Rwandan and Congolese governments. And because Wibabara’s family hailed from Rwanda, they were targeted by the Congolese authorities. Officials appeared at the Wibabara home in August of that year, taking all that the family owned — everything from the liquor in their store to the mattresses they slept on — claiming these as the domain of the Congo.

“We spoke like them and behaved like them, but physically we looked different,” Wibabara recalled. “We’re just glad they didn’t kill us.” The uncles she lived with were arrested, along with all other Rwandan men; only the women and children lived together. For a month, “anyone could come to our house and steal from us, or do whatever they like.” Unable to attend school, go to the market, or fulfill any basic deed of life, Wibabara and her remaining family members were recognized as refugees by the Red Cross.

They remained confined to their home. The Congolese government brought other Rwandan families living in the vicinity to the Wibabaras', and "basically made my house like a prison," Wibabara said. Six or seven people slept on one mattress, and Wibabara slept poorly. Security guards were stationed outside the home, to protect its inhabitants. Wibabara and the others ate fufu, a combination of beans and corn flour, "like grits." This lasted a year. In July of 1999, Wibabara and her family transferred to another city: one that had converted from a convent to a prison. Many had recently fled to Rwanda, where their families may have come from but they had never been.

There, Wibabara learned that her family was granted refugee status and would be admitted to the United States. First, though, they endured five months in a refugee camp in Benin, West Africa. This is where people became religious.

"They didn't know how long they would be there," Wibabara said. "Their only hope is to pray to God." Wibabara, who had grown up Catholic, watched as many converted. Some didn't, because there were others praying for them. Wibabara, along with other adults, fasted as she worshipped. When she got to Clarkston, she still ate only once a day. This is what she was used to. "I felt like I was gonna die," she said, with a chuckle.

Wibabara took her first English as a Second Language class in the same building on Church Street where she now works as a refugee-employment specialist for the Friends of Refugees career hub. On her desk is a jar filled with miniature flags of many countries; on the walls are

whiteboards, with notes and questions:

Proper way to write dates in the U.S.A. How many industries/fields have I worked in my life? What have I always wanted to learn?

One morning in early August, Wibabara coached Hukun Abdallah as he prepared for a phone interview for a warehouse inventory position. They talked about the difference between “I think” and “I will.”

“I will stay calm and do what needs to be done first,” Wibabara modeled. “I will look for work to do whenever there is downtime.” Abdallah left the room when his phone rang with a call from his potential employer.

Wibabara herself earned her GED while simultaneously training at Grady Memorial Hospital through a program called Job Corps. She attended the University of Georgia and received a degree in microbiology. She lived in New Jersey, and then in San Antonio, where she attended school to become a physician’s assistant but dropped out when she had trouble sleeping, sometimes remaining awake for over three days at a time.

“The doctors thought that maybe it was because of the war, but I don’t think I was traumatized. I mean, compared to people that have been through worse than me,” she said. After a brief stint in Orlando, she returned to Clarkston to take care of her mother. Along with her work for the Career Hub, Wibabara is also launching her own travel business through Friends’ accelerator program, “to help refugees go back home” to visit their families.

The philosophy of Friends suits her. Employees pray each meeting, she said, though they aim not to force their beliefs.

“We are here to serve everyone,” Wibabara said. She and her coworkers do not ask those they work with about their religious backgrounds. “We aim to serve, not to preach. But we preach through serving, by showing people we love them.”

A little while later, Abdallah returned to the classroom. He got a second interview. We cheered.

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Malek Alarmash wanted to go to the beach. He has lived in Clarkston for a year; he grew up in Syria, left in the middle of earning his college degree to spend three and a half years in a refugee camp in Jordan, and this summer, he planned to visit Savannah or Miami, his first trip outside of the Atlanta area. Alarmash does get to travel for work, though: He is a barista for Refuge Coffee, and has served up espressos in a refurbished Chevy truck across town since October 2016.

