

CHANCE OPERATIONS

Cultural Adventures of a Fledgling Scribe
a memoir by Tom Patterson

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“You are your own train. You’ve got your own track and you can go anywhere.”

--Charles Olson (as quoted in Fielding Dawson’s *The Black Mountain Book*)

“You can find out how to do something and then do it or do something and then find out what you did.”

--Isamu Noguchi

PART I: THE TOM PATTERSON YEARS

1. PAST FUTURE PRESENT

I wasn't prepared for the impact. One minute we were cruising down a narrow blacktop road that cut through acres of slash pines, red clay, and kudzu. Then we turned a curve into a dirt driveway marked by a tall stand of ribbon cane, and--WHOOM!--suddenly found ourselves in an absolutely other world, a rainbow-hued wonderland of elaborately decorated pagodas, mandala-patterned walls, sculpted life-size figures, and big, sentinel totems staring back at us with hypnotic, cartoon eyes.

We had been instantaneously transported from the familiar realm of rural Georgia, U.S.A., late 20th century, into an outrageously resplendent parallel reality. The only thing missing was the puff of smoke to transition from one world to the other. The experience had an uncanny, deja-vu quality.

As the car came to a stop at the driveway's end, two ferocious-looking, full-grown German Shepherds were suddenly upon us, barking and snarling outside the tightly rolled-up windows - glaring at us and drooling as they bared their shiny white fangs. They kept it up until a proud-looking elder gentleman strode our way from between the exotic compound's two biggest bug-eyed totem-pole columns, flanking the front entrance. He was regally attired in a long, orange-and-blue striped gown topped with wooden-beaded necklaces and a thickly feathered American Indian war bonnet, and his long, gray beard was braided along the sides of his face.

"Hush!" he shouted in a booming voice that promptly quieted his canine protectors. Then, peering through his black horn-rimmed glasses into the car windows at us, he said, "Them dogs won't mess with you. Not if you don't have no evil thoughts."

Sitting behind the wheel of the green Volkswagen Rabbit, the tall, balding poet dressed like an English country gentleman rolled down his window and said, "Hello, Eddie. It's me, Jonathan Williams." "Hello Jonathan," said the bearded Indian warrior-priest in a softer, more congenial-sounding voice. "I've been expecting you. And who's with you? Oh, that's Tom. Hello, Tom," he said to the bright-eyed, clean-cut younger poet in the back seat, Thomas Meyer.

"And who is this?" he asked as he made his way around the front of the car. Rolling down the front passenger-seat window, I extended my hand and introduced myself.

"Oh, another Tom," he said.

"This Tom is a writer from Atlanta," Jonathan explained as he opened the driver's-side door and unfolded his substantial frame to climb out. Tom Meyer and I exited the car too, and the three of us stood before our elaborately garbed host while the big dogs warily sniffed our hands and knees and crotches.

"I'm honored to meet such a legendary figure," I said. "Saint EOM." Pronouncing it phonetically.

"Om," he corrected me, looking me up and down. "But if you're a friend of Jonathan's you can just call me Eddie. E-O-M stands for Eddie Owens Martin."

"Okay," I said. "Eddie."

"Prepare to enter a strange and beautiful world," he advised as he ushered us through the gateway totems and into the environment behind the front walls, even more profusely ornamented than what we could see from the driveway. "I call it Pasaquan, the place where the past and the present and the future and everything else comes together."

“It’s spectacular,” I marveled.

“We’re on our way to New Orleans,” Jonathan told EOM.

“Yes, I know. I got your letter.”

“Tom is riding with us as far as Americus,” Jonathan noted.

“Why would you want to go to Americus?” Eddie inquired in a tone that told me he didn’t think much of the town. He looked at me momentarily askance.

“I’m just going there because it’s the closest place to catch a bus back to Atlanta,” I explained. “I need to be home this evening.”

I was about to add that I once lived on a commune outside of Americus, but Jonathan went on.

“Tom’s working on a magazine article about me, and about the Jargon Society,” he said as he removed a cigar from the inside breast pocket of his tailored brown tweed suit jacket and peeled off the cellophane wrapper. “I’ve been telling him about you, and he wanted to meet you.”

Like Saint EOM, Jonathan Williams was a larger-than-life character--prolific poet, photographer, esthete, proudly uncloseted gay American gentleman, and legendary small-press publisher. He had founded the Jargon Press in the early 1950s after dropping out of Princeton to attend North Carolina’s Black Mountain College. By the 1960s, when the press was incorporated as the not-for-profit Jargon Society, it had become known for publishing avant-garde poetry and prose in limited editions visually enlivened by photography and graphics. The books were works of art in themselves.

“Come on, let’s go inside and sit down to talk,” Eddie invited us as he stood in the shade of a huge water oak and opened a bright red-framed screen door on the back side of the house.

“I like your beard,” he told me, and I thanked him. “What magazine do you write for?” he inquired at the same moment Jonathan asked, “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Smoke what?” Eddie shot back, a note of mild excitement in his voice. “Did you bring some pot?”

“I’m afraid not,” Jonathan answered him. “You know I don’t smoke that stuff. But I’ve got some pretty good cigars here if you’d like one.”

“No, thanks. I’ve never been a tobacco-smoker,” Eddie said, then he turned his attention back to me. “How about you? Did you bring any pot?”

Alas, I had not. I was on professional duty and along for the ride, a passenger for the day in the company of two distinguished poets I was still getting to know. I’d been acquainted with Jonathan for a few years, but had never spent extended periods of time with him until I’d started interviewing him a couple of weeks earlier. Although he was the same age as my parents and looked too respectable to be a bohemian, JW was a hip sophisticate. I figured if he didn’t smoke cannabis, he was surely tolerant of the practice. Not wanting to be presumptuous, though, I’d left my stash at home.

“Nope, sorry,” I said as EOM ushered us into the back of his house. When he gave me a disappointed look I added, “I’ll bring you some if you let me come visit you again.”

“All right, I’d like that,” he said. “But it has to be good!”

“So, Eddie,” Jonathan changed the subject, “do you think your friend Jimmy Carter will be re-elected next fall?”

It was January 1980, and the presidential election was nine months off, but Saint EOM predicted Carter would lose. EOM earned his living as a fortune teller, so maybe he was right. He also happened to be personally acquainted with the President and with other members of the Carter family. They all hailed from the nearby town of Plains, Georgia, and several of them had visited Pasaquan. He said he’d given one of his “psychic readings” for the President’s mother “Miz Lillian.” He also recalled the time Carter paid him a visit during his successful gubernatorial campaign. Although he didn’t seem to harbor any ill will toward the President, he remarked on Carter’s “stoop-

shouldered” posture, and he seemed to have no doubt about the upcoming election’s outcome. Boiling it all down for us, he observed: “Reagan’s got just what this country wants--a good head o’ hair and a mean line o’ talk!”

2. ATLANTA

Georgia, the state where I'd spent my childhood and youth, was thrust into the national spotlight by Jimmy Carter's election in 1976. Carter's first year in the White House found me three years out of college, unemployed, and with no fixed residence, trying to figure out my next move. Armed with a bachelor's degree in English from a small liberal-arts school in North Carolina, I had started building a varied resume: one year as a small-town newspaper reporter, four months as a college public-relations officer, six months on a Tennessee dirt-hippie farm, four months as an earthquake-relief worker and independent traveler in Latin America, and, most recently, three months as a multi-tasking flunky at sawmills in rural Florida and south Georgia.

In the latter instance I'd been ostensibly hired to manage a turpentine plant in Belize, but my unpredictable employer - a mercurial, self-made millionaire in my boyhood hometown - promptly sidetracked me to other tasks involving his business interests closer to home. After a couple of months the situation wore too thin for me. Lacking a fallback plan and with very little money to my name, I walked.

Moving back in with my parents was out of the question. Temporary visits with them were usually pleasant enough, but my parents and I inhabited different worlds. I knew that spending more than a couple of weeks with them would only stir up familiar tensions and conflicts. My mother would start bugging me about returning to the church, and my dad would grouse about my "kooky" ideas, my stubbornly unrealistic approach to life, and my shaggy appearance. During one recent visit my mom--I called her Attee, her childhood nickname--had discovered a plastic baggie full of pot in my suitcase. She wasn't snooping, mind you--just putting up some of my clothes that she'd been kind enough to wash, dry, and fold without being

asked. She didn't confiscate the weed but instead rubber-banded it with a note in her flawless penmanship: "Please do NOT bring this into our house again!"

Equal to my need for personal autonomy was my aversion to the idea of living in the town I'd been so eager to escape while growing up: Dublin, population approximately 15,000 in those days, government seat of Laurens County, Georgia - an insular community smack dab in the middle of the state. A convention-bound culture-free zone inhospitable to artists, intellectuals, bohemians, bolsheviks, bisexuals, homosexuals, and all manner of outsiders - my people. Those of us who happened to grow up in Dublin tended to leave asap.

I was 25, adrift and restless, full of ill-focused energy, and anxious about the present and the future. I had played the role of nomadic, unemployed journalist and would-be poet for as long as I could get away with it, in my own mind at least. I knew I had to get serious about finding work and some kind of career foothold, but I wanted more than just a paying job. I was looking for work that would be meaningful. This meant it had to involve writing--my own and maybe that of other writers too. And I figured for practical reasons it also meant moving to a city. After too many years in small towns and rural places I was certainly ready. I considered New York, where I had some good contacts including family members. I had always felt strangely at home there - maybe just because it was the setting for so many movies I'd seen. But I decided to stay in the South, my home turf, the region I loved and hated but knew something about. Enough to know that it was an endless source of things to write about. So I planted myself in Atlanta--a city I knew far better than any other, where various threads of my life connected.

My maternal grandmother's side of my family had been established in Atlanta since the early 20th century. When I was a child my great grandmother Adams--my mom's grandmother--lived in the Morningside neighborhood at 684 Cumberland Road, with her disabled, chronically speech-impaired, adult son Price Adams, my great uncle. Price had contracted polio as a child, resulting in

permanent physical and mental impairments. I loved visiting their house and spending time with Price, whose most prominent physical features were his hawk-bill nose, inscrutable pinpoint eyes, and malformed torso, with its internal organs skewed to one side. Price always wore a clean, long-sleeved white dress shirt and dark, neatly pressed slacks, but he behaved and was treated like a child. To keep himself entertained he maintained a rich fantasy life as an orchestra conductor and owner of a Hollywood film studio. A plastic toy whale with built-in wheels, turned upside down, served as the hand-held projector he used to screen his latest productions on the bathroom shower curtain. Price also owned a substantial collection of fingernail clippers, which he stored in a cardboard box and employed selectively in manicuring his own nails. He called them “nippers,” and if he misplaced them - or if Grandmother Adams hid them - he would repeatedly plead, “Mama, where my nippers? Where my nippers, Mama?”

