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Pictures of the South: a Novella

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

This Honor's thesis entitled

"Pictures of the South, a Novella"

written by

Paul Brent Williams

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for completion of the

Carl Goodson Honors Program

meets the criteria for acceptance

and has been approved by the undersigned readers

Thesis Director

Second Reader

Third Reader

Director of the Carl Goodson Honors Program

April 15, 1997

For every "Southern boy fourteen years old,
not once but whenever he wants it" out there
thinking "*This time. Maybe this time . . .*"
and with an undying gratitude to every soul that
ever fed a story to the fires of my imagination.

"Tell about the South."

--William Faulkner
The Sound and the Fury

Author's Note

Definitions oftentimes are not definite enough. By their very nature, those little clips of what is what in our world fail to capture anything but trivia or insignificance in their attempt to label Creation. Simple definitions fail because they do not *prescribe* to us our concepts of environment but *describe* our general ideas of that stuff around us. And it's a great big world.

Try to define God. You cannot. He's too much; he's too all-encompassing; he's too personal; he's too far removed. But still, mankind knows Him. We know Him through our holy texts that discuss God in His fullness--and yet leave us lacking. We know God from ongoing description.

This is the stretch then: try to define the South. You can't. It's too much; it's too all-encompassing for those born and reared there, too vague for those not; it's too personal; it's a notion too subjective. But still, we Southerners know it as well as we know God. We know the South through our living its fullness. What we know, however, is never complete.

The South *is* the Southern Myth and Southern truth--a blaring former and subtle latter. It lives and dies by what it thinks of itself and what it can get the rest of the world to swallow. It's the haven of magnolia blossoms in April, cotton in June, and watermelons in late August. It's William Faulkner, Margaret Mitchell, Jimmy Carter, and Orval Faubus. It's the only place to be and someplace you wouldn't be caught dead.

What ain't the South we want to talk about and spread around a bit, we don't talk about. That part's up to a damn Yankee or two and those liberal sumbitches that skipped town early on because they couldn't take the heat, the humidity, the ignorance, or whatever it was that kicked the soap box up under their feet.

The American South, the land of Lee and the home of the knave, is something to salute and spit on simultaneously. It's happy darkies singing in the fields, a dead nigger in a tree, and increasing numbers of black men and women clawing their way into society. It's Martin Luther King, Jr.--and we admit that freely now. It's W.E.B. DuBois. It's James Meredith and Ernest Green. It's Maya Angelou. And, everywhere down the line, it's Mammy. It's an undying spirit that gave birth to an undying spirit that it wouldn't have given birth to had it known what the hell it was doing.

The South is good, bad, misunderstood, overdone, in vogue, passé, a has been, a will be, a backward country in its own right, and a component of the American miracle. Regardless, the South *is*! It's church on Sundays and Hades and high-water the rest of the week. It's macaroni and tomatoes and bread and butter Friday night. It's Grandma standing on the porch Saturday at noon calling you in from the yard for dinner--not lunch. It's the cemetery down the road you walk by straight and proud once in a while. It's please and thank you and ma'am and sir in a world so devoid of respect and dignity that we've forgotten how even to fake it. It's Southern Belles and Southern Gentlemen, crazy great-aunts we don't hide in the attic but bring down for the world to see, good-ol' boys in big-ol' trucks, and beer cans, and fiddles, and beauty, and barbarism. The South is the epitome of inconsistency and

of perfectly ordered society. Dixie is a gal with schizophrenia that refuses her medication. God bless her greasy little heart.

We in the South are the victors of defeat. We are the architects of miracles from makeshifts and messes. Tara never looked so grand as the day she burned, and Scarlett stood there with a radish in her hand demanding of God that He rewrite the history books. If that ain't a fact, pass the pen to the historian with the drawl and we'll see that it gets that way.

The South is the last bastion of men that are men and women that keep their mouths shut. It's high school football and hunting, Rebel flags, and bigotry--other opinions need not apply. It's closets that remain closed, more than one with a noose hanging from the ceiling and hatred dripping from the slit throats of limp bodies and the stench of death from a twisted cross run through the heart of a Christ decried and forgotten.

It's a loathsome beast that denies betterment. It's a vile creature behind a mask. It's a mind full of empty thoughts and emptier promises. It courses through my veins every second of every minute of every hour of every day. And it will--it is impossible to refute despite the history books--be borne much the same in my children and theirs. It lives, it breathes, it masters much of its own destiny now in yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I am inclined to admit with some shamed pride, I helped it along the way.