Refuge Coffee aims to provide a multiethnic gathering place in the heart of Clarkston. Founder Kitti Murray saw a “hospitality gap” when she moved to Clarkston five years ago; now, Refuge flourishes on the corner of Market Street and East Ponce de Leon Avenue, in the shell of a 1960s service station. Even on the hottest summer days, folks fill the picnic benches. The garage — which used to house a pharmacy where a young Pat Maddox would go with friends to drink

Coke with peanuts after school — now holds Square Mile Gallery; a rotation of flyers about citizenship classes and community center gatherings always amasses on the outer wall. Refuge itself provides job training opportunities and employment for resettled refugees.

Alarmash comes from a place where hospitality is engrained.

“When you come to the houses of Syrians or Arabs in general, you have to have food, you have to have tea after food, coffee, desserts,” he said. “It’s part of our culture that if we serve you a food and you were to say, ‘I cannot eat anymore,’ we would say, ‘Why? Is there something wrong with the food?’ We didn’t understand this because we consider it part of our culture that if you come to our house, you are very welcome. This is our home, and we welcome every guest.”

Malek and his mother, Majeda, are starting a catering business that, too, hinges on hospitality. When Majeda began vending home-cooked Syrian food at the Clarkston Community Center, Malek saw how much people loved his mother’s kibbeh and baklava. He decided to call their venture Suryana Cuisine, and hopes that, in the future, the business will offer job opportunities for refugees in the community. Already, the two have prepared meals for groups with Friends of Refugees, and for a recent event at their mosque, Masjid Al-Momineen, in Clarkston. The premise was to invite non-Muslims into the mosque, to help provide understanding.

“We were part of the bridge they were building through the food,” Alarmash said.

At 24, Alarmash must provide for his family. “Having my age,” he said, “or respecting my age, or enjoying my life and time, it’s hard to do both.” He hasn’t studied for five years. “It’s hard to start again in Jordan, and start again in the United States,” he said. He didn’t get to go to the

beach this summer; he had to stay home to study for an exam in management, and help get the family business on its feet.

But Alarmash insisted, “I’m the kind of person that’s like, ‘I can do it.’ I’m saying to myself, ‘I have a dream. I need to do this.’ So, it’s challenging. But we are having a great time. We are having a great experience. Learning from every moment and trying to enjoy our time.”

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I spent much of my summer thinking about what learning means.

Before refugees, and asylees, arrive in Clarkston, they must learn how to fill out extensive paperwork; to navigate Atlanta’s vast Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport; to find those who will bring them to Clarkston. Then, they must learn where the grocery store is, where to send their children to school, to speak a new language. They must learn to shake hands, to look people in the eye. They learn to eat Doritos and milk. They learn from God. They learn microbiology. They learn to write résumés. They learn how to make coffee, how to start a business. “The lessons that you’re learning are a lot more than you’re giving.” *What have I always wanted to learn?* “Learning from every moment. And trying to enjoy our time.”

I entered Clarkston on a selfish enterprise. I saw my own origins in the people settling here anew, just as my family — Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe — planted new roots in the American South. The crisis that unfolded around my grandparents, in the wake of World War II, prompted much of the legislative infrastructure that today allows refugees to make their

homes in Clarkston.

My grandparents lived in the Jim Crow South. These New Americans, New Southerners, have arrived in a place that promises both hope and prejudice; both opportunity and oppression. These are the layers—and, the contradictions— of a place that I have learned to see.

I think that learning is also, often, about losing. I know little to nothing about Lithuania and Poland, the stomping grounds of my ancestors. I met people in Clarkston who dove deep into America, who have voted in a democracy for the first time in their lives, who have run for office. And I have met people who surround themselves with those who are familiar and comforting, who cannot speak a lick of English, but who sit outside on hot day after hot day selling the jewelry they make by hand.

