

## INTRODUCTION

As May of 1967 drew near, I cast back over my protracted, four-year seclusion in graduate school at Washington University. I would soon receive my master's degree in English literature. Jan, my girlfriend since 1965, would get her BFA in fashion design. We both would attend the same graduation ceremony.

Having been accepted into the fall 1967 graduate creative-writing program at San Francisco State University, to pursue my second master's, in fiction, not poetry, I knew it was time to give permanent order to the poetic phase of my apprentice years. Indeed, the possibility existed that I might never write poetry again. By June, I had fashioned two books, *The Easy Philosopher* and "A Hard Coming of It" and *Other Poems* from the extensive *oeuvre* of my poems, incorporating many of the pieces from my first poetry manuscript, *Five Facets of Myself*, which I'd completed in January. I spent the rest of that summer sequestered in the upstairs back-hall study at my parents' home, in St. Louis, writing poems that would fit in my next two books — *Points in Time* (which remained incomplete for decades) and *The Foul Rag-and-Bone Shop* (a book I would not complete until 1969, containing favorite pieces from my apprentice years, with a handful written within the first few years after my graduation from Washington University).

In truth, that graduation was traumatic. For one thing, it didn't really mark my matriculation into the "real world"; rather, it nurtured additional procrastination by allowing me one more escape from reality, yet another reprieve from fastening onto a career that would support me, let me become fully independent of schooling, parents — essentially fostering the same sheltered, affluent existence I had known. It also marked the beginning of my separation from Jan, which was painful beyond reckoning. Soon after graduation, she left for New York City to begin her career as a fashion designer.

Conveniently for me, the five members of the English Department who sat in judgment over my master's orals (apparently, I was too complacent, probably because I felt that I had already overextended myself in writing an optional hundred-page thesis on animal imagery in Faulkner's fiction) decided that I was not "qualified" to pursue a Ph.D., at least not at their institution. Evidently, I had shown contempt for critical protocol in writing and defending my thesis. According to all my jurors except Stanley Elkin (himself a Faulkner devotee and, like me, a nonconformist with an artistic disdain for the conventional), I had footnoted far too few references in support of my conclusions and, therefore, must have borrowed from phantom scholars. Their insinuation made me grow sullen and resentful. Since there wasn't a large, sophisticated body of Faulkner criticism in the early 1960s, it had been easy for me to do the obligatory reading before proceeding to break new ground. If these panelists had determined my fate, I was grateful, because they had really shown me that I was meant to be an artist, not a scholar or professor. Creative writing, not teaching, would be my calling.

In August of 1967, I drove out to California, primed with an excitement bordering on messianic zeal. The preceding spring, I had submitted, with my application, samples of my fiction and poetry and was

selected for the fiction component of San Francisco State's creative-writing program. I eagerly accepted the opportunity to attend, even though I would rather have been concentrating on my poetry.

In San Francisco, I settled into a rented apartment by the Pacific Ocean, two blocks from Playland at the Beach. Mornings, I would inhabit the kitchen, on whose table I had set up my typewriter, where I would work for five to six hours, pounding out what I hoped would be innovative works, not be just imitations of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* In the afternoon and evening, I attended classes on campus.

During that era, San Francisco was an education itself. The climate was hysterical. The Haight-Ashbury scene fueled a rampant abnegation of morals. San Francisco State and nearby University of California at Berkeley were cauldrons of radical politics and melting pots of the most anarchical of the Bay area's war protesters, political insurrectionists, and artists. Bill Graham's Fillmore West served as a lodestone that attracted a miscellany of music lovers, substance abusers, disaffiliated youth, lost souls, and me on weekend nights away from my typewriter, always in the company of two ex-cons, neighbors in my apartment building whom I'd befriended and who filled in the gaps of my education with street wisdom. I was overwhelmed by such iconoclastic performers as Janis Joplin, Grace Slick, Pigpen, and Jimi Hendrix. And certainly San Francisco was a writer's mecca, with its own distinctive literary style, born out of the individual styles of Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Richard Brautigan, Ken Kesey, and Brother Antoninus.

For nine months, I gestated my two novels, wrote almost no poetry (to me, the two modes of expression were inimical), remained unswervingly faithful to Jan, and grew increasingly lonely as a result of leading an almost monastic life for the promise of literary celebrity and the eventual resumption of my close, secure relationship with Jan. Mine was a worthy sacrifice; my goals seemed reachable.