His impeded speech made him sound like a honking goose trained to speak English.

Price seemed to enjoy nothing more than having his right forearm gently stroked - a favor he often requested of family members and other visitors. “Rub my arm,” he would honk, holding out the limb at the ready as he rolled up the shirtsleeve.

“Oh, hush, Price!” Grandmother Adams would admonish him if he kept it up. “Nobody wants to rub your arm!”

Sometimes I would accompany my dad to Atlanta on overnight business trips - just the two of us - and he would spend the night at a downtown hotel near the Oxford office while I stayed at Grandmother Adams’ house. I was glad to be her only guest, and I was never bored. I spent lots of time by myself while she and Price were in other rooms. I whiled away hours examining all the nicknacks in the house - shelves of snow globes, miniature ship models, seashells, and glass paperweights. There were also exotic artifacts like a petrified-potato doorstop, an Indian stone-axe head that my late great grandfather was

said to have dug up near Macon, and a boxed collection of matchbooks imprinted with logos for places my great grandmother had visited. Her two brothers were wealthy stock-market investors who lived together in a penthouse apartment in New York. She showed me photographs of them on their roof garden. Their financial advice was apparently invaluable to Grandmother Adams, and it may have been the reason my mother's family always seemed to be relatively affluent in an unostentatious, Presbyterian way.

I took special delight in surreptitiously exploring storage closets and inspecting the contents of unlocked drawers in the homes of my older relatives. During one visit to Grandmother Adams' house I found an antique single-shot handgun underneath a stack of folded linen napkins in a drawer of the dining-room china cabinet. When I showed it to her and asked about it, she snatched it out of my hand and peered at me through her Coke-bottle-thick eyeglasses. She'd had that pistol since she was a teenager in Alabama, she informed me. I asked her if she'd ever shot anybody with it, and she told me about the time a strange man tried to molest her on an otherwise deserted street in Huntsville. She said she pulled the gun out of her purse and gave him a stern warning. When he didn't heed it pronto she shot him in the hand, she bragged, and he tore off running across a cotton field, howling in pain.

Grandmother Adams was not a woman to be trifled with. Most of my other elder relatives were somewhat milder of manner. My jovial great aunt Florence Adams Hollingsworth lived in northeast Atlanta on Roxboro Road near Lenox Square. Her daughter Marianne Lee, my second cousin, lived with her husband and three children in a suburban ranch house in Decatur, just beyond Atlanta's northeastern city limit. During a visit there when I was about ten I nearly killed myself trying to ride an old-fashioned penny-farthing bicycle they owned--the kind with an oversize front wheel--down the steep slope of their heavily wooded front yard. Fortunately the thing got caught on some yard debris, and I somersaulted over the handlebars onto the ground before reaching the bottom of the hill, where cars zoomed by all day on a busy street.

My mother's older brother John Hunter Junior--my rich uncle, president of an apparel company--lived with his family on West Paces Ferry Road in Atlanta's stylish Buckhead district, and later out on the Chattahoochee River near Roswell. "Serendipity" was the name he gave to the New Orleans-style plantation house he commissioned for their river property. Uncle John's first wife was an unpredictable alcoholic who forced their five offspring--my first cousins—to attend a private Catholic school run by mean black-clad nuns, according to their accounts. As children they were amusing playmates. They were also self-proclaimed pyromaniacs, who boasted of the fires they'd set just for fun, and the resultant damage - the time Bonnie burned down the garage, the time Little John set the woods on fire, and Becky's torching of the Christmas tree, etc. I requested regular re-tellings of these family legends, most often from cousin Deedee, on whom I had a serious crush. Almost exactly my age and to my eyes stunningly beautiful, Dean Douglas Hunter was killed at age twelve when the horse Uncle John had given her bolted into the path of a motorcyclist on Roswell Road near their house. It was my first experience of heartbreak and my first brush with death, casting a long shadow over my youth. I'm sure it prompted a lifetime's worth of sad reflections for Uncle John, despite his good-humored, wise-cracking public persona. He divorced Ann soon afterward.

Oxford Industries, the apparel company Uncle John headed, also employed the other men on my mother's side of the family by blood or marriage, including my dad. Dad attended Vanderbilt on a football scholarship, graduated in 1950 with a chemical engineering degree, married my mother, and went to work for a paint company in Nashville. He hated the job so badly he quit after two years, even though he and my mom had a new infant son - me - born at Vanderbilt Hospital on April 10, 1952. Luckily for all of us, Uncle John offered Dad an entry-level management position in Oxford's shirt-manufacturing division and eventually promoted him to district manager and later vice-president. In 1955, when I was three, Dad's job brought us to Dublin, where he managed the Dublin Garment

Company, a shirt factory and warehouse that was his professional home base for more than 20 years.

Since Oxford's regional offices were in Atlanta, Dad traveled there often during the 1960s and '70s, when the textile and apparel industries were thriving in the South. Sometimes my mother and younger siblings and I tagged along on these business trips. Installing ourselves in a downtown hotel - usually the Marriott - or at any of our relatives' homes, we would go on weekend sightseeing excursions. We toured the gold-domed State Capitol building and the Grant Park zoo, and we stood among the pedestrian throngs in front of Rich's department store to watch the big rooftop Christmas tree's illumination. And of course we visited Atlanta's most spectacular historical monuments, the Cyclorama and Stone Mountain, both commemorating events and prominent figures from the Civil War, an Atlanta fetish especially during the centennial years, 1961-65.

The Cyclorama - reputed to be the world's largest 360-degree oil painting - places viewers imaginatively in the middle of the Battle of Atlanta on July 22, 1864. Incorporating three-dimensional props and scenery in the foreground to heighten the illusion of spatial depth, its entire panorama passed slowly before your eyes as you stood on a rotating circular platform in the center of the room, with various parts of the painting illuminated at different moments during a recorded account of the battle. Stone Mountain is the massive granite monadnock that dominates Atlanta's northeast horizon. On its southern face is a huge carving of three Confederate leaders striking gallant poses on horseback--still a work in progress when I first saw it, but eventually to become the world's largest relief sculpture.

I grew up alongside people who venerated these heroes of the Lost Cause--a culture dominated by Confederate-flag-waving, rebel-yelling white racists, steeped in nostalgia for an idyllic plantation era that existed only in their collective fantasies. Although my family had a couple of ancestors who'd served in the Confederate army, none of us obsessed about this scrap of our heritage. My grandparents in Mississippi were products of their racist society, bless their hearts, but my parents were college-educated, middle-class New-South liberals

who embraced the idea of racial equality and encouraged my siblings and me to do likewise.

The Civil War loomed large in Atlanta's history. Founded in 1837 at the crossing of two rail lines, it was a boom town that quickly grew to become Georgia's largest city. General William T. Sherman's Union troops famously burned it to the ground on their March to the Sea, only months after the battle elaborately illustrated in the Cyclorama. These events served as the historical backdrop for *Gone with the Wind*, the iconic Atlanta novel and Hollywood film that still dominated the city's image in the popular imagination when I moved there. After the Civil War Atlanta emerged as an economic powerhouse, risen from the ashes like the mythological Phoenix that became its totem bird. World-renowned as the birthplace of Coca-Cola, the city gained new attention in the 1960s as the family home of Martin Luther King. During the Civil Rights struggle the city's white power structure cultivated an image as a socially progressive New-South metropolis. They touted Atlanta as "the city too busy to hate," implying an industrious spirit and enlightened superiority over other southern cities like Birmingham, Alabama--Bombingham, as it was called in those days.

My most powerful memories of the 1960s in Atlanta involved the rock and jazz concerts I attended there as a teenager - the Jimi Hendrix Experience, Cream, Soft Machine, Nina Simone, Wes Montgomery, Donovan, and scores of major and minor groups at both installments of the Atlanta International Pop Festival, in 1969 and 1970. (The festivals were actually held well outside of Atlanta, near the small Georgia towns of Hampton and Byron).

My early concert-going years coincided with my first independent explorations of Atlanta. Alone or with friends I started learning my way around Downtown, Piedmont Park, and Midtown, especially the few blocks around Peachtree Street between Tenth and Fourteenth. In those days this was the city's hippie district, the metro South's counterpart to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury. As in other

larger cities at the time, Atlanta's hip community had its own underground tabloid paper. Known as the Great Speckled Bird, for the old Roy Acuff song, it published free-spirited poetry, psychedelic drawings, outspoken editorials, music reviews, and investigative articles pertaining to the community, local culture, Atlanta race relations, and the activities of the "pigs," aka police. Longhairs hawked copies of it at every corner along the Peachtree Strip, as it was known. This zone consisted of inexpensive apartments and rental houses built in the 1920s, a couple of strip clubs, the Bird's editorial office, three or four head shops, and a concentration of other storefront businesses catering to the turned-on and tuned-in.

The northern end of the district was anchored by the Atlanta Memorial Arts Center, which housed the Atlanta College of Art and the High Museum of Art. Visual art had held a powerful appeal for me since my earliest childhood, and I began haunting the galleries of the High as a teenager. From pre-school through high school I'd spent hours of unsupervised at-home time drawing and making collages. The art museums I got to explore during visits to Atlanta and other cities were special sanctuaries where I could indulge my interest in such things and get ideas for my art projects.

Atlanta's hippie scene went into decline by the beginning of the 1970s and had evaporated by 1977, when I arrived in the city in my rattletrap Karmann Ghia--a greenhorn writer looking to make something happen. But new manifestations of a local counterculture still thrived in several corners of the city

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My move to Atlanta at that point in my life was partly motivated by the example of two former art professors from my alma mater, who had established their own non-profit arts organization in the city. Bob Tauber was a papermaker, fine-art printmaker, and old-school printer who turned out limited-edition poetry publications on an antique letterpress. Mark Smith was a sculptor who also wrote poetry. Until recently they had constituted the art faculty at St. Andrews College in North Carolina - young, charismatic, popular teachers whose students had been outraged when a new administration declined to renew their

contracts for the coming academic year. So Bob and Mark had both moved to Atlanta, where they inaugurated Pynyon Press and Foundry, a business intended to meet their own creative needs while supporting itself with classes in letterpress printing, paper-making, and metal casting.

