

## George Singleton

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an excerpt from

### *Which Rocks We Choose*

L UCKILY for everyone in the furthest branches of the family tree, the mule spoke English to my grandfather. Up until this seminal point in the development of what became Carolina Rocks, a few generations of Loopers had tried to farm worthless land that sloped from the mountainside down to all tributaries of the Saluda River. From what I understood, my great-great-grandfather and then his son barely grew enough corn to feed their families, much less take to market. Our land stood so desolate back then that no Looper joined the troops in the 1860s; no Looper even understood that the country underwent some type of a conflict. What I'm saying is, our stretch of sterile soil kept Loopers from needing slaves, which pretty much caused locals to label them everything from uppity to unpatriotic, from hex ridden to slow witted. Until the mule spoke English to my grandfather, our family crest might've portrayed a chipped plow blade, wilted sprigs, and a man with a giant question mark above his head.

"Don't drown the rocks," the harnessed mule said, according to legend. The mule turned its head around to my teenaged grandfather, looked him in the eye just like any of the famous solid-hoofed talking equines of Hollywood. "Do not throw rocks in the river. Keep them in a pile. They shall be bought in time by those concerned with decorative landscaping, for walls and paths and flower beds."

That's what my grandfather came back from the field to tell everybody. Maybe they grew enough corn for moonshine, I don't know. My own father told me this story when I complained mightily from the age of seven on about having to work for Carolina Rocks, whether lugging, sorting, piling, or later using the backhoe. The mule's name wasn't Sisyphus, I doubt, but that's what I came to call it when I thought it necessary to explain the situation to my

common-law wife, Abby. I said, "If it weren't for Sisyphus, you and I would still be trying to find a crop that likes plenty of rain but no real soil to take root. We'd be experimenting every year with tobacco, rice, coffee, and cranberry farming."

Abby stared at me a good minute. She said, "What? I wasn't listening. Did you say we can't have children?"

I said, "A good mule told my grandfather to quit trying to farm and to sell off both river rocks and fieldstone. That's how come we do what we do. Or at least why my grandfather and dad did what they did." This little speech occurred on the day I turned thirty-three, the day I became the same age as Jesus, the day I finally decided to go back to college. Up until this point Abby and I had lived in the Looper family house. My dad had been dead eleven years, my mom twenty. I said, "Anyway, I think the Caterpillar down on the banks is rusted up enough now for both of us to admit we're not going to continue with the business once we sell off the remaining stock."

When I took over Carolina Rocks we had already stockpiled about two hundred tons of beautiful black one- to three-inch skippers dug out of the river. I probably scooped out another few hundred tons over the next eight years. But with land developers razing both sides of the border for gated mountain golf course communities, in need of something other than mulch, there was no way I could keep up. A ton of rocks isn't the size of half a French car. Sooner or later, too, I predicted, the geniuses at the EPA would figure out that haphazardly digging out riverbeds and shorelines wouldn't be beneficial downstream. Off in other corners of our land we had giant piles of round rocks, pebbles, chunks, flagstones, and chips used for walkways, driveways, walls, and artificial springhouses. Until my thirty-third birthday, when I would make that final decision to enroll in a low-residency master's program, I would sell off what rocks we had quarried, graded, and—according to my mood—divided into color or shape or size.

I had decided on Southern Culture Studies, and the department chair of the one particular low-residency program I looked into wrote that I should mention the degree with purpose, as if capitalized, no matter what. Maybe I should've taken his advice as an omen.