When I was not composing what would become the novels *Vineyard's Toys* and *The Bindle Stiffs*, I indulged myself in the more relaxing art of epistolary writing. In myriad letters to Jan (who, literally, was working her way up from the selva-strewn cutting-room floor as a fashion designer in Manhattan's Garment District), I could explore my fantasies and wax embarrassingly sentimental and romantic, a style I dared not use in my fiction. But all the time, I feared that I would lose her to New York.

In truth, knowing that Jan was a gregarious person who was not likely to spend her nights home when she could be out socializing, I suspected that she was into the bar scene, meeting men. On my one visit to her there, at Thanksgiving, she did take me to a number of her favorite hangouts, like Yellowfingers and Maxwell's Plum — hot spots of the youth culture's emerging sexual freedom.

Too soon, the school year was over, my second graduate-school graduation a *fait accompli*. *Vineyard's Toys* made a fine splash in the English department, but less than a year later, it would garner nothing more than a disingenuously positive rejection from the editor in chief of Random House. In my naive and arrogant insularity, I had dreamed grandiosely.

By that time, I had already subjected myself to an additional humiliation that made the stillbirth of *Vineyard's Toys* seem like child's play. What had begun as a strategy to bring Jan and me together resulted in a personal debacle. Perhaps out of desperation, certainly against my principles and good judgment, I persuaded myself to apply for a teaching position at Miami-Dade South Community College, in Coral Gables, Florida, within minutes of Jan's apartment in Coconut Grove (she had accepted a fashion designer's job for Suntogs, a Miami children's-wear firm, and was beginning to gain a degree of name recognition). To my surprise, I was accepted for the position of English instructor for the coming fall.

I spent that glorious summer in northern Wisconsin, thirty miles east of Duluth, counseling teenagers at Camp Nebagamon for Boys, where I myself had been a camper for seven years and a counselor for five. Realizing that this would be my last summer shielded from the real world, I wrote a number of nostalgic, sentimental poems by which to record the end of my youth. Twenty years later, when I would accompany my son, Troika, to Camp Nebagamon for his second summer there, I remembered these poems and gathered them, along with other "camp poems" written over the years, into a paean to Camp Nebagamon, titled *You Can't Go Back, Exactly*.

In late August of 1968, I flew to Miami, set up house with Jan in her tiny apartment, and prepared to brave Miami-Dade South Community College's hotbed of academic apathy. The faculty was too laid back, invisible. I began denigrating students I hadn't even met, for their lack of interest, their fractured attention spans, their listlessness. And as the days of the training period passed, I grew more and more terrified that I had made a cosmic mistake. I was now on the brink of indenturing myself to a career which, in principle, I not only hated but which would prevent me from ever freeing myself from its clutches once I fully succumbed.

I confided in Jan that although I cherished our intimacy, I feared I was close to committing spiritual suicide. Furthermore, I was not being honest to those who were counting on me to set a responsible example. I didn't want to be in school one more day, even on the other side of the desk.

I lacked commitment to the job, and I shamefacedly resigned after four days of training. I terribly regretted leaving the administrator with such an unexpected dilemma; moreover, I knew this move would anger and disappoint my mentor, Muggs Lorber, director of Camp Nebagamon, who had used his influence to secure me the job despite my lack of a Florida teaching certificate. I'd come to realize that teaching would not provide me with the experience of working with working people. I felt that if I was to be a well-rounded writer, I would have to develop a new sensibility, with its own distinct language, different from the one I'd employed to complete four books of poetry, six novels, and a novella during the previous seven years, one more muscular, broader and deeper in scope, and more authentic, which could speak to readers not trained in responding to esoteric literary devices only those connected with academia could appreciate.

Moreover, I was experiencing a very bad feeling about Jan. The same suspicions I'd had while she was in New York and I in San Francisco now came back to haunt me. I had met some of her new coterie of "artsy"

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friends in Coconut Grove, and I could tell that they were fast and loose. She was always gravitating toward such types.

With a single phone call to my father, who owned the Biltwell Company and had just purchased a factory in Farmington, Missouri, a small country town of ten thousand people, seventy-five miles southwest of St. Louis, I arranged to enroll in my next, and ultimate, postgraduate school, the proverbial “school of hard knocks” — Farmington Manufacturing Company. Although I agonized in saying good-bye to Jan and flying back home, I wanted to believe that I was on the verge of undertaking an education that would provide me with material to further my creative energies in unimaginable ways.

