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Firsthand

Thomas Lake wanders the city with notebook and pen

## A Few Kind Words at the End

Thomas Lake

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Sandon Jones went in the ground on a Wednesday morning, 141 days after his death. No friends or relatives attended his funeral. The ceremony lasted not quite two minutes and was shared with another man, whose coffin was placed in the same hole. Neither man received a headstone.

“Spare me,” said the chaplain toward a chalky sky, through diagonal rain, by way of a eulogy, “that I may recover strength before I go hence and be no more.” Jones went hence in the spring at age forty-one on the floor of a rooming house on Cairo Street. It was heart disease. An investigator found insulin needles on the bed near the remains of his last meal, a 3 Musketeers bar.

The citizens of Fulton County pay taxes for many reasons, and one of them is burying the poor. Sandon Jones stayed in the morgue for twenty weeks while an investigator searched in vain for his family. Finally the medical examiner sent him to a funeral home for preparation and then to Lakeside Memorial Gardens in Palmetto, twenty-five miles southwest of Atlanta, in the cheapest available casket, which two gravediggers rolled across a muddy field on a green metal cart.



“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,” said the chaplain, the Reverend Clifton Dawkins, a courtly man with a voice so soft that sometimes only the Lord could hear him. Rain mixed with the earth and made orange pools around his feet. Two gravediggers stood in the hole and fitted Jones’s casket into a black plastic sheath. They did the same for the man next to him, Henry McGowan, age seventy-seven, dead 124 days. McGowan had been found on the floor of an abandoned furniture store on Hollowell Parkway. He died of heart disease. A smoked cigarette was found in the pocket of his blue denim shorts, along with a diamond-shaped earring and fifty-six cents.

“I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever,” the chaplain said, and picked up some mud. He threw the mud on the caskets of Sandon Jones and Henry McGowan. “I now commit God’s child to the ground.”

The chaplain took great care in his work. In his nine years with the county, he has buried more than 2,000 people, some of whom were the same homeless men who had eaten the free cornbread and turkey-vegetable soup he doles out with his church every Saturday. The chaplain believed that everyone deserved a few kind words before returning to the clay.

A Chevy Astro van came carrying the body of an Asian man identified as Dunt Bui, dead 131 days. The gravediggers wheeled his casket past a blue canopy on the edge of the field. The canopy was for mourners, and if you had no mourners your body went straight to the grave. Dunt Bui had fallen fifteen feet off a moving work truck in Gwinnett County and smashed his head. He languished at Grady Hospital for four months, then he died. By that time he weighed 102 pounds. No relatives could be found. The authorities said he was forty years old, but he looked younger.

The authorities said his name was Dunt Bui, but a coworker said that was the wrong name. The chaplain took a fistful of earth and followed the casket across the field, shoes swishing through the soggy turf. He spoke for less than thirty seconds.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” He threw mud on the casket of the 102-pound man who may or may not have been Dunt Bui, then he walked back across the field. A bird called from the pines. A jet whistled overhead. Another body had arrived.

*Photograph by Caroline Kilgore*