I have met people who, like Nathalie Wibabara, say: “Because the Congo kicked me out, it’s not really my home. I went to Rwanda in 2008 for the first time, but culturally I felt like I didn’t belong there. Clarkston is my only home. Georgia is my home.” I have met people, like Naing Oo, who say: “There is an expectation period that you go through where you realize that America is not what you’ve seen from Hollywood. The truth is that to be truly American, a lot of people think you have to be surrounded by white people.” Oo recently returned to Myanmar for the first time since his family fled. When he marveled at old kingdoms, active volcanoes, and rescued elephants there, his relatives who had remained said, “You don’t know how it used to be.” At the beginning of August, Oo moved to New York City to take a job at BronxWorks, another resettlement charity. He ultimately hopes to become an immigration officer, even though

federal hiring for those positions is frozen, at least for now.

At Refuge Coffee one day, I met a man named Usman Sule. This is what he told me: “Someone is going to walk past us while we are having this conversation and they’ll be like, ‘Where are you from?’ I’ll say, ‘I’m from Africa.’ Then, the African from the next table will look around and be like, ‘Where in Africa are you from?’ Then, I tell him I’m from Nigeria. A Nigerian would look at me and be like, ‘OK, where in Nigeria are you from?’ I’m from a certain state. And it doesn’t stop there. It’s confusing. Growing up in Nigeria, my parents are from two different states, and they come from two different tribes. Your father’s language is what you are. I am from a state named Benue state; it’s in the middle belt of Nigeria. Even right there, within, these questions don’t stop. Down to your very, very village, they want to know what part of the village you are from. Are you from the upper part or the lower part? At what point are we going to be like, OK, you know what, this common humanity that we are blessed with, are we going to exploit, are we going to limit? We are blinded.”

Sule prefers a more cosmic approach. “Do you know where I am truly from?” he asked. “I am from the universe.”

Assimilation is an odd beast. It forces forgetting; it craves a compression of culture, and the melting pot it stews serves up something hard for many to swallow. Living in a nation of immigrants means living in the tension between moving forward and looking back. The South, at times a close acquaintance of the beast, at times its nemesis, knows this deep, deep in its bones.

We’ve got a lot to learn.

New Pavement, Same Loops

As a teenager, I considered the Beltline the runway of my early adolescence. My emergence into a flimsy coolness coincided with the opening of the Eastside trail: the first portion of a city-wide project to both preserve and renovate the Reconstruction-era railway loop that encircles Atlanta. The shape of the ring was kept, but the purpose transformed: the old tracks were paved over and made into a path for bikers and runners and young Atlantans like me, hungry for a place to see and be seen. In late high school my peers and I would stroll along the leg of the Beltline between Monroe and Irwin street and take photos under concrete bridges adorned with carefully curated graffiti. We'd peer down at the shell of the Masquerade theater where we'd gone to our first concert and smelled our first swirls of weed in the air, and mourn the loss of that old structure. We would laugh at the cheerful mural that newly coated the side of the Murder Kroger—a scene full of smiling children and vibrant vegetables that felt like a wink, as it lived on the outer wall of that notorious grocery store now facing the Beltline—though we didn't know that the place would be torn down in the years to come. It would make way for another mixed-use development along the trail. Sometimes, my friends and I would climb onto the top of a storage facility just off the Beltline—a place we deemed, simply, “The Roof”—and would look out at the skyline a few miles away. It felt like Atlanta was made for us. The city had a pulse.

This was before Krog Street and Ponce City Market opened, before apartments were fashioned from all of those abandoned factory sites, when only a two-mile leg of the stretch was completed. The extent of the project had not yet come to fruition. Those who first proposed the Beltline

pitched the idea as a way to link 45 disparate in-town Atlanta neighborhoods with various racial and socio-economic makeups. Though in pursuit of connection, the Beltline paved the way towards discord.