Although I had no certainty as to what might be the outcome of my quixotic flight from south Florida to rural Missouri, I trusted that the move was the right one for me and for the future of my work, my writing. If what I envisioned transpired, I would spend a few years in Farmington, working as an assistant manager, and learn enough to say that I then had a firsthand understanding of blue-collar America. With this newly acquired knowledge, I would be able to write with a more authoritative voice, one that wouldn’t smack of bathos or pedantry.

What I didn’t count on was that the job would be so consuming, not just physically but emotionally exhausting, that it would rob me of my free time, drain me of the desire to write new fiction. At best, I might be lucky enough to jot down an occasional poem. Factory work was demanding in a way I’d never known. This came as a rude shock to me.

In my first days with Biltwell, in 1968, I toured its Salisbury, Missouri, manufacturing and warehouse facilities and immediately isolated an Achilles heel: the company’s inability to dispose of irregular garments. I was challenged to find a profitable solution for getting rid of the thousands and thousands of slacks relegated to the junk pile due to manufacturing defects. But my solution, an outlet store — retail garments at wholesale prices, sold right from the factory — would have to wait almost a year, until I’d assisted John Gulla, the plant manager, in starting Farmington Manufacturing Company from scratch.

For the first six months of my work in the factory, I lived in a motel five miles from Farmington and commuted to St. Louis on weekends to visit my parents and do some dating. I harbored a sinking feeling that in fleeing Coconut Grove, I had proclaimed my relationship with Jan finished. I was on my own, and to the extent I could gain time away from my new job, I began seeking female companionship. But after those first six months, I found myself sorely missing Jan. Dreaming that she and I might live together, I purchased a fourteen-room white-clapboard Victorian house, built in 1896, in Farmington, on the town’s silk-stockings street, West Columbia, and invited Jan to join me in Smalltown, U.S.A. In November 1969, she accepted.

My life was in flux. I was experiencing the turmoil of dislocation. Working in a sewing factory required different disciplines, skills, and energies than any I’d previously known, and living in a rural community that found little value in formal education or culture was a challenge, especially for an outsider with three college degrees, a handlebar mustache, and an exaggerated afro.

Jan was also in the throes of dislocation. Having been used to a very active

social life, she now found herself in Farmington with no job and no friends, certainly no excitement. We had no one but each other for companionship. The novelty of living together, “in sin,” buoyed us at first but soon began to vanish. And while the quiet country life satisfied me, it became unbearable for Jan.

Around this same time, my idea for an outlet store was coming to fruition. I convinced management to allocate nine hundred square feet in the piece-goods-storage area of the factory to house my infant operation. I cut a hole in the outside wall, installed a door, set up bins to hold the stacks of flawed pants, which I’d had sent over from the Salisbury warehouse, and with a cigar box for a cash register, I was in business. Through local word of mouth, the store grossed \$50,000 in its first year. (Unbeknownst to me then, word would soon reach St. Louis and beyond, helping the store gross \$250,000 in its second year and eventually grow into an operation of 2500 square feet, with half a million dollars in annual sales, in the years ahead.)

Despite the additional demands on my time, I was experiencing a kind of spiritual euphoria. I no longer felt obligated to maintain a good intellectual front. No one in my new environment cared whether I had academic credentials or could quote Shakespeare, Shelley, and Roethke. Hallmark cards were adequate, superior. All that mattered was my being thorough in administering my duties at the factory, treating all the workers fairly, and rolling up my sleeves, sharing in whatever needed to be done, whether it meant working overtime, coming in for half a day on Saturdays, or being in the factory by 6:00 each a.m. Because I was a provider of jobs, many lives depended on my sound judgments. I had become one of the town’s stewards. I began to take pride in the community and even joined the Farmington Chamber of Commerce.

In July 1970, Jan and I drove west. I’d dreamed of one day getting to share with her the haunts of San Francisco I had discovered during 1967, the Summer of Love, and 1968. The entire drive out, neither of us discussed marriage, let alone considered it. We were far too “liberated” to be beguiled by such traditional dependency. But in the back of my mind, I kept feeling that something radical, a significant change, would have to happen or our relationship would wither. And once we were in San Francisco, I was able to transform this fear into an abrupt marriage proposal. Spontaneously, we held our wedding ceremony outdoors, in Sutro Park, overlooking the Pacific. Our vows were officiated by a diminutive, red-headed leprechaun of a Presbyterian minister, symbolically named Glenda Hope. Our marriage, on the eighth day of July 1970, became our mutual high-water mark.