Their arrival on the scene was auspiciously timed, coinciding not only with the beginnings of Jimmy Carter's presidential regime, but also with the progressive city administration of Maynard Jackson, Atlanta's first black mayor, whose second four-year term would begin the following year. This political combination yielded a host of milestones in Atlanta, one of which was an infusion of federal money that helped fuel a mini-cultural renaissance. Among the beneficiaries in this equation were several non-profit arts groups and individual artists occupying a derelict school building near Downtown and collectively organized as the Forrest Avenue Consortium. Mark and Bob showed up just in time to join these groups and claim studio space on the ground floor - literally. Bob moved his letterpress into the studio, Mark started building a small metal-casting foundry in an adjoining concrete-floored breezeway, and they advertised a schedule of classes. Bob began producing small, limited-edition chapbooks and making paper from kudzu, available in abundance on property adjoining the schoolyard. Early on he hatched a plan to print "kudzu futures," bogus stock certificates for sale as a fundraising gimmick, but unfortunately he never found time to follow through on this clever idea.

In college I'd become acquainted with the small-press movement and the field of independent publishing. Editing the college literary magazine during my senior year gave me a taste of that world and spawned the idea of starting my own press. Since Bob had already done this, and since he and Mark were both visual artists whose literary interests were secondary, I arrived in Atlanta hoping to join their enterprise in some editorial capacity. Mark was kind enough to let me spend several nights on the couch in his apartment near Piedmont Park. Bob and his wife Kathy lived a few blocks away on Myrtle Street. On my first day in town they showed me their new operation's headquarters and toured me through the Forrest Avenue School, a

sprawling old three-story brick building on a street which in those days was named for Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest. I briefly met at least a dozen other artists who had studios there or worked for the other arts groups headquartered in the building.

In talking with Mark and Bob, I wasted no time declaring my interest in working with them on future Pynyon Press projects. My credentials were paltry, but having known me as a dedicated student, they took me seriously, and we immediately started talking about potential publishing projects. It wouldn't be paid employment, although grants might provide some token compensation, but it promised to be a worthy creative outlet. I saw it as a means of building an audience for writing and graphics by some of my talented friends and my younger brother Hunter, a brilliant writer who was prolific but never concerned himself with trying to get published.

Like me, Hunter had attended St. Andrews, known for its writing program. By the time I moved to Atlanta he was in his first semester of law school at the University of Georgia in nearby Athens, soon to take a year-long leave of absence. Fluent in Spanish, he'd landed a job in San Jose, Costa Rica, researching land titles for an Atlanta real-estate developer making new investments in the country.

Mark and Bob were in touch with a few other St. Andrews friends in Atlanta, including Ellen Thompson, one of Hunter's classmates, whom I'd first met during the one year our college careers overlapped. A philosophy major and an Atlanta native, she was a slender, pale-skinned blonde with a dry, offbeat sense of humor. She was also a poet, a fact I didn't realize until I saw her limited-edition book of poems *The Fossil Eaters*, produced at St. Andrews with one of Bob Tauber's art students during their senior year. I was drawn to passages like the following:

"We are in high gear / going over the fall, / the phase foreseen: / we are in a phase / which should be something else. / It is all American, / it is all historical, / yet of disparate groups / from all points of the landscape."

and

“The shadow in the darkness / meeting no answer, greets the silence /
The silence broken with a dream / the most brilliant of symbols / just
the symbol of a puzzle / lonely relic in the darkness”

In the summer of 1976, Ellen had spent several weeks with a dozen other St. Andrews, including Hunter, at Brunnenburg, the castle where Ezra Pound’s daughter Mary de Rachewiltz lived with her family in northern Italy’s Tyrol. The following spring, after graduating, Ellen had found a job as a paralegal with a title-insurance firm in Atlanta, where she’d grown up. She and a St. Andrews classmate named Betsy Burton moved into an apartment complex off Piedmont Road near Buckhead.

That’s where I found her after phoning her from Mark Smith’s place. I paid her a visit, we went out together a few times, and soon we ended up in her bed. As it turned out, her roommate Betsy was about to leave Atlanta for the DC suburbs. After Ellen and I slept together a few times we agreed it would be convenient for us to cohabit and go halves on rent. It would be fun, we told each other--an adventure in bohemian southern living.

We shared Ellen’s apartment for a few weeks at the end of 1977, during which time I found a reporting job with the Clayton Neighbor, a suburban weekly newspaper way out in Jonesboro. Then, on New Year’s Day of 1978 we moved into a run-down 1920s bungalow at 775 St. Charles Avenue, in Atlanta’s Virginia-Highland neighborhood. We inherited this bargain rental property from a couple of my high-school friends who had previously lived there and recommended us to the landlady, Viola Hazlett. For \$225 a month we got a house with a big kitchen, two full bathrooms, a living room and dining room, a screened-in front porch, an attic fan, and three to four rooms that could be used as bedrooms, studios, or offices. An industrial-size stainless-steel sink in the kitchen and disconnected red fire-alarms affixed above a couple of the interior doors were relics from an era when the house had been temporarily adapted as a senior-citizens’ group home. Soon after we took up residence there it became an

unofficial group home for aspiring writers and artists, most of whom had been in school with us.

3. ANARCHY IN THE DEEP SOUTH

During our time on St. Charles Avenue we usually split the rent evenly with one to three other housemates. Ellen and I claimed the best bedroom, which had a working fireplace designed for coal but able to accommodate the pieces of scavenged wood and old scrap lumber I sometimes burned in it on cold nights. For my in-home office I reserved a narrow room next to the back porch, overlooking the untended backyard two stories below. In the spring and into the summer I could swing the casement windows open and look out onto a riot of orange lilies. The far end of the backyard was bordered by Maiden Lane, an alleyway that bisected our block, where the neighborhood hookers could often be seen freshening their makeup or furtively getting high between tricks.

From our narrow, rickety back porch we could see the U.S. flag flapping on a pole atop the square tower of Sears Roebuck's regional headquarters. This fortresslike, two-million-square-foot edifice of red brick had its main entrance about three blocks southwest of us, at the bottom of the hill on busy Ponce de Leon Avenue. It sat directly across from the site of the old Ponce de Leon Park, the stadium where the Atlanta Crackers played home baseball games until it was torn down in the late 1960s, after a modern stadium was built for the recently arrived major-league Braves. By the time we moved into the neighborhood a small shopping center, a big asphalt parking lot, and a Denny's restaurant occupied the site. Separating all of those landmarks from the east side of the neighborhood, where we lived, was a train trestle over Ponce, adjoining our side of which was a dog-training business memorably named Bad Dogs Inc. Ponce de Leon Avenue ran parallel to our street one block to the south, and directly across Ponce were Green's Liquor Store and the fleabag Clermont Hotel, in the lower level of which was the Clermont Lounge, one of the city's most colorful strip clubs. Those establishments faced a couple of other nightclubs on the back side of our block - the Big Dipper, where local rock bands regularly

performed, and Ray Lee's Blue Lantern Lounge, a rowdy urban honky-tonk catering to white rural refugees, with wall-to-wall country tunes on the jukebox. The neighborhood hangouts we frequented were scattered within a mile or two in various directions--the Downtown Cafe, Atkins Park Delicatessen, Moe's & Joe's, George's Delicatessen, Manuel's Tavern, the Majestic Diner, and, on the edge of the nearby Inman Park neighborhood, Little Five Points Pub. Four days after our move to St. Charles Avenue we were present for a historic occasion--the opening show of the Sex Pistols abortive first and last U.S. tour. The venue was a small indoor amphitheater called the Great Southeast Music Hall, in a northeast Atlanta shopping center across the street from Ellen's former apartment. The Sex Pistols were a huge media sensation, brought together by an English avant-garde fashion mogul and hyped as the avatars of British punk rock. I had bought their debut album after reading about them with skeptical interest. Snarling, confrontational sociopaths with sickly-pale complexions, chopped-off hair, and drab, tattered clothing--that was the image. They were anti-hippie, anti-rock'n'roll, and anti- just about everything else. It was hard not to be amused by the album. Whatever else might be said about the Sex Pistols, they certainly offered a bracing antidote to the godawful disco that had been torturing us for several years.

My interest in the group's Atlanta show was amped up by my enthusiasm for the local opening act, Cruis-o-matic. Two of its six members were my boyhood friends the Tanner brothers, Edward and Blair. In high school in Dublin, Georgia, the three of us had been the core members of the Ancestors, an exceedingly well-rehearsed rock band that occasionally performed in public. The little enterprise helped keep me from going crazy during my teens. While I had gone on to pursue other interests in my twenties, the Tanner boys had persisted with their musical endeavors. Joining forces in Atlanta with the others to form Cruis-o-matic, they became known for their wise-ass renditions of cheesy 1960s radio hits - "Five O'Clock World," "Double Shot of My Baby's Love," "Secret Agent Man" etc. - accompanied by fast-paced onstage antics a la Marx Brothers or Three Stooges. They

came off as goofball preppy nerds rather than punks, and their onstage attitude was witty and deadpan rather than pissed-off. They seemed like an odd choice to open for the Sex Pistols.

The Music Hall occupied a corner location between a K-Mart and a Big Star supermarket, and the shopping center's entire parking lot was mobbed hours in advance of the show that night, mostly with representatives of the international press. CBS-TV's roving reporter Charles Kuralt was on hand with his crew to cover the occasion. I saw press badges identifying reporters for Le Monde and the London Times. It took Ellen and me a while to make our way through the crowd and into the front door. I had bought good tickets early. Soon after we found our reserved seats on the front left corner of the stage, three rows back, I surveyed the interior of the small club and wondered where these people came from. There were scores of kids who looked straight from punk-rock central casting, wearing ripped-to-shreds clothing, teased-out Mohawk haircuts, silver-spiked dog collars, and safety pins through their cheeks and noses. Equally conspicuous were ten clean-cut, thickly built, middle-aged guys wearing polyester leisure suits in various pastel hues, all sitting together about ten rows from the front near the center of the room. They represented the Atlanta Vice Squad, prepared for God knows what. If they were spoiling to bust kids for some form of public indecency--nudity, urination, or fornication, for instance--they would be sorely disappointed. But they were probably appalled and baffled by what they witnessed.

The crowd responded to Cruis-o-matic by screaming obscenities and hurling random projectiles at the stage through most of their set. It reminded me of audience reactions to the Ancestors at some of our shows. Undeterred, Cruis-o-matic raced through their droll takes on moldy oldies, carrying on in their usual madcap way. The highlight of their show was a special, original number they'd prepared exclusively for this audience--a punk-rock sendup featuring local-celebrity guest Darryl Rhoades--singer, songwriter, satirist, and leader of the erstwhile Hahavishnu Orchestra. With his long black hair, thick beard, and black Ray-Ban sunglasses, he didn't exactly fit the punk image, but he

compensated by wearing a torn gray t-shirt with “KILL ME” scrawled across the front in what looked like blood. He hit the stage brandishing a four-foot-long safety pin in one hand as the band launched into a dissonant, breakneck riff, over which Darryl repeatedly growled “I wanna put mah boot in yo’ faaaace!! I wanna put mah boot in yo’ faaaace!!”

