

Noel Polk

Living Outside of History

The autobiographical impulse is the curse of the aging – and the bane of everybody else. I have long since stopped trying to interest my children in my – and their – antecedents: they turn not even deaf ears but merely bored ones to my thrilling tales of yesteryear just as, I confess, I mostly turned deaf ears to my own parents' actually quite interesting memories of Depression Mississippi and even earlier. In fact, though, I can't really blame my children since the parts of my childhood that I remember, the bland fifties, wouldn't register on many scales as much of a childhood: I lived across the street from my grammar school and barely a block or two from junior high and high schools, so I had no weary tales of five-mile trudges barefoot through the snow to school; I was a city boy, so no tales of getting up at 4 a.m. to milk the cows before trudging barefoot five miles through the snow to school – and not much snow in South Mississippi anyway. But the autobiographical impulse strikes anyway, and we are nearly always helpless when it does, and so in spite of what I am about to say tonight, I may be more of a Southerner than I care to admit, since I can't seem to stop talking. I want to try to bring together a couple of things that I think are related, or hope they are; they are, at any rate, things on my mind greatly of late, for a variety of reasons.

My main title – “Living Outside of History” – is a perhaps too clever play on the title of my little book about the town of Picayune, Mississippi, where I grew up in that little corner of Southeast Mississippi just north of New Orleans and bordering on the Gulf Coast. I called the book *Outside the Southern Myth*; it was a meditation on lots of things connected with my growing up southern in a geographical sense but not really in any sort of historical sense. That is, Picayune and most of the Piney Woods were not, are not, southern in the same way that Natchez, Columbus, Oxford, Selma, Birmingham, Jackson, and the Mississippi Delta are. Indeed, we are somehow not even as *Mississippi* as the rest of the state is, apparently – especially if the Delta, as Jim Cobb would have it, is “the most Southern place on earth” – since we Piney Woodsers seem to get left out when anybody takes a group photo: we are perennially overlooked, like the ugly stepchild or the ungainly sibling – not an embarrassment, not shunned exactly, and not even with particular malice, but just sort of overlooked, forgotten, erased. Books called *Mississippi* sort of routinely leave the Piney Woods out.

In fact, history never seemed of much interest to Picayunites, as a whole. The one antebellum house in the region was privately owned and operated and since hardly anybody came to Picayune except to see somebody who lived there it hadn't been turned in to a bed & breakfast residence. It was also at the end of a very long driveway which made driving past it to show friends impossible. I actually laid eyes on it only once in twenty years – when I went there with a friend to run an errand. Grampaw Grady Thigpen, one of Picayune's half-dozen real patriarchs, did a yeoman's and commendable job of interviewing the older folks in the Picayune area, particularly those from Turtleskin and Gainesville, and of recording those interviews in a series of books he published himself, to record the old times, especially beginning in the late fifties when the most impossible of rumors exploded throughout the region that NASA would move in and take us into outer space, although to get us there it would have to destroy much of the area's early history at Gainesville, Pearlinton, Logtown, and Turtleskin. There was some muttering among a few naysayers and discontents, but most of us were proud to be on the solar map, and a few cemeteries and old houses were a small price to pay to belong to the universe – especially since the houses and cemeteries to be lost were somebody *else's*, not Picayune's. But even Grampaw Grady's books are histories only in the sense that they are about the past – or rather they are about what people remembered about the past; and they were generic history: they describe almost nothing that is peculiar to Mississippi or to the South: most of what happened there could have happened anywhere with similar geography. Picayune, sitting high and sitting pretty, was saved, apparently, because it had managed to situate itself on the *one spot in all of Southeast Mississippi* where nothing had ever happened. We even erased the one trace of Indian life in the area by simplifying the perfectly marvelous name of the Hobolochitto River to Boley Creek. It tells a lot that we had no kind of monument to our war dead until 1988. And though several times over the past five or six years I have asked several in Picayune what plans are being made for its upcoming centennial, I have gotten no response that indicates that anybody actually cares whether there's a centennial celebration or not. Actually, I find this kind of charming, even refreshing, given the worship of the South's past in so many places – a worship that always looks to me like enslavement.

