Introduction

In 1981, I turned forty and, in many respects, felt as though I were in the prime of my life, physically and intellectually. Jan and I, married for just over a decade, had a seven- and four-year-old, and we were well ensconced in one of the most beautiful edifices in Farmington, Missouri: a white-clapboard wedding cake of a house, built in 1896, boasting a wrap-around porch, with gingerbread motifs, and a colossal attic surmounted by three spires and a widow's walk.

We were so proud of our residence at 628 West Columbia, replete with a freestanding cookhouse and a four-stall stable, on three acres. I reveled in being a landowner, a homeowner, a provider for my wife and two kids. I loved coming home from the factory, not five minutes away.

Our Victorian mansion was a living museum, displaying an eclectic array of American antiques, which I'd been collecting since graduating from Yale, in 1963. We didn't have one traditional piece of furniture in the house. We did our formal dining at an 1890s roulette table with claw-and-ball feet, decorated green felt, and a smooth-spinning wheel; around it were two highly ornate 1870s McDannold optometrist chairs and four white-porcelain Koken barber chairs. The dining room was so large that it also boasted two six-foot, turn-of-the-century Mills quartersawed golden-oak console slot machines (the Owl and the Dewey) and comfortably held a Mutoscope, Holcomb & Hoke Sunkist Popcorn Machine, an oak-encased Watling upright scale, a six-foot-tall Sidney advertising clock, and a Cremona Style 2 nickelodeon. But the highlight of the room was a nine-foot-tall, seven-instrument 1912 Wurlitzer Model C orchestrion with three art-glass front-panel doors and a "wonder light." We fondly referred to this exquisite mechanical piano as "Winnie" and "The Big Music." I cherished those moments when I'd hold my children in my arms, dancing to the ten-tune paper rolls, whose spirited sounds would lift the roof off the house.

During those years, I composed many poems referencing these antiques and others I'd acquired. Our house was central to our existence. My eyes had memorized each inch of its insides; so had Jan's.

That storybook setting framed our existence and became the ultimate symbol of the life we'd built together, in Farmington (as notably detailed in "628 West Columbia"). Still longing to preserve the devotion and domesticity we'd shared, there, for so long, I expressed my adoration of Jan, in poems I'd dedicate to her not just for her birthdays and our anniversaries but for no reason other than needing to show my love, such as in "Keeping the Vows," "Mystical Union: An Adoration," "Stargazers," "The Seven Senses," "Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*," "Total Eclipse," and "Silkscreen."

Inside and out, the domain seemed a place of easy tranquillity. From early spring to late fall, I would start up my ancient, rusted, red Wheel Horse riding mower and, with wineglass in hand, navigate our estate. On my mufflerless machine, I was fearless Don Quixote atop Rocinante, or Captain Ahab at the helm of the *Pequod*. I knew every bush and tree by heart, every adventitious clump of onions, every swath of blue- and ryegrass.

At least three evenings a week, I would barbecue steaks or chicken breasts. It was a ritual I looked forward to whether it was ninety or twenty degrees out. The grill was my sacred retreat, cooking on it an opportunity to commune with nature and myself. "Dude," as my kids called me — and as I called myself — would "do the honors." All too often, indulging, to excess, in wine, as the meat, above the lowest possible flame, cooked and cooked, I would burn the chicken to crisps indistinguishable from the briquettes, turn our thick-cut steaks into shriveled shoe leather. Although, for a long time, my predictable culinary disasters were occasions for laughter and gentle censure, it eventually became apparent to my family that barbecuing was just my excuse for drinking. The stress of trying to make something of myself, not only as a family man and businessman but as a poet, was eating away at me.

All the while, I was writing my poems, chronicling my life. I never relaxed. Everything I did, from inspecting my factory-outlet stores, in Missouri, Illinois, and Arkansas, to visiting Bob Hamblin, in Cape Girardeau, where we'd busy ourselves with documenting artifacts in the Brodsky Faulkner Collection, took me more and more frequently from my family.