That's what this novella--if it may be called that--is roughly all about. It's another part of the Southern Bible--the continuing story of, the dialogue concerning, being Southern. It's an addition to the extended definition, the ongoing description, of the South. It's a glimpse at who and what we are.

I.

Sammy Coleridge was on his knees at nine o'clock in the morning on a Saturday. His momma had a sense of humor and, obviously, God had an axe to grind.

Mr. Will, the grizzled old Negro that had come in after him more than twenty years ago, picked his umbrella up off the floor by the bullet can marked TRASH and stuck his earphones in and shut the door, mumbling something over his purple gums that might have been Lock up when you're done but sounded more like Muddy Waters singing with a mouth full of peanut butter into a hallway that echoed like a lonely piss in a big toilet. He walked down the road, the heel on his left boot flapping like the gums that by now were all over Miss Mahalia, biting at the raggedy cuff of his corduroy pants. Mr. Will tugged on his rainbow suspenders and pulled the collar up on his green plaid flannel and angled down his fishing cap just as the first drop hit him, turning the corner past the Quick-Stop and crossing the tracks one step at a time, slow and even like behind a push broom. The other old man--the one on the floor--wished he'd done the same.

Sammy wiggled a little closer to the wall and put his spread haunches down on his feet, touched his brush roughly against the wall, and began skirting a fortyish, peeling farmgirl in lemon yellow ruffles while he ordered an aging debutante into the field.

The rain outside came slow and slower, but it came until the air inside and out was thick and hard to breathe and smelled of wet dirt. The big hallway at Union Grove High

School was as dark as the mood Sammy was in. Skylights were a bad idea from the git-go, he had told them himself when they ripped off the roof the week before he retired--never made it better, only made it worse. He hadn't been back since. He didn't trust the light breaking in; why take out the guaranteed light bulbs?

So he asked the little weasely principal to give him his watch in the cafetorium. Ugly damn word from a school board too poor to build anything more, too cheap to build anything right, and too lazy to be any more creative. Mommas and Daddys and Grannys and Pappys had been sitting on lunchroom chairs since two years after Sammy got there, through band concerts and plays and PTSO all because they were the kind that gave gold-plated watches to old men who finally quit mopping puke crystals for a living.

"To Mr. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for thirty-five years of fine, dedicated, distinguished service to this educational institution, we present this timepiece as a token of our esteem and appreciation." It was Rat-Boy's speech. The watch broke the next week. As a result, Sammy could never trust a man in a maroon tie and white patent leather shoes with gold buckles on the top again.

"And in special honor of his outstanding achievements in our employ, we dedicate the south wall of the central corridor of Union Grove High School the Samuel Taylor Coleridge Memorial Mural in honor of its creator, curator, and preservationist, our honoree today." Big words impress men with small assets. All Sammy wanted was fifty dollars.

When the dog-run that passed for the "central corridor" of the five-hundred-student high school across the river bridge under the eye of a mint blue water tower that read like a third grade love letter was built forty years ago to connect it to the two-hundred-student

elementary school, it was bare and boring. Lockers were on the way. Then the school board announced they had to be returned. Insufficient funds. Someone complained. Rather than explain where the regular as sunrise and death millage increases kept going, Superintendent Harley Mason, Jr., who was also chairman of the school board and silent partner in the Feathers and Lace Club, Members Only, on State Highway 7, offered fifty dollars in taxpayers' money to the winning suggestion on what to do with the bare walls.

That said, Union Grove was too busy trying to get its hands around President Grant's neck than Harley's or figuring out how he could buy himself and Myrtle Jean both a new Cadillac.

"Sammy, why don' you do 'em a paintin' like you did Miss Jewell when you was back in school? You was a good artist. And fifty dollars ain't gon' be no evil in our pocketbooks, but it'll sho'nuff give us tem'tation to livin' like real folks least one day." Sammy never could say no to his wife. That's why he divorced her.

Three months later, then, he held a check in his hand for all of five minutes and had a picture on a sixty foot wall that would last forty years. Too long.

"Damn, that's mighty fine work you done there, Sammy. Mighty fine. Where'd you learn to paint like that, boy?" Harley didn't know art from a velvet Elvis but he knew what he liked.