I was amused, but many of the crowd’s more demonstrative members howled and jeered and kept throwing things at the stage. Unlike Cruis-o-matic, the Sex Pistols gave the audience what they came for--a ragged, raging mess of a set that lasted about half an hour. Their appearance didn’t stop some audience members from hurling readily available objects and substances at the stage. Ellen and I had a particularly good view of the emaciated Sid Vicious as he plucked his low-slung bass and stumbled around. His flesh was the color of skim milk, and I noticed that his forearms bore what looked like cigarette burns. He put me in mind of an animated corpse, drooling and spitting at random, barely able to stand up. (Alas, he would be a real corpse about a year later.) Meanwhile, front man Johnny Rotten maintained his trademark stance--hostile, cynical, psychically maladjusted, and possibly dangerous, crouching like the Hunchback of Notre Dame as he prowled center-stage. At the end of their sloppily concise set, before stalking offstage, Johnny shot the audience one last crazed glare and snarled, “Ever get the feeling you’ve been cheated?”

Whatever.

We certainly got our money’s worth that night.

4. BABEL TOWER

The Clayton Neighbor was a free, ad-supported, weekly newspaper with its offices in a shopping center in Jonesboro, about fifteen miles south of Atlanta off I-75. Jonesboro's claim to fame was its proximity to Tara, the fictional plantation home in *Gone With the Wind*. The newspaper was part of a suburban chain owned by Otis Brumby, a right-wing businessman who lived in Cobb County, the white-flight enclave north of Atlanta. Brumby had made his fortune manufacturing rocking chairs. The editor Tim McDonald hired me on the condition that I cut my hair and beard, because Brumby thought long-haired, bearded men looked unprofessional. I cut off about a foot of my hair, leaving it well above my shoulders, and I trimmed my beard to make it look a bit neater, but I didn't shave it off. I compromised, I told Tim when I reported for work on my first day. He was about my age, and he obviously didn't care personally one way or another.

"That's okay, I guess," he commented tentatively. "Mr. Brumby doesn't drop in here very often. Let's just hope you're not in the office the next time he does."

"Yes," I said, "let's hope not."

Among the job's other drawbacks, reporting on Clayton County government meetings was often inconvenient, since they were often held at night. It was a stopgap job, one I took only because I needed a source of steady income. I remained on the lookout for better opportunities, and after about five months I found one that was less demanding, slightly better-paying, and much closer to home. Tele-log was a locally owned business that compiled weekly TV schedules for newspapers across the country. It was headquartered in a ground-floor office in the Peachtree Palisades Building, a big black cube on Peachtree Street near the old Brookwood train station. Although I only worked there for a few months, I got along well with the management and my co-workers - all female when I started there.

I also alerted friends to job openings as they came up, and eventually about half of the positions were occupied by friends and friends of friends.

In the summer of '78, during my Tele-dog stint, Alfred W. Brown contacted me about writing for his magazine *Brown's Guide to Georgia*, which had caught my attention soon after it started publication in the early 1970s. Before arriving in Atlanta I sent him a letter introducing myself and inquiring about a job, and I met with him at his office soon after I moved to the city. Our meeting and my meager publications track record somehow prompted him to think of me a few months later when he decided to hire a new staff writer. As a kind of audition for the gig, he gave me an assignment - to hike western North Carolina's Linville Gorge and write about the experience. If he chose to publish what I wrote, he promised to pay me the magazine's standard feature-article fee of \$150 and consider me for the new writing position; if he chose to pass on the article, he would pay me a 50-per cent "kill fee."

With that incentive I planned a walk in the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area in the middle of that steamy southern summer. The steep-walled gorge, deeper than any other in the eastern United States, extends along twelve miles of the Linville River below Linville Falls, a high-volume cascade that's a spectacle in its own right. The rim is lined with rock outcroppings, and the perpetually damp, rich black soil on its lower-lying slopes supported a thriving forest including many very old, towering trees which the rugged terrain had rendered inaccessible to logging crews that clearcut most of the South's forests in the early 20th century. This meant there would probably be ample shade from the summer sun.

After studying maps and other printed information about the gorge and its network of marked foot trails, I plotted a hike from the east rim down to the river, then along the riverbank for a stretch before following a trail back up the west rim, culminating at the gorge's tallest rock outcrop, Babel Tower. The name was a key factor in my choice of

the route. I had always been intrigued by the Old Testament story of the ill-fated tower to heaven, whose builders suddenly find themselves speaking mutually indecipherable languages. I was also listening to a lot of Patti Smith at the time, and had just read her new book Babel. Her "Babelogue" on the latest album was a special favorite at our house. ("I don't fuck much with the past, but I fuck plenty with the future....")

I mapped a walk that could be approached as a leisurely overnight excursion or taken on as a more rigorous one-day trek. I opted for the latter, figuring it would be easier and more fun if I didn't have to load myself down with overnight-camping gear. For company I invited Charlie Hart and Suzanne Madison Hogg to join me. Charlie, a St. Andrews dropout, had adopted a retro rural lifestyle since taking on a caretaker role at a Tennessee farm where I'd spent half of 1976. By '78 he had resettled in the mountain community of Valle Crucis, North Carolina, only a few miles from the gorge. Suzanne, a poet and recent St. Andrews grad, worked in the Atlanta office of Equifax and lived with us at 775 St. Charles. She was also an avid Patti Smith fan, and the idea of hiking to a place called Babel Tower amused her.

As it happened, I had recently come into possession of some blotter LSD - little blots of the drug on tiny squares of paper. So - in the spirit of gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, who claimed to have ingested powerful mind-altering drugs while pursuing some of his recent assignments - I decided to swallow a hit of this acid at the outset of the Linville Gorge hike. A heightened experience might make for a more interesting written account, I figured. Of course I brought enough to share with my two companions. We each downed a hit and chased it with canteen water as we climbed out of my blue VW bug to set out on the well-marked trail.

The acid came on strong within the first half-hour of the hike, and a formidable rainstorm caught up with us as we neared the bottom of the gorge. I wasn't hallucinating, but my visual experience of the forest--with its electric-green mosses, lacy ferns, and ubiquitous

rhododendron blossoms--was substantially enhanced. The miracle of life in myriad manifestations was palpable, all around and within us, perpetually unfolding. And intermittently drenching us in the form of precipitation. Rainfall in an ancient, primeval rain forest. The roar of the river--narrow but powerful, gushing whitewater--was so loud it was impossible to hear the rain or each other's voices as we neared the narrow log footbridge. All sounds were sucked into that roar like the raindrops and the veinlike spring-fed streams flowing into the river we approached and crossed. And by the time we were across, the entire scene before my eyes fogged over with the humidity, steaming the lenses of my prescription shades, which I removed and wiped clean with my bandana, only to have them steam right up again, and again, until I gave up and pocketed the glasses, proceeding along the uphill trail in temporarily blurred surroundings.

The only difficulty developed after we'd wound our way along the switchbacking trails up the gorge's west rim to Babel Tower. In order to set foot on the "tower" itself, you had to make a two- or three-foot jump across a drop-off of at least 50 feet into a chasm lined with jagged rocks. It was an easy jump, if slightly unnerving. Charlie and I both negotiated it in short order, but when Suzanne's turn came, she froze for a couple of minutes, then went into a minor freakout. She explained that she was flashing back to an experience she'd had as a child away from home at summer camp and out for a supervised group hike with some other kids. It was hard for me to sort out the details in her tearful account, but the point was that one girl who was part of the group had fallen from a steep cliff to her death, leaving Suzanne with an enduring terror of heights.

So while Suzanne sat on a big rock to calm down and wait for us, Charlie and I spent a few minutes on the towering rock formation, enjoying the view of the river sparkling below and the mountains on the other side of the gorge. "Now that we're up here I guess we ought to speak in unknown tongues," Charlie said, and so we did, shouting out gibberish for a minute or two and listening to our weird vocalizations echo off the gorge's rock walls.

We were still tripping pretty intensely as we hiked out of the woods to an unpaved parking lot on the west side, where we'd left Charlie's truck earlier that day. Our clothes and hair were wet, and I had a small red welt on the back of my left hand from a yellowjacket sting I'd sustained at the outset of our walk--a wound I'd promptly relieved by applying spit-moistened tobacco from a torn-up cigarette. But none of us had fallen off a cliff or been otherwise injured in the course of our psychedelically amplified trek. Before climbing into the truck we shared a drenched group hug to celebrate our mission accomplished.

Back at 775 St. Charles Avenue in Atlanta the next week, in the narrow back room with the canary-yellow, built-in desk, I spent several days over my 1939 Royal Standard typewriter, composing an account of our experience at Linville Gorge. I didn't mention the LSD. A couple of days after submitting the article in person I got a call from Fred Brown, who requested a few changes but accepted it for publication. By the end of the summer I had a new job as an editorial associate at Brown's Guide, with an annual salary of \$10,000, which seemed like a small fortune.

5. OFF THE BEATEN PATH

Alfred W. Brown was a public-relations executive at Delta Air Lines before he and a co-worker, Don Hutcheson, founded *Brown's Guide to Georgia* in the early 1970s. The concept was to give readers accurate, usefully detailed information and interesting, well-written stories about places to go, people worth paying attention to, and things to do in Georgia and the adjoining states. The magazine regularly included articles about leisure activities--canoeing, fishing, bicycling, hiking, shopping, and handmade crafts-- as well as a restaurant guide. Its classic, unfussy design suggested a southern hybrid of the *New Yorker*, *Field & Stream* and the *Old Farmer's Almanac*. The magazine's covers typically featured color reproductions of rural-themed paintings by contemporary Georgia artists--folksy, down-home imagery chosen for its presumed appeal to readers in the target audience.

Brown's Guide was headquartered on the second floor of an old commercial building fronting Main Street and the adjacent railroad tracks extending through the middle of College Park, Fred's hometown. A dozen miles southwest of downtown Atlanta, it was a sleepy little hamlet in transition due to its location at the edge of a rapidly expanding international airport.

In his late thirties, Fred was dark-eyed and devilishly handsome. He cultivated a preppie image, keeping his thick, salt-and-pepper hair neatly but not too closely trimmed and favoring seersucker suits. He could be charming or abrasively ill-tempered, depending on his mood, and he was a difficult editor who often demanded rewrites. He had a penchant for drastically restructuring an article to match his own, idiosyncratic vision of a subject. Most of Atlanta's professional journalists were prima donnas with overinflated egos, in his view. He prided himself on finding and cultivating writers from outside the city's journalistic mainstream, which consisted of *Atlanta Magazine* and the daily newspapers, the *Atlanta Journal* and *Constitution*. The shouting

matches he and I sometimes had over editorial differences--or when I was five minutes late to a Monday-morning staff meeting--were unlike any other workplace conflicts I was ever involved in. But he never threatened to fire me, and who knows, maybe he respected me for yelling back at him. Despite his temper, I couldn't help liking Fred, and I generally enjoyed working for him. I recognized that he'd given me a big career break, and I didn't take it for granted.

