

INTRODUCTION

For me, the last half of the 1970s and the first half of the '80s belonged to William Faulkner.

My odyssey in the South began in late July and early August of 1976, when I attended my first Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, hosted by the University of Mississippi, in Oxford. Although my admiration for Faulkner's fiction had been ignited during my freshman year at Yale, in 1959–1960, I had, with two brief exceptions, never spent time in that land, to which, for all my sojourns in his novels and short stories, I felt so akin.

In subsequent years, I would lose my social uneasiness at the conferences and become so familiar with Oxford and its environs, so friendly with a multitude of its residents, that I would come to consider the town, and especially the Ole Miss campus, my home away from home. But at that first conference, I kept to myself, remained painfully aloof, taking in the scene as an outsider, a Northern outlander.

That summer, Biltwell, my father's trouser-manufacturing company, had purchased a garment factory in West Helena, Arkansas, sixty-five miles due west of Oxford, in the heart of the Delta. I quickly took the initiative to open up another outlet store. It would add to my successful chain and give me an excuse to spend more time in Oxford, just an hour's drive away. Of course, this could only diminish the time my wife, Jan, and I would have together in Farmington, Missouri.

Always when I was away from home, I desperately missed Jan and my daughter, Trilogy, and couldn't wait to return to them and to our home in Farmington. But once there, I fell right back into the bramble of our disagreements, our growing friction. This paradox is mirrored in poems such as "Mariner's Lament: A Nocturne" and "Outrunning the Snowstorm."

And now, Jan was pregnant with our second child, who would be born in late October 1977, a boy we'd name Louis Daniel Brodsky III, after my paternal grandfather and me, and nickname "Troika" — if Trilogy, his sister, could boast a reference to "three" in her name, so could he. ("Troika" is a word, borrowed from Russian, denoting a three-horse sleigh as well as a triumvirate.)

Troika's birth, like Trilogy's, was a red-letter day for us, an occasion for immense rejoicing. But I found that the spell cast by his arrival didn't elicit much of an artistic response in me. I was as proud as any dad on earth, but "baby poems" refused to take fire with the same frequency as before. The rapture of encountering something for the first time, which transports the creative spirit, just wasn't there.

Despite her great love for Troika, Jan was not at all happy about the prospect of having to do most of the parenting for two children, now, knowing that my travel schedule was even more rigorous than it had been when Trilogy was born. Neither Jan nor I was prepared for the competing needs of two little ones, which would short-circuit our passion for each other, rob us, out of fatigue and frustration, of our

intimacies. Gentleness and tenderness had their moments, but as the days evolved, our affections for each other diminished and were replaced by bickering and nagging, followed by bouts of guilt and shame and fear over our impatience, our antagonism. Anger, short tempers, and distrust darkened our hearts.

Jan found herself tethered to the endless responsibilities of motherhood; I seemed, more often than not, to be in the way, clumsy at changing diapers, heating formula, giving baths. The tasks were tedious and wearisome for Jan, who was frequently up all night, nursing and soothing our newborn. As difficult as work was for me, it didn't carry with it the same emotional weight, and I could escape from home by returning to work or driving off to the other Biltwell factories, across the Midwest.

Still, I was responsible for a wife, daughter, and son, along with a large house and the dual roles of assistant plant manager and manager of outlet stores for the company. Also, I was continually impelled to write poetry. This was an act for a circus juggler. I was going in many too many directions for my own good. Jan knew it; my parents knew it; my two young children sensed as much. Only I failed to see that I was, regardless of my boundless energy, vitiating my spirit. Moreover, for the sake of making a name for myself, I was expanding my overly ambitious résumé yet again, hoping to become a premier Faulkner collector/bibliographer/biographer.

Late in the summer of 1977, just before Troika's birth, I had met Professor James B. Meriwether at that year's Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference. He and I became instant friends. As a graduate student at Princeton, he'd known Faulkner's Random House editor, Saxe Commins, and been responsible for assembling the first extensive exhibition of Faulkner materials since Robert Daniel's initial display at Yale University, in 1942. For that major retrospective, at Princeton's Firestone Library, in 1957, he authored a detailed catalog that was published and widely circulated. When Saxe Commins died, in 1958, Random House asked Professor Meriwether to assist Albert Erskine in editing Faulkner's 1959 novel, *The Mansion*. As well as being an authority on Faulkner's fiction, he knew many of Faulkner's family members and friends.

Impressed with the scope of my collection and with my poetry, he was eager to direct me to people with important Faulkner holdings and was directly responsible for my being able to procure three vastly significant archives: those of Phil Stone, Saxe Commins, and Malcolm Franklin. (Stone, a lawyer, had been Faulkner's early literary mentor and closest friend in Oxford; Commins, as editor in chief at Random House, had been Faulkner's trusted editor and confidante from 1936 until his death, in 1958; Franklin was Faulkner's stepson.) Jim Meriwether opened my eyes to possibilities, in the realm of collecting, I'd not dreamed existed. And as an editor of the *Mississippi Quarterly*, he urged me to put some of my newly acquired materials, many of which had never been published, into print and assisted me with my first fumbling scholarly articles, ushering them into several issues of that journal.