"Just works out alright, I reckon, Mr. Mason. Works out."

"Well, that's good shit, boy. How'd you get that big beau up there on the rocker to look so much like me? And, I swear, if I didn't know better, I'd think that was Miss Myrtle Jean up there wavin' her rag out the window. That's art, boy. Art."

"Thank you." Sammy threw his weight onto the broomstick propped beside him. He was in for the long haul.

"Big, strappin' darkies in the field. Coupla prime pieces on the veranda. And a nigger woman to boot when I get tired of them. Fine, fine work." Harley slapped him on the back, unbuckling Sammy's left knee and sending the janitor in a lurch forward, and walked away.

II.

Yellowing with age, literally entering the golden years. Old and brown at the edges, wrinkling and near ruined but impeccably caught up from oblivion by sheer will. Relics: she and every last figure preserved in the book.

"Alright now. You girls know the drill. There's lemonade, iced tea, and sandwiches on the buffet table. Just drop your ballot on your way through the parlor. Jimmy Sue and I can handle the rest." A room full of pill-box hats bobs past the stuffed and overstuffed horsehair sofas and chairs, past cherry and oak high-glossed and dusted to the last grain.

The historical society meets at Cotton Hill, her place, well outside the city limits--away from modernization. That's what keeps it alive, the emaciated plantation, six acres from eight thousand. It's on page three or four in the book--the original. Blurred tin-type columns run the length of the dozen-eyed face of the mansion, stretching upward into a worn metal haze. Tommie Ule's daddy won the picture in a poker game--along with the house--when it was not much of a prize. Page eight: burned and gutted and eyeless and a gas station dog, bloodshot eyes and whittled shoulder blades, laid over on the porch. But even white trash remembers glory and doesn't mind getting its hands dirty. Tommy Ule knows the story but won't admit it.

Daddy had been reborn aristocrat. No page, but in the front room: It's black and white and gray, lots of gray, in a big pewter frame. The giant oaken hall doors are swung

wide, sunset through the westward glancing glass soaking the film and Daddy strong and tall standing above Tommie Ule who's sitting on the step. It's the day he taught her to ride Redeemer, he on his own, Remembrance--named not for Tommie Ule's mother but for what Daddy had left of her. He's wearing tight linen stretched taut across his barrel chest, pulled close around his thick arms. His riding pants, too snug, bulge. He leans in arrogance with unwieldy weight against his youth and a silver tipped walking stick, a primitive depravity on his face that runs back across his slick black hair and into the glare that surrounds him.

Tommie Ule sits bowed, eyes under the camera's glance, at his feet, uneasy.

"Nearly done. Nearly done. Gather up back in the parlor for the announcement."

She never could do anything right--except keep the book. Tommie Ule wandered her way through school with her head down, went to college and came back early. Daddy went to get her. He said she just wasn't up to it. Keep the book. She never made friends but business and society acquaintances. Daddy said she brought home the wrong sort. She never married. Daddy said no man ever wanted her. Crying shame. She didn't even get his funeral right. Had him buried in the wrong cemetery--twenty miles from the family plot.

Tommie Ule never tried anything different from what Daddy always said she would do. He said he wasn't disappointed exactly, just sorry for her. She kept the book--and the house. Going in is going body and soul into the book, faces of public officials kissing babies and grimey-sticky county fairs and debutantes in candlelight and old women at cribbage and beggars on streetcorners. There is a story in that book for everything and everything has its story. The book and the house are boundless: tables and shelves and lattice cupboards

brimming with photographs of life, hers and whomever's, lives of people living and long dead and gone--away from modernization. That's what keeps them alive. That and Tommie Ule.

She walks with a hitch, leans to one side when it's not slung up to her breast, at least twenty pounds of paper and leather and memories, bound up, permanent, unchanging and well-edited. That's what Daddy taught her. A picture is worth a thousand words, just make sure they're the right ones. You're only as good as the story you tell.

Addie Mae Wilson's running for president this year. Tommie Ule, however, will have no page for her in the book. Daddy would tell her that.

"Here we go. The last one." Jimmy Sue pulls a final glass marble out of her hat box. She laughs. "Well, I swan, if it don't look like one of these old biddies has done gone and lost her marbles. And it's the wrong one." The room twitters gaily. "Passed unanimously."