As of late 1978 the magazine's full-time writing staff consisted of Bill Cutler, Susan McDonald, Russ Rymer, and me. Cutler, then in his thirties, was an astute, articulate purveyor of acerbic opinion and an openly gay Jew raised in New England. I eventually learned that his dad was Edward Aswell, the literary editor who had assembled (and partially written) the posthumously published books of Thomas Wolfe. Bill had changed his name when he fled his heritage and adopted Atlanta as his new home in the 1960s. Before *Brown's Guide* he had earned a local reputation as a lively writer for the *Great Speckled Bird*, the city's erstwhile underground newsrag. At *BG* he was the senior writer, responsible for the magazine's anonymous, critically incisive restaurant reviews as well as regular articles on bicycling and the places he discovered on his bike trips. Rymer--a talented writer who looked like a matinee idol--had the canoeing beat, while I traded off on the hiking articles with Susan--a bright, no-nonsense ectomorph with soulful, observant eyes. She and Russ and I were about the same age, late twenties, and we all covered other journalistic bases in addition to our writing on the outdoors. We occasionally made our own photographs to accompany our stories, but more often that job went to staff photographer Maury Faggart, a smart, perpetually good-humored Southern gentleman who was great fun to work with. He was from North Carolina and looked like he could've been the third Smothers Brother.

Soon after I started at the magazine, Fred inaugurated a series of "special sections" that focused at length on subjects he thought would interest our readers--features packed with information typically broken out in a list format. I spent several months researching and

writing one such feature billed as a “guide to home energy conservation in Georgia,” and an equivalent stint compiling a special section on the southern mountains, which became an annual component of the magazine. Bill Cutler and I eventually teamed up to research and write a special section on Atlanta, and we later followed it up with a separate publication, *Brown’s Guide to Atlanta*.

After I settled in at the magazine I began pitching story ideas more in line with my own interests, focused on cultural subjects. My profile of poet-publisher Jonathan Williams originated with such a personal pitch, as did the piece I wrote in early 1979 about an eccentric new rock group from Athens, the B-52s, then without a recording contract. I’d become an enthusiastic fan on first hearing the B’s play their nine-song repertoire at a small Atlanta club called the Downtown Cafe. The article was based on an extended interview I conducted with the five band members on a winter afternoon around the kitchen table in a tenant shack on a farm outside of Athens, home at the time to keyboardist Kate Pierson and several goats that lived in her yard.

6. ART SCENE

I started acquainting myself with the Atlanta art scene almost as soon as I arrived in the city. As a frequent visitor to the Forrest Avenue Consortium, I checked out the other creative enterprises that had set up shop in the old school, and I became a regular at the monthly receptions, when all of the arts groups and artists occupying the building would open their offices, galleries, and studios for public viewing and general conviviality.

After one such occasion in late 1978, my housemates and I hosted a post-reception party at our place, only a few blocks away. I had been in Atlanta for a year, and had recently landed the gig at *Brown's Guide*. Meanwhile, our shabby bungalow at 775 St. Charles had become a social center for a group of kindred spirits including several St. Androids, a few Atlanta friends originally from my childhood hometown, and assorted characters I'd met since I settled in Atlanta, more than a few of whom were writers, musicians, and/or or visual artists. Small parties sometimes broke out spontaneously at the house, but the pre-announced soirees usually drew crowds of young urbanites. Sometimes we had as many as 100 guests dropping in for drinks, conversation, and raucous dancing to loud music - Elvis Costello, Talking Heads, the Dead, Patti Smith, Bob Dylan, James Brown, Roxy Music, Little Feat, Nick Lowe, David Bowie, Iggy Pop, the Ramones, the Pretenders, Steely Dan, Lene Lovich, Ian Dury and the Blockheads, the Clash, the Jam, Brian Eno, the Sex Pistols, Devo, Miles Davis, Arto Moreira, Flora Purim, Weather Report, George Duke, et al. It was typical for people none of us knew to show up at these events, and some of them eventually became regulars, friends, and colleagues. Sometimes we hosted theme parties, like "Night of the Living Dead," to which guests were invited to "come as your favorite dead person."

The post-Forrest Avenue soiree wasn't a theme party, and no one showed up in costume, but it soon grew crowded, lively, and loud.

I noticed several people I'd seen at the reception but didn't know otherwise, including a couple I encountered in the kitchen as I was shoving newly arrived six-packs of beer into the fridge. They looked like serious intellectuals on a mission. He was tall and hollow-cheeked, with a wispy beard, thinning longish hair, and a soulful countenance. She was pretty and alert-looking, with appraising eyes, high cheekbones, and a prominent chin. They were both dark-eyed and dark-haired, and both wore black and gray clothes and horn-rimmed glasses. I introduced myself, offered them refreshments, and welcomed them to our humble abode, then we shook hands and they said their names, which I immediately recognized: Laura Lieberman and Dan Talley. She was a poet whose work I'd seen at Forrest Avenue--a poem stencil-painted in yellow on a staircase in the building, with individual lines running across the front of each step. He was an artist whose name I'd heard, although I hadn't then seen any of his art. They worked together as editors of a new contemporary-art tabloid called *Art Papers*.

"So, I've got to know," Laura said as she moved in closer and locked eyes with me, "who are you guys and where did you come from? There seems to be this whole group of you that have your own little scene, but we never heard of you before. And by the way, how did you get that plum job at *Brown's Guide to Georgia*?" I raised my eyebrows and smiled. She was in my face, challenging but playful, maybe a little flirtatious, although it was clear that she and Dan were a couple.

"Well," I said, "I took some acid and went hiking and came back and wrote about the experience, and the editor liked what I wrote, so he hired me."

That ice-breaker led to an extended conversation among the three of us about our backgrounds and cultural interests. Laura had grown up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the daughter of an electrical engineer who worked on nuclear reactors. She had an English literature degree from Swarthmore. Dan was a small-town Georgia

boy like me, an unlikely product of Hogansville, about 50 miles southwest of Atlanta, and an Atlanta College of Art graduate. They encouraged me to consider writing for *Art Papers*, even though they'd never read anything I'd written, as far as I knew. I told them I wasn't an art critic.

I would cross paths with Laura and Dan often over the next couple of years, and they would continue urging me to write for their magazine. When they split up and Dan left *Art Papers*, Laura kept prodding me. I resisted because I assumed writing about art required a background of systematic studies in art and art history. I had learned in piecemeal fashion just enough about art to know how little I knew. I'd been interested in art since my childhood--in making it as well as looking at it--but there wasn't an art museum or gallery within 100 miles of my small hometown, where the schools offered no art classes. Since my teens I'd read sporadically about art in the popular press and habitually checked out art museums in the cities I visited. My attention to such things was driven entirely by curiosity and personal attraction.

What little I knew about pre-20th-century Western art I learned during a three-week tour of Europe with a high-school group when I was 16, in an interdisciplinary cultural studies courses I'd taken in college, and from watching installments of Kenneth Clarke's "Civilization" series on public TV. Aside from the preColumbian art I'd sought out during my travels in Mexico and Central America, I was mainly drawn to 20th-century art, from Dada and Surrealism through Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and recent folk art. Duchamp, Bacon, Nevelson, Keinholz, Rauschenberg, Johns, Oldenburg, and Warhol were of special interest, as were photographers Walker Evans, Diane Arbus, and Ralph Eugene Meatyard. I wasn't a regular reader of the New York art magazines, and I didn't keep up with recent art trends. I would've been hard-pressed to name any of the era's hot, emerging artists. I was aware of Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and Earth Art but was at best vaguely familiar with their leading practitioners and the underlying theories. In Atlanta I saw the shows at

Forrest Avenue, and generally checked out the new exhibitions at the High Museum of Art, where I also attended lectures and presentations by artists like Hannah Wilke and Christo. But I lacked any expertise in these areas, and I had never harbored an aspiration to write about them.

7. HOTHOUSE

In the year and a half that Ellen and I lived together at 775 St. Charles, the house saw many social gatherings and myriad comings and goings, as friends from scattered locales came to visit or move in with us. Housemates at various points included Michael McOwen, Suzanne Hogg, Tony Ridings, Jean McRae, Julie Cramer, Jackson Morton, Melissa Tufts, Clay Hamilton, and Malcolm Fordham. There were also several pets: Suzanne's constantly shedding mutt-dog Mona, Tony's and Jean's Arizona-born cat Micho, and the litter of six kittens she had during her residency with us. Ellen and I claimed one of the kittens, a gray tabby, and named him Redondo, after Patti Smith's song "Redondo Beach."

In late 1978 Tony's sister Linda and her husband Cornel Rubino--both painters--moved into the bottom half of the wood-frame duplex nextdoor,. They had relocated from Italy by way of New York, where I'd first met them two years earlier. To celebrate their first morning in Atlanta I invited them over for a big southern-style breakfast, a specialty of mine in those days--garlic cheese grits, bacon, scrambled eggs, buttered wheat toast with blackberry jam, orange juice, and lots of coffee. Everyone loved the Rubinos. They were eccentric, creative, continental, and charming, like characters from a Fellini film. They were both figurative painters, each with a distinctive style that had little to do with current art trends. Cornel's work was narrative-based and often erotically themed; Linda abstracted and elaborated on landscapes and cityscapes, and she also painted stylized cats. They made art at home, every day, taking day jobs to support themselves and selling their work when they could. Cornel promptly found a job at Brentano's, a chain bookstore downtown. Framed samples of their work soon went up on our cracked-plaster walls.

The one-story bungalow on the other side of our house--even shabbier than ours, with its perpetually overgrown yard--generally

looked deserted but was in fact occupied by an aging, slovenly man we glimpsed on rare occasions peeking out his front door or stepping out on the shadowy porch. The activities we witnessed there--usually very late at night or in the pre-dawn hours--convinced us it was a front for a fencing operation. I saw countless TV sets brought into and out of that house, along with other unknown items packed in cardboard boxes.

Two blocks to the east, on the opposite side of our street, our friends Malcolm McKenzie and Jane Keener occupied the upstairs unit of a 1920s brick duplex. I'd initially looked them up on Hunter's recommendation. He and Malcolm had met each other as students in Mexico a couple of years earlier. A few doors down to our west, in a newer but scuzzier red-brick apartment building near the end of our block, lived a tall, eccentric, deceptively all-American-looking law student named Bill Matz. We met him for the first time when he wandered up to our house one warm spring afternoon wearing sneakers, cutoff jeans, and a long, red-velvet cape - shirtless and brandishing a sword. He and Suzanne had a fling that lasted a few weeks. Bill's apartment in the rear of his building overlooked Maiden Lane--our mid-block alley--and the back of Ray Lee's Blue Lantern Lounge. Patrons of this redneck bar often stumbled into Bill's backyard to relieve themselves or throw up. In response to these rude intrusions on his turf, Bill claimed to have retaliated with a uniquely disgusting bit of creative vandalism.