In late 1978, I got a phone call from a professor of English at

Southeast Missouri State University, Robert W. Hamblin, who had heard of my collection. He was a former Mississippian who had earned his Ph.D. from Ole Miss, writing his dissertation on William Faulkner. Not long afterward, he drove to Farmington to meet me and view my holdings, which I was keeping in numerous safe-deposit boxes at a local bank. This visit began a wondrous collaboration of intellect and friendship that continues to this day. After seeing my treasures, all Bob had to ask to spark my imagination was, "What are you going to do with all these things?" For a moment, I was speechless. Over the next few weeks, I formulated what I believed to be a judicious response: "I want to make my collection available to scholarship."

From that inspired beginning, I started canvassing America for others who had known Faulkner, to obtain books and manuscripts he'd given, and letters he'd sent, to them. Bob's excitement had compelled me to uncover items that would fill out the collection. He, as professor, and I, as enthusiast, made a powerful team.

In 1979, the University Press of Virginia published the first of eight books Bob and I would coauthor, *Selections from the William Faulkner Collection of Louis Daniel Brodsky: A Descriptive Catalogue*, showcasing highlights from the Stone and Franklin manuscripts, letters, and inscribed editions, which I had acquired over the previous two years, as well as listing all of the other items in an exhibit that Bob and I were responsible for organizing at Southeast Missouri State University earlier in '79. The book filled the two of us with visions of great things. We were embarking on a project, fueled by mutual respect and friendship, that would test our ambitiousness, tenacity, and energy.

But this constant flurry of activity exacted its toll. My family now suffered my being away even when I was home, because much of the work Bob and I did was conducted at our dining-room table. Jan came to believe that she was competing with Faulkner for my affections. Though I denied this from my heart, I could never convince her that she had nothing to worry about. In truth, I was the one who needed convincing. My obsession was keeping me away from my family. And Jan was pushing me away.

Nonetheless, my poetry writing continued to flourish throughout this period, revitalized by my travels, which had become more frequent and much longer, now that Biltwell's outlet stores were in three states — Missouri, Illinois, and Arkansas. The poems were serious and intense, almost always humorless. Some expressed my love for Jan, my hope that we might repair the rift between us, as in "Touching" and "All in a Fog: A Love Poem"; others focused on the increasing tension between us and our resignation to feelings of guilt and unhappiness, including "Leave-Takings," "Looking for Homes," "Separated," and "Peddler on the Road."

Perhaps the strangest poem in this genre, one which I should have been able to use to gain personal insight into our widening separation, is "Returning to Troy." In this piece, the couple keeps up "pretenses of sadness" as the husband leaves home again, prepares to assume "the

many disguises / My frequent escapes begged me undertake / For the sake of survival." The husband admits that his is a "restless questing" to "Fashion, in verse form, the heart's dilemma." The view of the land he travels is registered "Through these disillusioned eyes of mine." Finally, he sees himself "Fading out of sight of my wife, / Adrift in an ocean empty of water," and frightened for his life, he turns his car around and flees for home. Unlike the protagonist of this poem, I kept propelling myself farther away.

This poem echoes the theme of desolation first posited in "The Martyrs," in which the husband is depicted as a gallant conquistador unknown to his children, for his extended expeditions to his "mind's concupiscent Spice Islands." From stories told them by their mother, they believe in his "incredible infallibility." The truth is, he doesn't want to return to them. The wife maintains her faith that he will be redeemed one day. Ultimately, his children go off, "Roaming in search of their fatherless past" and discover, on "a tiny island" in an "inaccessible land, / . . . a gaunt man / With glazed eyes, stranded and alone." They transport him, their father, to "the time before their birth, / East of dawn, where their mother waits / To salve his lacerations, slake his thirst, / And succor his broken heart on the journey home."

To counter such desolate views of the future and attempt to ignite some passion in our lives, I composed Marvell-inspired persuasion-to-love poems, such as "Points in Time" and "*In absentia*: A Panegyric," in which I argue that there must be a design to and a justification for my absences. In the latter, at least, I pose the possibility that each separation is a dress rehearsal for death's separating of our loving hearts, our souls, and I conclude that "Eternity might require of us / Loving that leaps eons and galaxies." Other hyperbolic poems like this one are more overt in their invitation to make love. These poems were hardly satisfactory to Jan, and they did little to assuage my frustration with our sexually impoverished relationship. These persuasions and their justifications were poor substitutes for communication between Jan and me.