The late summer of 1971 ushered in the rebirth of my poetry. From August of 1971 through February of 1972, I composed fifty-four poems, which formed the basis of a new book, entitled *Taking the Back Road Home*. My excitement for the medium had been renewed. The act of creating a poem seemed to be perfect for me, considering the limitations my job imposed on my time.

After almost four years of hit-and-miss composition, I had taken fire again. In truth, before these new poems appeared, I had come to believe that my writing career was a graduate student’s ephemeral run at immortality. But once they had achieved momentum, I was determined not to

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discourage them. Poetry, not fiction, turned out to be my saving grace.

I also realized that, with some maneuvering, I could have a continual taste of two worlds: I could play a role in the operation of the factory — be a businessman after all — and I could utilize the skills I had developed during nine years of undergraduate and graduate school, dreaming of one day becoming a professional writer. More so, I could be a responsible family man.

Marriage changed everything in our relationship for a while. Now, Farmington, with its small-town mores, embraced us, and we began to make friends. We felt welcome. Yet this new sense of belonging, which seemed so appealing, eventually began to wear thin. There wasn't any culture in Farmington. The closest movie theater was in Flat River, five miles away. St. Louis was an inconvenient hour and a half to the northeast.

My wife was the first to feel disenchantment. During the initial years of our married life, Jan busied herself with shaping our old house into a home. She painted pictures, played with her dogs, planted a garden. She cooked for me when I walked home from the factory for lunch and dinner. She became a recluse, progressively feeling confined, trapped, longing for escape.

In the fall of 1971, Jan's desperation took a bizarre turn. An old fellow camper and schoolmate of mine, who was living in Florida, came to Farmington to visit us for a few days. One afternoon, he confronted me. He was leaving immediately and claimed he was taking Jan with him. At first, I was completely stunned. Jan was nowhere to be seen. I became enraged, slugged him, and actually shoved him out the front door, without his suitcase. In my naiveté, I believed that he was irrational, crazy. It never occurred to me that for him to have screwed up the courage to disclose such shocking intentions, Jan would have had to encourage him. I think my violence surprised her. She never said another word about the incident.

I was so absorbed with factory work, the outlet store, and my poetry that I failed to notice her disaffection, or if I did, I would dismiss it. One attempt I did make to help lift Jan out of her malaise was to plan a trip with her to Europe. We hadn't really had a honeymoon, and this would be it. In April of 1972, we visited Lisbon, Madrid, Rome, Florence, Venice, Zurich, and Lucerne. In Venice, I wrote a poem called "Marriage in the Basilica di San Marco Evangelista" to belatedly celebrate our wedding. However, at the end of our trip, I also composed a poem about returning home from New York by myself. Without warning, Jan insisted on remaining behind for five or six days. I later found out that she stayed with a homosexual male classmate from her fashion-design class and five of his acquaintances.

In June of 1972, I opened up a second outlet store, in one of Biltwell's factories out in the middle of Missouri, in Tipton, not far from the college town of Columbia. This, though I could hardly realize it at the time, was the beginning of my life as a peripatetic, my career as a traveling salesman and a wandering bard.

In 1973, my parents bought a condominium by the ocean, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in a building auspiciously named Point of Americas II. Jan and I spent Christmas of that year there and returned again in March of 1974, when she was seven months pregnant with our first child. We



would come back again in June, after our baby's birth, and in December, to celebrate Christmas and New Year's. Fort Lauderdale would become a great refuge for us. For me especially, it provided the serenity that I couldn't find in Farmington and allowed me to relax from the pace I was keeping. I would write many poems about those magical shores.

Jan and I rejoiced in the birth of daughter, Trilogy Maya. Jan, the fashion designer and painter, and I, the poet, placed on our baby the mark of our own creative souls. We named her Trilogy because we considered her to be one of three equal parts of the trilogy we constituted, and she received the middle name Maya because she was born in May and because we deeply respected Maya Angelou, whose book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and whose good deeds and compassion for others inspired us.

This miraculous event sparked many poems, which eventually found their way into three books about our first child: *Trilogy: A Birth Cycle*, *Monday's Child*, and *La Preciosa*, the first two of which were ultimately incorporated into *A Gleam in the Eye: Poems for a First Baby* (St. Louis: Timeless Press, 1992), a volume that carries an endorsement from Maya Angelou herself.