But I'm far from complaining, really, no matter how much like whining this sounds, since growing up outside of history – or at any rate growing up in a sort of time-warp where southern history was a kind of distant bell – gave me certain advantages – or I call them advantages, might as well, as a default option, since whether they are advantages or not they are what history – or historylessness – handed me at birth and there's not a lot I can do about that. I can never have been born in Natchez or Oxford or the Delta,

desirable as that might be, no matter how hard I try, so I might as well accept my Picayunist status and get on with my life, and I hope to succeed pretty soon.

It is as if Picayune had succeeded in hiding from the rest of Mississippi and the South, swaddled as we were in those tall gorgeous pines, as if we did everything we possibly could to avoid calling attention to ourselves, to diminish our presence. Even the name *Picayune*, surely the oddest, most bizarre name ever bestowed upon a town, not only suggested or implied but actually *claimed* its kinship with the smallest, the least valuable, the least inspiring, identified it with small-mindedness and pettiness: by naming it, the city parents described it as something worthless and uninteresting, something to be avoided, if possible. It is not a name that attached us to the glories of the past or to the aspirations of the future. The name, it would seem, stuck us smack dab in the present, the current moment; like the daily newspaper which a Picayune bought, life went on by the day, each day different, each day the same. The name was apparently given to us by Eliza Jane Poitevent Nicholson, the woman editor of the New Orleans newspaper by that name, who lived in our antebellum house; at very least the town was named in honor of her exalted position on that paper. Since she had already given her married name, Nicholson, to a small railroad stop two or three miles south of Picayune, we can only speculate whether the namers ever considered calling our community Poitevent or even Eliza Jane. I confess I have often wondered what it would have been like to grow up in Eliza Jane, Mississippi, and whether Jesus could have ever been lord over Eliza Jane, as the signs proclaim him to be over Picayune.

So: I grew up outside the Southern myth, by which I mean, of course, that portion of southern history, that part of the public image of the South that belongs to Natchez, Vicksburg, and Oxford, but which attaches itself to all the rest of us, and that has accounted for a lot. There were no Civil War battles in the area, so we had no statues of Civil War heroes adorning the courthouse square: we had no courthouse square, for that matter. We had no huge courthouse or antebellum mansions which we showed to visitors. I never to my knowledge talked to a Civil War veteran or anybody else who knew one, and I never heard tales about *The War* from uncles and aunts. Andrew Jackson and his merry men apparently marched through the area, even camped there, on the way to fight the Battle of New Orleans, but that was in another war and so does not really count. I did not grow up imbibing from my mother's milk or from any ancestors an overwhelming sense of myself *as a southerner*. I did not grow up surrounded by natural-born story-tellers and we did not sit around the veranda of an afternoon sipping toddies or moonshine, telling and retelling enthralling family legends. I had only one uncle who fancied himself a raconteur, who would stumble through a joke and laugh himself into hysterics while repeating the punch line every time his audience's polite

laughter subsided. When I studied Mississippi and southern history in high school I might as well have been studying the history of Afghanistan; and I still cannot keep the names of Confederate and Union generals straight.

Oh, like Doris Betts, I can *do southern*, of course, because I have been around a bit and know all the *signs* that folks take for southern: I can supply southern upon demand or expectation for those who think they want southern. I can give you what I think you think you want, and I do so partly because it's fun to put you on, but also partly because it's often easier to give you what you want than to expect you to accept something other than what you are going to see no matter what you are looking at. I can hunker for hours, eat grits by the gallon, talk with a twang and a drawl, but I draw the line at chewing tobacco and dipping snuff; I own three Patsy Cline and a dozen Willie Nelson albums and mostly sing Hank Williams, Sr., in the shower. I can fry catfish and hushpuppies and drink large quantities of Dixie or any other kind of beer while doing so, and the clerk in my local liquor store used to be a guy named Billy Bob who once sold me a bottle of what he called *pie-not nawer* wine. I can preach you a sermon that'll make you want to be a Southern Baptist and make your mama and papa send me their social security checks every month. I can do Rhett to your Scarlett and, given enough time and incentive, Scarlett to your Rhett. *BUT* I also drink St. Emilion and eat Beluga caviar. If forced to choose I would listen to Kiri Te Kanawa, Renee Fleming, and Elizabeth Schwarzkopf rather than Patsy Cline and Loretta Lynn. On good days I can spell Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and would drive a Porsche if I could afford one. I do not come from a slaveholding family; nobody that I know of in my ancestry was a Confederate soldier. My history is thus more pathetic than tragic, and the things I feel guilty about are none of your damned business.