Scattered among these were other, more mystical, love poems similar to those that had flowed so effortlessly in that perceived halcyon period preceding the birth of our children. They tend to be sentimental, inclined to bathos, such as "The Opal" and "Wind-Flowers."

Preoccupied with my itinerant lifestyle, I also wrote many poems about traveling salesmen, especially a character named Willy Sypher, a composite of my great-grandfather, my grandfather, my father, myself, and various members of Biltwell's national sales force, whom I'd gotten to know at the company's semiannual sales meetings in St. Louis, schleppers who plied the highways, hawking men's dress trousers to mom-and-pop shops, department stores, and everything in between. Also, I wrote often about nature and the characters who inhabit small-town America. During my stays away from home, I composed poems about the vagabond I'd become, frequenting hotel bars and lounges, bedding down in smoke-soiled motel rooms.

Wanting to enhance these poems and others, I had also been corre-

sponding with Hayden Carruth, writer and poetry editor of *Harper's*, who offered critiques on my submissions to the magazine and accepted two of my older poems ("Death Comes to the Salesman" and "Rearview Mirror," both from 1975) for the March 1980 issue.

When they were published, Ron Short, owner/pharmacist of Dicus Drugs, in Farmington, purchased a hundred copies of the issue from his distributor and set up a card table in front of his store, on West Columbia Street. I signed copies for the fifty or so customers who bought them. While I was certain that my rise to stardom had begun and other journals and anthologies did print my work, the public failed to take note of my auspicious *Harper's* debut.

Unfazed, I continued revising my work for publication, and in 1980, the last two of my ten signed, limited-edition poetry books, *Birds in Passage* and *Résumé of a Scrapegoat*, were published by the Farmington Press. Though I never allowed myself to stop composing poems every chance I had, whether in my writing office at home, in Farmington cafés, or on the road (in the car, at motels, and in restaurants, bars, and diners), I finally realized that trying to keep up with revising them was impossible if I wanted to continue my Faulkner pursuits with Bob Hamblin.

Meanwhile, my relationship with Jan had grown into one of constant confrontation, despite the occasional pleasant times we shared at home with our children. Strangely, both of us grew highly adapted to this contentiousness, so much so that we didn't even realize we were engaged in an ongoing battle of wills. But people around us saw it and found us difficult to be around. The only way I could handle the tension was to turn my back on it. I continued escaping into my work, taking solace in being alone. And the pace kept growing more furious. In any given week, I might be in the Missouri towns of Farmington, Tipton, Salisbury, Rolla, Sullivan, or Jefferson City, in New Athens, Illinois, or in West Helena, Arkansas — places where I would light for a few hours or overnight or a few days, to tend to what had now become a multimillion-dollar factory-outlet business. Or I might land in Cape Girardeau, at Southeast Missouri State University, where I had temporarily deposited my Faulkner collection, in the rare-book room of the Kent Library. Bob Hamblin and I would spend the afternoon cataloging its vast contents and putting together materials for our first volume of *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection*, which the University Press of Mississippi would publish in 1982. On many of these trips, Bob and his wife, Kaye, would invite me to stay with them. After dinner, Bob and I would retire to his downstairs study and resume our endeavors, picking up where we'd left off at the library. These sessions would continue until one or two in the morning, ending only when fatigue would vanquish enthusiasm.

The closest I ever came to relaxing was when Jan, the kids, and I would take off to St. Louis, for a day's entertainment, returning to Farmington late the same night, or when we would visit her parents, in Jacksonville, Illinois, or fly to Fort Lauderdale for a family vacation, at my parents' condominium. However, even there, I never completely

unwound, since I devoted the mornings to composing “Florida poems” or revising existing work, often several years old, poems that otherwise would have stayed buried in my blue-ruled notebooks or piles of old typescripts.

Those vacations were never long enough. Once home, I would fling myself right back into the cyclone of my ambitions, poet first, then assistant plant manager, manager of outlet stores, road peddler, and Faulkner collector, with a raging drive to be the best.

By 1980, I realized that my poems were disclosing yet another semi-autobiographical character, one with a darker, more self-destructive mentality: a straying husband, a lonely alcoholic, wandering away from his once-happy home, abandoning his wife and kids, drifting perilously toward the precipice of his soul. “We Are the People We Deemed So Sad,” “Buzzed Confession,” “Tonya,” “The Man Who Knew Too Much Too Soon,” and “The Children of the Children” document this decline.

Perhaps the forces that drew me toward Oxford for the first Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference I attended, in 1976, and then beguiled me back in subsequent years, were motivated by my disintegrating relationship with Jan and by a pervasive sense of loneliness.