In those years, I became a citizen of impersonal motels, cafés, restaurants with busy bars, hotel music rooms featuring amateurish bands — all of them serving as sanctuaries from my travels, where I'd unwind, after work, with glasses of wine, my trusty pen in hand, recording my anguish and occasional joy, in poem after poem. I was adrift in an archipelago of Tipton, Salisbury, New Athens, West Helena, and Sullivan (and, later, Jefferson City and Rolla), each a destination on my three-state map, each a home to one of my slack-factory-outlet stores. And, of course, there was Oxford, Mississippi, to which I gravitated every few months, to immerse myself in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha.

Sadly, even my time in Farmington began to feel like time away from home. Nights with Jan grew into mere occasions of marital frustration. I'm sure her dissatisfaction was every bit equal to mine, or even greater. Our small Missouri town had no cultural outlets, no fine dining, no movies, just a twice-weekly newspaper, which often arrived *once* a week. Farmington had its assets (no traffic jams, little crime, a low cost of living, friendly people), but its liabilities far outweighed them. To revitalize ourselves, Jan and I would frequently leave for St. Louis, to visit my parents, or for Jacksonville, Illinois, where her mother and father were always eager to entertain us, in their home and at the town's one country club. And there were occasional weekends when we'd import friends to our house, for parties.

At this time, I began teaching a three-hour evening class (creative writing or short stories, given the semester), one night a week, at Mineral Area Junior College, in Flat River, five miles away. I felt that by doing so, I was giving something back to the community. And in some respects, my position at the school was the fulfillment of my original plan in 1968, when I went to Miami-Dade Junior College, to pursue a career as an instructor. I found that teaching people for whom higher education was an exception, not an escape from the real world and a postponement of

work (as I'm sure the case was in affluent Coral Gables), was a privilege. Their appreciation of my efforts was enough to sustain my enthusiasm. More so, cut off as I was from academia (other than for the scholarly work I was doing with Bob Hamblin and for the friendships I'd made within the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference community), teaching kept my critical and analytical faculties honed.

For all the satisfaction of the classroom, home had begun to offer little respite. Jan and I tried our best to hold our marriage together, but arguing had become our language, and we diminished each other with our barbs, our carping, our fighting. Though young, our children must have registered our turmoil, without being able to intervene on their own behalf or ours. Things got progressively more embittered between Jan and me. She was venting her frustration with my abrupt departures from Farmington. I was constantly defending myself, arguing that my traveling for Biltwell was our sole source of income, although, in truth, some of my trips were not necessary, rather excuses for me to escape domestic stress. Our marriage had become a tribulation. Our gentleness had hardened into ugliness. Our time together was perfunctory. And our intimacy ceased to exist.

Dejectedly, I drove to Oxford, Mississippi, in August 1981, to attend my sixth Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference. It had been a year since I stumbled into marital indiscretion, a year since I had looked at any woman other than Jan. I believed I had learned a painful, humiliating lesson and that I had atoned for, mitigated, if not absolved myself of, my sin.

Faulkner's hometown had become as familiar to me as Farmington. I felt comfortable in its sleepy purlieus, from South Lamar to St. Peter's Cemetery, Old Taylor Road to the courthouse square, the Ole Miss campus (especially the John Davis Williams Library and the Alumni House — the hotel where I'd stay) to Bailey's Woods and Rowan Oak. And I knew its fictional counterparts by heart. Faulkner's novels were my scriptures, his protagonists apostles I worshiped.

The last evening of the conference, attending a party at Square Books, in downtown Oxford, I met a young lady, a Mississippian with a beguiling smile and sensual drawl. She was so respectful, polite, and accepting of me. That night, we initiated what would become a frenzied love affair and a deeply intimate friendship. "The Fawns," which I wrote the following morning, between Memphis and Farmington, on my drive home, describes my enchantment.

One month later, using a scheduled trip to my outlet store in West Helena, Arkansas, as a disguise for my real motives, I met my new lover, in Oxford. My sexual liberation was ecstasy. I believed that her appreciation of me as a poet was typical of Mississippians, whom I felt revered their artists.