Over several weeks, he told us, he saved gallons of his own urine in a giant-size water-cooler bottle, which he somehow managed to hoist onto Ray Lee's roof with him when he climbed up there after closing time one Saturday night--or rather Sunday morning. According to his account he poured piss down every one of the rooftop pipes and vents until he'd emptied the bottle.

Our house saw streams of visitors from St. Andrews, several of whom returned repeatedly, and every party we hosted brought in at

least a few first-timers who would make repeat appearances. Our little scene attracted strong, idiosyncratic personalities, and the group dynamics were sometimes intense and dramatic. There were loud arguments, fierce personality conflicts, petty housekeeping disagreements, and complicated sexual tensions, but never any physical violence. We hooked up, broke up and made up in various combinations, and of course we got on each other's nerves occasionally or more often. To let off steam we celebrated. Ample quantities of beer and wine were regularly consumed by one and all, bottles of liquor were shared now and then, and pot was smoked on a daily basis. Psychedelics were enjoyed whenever they became available, and small quantities of cocaine were occasionally divvied up courtesy of one generous visitor or another. I wasn't aware of any needle-injected drug use on the premises during our time there, although one never knew what went on behind locked bathroom doors during some of our more crowded parties.

It was a hothouse - literally so in the summer months. Pre-dating the era of home air-conditioning, it was designed to catch cross-breezes through many windows on all four sides. There was a built-in attic fan to suck out the hot air at night, and we brought in a couple of portable electric fans. Even though the house received hours of daily shade from the big oaks that almost surrounded us, it still got oppressively sticky-hot inside during brightly sunlit days from early June until late September. Many of those afternoons were spent on the broad, screened-in front porch on the well-shaded, north-facing front of the house.

We furnished the place with miscellaneous chairs, sofas, tables and beds we'd hauled from our parents' houses, college dorm rooms, or other previous residences. For wall decor we tacked up National Geographic archeological maps and hung cheaply framed art by our friends, along with a few small black-and-white photos of musicians and writers we admired. Books were scattered about and arrayed on makeshift bookcases, and in one corner of the centrally located dining room a turntable was flanked by stacked wooden fruit crates loaded

with several hundred record albums, the vast majority from the collection I'd been amassing for half of my life. It was our little urban bohemia, and of course it couldn't last long--at least not in that form.

8. CHANGE OF VENUE

The beginning of 1979 marked the one-year anniversary of our move into 775 St. Charles. Much had happened in our lives and in the house during that year, and my relationship with Ellen had undergone more than a little stress in the midst of all the transformations. It was the first domestic-romantic partnership for both of us, and the highly charged circumstances of our ever-changing household made it more challenging than it might've otherwise been. We'd been on-again and off-again over the course of the year as Ellen tried to make up her mind about some unfinished business - a former boyfriend with whom, to keep it complicated, I was also friends. Still enrolled at St. Andrews, he was spending a year in the United Kingdom, where Ellen had visited him for a week in the spring of '78, with my blessing, more or less. Philosophically opposed to jealousy, I figured it made perfect sense for one close friend or lover to be attracted to another. Anger seemed like a stupid response, so I refused to be angry, but this line of seemingly clear thinking didn't stop me from feeling the emotion of the circumstances. I had allowed myself to become too attached, but I hadn't completely forgotten what I'd learned from my studies of Buddhism--attachments cause suffering. Clinging to the attachment, I knew, would only increase the suffering.

So I staked out a separate bedroom in the back of the house, and otherwise did my best to proceed as usual in my dealings with all parties directly or peripherally involved in our ongoing household soap opera. (Those peripherally involved included our housemates and closest friends, as well as Ellen's friendly, helpful, consistently even-tempered parents, Bill and Janet, whom we saw about once a week, since they lived nearby in the north Atlanta suburbs.) I had plenty of work to help distract me from the romantic quandary, not to mention opportunities for diversionary casual sex with other female friends and acquaintances. It's probably just as well that I pursued few such opportunities.

After two or three months Ellen evidently changed her mind. She wasn't one for talking about her feelings, so I never really knew what happened, and I didn't force the issue. We simply picked up where we'd left off, although I confess to feeling a new ambivalence about the relationship in the months that followed.

Meanwhile, Ellen had become disenchanted with our housing situation. She was clearly having serious second thoughts about the communal, bohemian life at 775 St. Charles, and about the house itself. By that time we'd been joined by Melissa Tufts, with whom I'd been very close during my last year at St. Andrews. She'd grown up in Atlanta's Ansley Park, and I still adored her, but any romantic feelings between the two of us had cooled. She and Ellen hadn't previously known each other well, and their personalities were vastly different. Melissa was a tomboy who loved to ride horses, go camping, and explore the woods, while Ellen was domestically oriented; on more than one occasion she'd commented that her ideal life would involve staying home and reading magazines all day. In Atlanta the two of them hit it off beautifully--a pleasant surprise to me. Melissa had only been with us for about a month when she and Ellen started talking exit strategies. The next thing I knew they'd found a three-bedroom apartment in Midtown. Pooling their resources with Ruth Lancaster, aka Truth--yet another St. Android freshly arrived in Atlanta--they rented the new place and moved in.

Ruth was an artist, raised in Japan by missionary parents. She painted neo-primitive, Japanese-influenced landscapes and portraits reminiscent of Alice Neel's. As an art student at St. Andrews she'd painted a life-size portrait of Hunter, which he commissioned as a Christmas gift for our parents. In a pastoral setting against a background of dark mountains intended to represent central Mexico, he sits in relaxed pose and gazes off to one side with an expression of tight-lipped concentration. Our mother dutifully hung the portrait over the upright piano in the dark-paneled family room at our home in Dublin, but I know she never liked it. She said it made Hunter look like an Amish farmer sitting in a wheat field.

Ellen and Melissa moved out of our broke-down palace on St. Charles and joined Ruth in a better-maintained duplex at 74 13th Street. It was an area undergoing “re-gentrification,” just a few blocks from Piedmont Park, the High Museum of Art, Colony Square, and Ansley Park--Melissa’s childhood neighborhood of winding streets, tall trees, and neatly manicured lawns surrounding well-preserved, pre-Depression-era homes. Their new place was less than half the size of our house, but the rent was almost twice as much--\$425 a month. It was never hard to find new housemates. After the girls moved out I shared the house with Clay Hamilton - another St. Andrews refugee - and Malcolm Fordham, a photographer and former public schoolteacher from my hometown, then earning a living as a driving instructor. Easy as they were to get along with, I quickly realized I wasn’t cut out for an all-male household. My difficulties with this new reality had to do mainly with housekeeping habits and aesthetics. After a couple of months I’d had enough of bachelor-pad life. Meanwhile, back in Midtown, just weeks after she moved to 13th Street, Melissa was suddenly given an opportunity to work for a year in Paris, as an au-pair for family friends. Not long after her departure in the summer of ’79, I left St. Charles Avenue to the boys and moved in with Ellen and Ruth.

9. STRAY CATS IN THE HOUSE OF THE VICIOUS DOG

Seventy-four 13th Street was the top half of a two-story duplex from the 1920s, with a tan-colored brick exterior and screen porches on the south-facing front side. Situated on a two-block stretch between Peachtree and West Peachtree streets, ours was the central building in a row of three from the same era, all nearly identical except for variations in the brick colors and modifications made in later years. The one on the east side of us had been transformed into a communal home for the Holy Order of MANS, a group of latter-day Gnostic Christians who operated a nearby vegetarian restaurant called Brother Juniper's. The duplex on our west side had been renovated to accommodate a gay bookstore known as Christopher's Kind. The shop occupied what was originally the lower apartment, and owner Gene Ramey lived upstairs with his boyfriend David.

The other houses on the street were residences, except for a bungalow six or seven doors west of us, the longtime local headquarters for the Theosophical Society. A huge oak tree in the backyard was reputed to be the oldest tree in Midtown, or maybe in the entire city. When I moved to 13th Street the apartment below ours was occupied by a German guy and his girlfriend, both about our age. Later they were replaced by three Georgia Tech students - all smart, agreeable guys.

Like our house on St. Charles, 74 13th became a social gathering place. We hosted invitational parties on special occasions, but friends often got together there spontaneously. We were conveniently located, in easy walking distance of the art museum, several bars and restaurants, the new-music club 688, and a gamut of other entertainment venues, from strip clubs to gay discos. Our apartment often had the feeling of a salon--a loose group of writers, artists, and working-class intellectuals hanging out to drink, gossip, argue, and tell stories while enveloped in clouds of tobacco and pot

smoke and the sounds of rock, punk, and jazz records. Ellen referred to this crew of associates as our “little friends.”

Our little friend Melissa Tufts, meanwhile, was enjoying her new life in Paris. In one of her entertaining letters from late 1979 or early '80 she enclosed a small, white plastic plaque incised in blue with the words “*CHIEN MECHANT*,” French for “vicious dog.” It was pierced with small holes on either side so it could be nailed or screwed in place. I installed it on our front door, which opened into the carpeted stairwell to our apartment. In informal correspondence I took to calling our place *Chez Chien Mechant*--House of the Vicious Dog. We didn't have a dog, of course. We had a cat, Redondo, more or less fully grown by that time, a gray Tabby with white paws and a white belly. Redondo was a free-ranging kitty whose hunting ground was the kudzu jungle behind our house on the otherwise vacant hillside lot that sloped up to 14th Street. Our back door opened from the cramped kitchen onto a tiny porch with an adjoining stairwell that was entirely enclosed with windowless wood-frame walls, leaving it dark even during daylight hours. It gave open access to the downstairs neighbors' back porch and the backyard, and ended a few steps below the yard at the door to the musty basement. For Redondo it was a convenient access passage, because we left our back-porch door unlocked and slightly ajar 24 hours a day in all seasons, despite the opportunity it presented for would-be intruders. We were never burglarized, though, and Redondo was able to come and go as he pleased. A skilled hunter, he often brought the small, bloody corpses of freshly killed rodents or birds into the house and left them on the living-room carpet as gifts for us.

On a few occasions Redondo was followed inside in the middle of the night by other male cats from the neighborhood. Awakened in the wee hours by unearthly yowls that sounded like a chorus of the devil's infant offspring, I immediately knew what was going on. My foolproof method of breaking it up was to leap from our bed, rush directly toward the horrendous racket, flip the first convenient light switch, and bellow the loudest animal roar I could summon. The feline

trespassers were invariably shocked and terrified, literally bouncing off the walls in their scramble to escape.