We marked our first decade together in July 1980, and I wrote the poem “The Tenth Anniversary” to commemorate the occasion. In it, I propose that Jan and I reenact our Sutro Park wedding, “celebrate our second efflorescing of vows,” in Manhattan. I predict that the second ten-year growth of our marriage will come from the gorgeous flowers we planted in the seventies — Trilog and Troika: “No matter how far we travel from now, / Their garden will flourish; it’s rooted in our hearts.” What neither Jan nor I may have intuited was that this noble and altogether hopeful expectation was not much more than that and relying on our children to supply the glue to mend our fractured marriage was neither fair nor realistic, especially since rearing children demands so many sacrifices.

It was with this delusion that I drove down to Oxford, in early August of 1980, to attend my fifth Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference. I’d taken the 333-mile trip many times before, and I’d formed memorable friendships with scholars who’d made a difference in the appreciation of Faulkner as a sardonic genius of lyrical stream-of-consciousness prose, luminaries of literary criticism, such as Malcolm Cowley, Cleanth Brooks, Lewis P. Simpson, Robert Penn Warren, Joseph Blotner, Michael Millgate, Noel Polk, Thomas McHaney, James Carothers, Judith Wittenburg, and James G. Watson. And with James B. Meriwether’s advice and Bob Hamblin’s steady collaborative support, I’d established an impressive reputation for myself as the world’s premier Faulkner collector.

I had been doing my journeyman’s work, biding my time, keeping a low profile, amassing marvelous Faulkner artifacts from all parts of the country, as well as writing my “Southern poems,” on business trips to West Helena and Oxford. In fact, during this period, I wrote twenty-nine of the thirty-nine poems that would eventually shape *Mississippi*

Vistas, which would be published by the University Press of Mississippi in 1983.

One part of my soul was a Northern apologist's, who naively hoped to right the wrongs of Mississippi, its fierce, despicable discrimination and bigotry toward "Negroes." In my innocence, I was going to write poems that would expose man's intolerance and thereby redress civil depredations, moral desecrations. Among the pieces I composed at that time were "Chiaroscuro" (about a bib-overalled black sharecropper sitting on the same Oxford-square bench with a Midwestern Jew — two pariahs staring at each other just long enough to understand the common humanity of their smiles), "Porch People" (about poor blacks enduring a blistering hundred-degree night in West Helena, dreaming the same dreams as others but knowing no way of escaping their poverty), "Drought in the Mid-South" and "Slaves" (dealing with white plantation owners and black tenant farmers contending together against cruel nature), and "Shall Inherit" (about dispossessed blacks being the beneficiaries of heaven's treasures, the truly blessed).

A less idealistic facet of my outlander's soul was that of spectator to the cult of youth at Ole Miss. The campus was so crowded with beautiful young ladies that it was impossible for me not to take notice. Before long, I began to fantasize about making love to a "Southern belle." As my relationship with Jan continued to fail, the fantasy demanded to be made reality, as foreshadowed in the poems "College Town, Friday Night" and "Enchantment."

My arrival at the conference caught me at this pivotal juncture. I was anxious, knowing that I was to be one of the presenters, lecturing on "The Collector as Sleuthsayer," describing my recent acquisitions as well as how I'd come to revere Faulkner's fiction during my days at Yale. It would be a different bill of fare, light entertainment, a break from all the intense scholarship. Because I was so nervous and feeling vulnerable, in need of nurturing, I was primed for compromise.

The day before I gave my speech, I was relaxing at the Alumni House's swimming pool and became smitten by a coed assisting at the conference. In the span of an afternoon and evening, I was beguiled, mystified, subdued, and destroyed. All the vows of spiritual love I'd made to Jan, in San Francisco's Sutro Park, dissolved. The sacredness in our marriage evaporated. I'd forfeited my faithfulness.

I wrote three poems about my adultery, ranging from unbridled eroticism to inutterable shame: "Jongleur: Initiation Rites," "Belinda, Lady of Fiesole," and "Guilt-Throes."

The next morning, I picked Jan up at the Memphis airport, and we drove back to Oxford, in silence. She was suffering from a raging head cold, and I couldn't look her in the eye, knowing that I had committed a moral crime against her. That night, I delivered my lecture, and the audience gave me a standing ovation, asking questions for almost a half-hour after I'd concluded. I was elated.

But melancholy, misery, and deep sorrow following my act of infidelity overwhelmed my spirit, disgusted, repulsed, and sundered me. I

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knew that what I had done was irrevocable. I was so devastated, be-
develed, for having sullied my union with my wife that I withdrew from
society, into myself, my family, my work, my writing. I refused to answer
the young lady's calls and letters. To save my soul, I had to make myself
believe that none of it had happened. I promised myself that I would
never let it happen again.

For almost a year, until the 1981 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha
Conference, I kept that vow.

Louis Daniel Brodsky
5/1-2/2000
Fort Lauderdale, Florida
4/23 . . . 7/3/01
St. Louis, Missouri