On September 12, 1981, I composed three poems in my notebook, while driving the 333 miles from Oxford to Farmington. "Of Elegies and Renascence" and "Sparks Jumping the Gap" express my complete admiration for my Southern belle. During that seven-hour drive, I also wrote

"The Defrocking of Rudy Toothacre, Itinerant Minister of the Universal Gospel of the Synod for All Churches of the What's Happenin' Now," which, like "Guilt-Throes," from the year before, bespoke my self-loathing for having again defiled my marriage with Jan.

But the pain was not as great as the longing for my new "fawn" from Jackson, Mississippi. And as fate would have it, the manuscript for *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection, Volume I: The Biobibliography*, which Bob Hamblin and I had worked on for almost two years, was due at the University Press of Mississippi, in Jackson, at the beginning of October. (This initial volume of a seven-book series that Bob and I would eventually produce was published the next year.) Even though I had only been home a month, from Oxford, I knew that delivering our four-hundred-page manuscript, in person, to Barney McKee, director of the press, would not only allow me to discuss critical design issues with him but also to meet my lover.

I recorded my liaison with her in a sequence of five extremely sensual and highly emotional poems: "Mistress Mississippi," "Running Scared," "[I enter your house, not a stranger]," "Wind Devils," and "Goldenrods." So captivated was I, by this woman, that I dreamed of throwing everything away and moving to Jackson, to stay with her for the rest of my life. Mine was a desperate ecstasy, at best, as was hers. For our few days together, we were kindred Mississippians — I an adopted native, she a latter-day Scarlet O'Hara, living by her resourcefulness, mystique, and guile.

The romance we shared was unlike any I had experienced in years. In her kitchen, while she cooked dinner, I wrote "[I enter your house, not a stranger]" for her. She became my Southern muse, my mistress Mississippi.

At the far end of that same month, we met again, in Oxford. Like the previous trip, this one also yielded a sequence of love poems: "In Defense of Physical Manifestations," "Exhortation in Praise of Spontaneity," "Cosmic Consolations," "Even the Highway Is My Crucifix," and "Rummaging in the Attic," a lament for Jan, expressing my sad sense of longing for her amidst all the chaos of our lives.

Despite our need for each other, this woman and I knew that our relationship was ephemeral, doomed to lapse into silence. She had committed herself to me completely; she had no other attachments. I was married, with two children.

Over the next ten months, I returned to Oxford five times but only saw her once more, in March 1982, when I told her that I had decided not to leave Jan and my kids, not to move to Oxford or Jackson, not to devote myself to her. With melancholy, I confessed my fear of cutting loose from what I had come to accept as familiar, if not fulfilling. To leave it all behind — two children, especially — for someone I'd known less than a year, been with fewer than half a dozen times, was too risky, foolhardy.

In two poems, I penned my disgust with the licentiousness that had once again wormed its way into my heart: "The Profligate" and "Cloven-Hoofed Goat."

In April 1982, I turned forty-one and vowed, for a second time, to recommit my apostate soul to Jan. My daughter, Trilogy, was almost eight, and my son, Troika, was about to turn five. If Jan and I weren't compatible as lovers, husband and wife, at least we were able to share satisfaction in being parents, as reflected in "Post-Giraffic," "Connecting Dots," "Getting Our Tree," "One-Room School," and "Gentle Revolutionaries."

And we enjoyed our separate pursuits. She'd made an affiliation with the YMCA in St. Louis, to create a branch in Farmington and serve as the lead instructor for the new aerobics program. As she got into shape, I became more sedentary, continuing not only to write my poems but also mine my Faulkner materials, with Bob Hamblin (preparing *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection, Volume II: The Letters* [1984]; *Volume III:* ***The De Gaulle Story*** [1984]; and *Volume IV:* ***Battle Cry*** [1985]), and pen a variety of articles and essays on William Faulkner, which were published in *Studies in Bibliography*, the *Southern Review*, and the *Faulkner Journal*, as well as in several collections of the annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference lectures.

Jan was also taking flying lessons at the Farmington Municipal Airport, practicing in a Piper Cherokee. I had vast misgivings, but she felt at ease with her training. She invited me to fly with her on her first "cross-country," from Farmington to Perryville. She made a perfect landing, in a massive cross wind, with me in the backseat, vomiting. She stepped out of the cockpit like Amelia Earhart. She loved her new avocation.

