

Praise for The Skin Artist

“*The Skin Artist* is the complex saga of a young man’s search for his own identity on the dark side of the New South—it’s hard to believe this is a first novel. Hovis has created an old-fashioned morality tale set against some of the most garish manifestations of the Sunbelt.”

—Lee Smith, author of *Dimestore* and *Guests on Earth*

“Out of America’s age of information, image, tattoo, and Adam and Eve eroticism comes a tightly written novel about addiction, family, and religion. *The Skin Artist* is at once smooth-deep literary and fast-eddy suspenseful. George Hovis’s first novel—it never slows down one iota—is an extraordinary debut.”

—Clyde Edgerton, author of *The Floatplane Notebooks* and *Raney*

“George Hovis displays a world we know and try to turn our gaze from. But the story is too powerful, the forces of destruction too strong, and we readers watch, hypnotized, as the descent gathers friends, lovers, and family into its vortex. Can such dark passages lead to hope?”

—Fred Chappell, author of *Dagon* and *As If It Were*

“Equal parts psychological complication and harrowing action, a pull-no-punches tale of one man’s reckoning with his mistakes. An unforgettable read.”

—Leah Stewart, author of *What You Don’t Know About Charlie Outlaw*

*The
Skin Artist*

George Novis



The Skin Artist

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To Clyde
(for the gift of your voice and years of patient mentoring)

“I had come into a place mute of all light, that bellows as the sea does in a tempest. . . . The infernal hurricane that never rests carries along the spirits in its rapine . . . hither, thither, down, up it carries them; no hope ever comforts them, not of repose, nor even of less pain.”

—Dante, *Inferno*

Translated by Charles Eliot Norton

Part I



When his neighbor cut the seal on a new bottle of Baby God, Bill held out his glass. He moved his body into the last of the sun, its thin warmth, and turned to watch the dogwoods glow. The bourbon burned sweet, finished long. So, why this unrelenting sadness? He hadn't earned this funk. Through the French doors, Bill watched his wife hurrying around the kitchen. Too cool out here for her skin and bones. He could tell Anthony anything—Maddie wouldn't hear. And he had to try to talk to somebody.

For two weeks, almost every night, Anthony had been coming over in the evenings. He said his wife was working late at a new job. Sometimes Maddie would fix dinner. Or Bill would grill steaks. Anthony always brought the overpriced bourbon, some brand neither of them could pronounce. It had aged in oak barrels since God was a baby, so that's what they called it.

Nine miles to the north, downtown Charlotte shimmered against a purple sky. The Queen City. With a sky this clear, those skyscrapers piled themselves on the horizon. The days were finally starting to warm, and the smell of damp earth, combined with the ringing of peepers, took Bill home to the sticks—which only deepened his funk.

He started by complaining to Anthony about the house; the new green paint on the shutters had provoked the ire of the homeowner's association. Whenever he had a dispute with the homeowner's association—about the color of the shutters, or the clothesline he wanted to string up in the backyard to save electricity, or the chemicals he didn't want sprayed on his lawn—his wife always sided with the homeowner's association. Anthony grumbled agreement about

“those fascists” and refilled Bill’s tumbler with Baby God.

“There’s other stuff, too,” Bill said. “Bedroom stuff.”

Anthony nodded and waited for him to go on. They had propped stereo speakers in the windows and had classic Springsteen turned up loud. *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. They both knew the words. Maddie was after him to get rid of all that vinyl. But in a house this big he didn’t understand the necessity of compact discs.

How could Bill explain their problems to another man? He started by parroting what Maddie had told him on multiple occasions in the plainest language, how it wasn’t about *him*; it was, rather, about *her* and *her* body image and *her* inability to feel sexy when she went to bed with him. He knew he was supposed to empathize, that somehow it was his fault—this diet she was on, her new obsession with high-impact aerobics, how she had dropped nearly thirty pounds and was now dangerously thin. Scrawny. Skinny legs that were pitiful to look at.

“Well, you can see for yourself, can’t you? The woman is in trouble, and if you say so much as ‘How about a doughnut?’ she gets tight-lipped and icy and asks how anyone who pickles himself in bourbon every night could have the nerve to question her diet.”

Bill was in mid-sentence when she opened the door and stepped out onto the deck, hugging herself and turning her back to the breeze, shivering.

“Are you guys going to stay out here the entire night?”