Addie Mae smiles and they take pictures on the veranda with the sunset through the westward glancing glass soaking the film and Addie Mae surrounded by her society standing above Tommie Ule who's sitting on a step. She'll have to put it in the book. And she'll have to explain to Daddy. The picture is color--but it's black.

III.

It was good, but evidently not good enough for the weasel and his history teacher wife when they moved into the school-owned principal's house across the elementary playground. Sammy had always preferred Mr. Charles anyway. He treated him fair and never said a word one way or the other; he stayed in his office cleaning guns barrels and went hunting on Monday afternoons. School could've come to a screeching halt and burned to the ground so long as it wasn't on Deer Day, meaning Mr. Charles would have to be dragged from the woods to talk to a fireman.

"I'm afraid we have a problem, Mr. Coleridge." Rat-Boy talked a lot.

"Sammy."

"Very well, Sammy. I'm afraid we have a problem with the mural in the central corridor."

"Mr. Harley likes it alright, don't he Mr. Spencer? He done said so hisself when I finished it."

"Oh, I'm sure he's properly satisfied with it, Sammy. But I'm afraid it's the rest of the faculty that are unsure about the historical accuracy of the representation. We held a meeting to deliberate upon the issue yesterday afternoon. Mrs. Spencer has done some far-reaching investigation into the costume of the period and we believe there are some glaring anomalies in your rather quaint depiction."

Sammy's eyes were scanning the walls behind the principal's head for clandestine wads of chewing gum. After a while they ceased to blink.

"They've got on the wrong clothes, Sammy." Rat-Boy shifted his feet, his glassy hair breaking the other man's bored gaze.

Two weekends and about sixteen sartorial lectures later, everyone from Boss Harley to Stepin Fetchit got a makeover--per Mrs. Spencer's instructions. And the skylights were on the drawing table. Rat-Boy came meandering up in a peach and green leisure suit.

"Sammy, I understand we're about to lose you to bigger and better things."

"Last day's next Friday, Mr. Spencer."

"Excellent, Sammy. Fabulous thing retirement. I hope you'll always look fondly on your years at Union Grove. Your time with us has been greatly appreciated. But I'd like to request one final labor for us before you embark on the journey of your finest years."

Sammy ran a mental inventory of the colors of paint left in the maintenance closet and he curtsied only slightly, popping a swollen knee.

"It's the portico, Sammy. Mrs. Spencer is thrilled with the new raiments our Southern characters have taken on, but I'm afraid further research has turned up some inaccuracies in the structure of the facade of the plantation house. Do you think you could go see her for the corrections?"

Sammy submitted to a diatribe on everything from Georgian Revival to Buckminster Fuller with something of the fervor of a limp noodle and in a day's time had finished the renovation--a false window at the center of the overhang. And it was all somewhat appropriate. About the time he put the lid back on a tin of blue paint, Jim Earl Washington,

one of Ray Womack's boys making holes in the ceiling dropped a sheet of glass twenty feet through one of them, smashing into the floor tile, spraying glass shards into the wet paint on the wall and adding a touch of shine to an otherwise, to Sammy anyway, numbing picture that was getting to be more hassle than it was worth. Fifty dollars.

IV.

Quick shot of a girl at four years of age. Home movie grainy and shaky in untrained hands--unknown hands. The sun is too bright for the film, of course, but pink isn't pink after dark. Cutesy is a daytime color. Mama's in the frame. She looks tired. But Daddy's gone. Hasn't been in the picture from the word go. Mamma smiles, though. Joyce does too. He left too early for her to learn what it is to be ugly and hateful.

Pan out forty-something years. Steady focus on a woman in her red--deep-and-hot-like-youth-that-never-gets-used-up--convertible. It's a Camaro and it pulls up cautiously with reckless abandon behind the wheel. At the high school. She teaches literature. Joyce carries her briefcase in--leather. It matches the mini-skirt, like the color of her hair matches her wedding ring, both of them originally coming from a box.

Cut to home. He's older than she is--by a mile. Enough to be her father. But he ain't for damn sure quoth Momma. Joyce reads, stares into the book, turning the pages at projector speed, frame after frame, thinking. Edges torn. Faulkner. Steinbeck. Like they've been thrown against walls. We always hurt the ones we love. Her ex-husband did. She had a son with the first one: Stephen, the son. So she raised him alone. He got a girl pregnant. Stephen cheated on her like Daddy on Mamma. And Joyce told her to sue hiss ass for everything it's worth. Stephen doesn't even get a Christmas card anymore. Her heart's in the

right place. And the granddaughter's got red-hair like Grandma's would be if it wasn't going gray and boxed up blonde like it is. Fire in her soul.