I want to tell you my puzzlement when I discovered that Picayune had no part of the Civil War, and so shared in none of the glorious exploits of those who created that Southern heritage that still makes grown men and women weep to share. Oh, we were required to take History, of course: the curriculum at Picayune High School, we believed, was even designed so that the one teacher everybody had to take before graduating was the History teacher, Mrs. Richardson, a classic, a cliché from all our childhoods: you have *ALL* known her, in one guise or another. But the main feature of history in her classes was our collective interest in whether she would ever find a brassiere that fit: we even occasionally pooled bets on how many times during class she would reach under her collar to adjust those straps. And so it comes as something of a shock to recall the *one fact* that I gleaned from her classes. It was a moment in my 10th-grade history class in 1959, I believe, when Mrs. Richardson came smirking into class one morning brandishing a newspaper and announced that the last Civil War veteran had just

died – finally, I gathered. I remember it that she said he was a Mississippian, from just up highway 11 in Poplarville. “You know what this means, dont you?” she said, with the only twinkle I ever saw in her very serious eyes. We didn’t. “It means the South has finally won the Civil War!” She announced this as something momentous, but we either hadn’t gotten to the Civil War yet in American History or, more likely, I was not paying attention during Pickett’s charge or Vicksburg or Jackson or Appomattox. So I was more mystified than elated at the news that we had won! Won *What?* I wondered. What war? What the hell is she talking about? I knew about World War II because my father had fought in it, and about Korea because I had seen it on television. But Natchez and Vicksburg were foreign countries to me, part of a time and place I had not inherited and knew nothing about.

So that to learn that *we* had just won a war I didn’t even know we were fighting, much less *still* fighting set in motion a lifelong puzzlement and distress for me and lodged me firmly in a historical gap, a chasm, of history, which seemed to shut me off from a past that everybody seemed to have but us Picayunites, or maybe it was only I who didn’t have it. So in Picayune I was outside of history, but I began catching up, or trying to, when as an undergraduate just outside of Jackson, Mississippi, I learned that the war in fact had *not* been won but was an ongoing battle. I heard Ross Barnett incite Mississippians to mob rule at an Ole Miss-Kentucky football game and then, within a week or so, listening to the carnage at Ole Miss on radio stations that played “Dixie” instead of commercials; and I read and heard as the freedom riders and marchers and demonstrators made their way through the South; listened and read and shuddered as the names Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner emblazoned themselves across America’s beautiful for spacious skies and amber waves of grain. I did have the grace to be embarrassed, humiliated even, when Lawrence Rainey’s tobacco-stuffed face leered at the nation in *Life Magazine*’s famous photo of him sitting in the courtroom with his cronies; and at Mississippi College I met and got to know one of the sweetest girls I *ever* knew: she became a kindergarten teacher, and was killed in the summer of 1968 in a shootout with the FBI as she and her lover were transporting in the trunk of their car a bomb to place in a synagogue in Meridian. The Jackson papers extolled her virtues and praised Mississippi College for making such fine young people possible. All this without hearing a shot myself, without seeing a klan cross-burning, without witnessing a lynching, and almost without witnessing so much as a single act of discourtesy of any kind between the races. Running, still trying to catch up, but still not mine, not even as the bodies continued to pile up over a century after Appomattox.

But perhaps running away from, not toward: it was still not my war, not my history, not the history that positioned *me* in time and space, since I was not Natchez or the Delta