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It was around this time that I began hanging out with Naz: a friend who would change the way Atlanta took shape in my mind. Naz had grown up moving between Atlanta's majority black neighborhoods—Kirkwood, East Lake, Old Fourth Ward—all places mostly foreign to me. I sensed that Naz's world and mine existed on either side of a gulf I didn't yet have the language to name. Though the two of us mostly saw each other at the private school we attended in Druid Hills. We were partners in a peer leadership program that necessitated a forced kind of friendship: one predicated on appearing as a unified front to a reticent group of younger students, to whom we were meant to eke out a little bit of vulnerability. To build trust between each other, Naz and I did all kinds of artificial exercises we mostly giggled through. Yet they stick in my memory. I recall sitting with Naz in the park that runs adjacent to our high school, just south of Ponce de Leon Ave, and allowing each other to talk for fifteen uninterrupted minutes about anything that came to mind. I spewed aloud about the things that occupied me then: my worry over dating a boy long-distance come college; my premature nostalgia for home. Naz spoke of the police murders of black boys across the country, all victims that looked like him, and what could happen if he carried an Arizona iced tea at the wrong place at the wrong time. We bonded over our writing. I shared with him the vignettes I wrote of fictional, angsty hipsters who frequented an indie movie theater on the Beltline. He showed me an elegy he wrote to Trayvon Martin.

Towards the middle of that year, the teachers who ran the peer leadership program encouraged all of us to visit our partners' homes. Naz came to my house for dinner during Hanukkah. He'd often spent time in my neighborhood. Whenever we hung out together outside of school, it was in my Atlanta: a city growing around Beltline, a place full of niche shops and restaurants where most of my friends and I paid for things on our parents' dollars. A city of well-off white folk. I don't recall what we talked about when Naz sat with my family at our dinner table, or how my parents reacted to his presence. I had so rarely seen a black person in our home who was there as a guest to eat with us. Mostly, black folks had been around to mop the floors or prepare the food.

Soon afterward, I went to Naz's home for the first time. I recall driving through an intersection southeast of Decatur beyond which I saw no other white people. This city was new to me. There were black folks on all the billboards. There were fast food joints I didn't recognize the names of. I relied on my phone to direct me to Naz's house, for I couldn't conjure up the layout of the streets for myself in this part of town. The map of Atlanta I'd held in my mind suddenly felt glaringly incomplete. When I got to Naz's house, we lit the Kwanza candles with his family in a room that held both traditional African masks and a Christmas tree. His parents asked me to offer a reflection. I said something on the fly about shared traditions, festivals of light. I wrote, later, that at Naz's I'd entered a parallel universe.

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Naz and I both moved away from Atlanta upon high school graduation. As I settled into my quaint campus in New England, Naz began to forge a life for himself in New York City. His

parents had grown up in small Southern places and had moved to Atlanta to test their chances at rising, as mine had. Naz's parents met at Emory and had Naz while they were students; his birth cut their degrees short. Naz got to go further than they had. In the fall of 2015, he took a bus to Manhattan, where he had never been before, and moved himself into his dorm room at NYU. He would spend the next four years establishing himself as a playwright there. Throughout these years away from Atlanta, Naz and I have sustained a conversation about home, attempting to make sense of the place with the aid of distance.

When Donald Glover's *Atlanta* came out, Naz told me that the show looked like the place he is from. That was the fall of 2016, and Naz and I both happened to be studying abroad in England. We had met up in London and walked and walked, surrounded by edifices older than the city and the country we hail from.

"Donald Glover's Atlanta is dreary," Naz said. "It's full of ranch houses like mine, and everything is on the cusp of falling apart. It's the city I know."

I hadn't watched *Atlanta* yet, and so did not yet realize exactly what Naz meant. The import landed later. A white friend from school who had visited me in Atlanta the year before sent me a message about the show a few weeks after I had met up with Naz. "It's a different side of Atlanta that I didn't see with you," this friend said. It was an innocuous enough comment, and yet with it came the reality of a fault line. My Atlanta is white; Glover's and Naz's Atlanta is black. These Atlanta's are different cities. I responded to this friend with the mild "Can't say that's too surprising."

That day, Naz and I happened upon a food stall in Camden Market called “Mother Clucker,” and we bought the overpriced “Southern Fried Chicken” it advertised. While we ate, we laughed at the comfort and the mediocrity of it. The breading wasn’t thick enough; the spices were all wrong. It was both a gift and a disappointment, reminding us how far we were from home.

