C H A N C E O P E R A T I O N S

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 seen 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-impeded, 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. Androids, 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 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.