Yet, despite our activities, life in Farmington was stuck in a time warp. Things refused to change. The town's official logo, glaring from the water tower, was "City of Traditional Progress" (corrected, some years later, to "City of Tradition and Progress"). Everything happened in quarter-time. While Jan continued to feel imprisoned by Farmington's sluggish ambiance, I enjoyed the slow pace, marking the progress of my family, in poem after poem. Trilogy's and Troika's antics were so delightful that I couldn't resist capturing them. I preserved those years in the fourth of my unpublished books of poems about our days at 628 West Columbia (*Hopgrassers and Flutterbies: Volume Four of* ***The Seasons of Youth***) — vignettes depicting adoring parents nurturing their two children. I did this even as I was spending more and more time on the road.

Even when I was home, my daytime hours were often spent in my writing office, editing my first book of Southern poems. It was a highlight of my career when, in 1983, the University Press of Mississippi published *Mississippi Vistas*, selling all fifteen hundred hardback copies, within the first six months. Immediately, I began working on sequels to that edition, to fulfill my vision of creating an ambitious trilogy of the South. University Press of Mississippi tacitly committed to publishing volumes two and three.

By the middle of 1984, I had completed first drafts of *Mistress Mississippi* and *Disappearing in Mississippi Latitudes*, though I had no idea that they were conceived in reverse order. (Fortunately, the University Press of Mississippi's board of directors decided to discontinue publishing poetry; otherwise, I would have issued books two and three out of

sequence.) Their further development was delayed until 1992 and 1994, when the problem was resolved, under the guidance of Time Being Books' first Editor in Chief, Jane Goldberg, with *Mistress Mississippi* correctly published as the trilogy's concluding volume.

During that period, a tormented persona appeared to me, haunted me, inhabited my imagination, compelled me to flesh him out, in the form of many characters from the Holocaust — victims, survivors, and perpetrators. Most of the Holocaust poems from this time would not find their way into a book until 1989 (*The Thorough Earth*), but the appearance of poems such as "Cracow Now" and "One Out of Six Million" signaled to me another side of the unhappiness I was feeling in my marriage. If my Willy Sypher traveling-salesman poems (which derived from my experience with managing Biltwell's outlet stores) reflected my uprootedness and solitude, and the Southern poems exposed me, in the guise of a Northern outlander, as a moral reprobate and a drunk, the Holocaust poems presented me as a victim. My victimization, I realized, was metaphorical and certainly not to be confused with the devastating obliteration of human lives in the Nazi scourge. Nonetheless, my psyche's torment was unrelenting.

To ameliorate my pain, I found myself gravitating to Oxford, Mississippi, as often as possible, where I could steep myself in the Faulkner mythos. People there respected me as one of the world's premier Faulkner collectors and scholars. Though uncomfortable with celebrity, I did find it flattering to have strangers want to shake my hand, introduce themselves, talk with me about Faulkner.

But mine was, by choice, a lonely quest. When in Oxford, I'd end my days at the Warehouse, a restaurant converted from a cotton-storage facility, just off the square. Despite the bustling atmosphere, I blended into this easygoing, stained-glass setting. It was a favorite watering hole for Ole Miss students. I would sit in the dining room, drinking carafes of Mouton Cadet white, writing poems, sometimes past midnight. There, it was easy for me to imagine myself a reclusive Faulkner. And in the solitude of that crowded place, I was free from the disappointment and pervasive sense of personal failure in my relationship with Jan, free to commune with my imagination.

One night, while sitting in the Warehouse, fantasizing about making love with any one of the many Temple Drakes in the place (Ole Miss coeds who might have stepped from the pages of Faulkner's *Sanctuary*), I was introduced, by a university friend, to a tall, slim, young woman with long blond hair. I was mesmerized; she arrested my breath. When my friend excused himself from our company, she whispered to me that she hoped we could get together. The next afternoon, I picked her up, and we drove off to her hometown, Holly Springs, to visit her father and go swimming at a friend's house, tour the town, and mingle with the ghosts in Hillcrest Cemetery, which contains the history of that quaint antebellum Mississippi town.