Flashback. Sunsets like honey and lemonade and dirt roads through the fields to where she was born. Mississippi. Poor. Alone--except for Momma who still goes with her to Las Vegas once a year to play the slots and every weekend to Oaklawn to a private box to watch and win on the horses. Joyce made friends.

Fast forward. 1964. Irma was her best friend's name. Sixty miles away, but that's what pick-ups are for. Cops don't care about bob-haired girls in dusty trucks rumbling down backroads in Barnett's stomping ground. If it didn't kill them, it made them stronger. License didn't matter. License is what you take with life. Joyce is existentialist--and Methodist on Sunday.

Focus. Asleep in the bruise of midnight. Terror knocks on the closet door. The floor hisses. The girls scream. The trailer floor jumps. And jumps again. Irma wanted Momma but Joyce wanted more. Open the door. Matted ashen horror jumps out, teeth bared. It is Mississippi. Possum out of a hole in the floor. Right through the blanket that covers it up. Irma has a fit. Joyce just opens the window and puts a bandage across her nose where he said hi. Not much damage was done. Just to Irma's nerves. the possum was gone and the hole was re-covered and the shoe that had fallen on their visitor and woken him up was pulled back out and stacked back in the closet. They went back to bed.

Backlight in a hospital room. Sometimes girls don't sleep. Momma had a quiet job. She was a midwife--at night. She did all the work and the doctors signed the certificates--and got all the credit. And the money. That's what Joyce says. One night Momma got busy.

The girls were there when two women needed attention and Momma yelled at them what to do from one room to another. They doped the woman up good. She had a beautiful baby. The drugs kept coming. The woman thanked the girls for helping her have her baby and the girls asked if they could name it. The woman said yes. Momma wrote up the certificate and the doctor signed it. To this day there's the most beautiful black man in the world somewhere in Mississippi who answers to the name IrmaJoyce if you call real loud. They doped her up good.

Static. Joyce moved to Arkansas. Spent time in Dumas away from a prison but on the same utility system. She was still learning what life was all about when she'd turn on the TV and hear about her prison and the bad men that lived there and what they'd done and how the state was going to get them for it. At night when she would say her prayers she kept a lamp on and the light would dim and bright and dim and bright and there would be an empty cell down the road. Joyce would turn the lamp off. And quit praying. I get letters from her that have a quote in little letters at the bottom: There's no Christian way to kill a man. It's funny it reads like that. She never did have to turn the lamp on again.

Close up. I still talk to Joyce every once in a while. She drives her fast car and tells her stories and she taught me and I remember every bit of it. That's what Joyce is about.

V.

The drone seemed to reach backward and forward through every vain minute. "We all hope that you will look fondly back on your time spent with us at Union Grove High School, and that we can all look forward to a continuing cordial relationship with you outside of the workplace." Rat-Boy wasn't ever going to give him his watch.

Then, twenty years later, the phone rang again.

"Could I speak, please, to Mr. Sam Coleridge."

"This him."

"Mr. Coleridge, good morning. My name is James Bentley. I'm the new principal at Union Grove High School, and I was wondering if you could come down to my office at your earliest convenience and let us have a talk about something. Some of my staff and I have a few questions about your mural here at the school."

Sammy rocked forward with the best jolt an old man could make in his chair and flat-fisted the power button on his new color TV. "Come'gin. Is Rat-Boy wantin' me change that damn thing again?"

"I'm sorry, sir, who?"

"I said," Sammy stood upright or very nearly so, "Rat-Boy can kiss my big ol' black ass if he think I'm changin' that thing even one mo' time. What's it this go-round anyway:

nigger ain't got a big 'nough dick? Want me to write Toby on one of 'em's back in whip stripes? I been meanin' to tell him just what I think uh him since I. . . ."

Bentley dove over the top of several decades worth of frustration. "No sir, Mr. Coleridge. Actually, we'd like to ask your permission to paint over it."

The other end of the line died out suddenly. And indefinitely. Bentley's eyebrows slanted toward one another. "Hello?"