but merely small, twentieth-century middleclass, historyless Picayune. In graduate school in the late sixties I was catching up, but still running at a distance. In South Carolina I was advised that in fact the North had won the war and that everybody in South Carolina was still mightily pissed off about it. I was astonished to meet 80 year olds who were still mad as hell at Sherman in particular for burning Atlanta and in *particular* particular for burning Columbia, the houses where their parents and grandparents had lived; they took the burnings very personally – which, as I once suggested to one of them, was exactly what Sherman had intended, wasn't it? I met professors and other graduate students who knew details of Antietam, Shiloh, and Chickamauga that I had only recently read about in Faulkner and who boasted of their own ancestors' heroism at Petersburg or Cold Harbor, and I kept quiet when they all assumed that because I was a Mississippian I had similar stories about my own family which I for some reason did not want to share. And some of these today, nearly forty years later, are still promoting the delusion that that damned war destroyed the last ordered society civilization has known – without, of course, considering on whose black backs, by whose black sweat, that order, those antebellum mansions, had been built. *Order?* I thought, even then: *for whom?* I had no such ancestors, no such connections, no such history as they had. As I've said, I could never even keep the Confederate and Federal generals straight (still can't, now after 2 volumes of Shelby Foote's magnificent history of the war and Ken Burns's documentary). That war was on the one hand a great Black Hole into which drained so much of the twentieth century I encountered when I left Picayune and threatened to suck me through along with everything else; and on the other hand a kind of challenge to me since because I liked reading and writing about Faulkner, I seemed inevitably and understandably taken to be *in* Southern Studies, where folks would expect me to know all there was to know about The Wilderness and Lookout Mountain. But not my history, not yet, and thanking God, for that war was indeed a hard war to love. You have to work hard to love any war, I'd say, much less to love one you had *lost*.

Not my history, not my war even yet, when back in Mississippi for good some 25 years ago, I took visitors to Natchez and listened as the tour guides told us all about the beauty of the antebellum mansions but said not one single solitary word about the black sweat that made them possible, watched continuing battles in the newspapers and the legislature, often joining them myself, over the replication of the confederate flag in the Mississippi state flag until finally our legislature heroically decided to turn the choice of state flag over to the Mississippi voters who *of course you bet your season tickets to Ole Miss football* voted to keep the flag as it was, flying confederately and smugly over capitol and all state institutions. So it was my history, after all, when our governor

attended a press conference to announce that there would be no more set-asides for minority contractors wearing a wide gray tie on which Rebel soldiers hoisted the confederate flag high.

My war, finally, then, at that moment: and it always has been, it and all its afterglow, which I never feel more bitterly – and bemusedly too – than when I travel and meet people who type me because I am a Mississippian. I'm bemused because I know better; bitter because I know our accusers have ample justification for thinking of all Mississippians that way, given how often we shoot ourselves in our social and cultural and political feet; and when candidates for jobs come to my campus for interviews and are *still* surprised that we have sidewalks and McDonald's and Porsches and BMWs, and report how many of their friends and family had questioned their intelligence and sanity by presuming to seek employment in savage, redneck, racist Mississippi. It is my war, my history most galling of all, in my recognition that I was going to be tarred with it no matter what I said or did or was or tried to be: racist, redneck, ignoramus, and, almost worst of all, backwardlooking. And all the more reason to hate that damned war, since *I did not and do not want it*. But I did not want to go back to Picayune either, though I came close, by moving to Hattiesburg and it has been mine these 25 years.

For me, history was something that happened somewhere else, in another country, countries as far away as Natchez and Oxford – and I don't mean miles. I vaguely knew that history had happened in New Orleans, where I went at every opportunity, but I had very little larger sense of its history than the general signs partly in a foreign language that I read and immediately forgot. So that I seem to have grown up in a historical vacuum of sorts, an area swaddled in pine trees that seemed to keep time, history out, to insulate us not from change so much as from any of the traditions, good or bad, by which so many Mississippi towns, even Piney Woods towns further west and south, created an identity that connected them to the past, and therefore for better or worse gave them a foothold on the present, a solid place to look *from*.

If anything, our eyes seemed always on the future: we mushroomed around the railroad that came through carrying folks to Chicago and other points north; we rejoiced when the interstate came through, and didn't worry too much, that I could tell, over the possibility that a great influx of New Orleanseans might make of Picayune a bedroom community and so change its demographics and its bland social life (though there would have been considerable concern over the possibility that some of those Cajun catholic folks might want to be able to buy beer at the 7-11); and we rejoiced when NASA announced it was on the way, to the point of naming our first shopping mall the Space Flight Plaza Mall, a quite wonderful and even preposterous ecstatic *overreach*, it seemed to me even then, to attempt to catch the tail of the first rocket to the moon and to ride

along with it. Picayune was ever a waystation for folks on their way from one place to another, folks escaping the past into an unknown, unknowable future. That is, Picayune's motto seems always to have been: *we start today*, not yesterday. We look forward, if only because we have no Backward to look at. Picayune was Ground Zero.