By the end of 1974, I had four outlet stores up and running, three in mid-Missouri and one in southern Illinois. They were grossing in excess of a million dollars a year — a tidy accomplishment, especially since the men's dress slacks I was purveying were factory seconds. The stores succeeding required me to take to the road more and more.

But this traveling was anything but a hardship; in fact, it provided a very necessary escape for me from domestic tensions. I would come home tired from work, and Jan would be irritable from the lack of sleep that accompanies caring for a new baby. Then our constant arguing would begin all over again.

Now that I was driving so extensively, I learned to distract myself from the rigors and the boredom of rural road travel by devising a desk in the front seat of my Ford station wagon, one consisting of my attaché case securely pressed against my right thigh — it was the perfect size to hold my Boorum & Pease account book. (To this day, I do all my composition in similar record books, with the same kind of Bic ballpoint.) I had initiated a habit that would soon grow into an addiction to feed what I discovered was a ferocious compulsion to turn my road meditations into road-poetry.

With increasing eagerness, I looked forward to taking off in my station wagon to write "in flight." But what I failed to realize was that my time away from home, from Jan, was widening the fissure in our romance, our marriage. I misconstrued her complaints of loneliness, her pleas for me to stay home, as expressions of love, not cries for attention. I, too, was lonely on those trips, but I would keep so busy that I hardly had time to brood, and if I did, I would shape that brooding into poems that I deluded myself into thinking were love poems, albeit ones about love unrequited due to separation. When I was off to the stores, I doubt I ever imagined Jan's sense of emptiness in that big house or her growing aloneness.

Aside from providing me needed freedom, my time on the road made me feel like a stranger in strange lands, a Moses wandering through rural

wilderness to purvey raiment. One night, while eating dinner at the Ramada Inn in Columbia, Missouri, having worked all day at my stores in Tipton and Salisbury, I wrote a poem titled "Breaking Stallions," and all at once, my entire world was transformed. I realized that I was seeing myself as the scion of Eastern European ragmen and bearded Russian tailors.

In a flash, I knew my great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father. I had inherited the mantle of my Jewish ancestors. From that point on, a part of my writer's identity became a character named Willy Sypher, an ordinary but nobly spirited road peddler for "Acme-Zenith Trouser Co. of St. Louie, Mo." who, from Monday to Friday, day in, year out, plied the heartland, calling on small-town merchants, deriving a paltry commission from meager sales. Willy Sypher, schlepper, was me, a part of me, anyway, with which I had yet to acquaint myself. He was my undiscovered Jewishness.

I would continue in my capacity as manager of outlet stores for fifteen years. Whenever I'd drive to one of the stores (at one point, my modest chain grew to seven), Willy and I would merge. More than a few hundred "traveling salesman" poems document the intimate meeting of minds Willy and I experienced before we said our last good-byes in 1987, when I would leave Biltwell to pursue my writing full-time, leave the highway to Willy's memory.

During this same period, I revived a hobby from my university days: my William Faulkner collection. In 1968, upon moving to Farmington and immersing myself into my new business career, I had put the wraps on my collecting. But given a serendipitous opportunity, in 1974, to acquire a dozen first-edition presentation copies Faulkner had given to an old friend, Hubert Starr, a lawyer living in Los Angeles in the 1930s, I rekindled my passion. In May of 1975, motivated by my recent acquisitions, I paid a visit to James Webb, who, in his retirement from Ole Miss, was serving as curator of Rowan Oak, Faulkner's house in Oxford. After spending an afternoon with him in late May, roaming Faulkner's property, Bailey's Woods, being given a personal tour through the house, and visiting with the professor and his wife, I was moved to write one of my first "Faulkner/Oxford/Yoknapatawpha/Mississippi" poems, "Of Books and Woods and Us," dedicated to Dr. Webb. Little did I know that this would spark a love affair with Faulkner's mythical Yoknapatawpha and real Oxford, Mississippi, and an outpouring of almost 160 poems over the next fifteen years, which would eventually be comprised in three individual volumes — *Mississippi Vistas* (1983, 1990), *Disappearing in Mississippi Latitudes* (1994), and *Mistress Mississippi* (1992) — and the unpublished 1995 compilation *A Mississippi Trilogy: A Poetic Saga of the South*.

On June 23, 1976, Jan, two-year-old Trilogy, and I flew to Memphis, then drove to Oxford for the day to visit the Webbs, as if to formally stake claim to my next territory, have my wife and child give their tacit approval. In early August, I attended my first Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference at Ole Miss. The experience would redefine the course of my life.

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