Naz looked around at all of the Londoners bustling around us. “They don’t know what to make of me here,” he said. “People think I’m African. It’s weird sometimes, but it also feels like everything it means to be an African American has been lifted off of me. For a little while.”

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The moments in *Atlanta* that portray the places and people that I recognize feel both like gifts and indictments. I might see a vestige of somewhere I know, like the façade of the Onyx club on Cheshire Bridge that I passed in the car on the way to school as a kid, and where, in one episode, Michael Vick races dogs in the parking lot. I see myself and my people in the amiable and blundering white folks who get shit wrong, who always miss the wink. The world Glover depicts and that Naz knows is a world largely alien from my own. Watching *Atlanta* is like gaining an education on a new place.

I have been fixated, recently, on the second episode of the second season. In it, Paper Boi, an upstart rapper, and Earn—Glover’s character and Paper Boi’s cousin—go to a recording studio to discuss a deal. The place is full of the kind of bright repair I see everywhere in my part of

town. Murals adorn the otherwise sterile walls; tech abounds. The recording studio is fictional, I think, though I can so easily imagine it situated on the Beltline, in an old industrial complex redesigned by a peppy young developer. It is the kind of place that hikes up the property values along the trail and forces the renters who've always live in the spaces around it to move. A gift and an indictment.

The recording studio in *Atlanta* is a place I might find cool and hip, yet Glover makes it feel undoubtedly nefarious. The white staff members there appear nervous at the presence of Paper Boi and Earn. They ask the two to perform their blackness for their gain. In one scene, Paper Boi sits before a mic, giving an introduction to his track. "This is Paper Boi, and you're tuned into the fresh mix rap playlist. Long live fresh," he says, dispassionately. The white guy recording him says, "Let's do another take. Let's do one that's cool. That's like, cool." Paper Boi repeats this introduction and tacks a "nigga" onto the end. The white guy nods along, then tells Paper Boi, "Okay, let's do it again. It's like you're at a party and everything's crazy." Paper Boi, skeptical at this white guy, turns to look at through a window back at Earn, who is out in the office eating a tiny box of Cheerios. We see that all of the staff members out there are staring at Earn. As soon as Earn turns his head in their direction, they all turn back to their work, denying their surveillance of him.

I worry that, like the white producers in *Atlanta*, I have too often asked Naz to perform for me. I have certainly relied on him too many times to be my teacher. Three summers ago, when the stories of Caitlin Jenner's transition to becoming a woman and Rachel Dolezal's outing as white coincided in the news cycle, Naz and I had dinner in Atlanta. I had been having trouble parsing out the particulars between the Jenner and Dolezal cases. I had wondered: why were people so

accepting of Jenner yet so stringent on Dolezal in their choices of identity? So I posed to Naz: “What’s the difference between being transgender and transracial?”

He responded with too much patience. “It’s a historical thing,” he said. “Your gender is your choice. Your race isn’t.”

I worry that I pigeonhole Naz into being my “black friend”; one of few. I worry that I congratulate myself for how close we are. I worry that I use our friendship as a way to prop up my status as “woke.” I worry that even with Naz’s generous insights, I can never know Atlanta in its fullness. I worry that in my pursuits to understand Naz’s Atlanta, and Glover’s, I risk a slide into exploitation. I worry that I fetishize Naz. I worry that our Atlantas are not parallel at all. I worry that my Atlanta intends to suffocate his.

Of the white viewers of *Atlanta*, Glover has said, “I don’t even want them laughing if they’re laughing at the caged animal in the zoo. I want them to really experience racism, to really feel what it’s like to be black in America. People come to ‘Atlanta’ for the strip clubs and the music and the cool talking, but the eat-your-vegetables part is that the characters aren’t smoking weed all the time because it’s cool but because they have P.T.S.D.—every black person does. It’s scary to be at the bottom, yelling up out of the hole, and all they shout down is ‘Keep digging! We’ll reach God soon!’”