Anthony started joking with her, bellowing along with the record in a voice that took all of Springsteen’s darkness and turned it into Maddie’s laughter. Bill clawed in his shirt pocket for a Marlboro Light. That lilt in her voice. The only time they were civil lately was when they were around other people. He chugged the rest of his bourbon, inhaled the cigarette until the dizziness from the nicotine on top of Baby God made the horizon tip abruptly away from him.

Goose pimples rose on her bare shoulders, and it wasn't even that cold out. She wore a new pageboy haircut that broke his heart. He still ached for that face to look on him with kindness, with approval.

Her skin glowed from their trip to Myrtle Beach the week before Easter. Though they had not actually spoken of it, that week had been a clear signal that their marriage was in trouble. He had adjusted to the silences at home. But stuck together for seven days straight, those silences had begun to suck up all the breathable air, whether in the cramped hotel room or out beside the roaring surf. She had lounged in the sun with a paperback, hadn't even looked up from her book to make eye contact during their few brief conversations, and he had gone for long walks on the beach, stayed gone for an hour at a time. Pocket a flask, catch a buzz, and enjoy the view through green lenses, the sand sticky as lime sherbet tugging at his heels, the beach spreading out wide and open like a long par five, filled with hundreds of women lined up in rows, melting beneath the sun, the oil shimmering, dripping off of them. It would be September before he had another vacation, and he couldn't bear the thought of spending the whole summer in air conditioning, in a white shirt and tie, while his tan faded to the color of skim milk.

Maddie and Anthony were talking about towns in New Jersey, the state where both of them had grown up. Bill suddenly regretted telling this lawyer so much about his marital problems. Maddie said she had apple pie and a pot of coffee inside, and Anthony rubbed his hands together as if to warm them. Bill said cut a slice for him, he'd be there as soon as he finished his cigarette. But when he stubbed the butt out in the ashtray, he lit another. Baby God was empty, so he cracked the seal on a bottle of Jim Beam and sloshed it into the glass.

He walked to the corner of the deck so that the house

blocked the glare of the security lamp. He stood in what passed for darkness and squinted up to see a few stars peeking out. Nowhere in Eagle's Pointe was there a tree over ten feet tall. The developers had clear-cut the land, bulldozed away the topsoil. They'd ripped up all the wild growth by the roots and plopped down as many half-million-dollar homes as they could fit per acre. One good thing, their house was built on a rise with a view of the city. There were too many streetlights to see much of the stars, but they enjoyed a clear view of downtown Charlotte. And there in the center of that hump, twenty floors taller than the rest, shone the crown of the new NationsBank Tower—lit up like a birthday cake. Its image whispered nightly to Bill that there was someplace else he ought to be other than this suburb—other people he ought to be partying with. Some of his frat brothers lived in Charlotte, and occasionally he would join in a foursome for a Sunday morning round of golf, but it wasn't the same. They couldn't talk the way they had in college. Now their talk was always somehow connected to money. His brothers had turned into a bunch of yuppies. And maybe he had turned into one, too.

Sometime later he found himself in the backyard walking among the dogwoods, their sweet, fecund scent; he wasn't sure what time of night it was. The music had stopped. These blackouts were plaguing him more and more often. He stepped up onto the back deck and heard Maddie and Anthony inside laughing. Anthony was doing one of his impersonations, President Clinton introducing himself to Ms. Lewinsky. It seemed too late for Anthony to still be hanging around, but maybe it wasn't so late after all. Bill stood in the shadows and strained to hear. Their conversation was muffled by the window panes, drowned out by canned laughter from a neighbor's TV. Through the glass he saw them sitting at the dining room table together, like husband and wife. Anthony talked nonstop and every

so often reached out a hand to place on top of her wrist. She smiled at the touch, leaned forward. They both burst into laughter.

One of the straps kept falling off the tanned point of her shoulder, and she kept languidly lifting it back up. A string of pearls lay against her collarbones. Her eyes spread wide with life. Earlier, Bill had told Anthony that she had starved all the meat off her bones. But, no, not entirely. On such a lithe body, her breasts made two nice handfuls right there in Anthony's face, and he was talking right at them. That smile on her face, the one Bill had come to believe he would never see again, yes, that one—there it was. It made something glow inside of him, glow and rise hot to his moistening eyes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Before becoming a writer and teacher, George Hovis worked as a process chemist at several ink factories in Charlotte, North Carolina. His stories and essays have appeared widely, most recently in *The Carolina Quarterly*, *The Fourth River*, and *North Carolina Literary Review*. He earned a PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has attended the Sewanee Writers' Conference. He currently lives with his wife and their two children in Upstate New York, where he is a professor of English at SUNY Oneonta.



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