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On the third or fourth night of the writers' conference, the University of the South's Music Festival opened, drawing musicians from Scandinavia, Central America, and many states in the U.S. Walking from the fiction workshops, I'd slip in the back of the formal concert halls to hear, say, 10 cello players rehearse. Violinists practiced from rock balconies facing the street and the sounds of brass echoed jazz down hallways similar to the background from late night jam sessions.

The classical arrangements fit the scene of massive gothic bell towers, and water streaked gray rock walls. Inside or outside, the atmosphere radiated the beauty of stained glass and marble columns. The library stayed open 24 hours a day; professors wore black robes. Honor codes ruled to the point of unlocked bicycles and indifferent security for lockers. No franchise house or commercial signs marred the scene.

The Episcopal dioceses of 12 southern states control the University. In 1858, the founders wanted to build another Cambridge up on the 17,000 acres the church owned on the Cumberland Plateau. A plaque said the Northern forces burned the college in 1863 and five years passed before building resumed in 1868.

Over close to my dormitory, bordered by quarried stone, was the University's cemetery. On morning walks, I

discovered markers going back to the 1870s of modest stones for the ordinaries and huge monuments honoring bishops and chancellors. One slab on an important site stated: "Thou knoweth I loved thee Lord," the reverse of the test once taught in the 1930's in Mertzon, Texas. Wasn't any doubt in our minds the amount of beer we swiped out of the back of Doc Sorrel's pool hall was going to be forgotten in the present, or the hereafter. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but it's hard to believe the Maker suffers from poor memory, regardless of what's etched in stone over a bishop's grave.

One night after a discussion on poetry in the Commons, a poet led a group to the cemetery to read a poem honoring the dead of the Confederacy. The reading was under flickering candles and shadowed moonlight over the author's grave. Thirty of the 105 conference participants lived in New York City. A breakdown of locations is unimportant, however, do note one gentleman hailed from Canada and one lady lived in London.

At dinner, I broke the blab rule for auditors, and told the Canadian that time had come to commit one way or the other. He was no longer free to straddle the Mason and Dixon line. If tonight he chose to go straight to his room we would respect his choice, but not his judgment. I decided not to embarrass the English lady. My understanding is that though slavery was outlawed in the United Kingdom in 1831, the Union Jack favored the Cause.

Turned out to be too dark to know who came to the reading. But don't think it isn't dramatic to be gathered in summer darkness on a venerable plot of ground close to where the depredations of war flamed, wondering if where you stand may be the grave of a battle-torn soldier or the resting place of his broken-hearted mother.

Some few people whispered, however, I had no problem being reverent as I was beginning to lose the use of my vocal chords. Once a long time ago, a lady in Mertzon left the cover over her parrot's cage for several days while she vacationed. All the old bird ever said after his trial of darkness was one phrase: "Let there be light." She took him to a veterinarian, but in those days, there were no speech therapists for birds.

On the way back to the dormitory, fireflies darted and dipped along within arm's reach, recalling childhood walks on the banks of Spring Creek. Frogs croaked and crickets sang the same melody crickets chorus after big rains on the ranch. High in the poplar trees, a screech owl made a quavering call, haunting the night. Down an alley, a French harp player wailed a blues song from a long train ride on the Birmingham and Mobile Line.

Before credit cards, college towns installed extra circuits to expedite collect calls home. At military schools, deans hired escorts to ship recalcitrants back to the ranch when the longing for horses and cows became too great. The university telephone system was coded for

electronic mail to my room, but someone has to punch the "e" on the other end for a message to come. Mail call remained unchanged from being off at school decades ago. "Noble, Nolen, Person," the postman called, but not a scrap of mail for "Noelke."

Having to be silent was breaking down my equanimity. On all trips, I could always find an Aussie guy or a British chap to stay up and talk into the nights. Looking at your reflection in the dark window of a dormitory room is very disturbing, when in the rotunda the muffled voices of the young lark away the night. Lying on my pillow, I could hear that old bird saying: "Let there be light."