And I wonder: for a place so obsessed with rising, why does Atlanta keep asking someone to dig?

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One hot day in the summer of 2017, Naz and I drove around Atlanta aimlessly. We crossed intersections that changed the names of roads. Glen Iris turned into Randolph, Monroe to Boulevard, Briarcliff to Moreland: all those demarcations of where white folks once decided they couldn't live on the same street as the black folks down the way, so altered the nomenclature. Though there remained the reality of the pavement underneath. Naz and I looked around at all of the manufactured vibrancy around us in the neighborhoods on the Beltline. We were just old enough to remember this part of town as dreary. I couldn't help but appreciate the cool factor of it all.

"I just think of all of the folks who get edged out of here," Naz said.

I looked around, silently, knowing that so much of the gentrification has been made for me to enjoy. I thought of the times in years past when Naz and I had driven in loops and talked about whether or not we'd return to Atlanta in the future. And so I asked him, then:

"Do you still think you may move back here someday?"

"Sometimes I think so," Naz said. "But other times I think of how these neighborhoods were all black when I was a kid, and how they're all white now. That doesn't feel like a fluke. It's an effort. My parents might have to move soon."

I thought of Ryan Gravel's resignation letter that I'd recently read. Gravel—the man behind the brainchild of the Beltline—had first written of the far-fetched idea to renovate the old tracks in his Georgia Tech Master's Thesis. In 2016, he had stepped down from the Beltline director's

board because not enough affordable housing was being offered to quell the damage. “At this critical moment,” wrote Gravel in the letter, “we feel compelled to concentrate our efforts more directly on making sure that the Atlanta Beltline lives up to its promise and potential, and specifically, that its investments and supporting policies become more intentional about who they will benefit. We know you agree that its advantages most accrue to everyone, especially those who are otherwise most vulnerable to the changes it brings. We fear, however, that without more urgent and deliberate attention to these communities, we’ll end up building the Atlanta Beltline without achieving its vision.”

Naz turned to me. “Do you think you’d ever come back?”

I paused. Folks in my family haven’t settled down in the places they’ve grown up for a long time. I am a native of a city filled with transplants from other places, and I often question the hold of my roots. But I love Atlanta. My fascination with it grounds me. Despite all of my criticisms of this city, and all of my worries about it—or, perhaps because of them—I feel that I have a stake in it. Yet sometimes the future can feel just as opaque as the past.

“I don’t know,” I told Naz.

We kept on driving. We passed Auburn Avenue, the old Black Mecca of Atlanta, now checkered with empty storefronts. Earlier that summer I’d driven down the street with a white friend from out of town, and we’d almost played *Childish Gambino* with the windows rolled down.

Thankfully, we thought better. Naz and I drove under a highway overpass, and as we emerged I looked up at the skyscrapers made of chrome and glass rising up towards the sky.

“Sometimes I’m not sure if Atlanta is an exception to the South or the epitome of it,” I said.

Naz thought about this, scanning the pillars of capitalism around us. “The freedom of my people for so long has come at the expense of the economic health of our region, and our city,” he said.

We circled back near the Beltline again, making our way towards the old lots of the Masquerade theater and the Murder Kroger. Now there are sleek condominiums under construction in their places. “People can never get over how Sherman burned this whole place down,” Naz laughed, shaking his head. “I just think; Atlanta is like a broken arm that never got set right.”

I think, later: allow me to entertain a different metaphor. Atlanta is a house. At first it was some utilitarian structure that suited the needs of pioneering engineers and intrepid businessmen, but serial renovators have long inhabited this place. It is like a new city every time I come home.

There are novel interiors to the same old structures of bricks and mortar. There is new pavement laid over old foundations, habitually. All for the sake of remaking.

Yet it all comes back to houses, to how people live. To our dual wills: to make museums of home; to pursue perpetual novelty. Let us remember that the root meaning of the word “to renovate” is “to make new again.” In that redundancy lies the pattern of Atlanta’s remakings: a cycle preserved from the past.

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