Our new home in Midtown became the ad-hoc headquarters of Pynyon Press, as indicated on boxes of letterhead stationery I had printed. By the fall of 1979 Mark Smith and Bob Tauber realized they couldn't sustain the business as they'd originally envisioned it. They reluctantly vacated their ground-floor space in the old Forrest Avenue School and took on regular jobs to make ends meet. They abandoned the foundry, which wasn't portable, and that part of the name was informally dropped. But the publishing aspect of the business - Pynyon Press - remained active after they named me as the new executive director.

In the works during the transition was Pynyon's most important book to date: *Fram*, by Ronald H. Bayes, St. Andrews' writer-in-residence and my first literary mentor. The eighty-page volume, published in an edition of 500, was the fourth and final book in Ron's "Umapine Tetralogy," a long, free-form, autobiographical poem named for the tiny Oregon town where he'd been raised. It was his ambitious effort on the order of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*. Ron had been working on the tetralogy for fifteen years, and *Fram*'s publication was a major event in his career. The book was too big a production for Bob's letterpress, so a commercial printer had been contracted to print the text pages, in old-fashioned hand-set lead type, but on a much larger, industrial-scale press. We'd raised the few thousand dollars to pay for the book from a series of small grants, contributions, and advance-paid subscriptions. Having overseen the project almost from the start, I was looking over page proofs about the time I became Pynyon's director.

For *Fram*'s offset-printed cover I made a small collage featuring a cutout photo of a Maya pyramid from Yucatan with Japan's Mount Fuji looming in the background. (Both places were important settings in the book.) I placed this hybrid image under the black, white and orange logo of the Fram brand of automotive oil filters--a big letter "F"

emblazoned across the center with the boldface company name **FRAM**. I figured a copyright-infringement suit was unlikely, and in the event we got sued, it would be good publicity for Ron's book. We had another Pynyon publication in the works at the same time, a non-thematic anthology of writings and graphics by various contributors. It would have been a magazine, but I didn't want to commit to publishing on a regular schedule. After rejecting about 100 other potential title ideas I named it *Red Hand Book*, hence the red-printed spiral-hand image on the press' new letterhead stationery. The name had nothing to do with Communism or Irish politics. It was inspired by the red handprints often found in Europe's prehistoric cave paintings, as well as on interior walls of buildings at some of the Maya ruins I'd visited. I thought of the image as a universal human signature, an emblem that said, "I made this." Stamped on the front cover with my own right handprint in red ink, it was the first of three such anthologies Pynyon would publish between 1979 and 1982. Contributors included Bayes, John Cage, Fielding Dawson, Richard Kostelanetz, Paul Metcalf, Thomas Meyer, Joel Oppenheimer, Jonathan Williams, and some of my more talented peers--Ellen Thompson, J. Hunter Patterson, Suzanne Madison Hogg, Ruth Lancaster, Chip Wrenn, Dan Talley, Cornel Rubino, Linda Ridings-Rubino, Malcolm Fordham, Terrill Shepard Soules, and Melissa Cole Tufts, among others.

The second volume, *Red Hand Book II*, paid tribute to Charles Olson on the 70th anniversary of his birth and the tenth anniversary of his death, with contributions by some of Olson's former students and associates. I enlisted fellow Olson enthusiast rival Steve Allgood as my co-editor for that one. The third and last volume carried several of Bruce Hampton's song lyrics and Atlanta music critic Mitchell Feldman's exclusive interview with Allen Ginsberg about musical interests, influences, and collaborations.

We paid for these publications with donations, advance subscriptions, and small grants from the Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs, the Georgia Council for the Arts, and the National Endowment

for the Arts. We also occasionally sponsored readings by writers we published in Atlanta galleries and bookshops. For some events we brought in guest writers--Bayes, Oppenheimer, Williams, Meyer--and in one case, at Brentano's bookstore in the Omni, we mounted a group exhibition of work by artists represented in the first volume of *Red Hand Book*.

Pynyon was a classic do-it-yourself operation. In addition to editing and designing the books, working with printers and a typographer neighbor, I wrote press releases and sent them to my contacts in the Atlanta print media, sometimes leading to articles about our new-book releases and readings. For official purposes I organized a board of directors consisting of Ellen, Cornel Rubino, and Linda Ridings-Rubino. We eventually established a modest reputation on the local cultural scene and in the national small-press arena. All in all, it was a labor-intensive but personally rewarding endeavor - exactly what I had dreamed of doing only a few years earlier.

10. THE STEIN CLUB

After we moved to Midtown we began frequenting the Stein Club, a dimly lighted dive on Peachtree between 8th and 9th streets. Its co-owner David Heany was a sculptor, a bearded, barrel-chested bear of a guy. A big, abstract steel sculpture he made was installed in a spruced-up vacant lot at the northeast corner of Peachtree and 10th. The Stein's refreshment mainstay was cheap beer by the pitcher, and one of its claims to fame was the "best jukebox in town," with an assortment of 45s by Edith Piaf, Patsy Cline, Etta James, Coltrane, Miles, Sinatra, Roy Orbison, and the Electric Prunes, among other varied offerings. The official logo was a graphic appropriation of Picasso's Gertrude Stein portrait, modified with a cartoon "STEIN CLUB" thought balloon bubbling from Gertrude's African-mask head. The Stein hosted annual chess tournaments, limerick contests, and orthographic meets (aka spelling bees), with gift certificates and other special prizes awarded to winners. I never competed in these events, but I once served as a judge for the limerick contest.

There were usually chess games and backgammon matches proceeding in a back room. The place was furnished with sturdy tables, cheap metal chairs, and a couple of salvaged church pews at the long tables near the front entrance. The bar and tiny kitchen area were in the back of the main room, alongside a narrow corridor under a glowing red EXIT sign, giving access to the restrooms and the back parking lot. In a corner between this exit corridor and a step-up into a pair of adjoining rooms was a round table unofficially reserved for longtime regulars. The top half of the wall between the main room and the middle room had been removed. The remaining walls were darkly painted and covered with framed 8-by-10 photographs of regular patrons made on-site by a neighborhood lensman, probably in exchange for free beers. Interspersed among these generally cheerful-looking mug shots were a few mirrors and illuminated signs advertising popular beer brands.

The Stein's clientele included blue- and white-collar nine-to-fivers, lawyers, writers, ad-industry people, musicians, dancers from the nearby Cheetah III Lounge, and students and faculty from area colleges and universities. The nearest of the latter institutions was the Atlanta College of Art, seven blocks to the north - one of the reasons the Stein was the city's main artists' bar. For several years Art Papers was headquartered on the second floor of a box-shaped 1950s office building diagonally across Peachtree, and members of the magazine's staff could sometimes be found at the Stein on weekdays in the late afternoon, when Ellen and I were most likely to stop in for an hour or two before dinner.

Because the Stein faced west with only low-rise buildings across Peachtree Street, blinding sunlight streamed into the front room through the big plate-glass windows in the late afternoons or early evenings, depending on the season. It was the only time the interior was brightly illuminated, rendering visible the thick clouds of blue-gray cigarette smoke swirling psychedelically around in the sun rays. Sometimes the smoke got to be too much, so the front and back doors had to be thrown open to air the place out.

We all smoked in those days. I'd gotten hooked on tobacco a few years earlier in Guatemala and Mexico. Back in the U.S.A. I sometimes rolled my own with loose tobacco, but I usually smoked Camel straights, until I switched to Camel Lights. Ellen's brand was Benson & Hedges Menthol Lights, of all things. Every now and then someone in the Stein would take out a joint or a small pipe and sneak a few tokes, but normally if we wanted to smoke marijuana we would duck out the back door. The back parking lot was an expanse of unevenly pitted red dirt partially shaded by a lonely live oak, the last remaining tree on the block. Depending on the weather and the time of day or night, we would either sit in or stand alongside one of our cars while getting high. The parking lot also offered an opportunity for cheap thrills, thanks to its location alongside the back of the Cheetah III, which had a big window-mounted exhaust fan at eye level in the brick wall. When the vents were open and the fan blades spinning so

fast you couldn't see them, the window offered an unobstructed view of the house girls, luridly illuminated as they writhed and shimmied in their g-strings and heels--a free peep show. From inside the Cheetah III, the faces peering into the vent could be seen by anyone looking in that direction, and sometimes the staff goons would throw buckets of ice water through the opening. One or two of my friends were on the receiving end of these frigid dousings.

Ellen and I made new friends and many friendly acquaintances at the Stein, including a number of the regulars from the neighborhood--a rogue's gallery of urban southern characters. There was Jeff Tate, son of a beloved long-serving dean at the University of Georgia in Athens. Stockily built, with a head of thick, graying brown hair and a beard to match, Jeff was a charmingly loquacious, widely read bon vivant with the syrupy accent of the old Georgia aristocracy. In his mid to late thirties, he was always immaculately dressed in a long-sleeved dress shirt and a tie, polished leather loafers, neatly pressed slacks and a matching jacket on the back of his chair. He didn't seem to have a job, though. I think he lived off of a trust fund. He enjoyed regaling us with stories of his turn as an Atlanta gigolo. Back in his younger days, when he "looked like Troy Donahue," he'd worked with a partner to run a thriving escort service out of their apartment in the Georgian Terrace Hotel. They called their business "Gray Hustle."

I still have and occasionally wear a silk Yves Saint Laurent necktie, navy blue with diagonal white pinstripes, that Jeff spontaneously removed and awarded me as a gift one late afternoon when I said something, I forget what, that amused him greatly. "Tom Patterson, that's so wonderful ah'm gonna give you my tie!!" he announced to the whole table. And he did.

Coleman Smith was an amiable ectomorph who'd lived in the neighborhood since the hippie days and patronized the Stein Club for almost as long. I don't know his ethnic heritage, but with his large dark eyes, beaklike nose and prominent teeth, he looked vaguely Middle

Eastern. He lived only a couple of blocks from the Stein in a 1920s apartment kind of like ours but more rundown. He had a day job of some kind, and he moonlighted as an astrologer, creating elaborate personal zodiac charts on commission. Elaine Falone, who also lived in Coleman's building, was another Stein regular--a theatrical performer and poet with a dry sense of humor and a streetwise demeanor. She had a thin face and a ski-slope nose like Bob Hope's, and she typically dressed like an office worker. When she was talking with you she always made eye contact, but she batted her eyelashes incessantly--a nervous tic rather than a gesture of flirtation, it took me a while to figure out. Elaine was a card-carrying SAG member who occasionally performed in local theatre productions. Her closest brush with professional fame was the bit part she played as a jailed prostitute in *Sharky's Machine*, a Burt Reynolds film made in Atlanta during that era. I never knew what she did in the way of paying work to fill in the gaps between acting gigs. She had sworn off alcohol, or maybe she'd never been a drinker in the first place. At the Stein she drank coffee with lots of sugar and chainsmoked.