"Gib'me half'n'our." Sammy hung up the phone.

James Bentley was a tight-laced, clean, prim man from Illinois sitting in a smaller, emptier office than Rat-Boy's. He wore a blue shirt with a white collar and a red tie. And he was there, when Sammy got seated, with an young, very round, happy faced woman.

"Mr. Coleridge--"

"Sammy."

"Sammy, this is Peggy Hansen, the school's guidance counselor. She has some concerns about the mural outside in the hall that's been dedicated to you. That's why we called. We didn't feel right in removing the painting, as fine as it is and being dedicated to you, without your blessing. But we feel it has to go."

"Somethin' historical accurate wrong again?" Sammy wondered if they'd moved the maintenance closet in twenty years and how long paint lasted in a metal bucket.

"No, not that we've noticed, but it's just the image that the painting presents in general. Mr. Coleridge--Sammy--we have an integrated student body with a broad curriculum, but we feel that it simply doesn't have in it a place for depictions of such a prejudiced nature. We feel the painting is a problem for self-esteem on campus."

"Niggers don't wanna see niggers bein' niggers, huh? That it?"

Peggy Hansen blushed beet red and forcibly crossed her sausage-like legs using her hands.

"We just feel it best to move on. And we feel the best way to do that is by starting over." Bentley never blinked.

"Only way, huh?"

"Well," and Mrs. Johnson piped up this time, "we considered one other way."

VI.

They were rough and heavy--scarred ivory pink slashes crisscrossing the tanned knuckles and seeping black red brawling wounds from the night before. He nailed his sanguine palms hard to the body of the still hearse and pressed an eye, rimmed with brimstone and slate gray, cold as sunless mornings shot through with anger, to the window glass.

"Get out the goddam car!" burned our ears and the piney woods and the soul of every living thing it touched and the driver shrank back from him without a sound and sat squarely in the center of the long seat and would not budge. "I tol' you get her out! I paid for it; I want 'er out!" His words slid across each other awkwardly and smelled of whiskey.

The blue lights pulled away a while ago; they would not wait. They flashed on our faces and we felt sick like she did and the lights flashed on our faces the numb blush she wore when we saw her. Judas had halted us only a mile from the cemetery on a dirt road baking in the summer light. He ordered the driver to stop and he got out, bracing himself upright and brazen in the sun--the shadow casting out even bigger than the man.

"Ain't no way out, ya little shit," he taunted in a deep, jagged voice as I reached for the door handle. "I see you in hell before ya get out of this." Then we were alone.

She had no friends since he came to live with us and no one knew she was dead now but us and the eyes of the men that carried her away in a black plastic shroud and had carved

her up to prove what he lied and said happened and put her back together and painted her like a whore and talked sweet about her even though they would not look upon her without retching. So Jesus and I sat in the back of that sleek white limousine alone and watched him beat at the hearse until the driver gave in.

Jesus and I looked on. We saw him when he mumbled bitch while the priest pretended to love her and did his duty to commend her to God. We saw his eyes, scarlet fingers reaching into the void at their center, that sagged in circles and watered like he had been awake for years, worked untiringly toward that unwaking sleep that was hers now. Fools thought he cried. But he never cried. He never worked for anything but himself.

Every day he slammed their door behind him and locked it and sat naked in their bed and drank and filled his body with drugs and played at manhood when he watched TV while she labored to be abused and raped each day she forced herself home.

Then he sat there in a pew at the home in the musty charcoal suit offered of a sympathetic neighbor, me on one side and Jesus on the other, while he fondled its zipper and thought more of his manhood and the Father went on.

He would get the coffin on his own. He was never a weak man and his form ripped across itself, tight and lean, and was in its dark perfection grotesque, blessed and cursed, and what he was was evil. He got her out and threw the polished silver box to the ground and the driver just looked at it and he looked at Judas and he stepped back deliberately and looked toward the cab again and stood ready.

She was the sun on earth, the coffin feeding back into the air every ray that leaned down to embrace her. He squinted his eyes.

"Open it." He recited the words in measured unconcern, ugly and heavy in a low voice.

The driver stood still and stared back at him with widening eyes.

"I bought it; it's mine to do what I want with it." The driver was still. Judas paused. "I do it myself."