Nothing about her was deliberate; she was all nuances, textures, suggestiveness. I'd never seen such physical beauty combined with such ravishing openness. She was primal.

The beginning of our affair coincided with the 1984 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference. "Night Vipers," "Vague Lady from Holly Springs," "Skimming Mississippi's Urn," and "The Peabody" came out of our departing Oxford, for our first tryst, in Memphis's legendary hotel, The Peabody, an institution Faulkner so loved, and, thereafter, poems about our long-distance relationship exploded from my psyche.

A month later, I headed back to Oxford; she traveled up from Jackson, where she lived with her young daughter. We were so good together, so happy during that transitory encounter. After I returned to Farmington, I wrote "Tied to Our Tides," a lament on leaving her in Memphis, "Matriarchy," about hearing her voice on the phone, "Aubade," a paean to her intellect and sexual energy, and "Byhalia," about our visit, at my behest, to Dr. Wright's sanitarium, in a small Mississippi town, where Faulkner was last sent to dry out and where he died of coronary thrombosis.

Four weeks after that, we met again, in Memphis. "Following the River South," "Mizpah," and "Unexpected Awakening" captured this rendezvous.

In November 1984, we drove to New Orleans, indulged ourselves — Commander's Palace, Court of Two Sisters, jazz, the atmosphere of the Vieux Carre, Cabildo, Pirates' Alley (where Faulkner shared an upstairs room with the artist William Spratling, in 1925), and Ignatius J. Reilly's weenies (both of us admired John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*).

But our trip got strange. What I didn't know was that my "vague lady from Holly Springs" had a dark side. While in New Orleans, she had a manic episode, and I grew terrified for my well-being and hers. I hadn't imagined that she could be self-destructive. Lying in bed with her, on our first night there, I began to wonder where I was, just how far I had roamed from home.

Suddenly, all I wanted to do was leave the Crescent City, rewind the clock, bring myself home safe, to Jan and my children, to all that was predictable.

I ended my flight from reality with two poems, "The Dioscuri" and "Under the River's Stern Surveillance," which I composed in an attempt to put closure to that misguided period. Though I had considered, during the past year, starting a new life, I couldn't. The history Jan and I had written, the traditions and rituals and myths we'd carved out of our time together, and Trilogy and Troika, who carried our mutual imprint so deeply, had kept me from leaving Jan.

But even having ended that volatile relationship did not lessen the tumult I was experiencing, now that my family and I had relocated to St. Louis. Although Jan and I had determined that our children needed a better education, it was still with immense regret that, during the summer of 1984, we had closed our beautiful Victorian mansion in Farmington, moved to a rented house on busy, tree-lined Wydown Boulevard, in Clayton, an affluent suburb of St. Louis, and enrolled our two children in Glenridge Elementary School.

For the next few years, I traveled between St. Louis and Farmington, working in the factory, by day, and driving home at night. Occasionally,

suffering bouts of nostalgia, or after teaching my Monday-night class at Mineral Area Junior College, I'd stay over, at our old house, alone with fifteen years of memories. Some evenings, sitting outside on the back patio, I'd barbecue, drink wine, and write poems such as "September Moon Through the Elms: A Nocturne" and "Dad in His Empty Country Castle." The first of these poems expresses my hopeful attitude toward the future: "Sitting amidst these mellifluous crickets, / I wish not that we might be as before / But as we are, that we might yet explore / What's left of love's metaphoric Horae, / Scavenge the sky's floor, for doubloons and other moons / Repousséd with our faces, search the earth, for signs of our newest designs."

But in "Dad in His Empty Country Castle," this nostalgia and optimism are tainted by melancholy over our having so completely uprooted ourselves: "I discover myself marooned, / A derelict stranded in isolated inebriation, / Lonely old man bereft of wife, children, friends, / Inventing jack rabbits that roamed these acres, / Years ago, when all of us were just growing." Inherent in this mood of loss is a vast uncertainty as to the wisdom of our move to St. Louis. Sadly, the next five years would justify my misgivings.

Louis Daniel Brodsky
11/17–18/00
5/9 . . . 7/11/01
7/13–14/05
5/21/08
St. Louis, Missouri