Bill Butsch was a corpulent, bespectacled tax attorney, always the largest person in the Stein whenever he was there, which was just about every afternoon after five. Despite his substantial girth he still managed to balance himself on a bar stool, in which he was easily recognizable from behind by his gleaming bald pate, his customary white dress shirt and the big X of his suspenders stretched tight across his hulking back. Bill was in his forties, had a sarcastic sense of humor, and invariably introduced himself as a "Midtown shyster lawyer," although he was more conventionally identified on the business cards he liberally handed out. He lived and conducted business in a rambling old house on 11th Street, where he also rented out rooms to two or three tenants. He was an old-school skinflint, but he was such a character that I had to like him. It took me a while to figure out he was gay.

Present just as often among the Stein's late-afternoon patrons was another middle-aged gay bachelor, John Peak. As a young man

in the 1950s he'd left Milledgeville, Georgia--the hometown he shared with Flannery O'Connor--for Atlanta, which reportedly had a lively gay scene in those days. For years John had held the same sales-clerk job in a men's clothing store downtown. On weekday afternoons he arrived at the Stein directly from work, right off the MARTA bus, looking distinguished in a light-brown two-piece suit with a white shirt and dark tie, neatly groomed down to his pencil-thin mustache and shiny leather shoes. Inquisitive and literate, he was one of the more talkative regulars, vaguely reminding me of Tennessee Williams. John typically spent two or three hours on his bar stool or table-hopping, often eating dinner from the limited menu of sandwiches, pizza, fries etc. Finally, slightly more disheveled than when he arrived, he staggered glassy-eyed out the front door and somehow made his way home to his apartment off Juniper Street, four or five blocks from the Stein.

Another regular weekday arrival on the late-afternoon MARTA bus from Downtown was James Taylor, a reference librarian in the city's Central Library who lived on 11th Street, not far from Bill Butsch. About my age, late twenties, James was a friendly, engaging conversationalist, widely read, curious-minded, amusing and ever ready to be amused. With his expressive features and thick, wavy blond hair, he looked like a cross between Harpo Marx and Barry Manilow. James was from Boston, and he had the accent to prove it, although by then he had absorbed the influence of the southern speech he'd lived with for a few years. James and I immediately took a liking to each other when we struck up a conversation at the bar one afternoon, and he hit it off likewise with Ellen when he met her not long afterward. We promptly adopted him into our social set, where he fit right in.

It was James who introduced us to David Hudson, another Stein Club habitu  who became a close friend. I noticed him in the Stein playing chess or brooding alone at the bar when he was new to the neighborhood, but we didn't meet him until James brought him to our apartment on a rare winter snow-day morning. A few inches of

accumulation had brought vehicular traffic to a standstill throughout the city, and most nine-to-fivers were using the weather as an excuse to stay home in the middle of the week. James and David walked over from their apartments near Piedmont Park, and we ended up spending the day together. Hudson was in his early thirties, an autodidact polymath whose job involved high-tech audio equipment. He'd spent his youth in and around Miami, hanging out with musicians and other bohemian characters in Coconut Grove. He had eclectic musical tastes and strong opinions about any musical artist you could name. He'd also read widely and was well-versed in subjects like theoretical physics, although he hadn't gone to college. A sensitive soul whose skin wasn't as thick as he liked to pretend, he normally wore a deadpan expression that dared you to surprise or amuse him, but I found it easy to crack him up. His most distinctive physical quirk was his mismatched eyes--one blue and one brown, like that other David, Bowie. Ellen considered Hudson a know-it-all, but I never once caught him pretending to know more than he actually knew about a given subject.

Patty Champion, a fellow writer who'd begun her career as a rock journalist and critic, was a southern Melina Mercouri--blond and long-legged, friendly and talkative, even more so when she'd had too much to drink, which was not infrequently. I think it was Jeff Tate who introduced me to her - or vice-versa. Patty was full of stories about rock musicians she'd covered for a defunct regional music tabloid, and other writers she'd hung out with, especially the acerbic New York rock critic Lester Bangs, whom she adored. When we met her she was nominally freelancing, but I never saw any evidence she was getting anything new published. Her generally cheerful demeanor failed to mask the fact that she was down on her luck, reduced to living in a tiny one-room apartment at the back of Bill Butsch's house. Even though her rent was something like \$75 a month, she was chronically delinquent in paying.

Lew Deadmore was an architect and Georgia-Tech alumnus who'd divorced his wife and left his middle-class family in the late

1960s to start a new life among the Peachtree-Strip hippies. When we met him a dozen years later he was pushing 50 and living in the same spacious apartment he'd occupied since the groovy old days, at the top of a three-story brick building on 8th Street, just around the corner from the Stein. He still dabbled in architecture, taking on small house-addition projects for friends every now and then, but since his straight-job days with a firm he'd largely reinvented himself as an independent art dealer. He also sold marijuana in quantities of an ounce or less. His specialties were traditional African art, folk art, Asian and pre-Columbian antiquities, and pricey Colombian sinsemilla.

Tall and gangly, with a deep, booming voice, close-cropped white hair and a neatly trimmed beard, Lew reminded me of the actor James Coburn. He didn't smoke tobacco, and his habits of eating healthy and running a few miles almost every day kept him in terrific shape for his age, notwithstanding his propensity for staying up late and drinking a bit too much. Lew was a connoisseur of the visual, and his carefully decorated apartment was full of exotic artifacts, distinctive contemporary art, designer furnishings, and an impressive library of art books. Always a fun place to visit, although Lew sent you outside to the fire escape if you wanted to smoke a cigarette. He would tolerate tobacco smoke in the Stein Club--up to a point--but not in his art-filled personal sanctuary.

Aside from the wealthy clients he cultivated in his art-dealer's role, he seemed to prefer the company of younger people. He typically expressed his fondness for friends and his openness to new acquaintances with a tight embrace, a long arm clamped around the shoulder or a squeeze of the thigh. His tendency to overdo the groping, especially after a few too many beers, earned him the nickname Lecherous Lew. A natural salesman, he was always alert to the possibility of a sale, and he could be pushy. He also had a tendency to boast and--speaking of know-it-alls--sometimes pretended to knowledge he didn't really possess. Some of my friends had little patience with him, but I viewed him as a lovable rogue, and I usually enjoyed his company. We shared a lot of interests, and I never tired of

visiting his apartment, where he always had a new acquisition to show off and some new Colombian bud to turn you on to.

Another neighborhood cohort who often met us for beers at the Stein was the artist Stan Sharshal. I initially met him at some art function, and he became a close friend after I moved to Midtown. A Midwesterner of about my age, he was an adjunct instructor at the Atlanta College of Art and worked nine to five for a printing company in the neighborhood, where he'd lived for several years. In his late twenties like me, he had a smart, humorous critical perspective that was reflected in his work and in his conversation. He wore a bushy, dark-brown beard, horn-rimmed glasses, and almost always the proletarian uniform of blue jeans, t-shirt, and sneakers. He wasn't a prolific artist, but he was always thinking and sketching and working on ideas for projects. His peers respected him, and he had the distinction of showing at the High Museum, where he'd been one of the 12 featured artists in a 1979 exhibition purporting to represent the city's avant-garde. Stan's pal Dan Talley, Art Papers co-founder, also had some work in that show. But of course no one was buying any of Stan's work. In those days Atlanta had few art collectors with enough intellectual curiosity to appreciate what he was doing. When I met him he was creating miniature tableaus with tiny, monochromatic plastic sculptures of ordinary people, the kind sold in hobby shops for placement in miniature villages lining the tracks of electric-train sets. One piece from the early 1980s consists of a tiny balsa platform, in the center of which stands a lone figure with a bobby pin clamped around his neck. The multivalent title, *State of the Arts*, rendered it applicable to Atlanta's art-patronage situation and to paltry, tightly restricted government arts support.

Stan and his scruffy little black-and-gray poodle named Bud lived on 16th Street near West Peachtree, in a sparsely furnished bungalow with a crumbling stucco exterior and interior walls of cracked plaster. It was even shabbier than our old place on St. Charles. Dan Talley lived in a nearly identical house on one side of Stan, and their friend David Lee lived in a similar dwelling on the other side. David, who resembled

a young Hal Holbrook, was a writer who sometimes made experimental films and orchestrated performance events. He was from LaGrange, a small Georgia town southwest of Atlanta, and had attended Goddard College in Vermont. A couple of his stories had been published in the Chicago Review. He had a day job in the advertising-layout department of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. As for Dan, he broke up with Laura and disengaged himself from Art Papers not long after I moved to Midtown. He went into an extended emotional tailspin, keeping mostly to himself. He started listening to a lot of country music, and evidently tried to live out the lyrics to some of the songs. I didn't see much of him for about a year, but I saw Stan and David Lee often. Neither of them had girlfriends at the time--or maybe David had a girlfriend he rarely spent time with.

Anyway, at least twice a week Ellen and I met them at the Stein at the end of a work day, and often they joined us for dinner afterward. Sometimes we went out--usually to Cha Ghio, the cheap Vietnamese restaurant on Peachtree between the Stein Club and our place - or Stan and David would follow us back home, where Ellen would make dinner for us. She was starting to refine her culinary skills, and she never seemed to mind feeding a few friends on short notice. If there was a televised Braves baseball game, we would all watch it on the TV in our dining room. We generally didn't go to the Stein Club on weekend afternoons, but on Saturday evenings, if nothing else was going on, David Lee and Stan would join us to watch the low-budget horror features on "Movie Macabre," hosted by Elvira, Mistress of the Dark. After the movie we would sometimes go to the Stein to close out the evening.

When the staff was ready to shut down the Stein Club for the night--1 a.m. on weekdays and 2 a.m. on weekends--there was a standard ritual. One of the waitresses would turn off the jukebox, then David Heany or his co-owner George Faulkner would play three songs in sequence on a turntable in the kitchen, also wired into the sound system: "La Marseille" (the French national anthem), followed by "God Save the Queen," and finally Kate Smith belting out "God Bless

America.” Meanwhile the handful of staffers would be wiping off the unoccupied tables and placing the chairs upside down on the tabletops, to be followed by a thorough sweeping of the premises.

For the benefit of the last stragglers still nursing their final beers, Kate Smith’s recorded voice would be followed by a live announcement:

“All right, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming out tonight. It’s been fun, it’s been exciting, and everyone’s had a good time, but all good things must come to an end. That’s right, folks. It’s time to drink up and gather your things together.

“You don’t have to go home. You just have to go.”