The driver pointed limply to a lock peeking barely from beneath the crushed carpet in the back of the hearse. Judas pulled it and opened the box and produced a long red orange iron bar and I turned my head and looked down the drive and into the mute trees that surrounded us and I pretended he was only opening another beer can out of the refrigerator and I did not hear the sucking snap and the hits of steel. I looked at the trailer on the side of the road where we stopped just a mile from the cemetery and Jesus said, "It's pretty, isn't it?" But I would not look back to see; I did not hear him do it and I did not see him kiss her shattered, empty body.

I just looked at the trailer on the side of the road and it looked like all I knew of home. It was ugly and old and broken. It swayed and sagged on cement blocks and fit somewhere against a slanted porch and the windows were dirty and the curtains torn. Wind swept dust flames against its green sides and the paint flaked and fell conspicuous like early leaves on August grass. And his refrigerator sat on the porch, grease-fouled and rusted white. I turned it over that day and he beat me like he had beaten me before and had beaten me since and told her I fell when he took her into their room and finished her off and said he would kill her if she told. I spilled his beer.

The water tower stood behind the trailer, painted bitter mint blue, looked like the bottom of the swimming pool at the "Y" before Mama's baby drowned, smelled like disinfectant, and tasted like the green hearts that say I love you and other lies on the Valentine's Day. It read like a bathroom wall and said I love you and other lies every day of forever. My eyes burned and Jesus said, "It's pretty, isn't it?"

Judas spun the gold circle around his finger, biting into its power with his own, and walked up the quaking wooden steps. It was only then that the boy came out. He was my age when I last saw happiness and he ran with truck in tow and he played in the brown grass in the shadow of the tower. And he was beautiful when he talked unashamed to his friends in the air and played unabashed with toys that weren't there. He shone in blinding white clothes that would not soil and he smiled, his eyes upturned sapphires into God's own. His life was good. He was innocent. I smiled and I went to him for salvation.

His shirt was hot and new red and he did not smile.

Jesus and I rested in the limousine after we saved him. And we waited for the blue lights to flash across our faces once more. And the boy's mother wailed over her son's escape. And Judas turned to Mama's priest and said, "What you got planned for today, preacher?"

And Jesus said, "It's pretty, isn't it?"

VII.

So Sammy Taylor Coleridge on a rainy Saturday morning was crouched in a dingy high school hallway, tanning no more than half of the light faces on the porch of his four-decades-old Twelve Oaks, prying spit balls off cotton bolls, and painting hoop skirts and mint juleps on workers in the fields.

In the sky, singular amongst the jays and sparrows and larks, he drew an albatross. Maybe one of these days, he could finally give someone else the bird.

Appendix

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. (AP) -- What's the best test of whether a piece of fiction is truly Southern? Twangy speech? Sultry weather? A death in the family?

A dead mule, says Jerry Mills.

"A dead mule is something you can't ignore," he said. "It makes its way metaphorically and has to make a point."

The former professor at the University of North Carolina has dug up more than 200 dead mules from short stories, novels and poems by such authors as William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Clyde Edgerton and Doris Betts.

Mills said mules are ubiquitous in Southern fiction because the mule was the basic work animal on nearly every farm earlier in this century.

Over 31 years, his mule theory spawned a literary magazine in North Carolina and a bar in Chapel Hill, the Dead Mule Club, where the fireplace is decorated with a mule skull and the bar sells mule T-shirts and caps.

In a recent issue of *The Southern Literary Journal*, he published an article titled "Equine Gothic: The Dead Mule as Generic Signifier in Southern Literature of the Twentieth Century."

Mills catalogs the appearances of dead mules and describes how they died--overwork, asphyxiation, drowning, beating, gunshot, train collisions, even decapitation by an opera singer.

His dead mule king is novelist Cormac McCarthy in whose "Blood Meridian" 59 specific mules are killed and dozens of other, anonymous ones die in a plunge off a cliff.

Mills' favorite mule story is from Truman Capote's "Other Voices, Other Rooms," in which a mule named John Brown is found hanging from a chandelier in a dilapidated antebellum mansion, a spittoon tied to its leg.

"It's quite a scene--like something out of 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show,'" Mills said.

In his *Southern Literary Journal* piece, he wrote: "My own browsing in the area is at an end, and I am ready to leave the field to another, more coltish generation of critics and scholars. To do otherwise would resemble beating a dead--well, we all know what I mean.