Growing up without history, I say, and with eyes pointed by default into the future, I had no solid place to stand on the slippery slopes, the constantly shifting and destabilizing sands of the present moment, no already-established points of view to guide my understanding of what was happening, no traditions to accept or to rebel against, to help me make sense of things, which is, of course, among the important things that history does for us. I had no sense of *process*, of how things got to be the way they are, the step by step accretion of action, reaction, and consequence, cause and effect multiplying themselves infinitely over the years. Oh, I knew well enough that things happened in the past, but they seemed unconnected to each other, and unconnected to me. It never occurred to me that any of the citizens of Picayune, other than my own parents, actually had a *reason* for coming to live in that little place; they just seemed to me to have appeared there one fine morning and settled down. It never occurred to me to wonder how things, people, *started*, how they got to be where and what they were. It is more than difficult for me to confess these things to this group, since I know you are shaking your heads at least internally, pointing out to yourselves my own obtuseness, my own purblindness; and I agree that a good deal of what I describe today was my own intellectual and emotional limitations that caused me to miss so much; no doubt they are still at work. But work with me, please, since I am talking about how it seemed to me, one person, not necessarily how it actually was.

Such a start in life, though, isn't necessarily all that bad; since without a ready-made history to tell me what I thought and saw, a condition which could have been a considerable advantage to a worthier pair of eyes, the advantage of being able to see things for the first time, to experience things for the first time and to try to understand them, or even describe them, on their own terms instead of the terms history handed me. I had precious little of the state's racial history to explain, for example, either to defend or accuse: Yes, I know that Pearl River County occasioned Theodore G. Bilbo and Mack Charles Parker, and I know they didn't occur in a historical vacuum – though in fact Bilbo and Parker are more closely associated with Poplarville than with Picayune and in fact the Parker episode did seem to come out of nowhere and was as strange to my youth as a mountain in the Mississippi Delta would be. Picayune's protective bubble gave, but it did not give way. I know from my own family that all that history, all those blunders, lay simply quiescent during the fifties and erupted in racial conflict at Picayune High during the eighties; but I am speaking here of how Mississippi's and the South's history

intruded, or did not intrude, on us at Picayune in the fifties, how Picayune seemed to me so oblivious to its southernness, so innocent of any collective need to claim any history at all, who were dead set on the future.

I'm not sentimentalizing the fifties in Picayune, I hope: it was not an Eden, to be sure, since I was aware of change, of something energetic and dynamic about those days. There were, still are, those truly wonderful pine trees everywhere, thanks to Lynn and Stewart Gammill, some few live oaks here and there along the Pear River. I saw the logging trucks that pulled the cut trees from the forest and I lived barely two or three blocks from the sawmill the trucks brought them to; I heard the saws rip them in to lumber; I saw the gleaming bright boards stacked by the thousands, probably by the millions. So I know they – the loggers, the lumbermen – were cutting the timber, but I was never conscious of any diminishment of the forests that has distressed so many southerners and northerners too who read Faulkner's "The Bear" – read it wrongly, I should say – and who inevitably saw lumbermills as scenes of despoliation; despoiling not just the wilderness but Eden too, they were tools of Satan. Faulkner disparaged the *waste* of natural resources, not their uses, and I saw little waste.

I had no sense that anything was being destroyed, but rather in fact that the lumber was the spawn not of Satan but of very creation itself, and that in the Piney Woods around Picayune at least, creation and destruction fed on each other in a perfectly balanced symbiosis of nature and people and need. I had the great good fortune to know L. O. Crosby, Jr., as the father of two of my friends, and had the opportunity on several occasions to follow with his son Oz and other friends through the woods at Camp Tiak just outside Wiggins, as he talked lovingly about the trees, teaching us the difference between short-leaf and long-leaf pine, which was easy to spot, and slash and loblolly, which was not. At any rate I got from him and such experiences in Boy Scouts a city boy's sense of the Big Woods as *useful* rather than merely holy or merely mystical and symbolic: I saw the forests being replanted as they were cut and so knew the Pine Forests as dynamic and not static, as existing *in* time rather than *before* time, as Faulkner's Isaac McCaslin – but not Faulkner – would have it: cities cannot be unless at least some of the natural world is sacrificed to it.

Thus the Picayune of the fifties seems to me now a place where the South started over, could start over because it was free of so many of the blemishes, the irreparable blunders of the past that marked other parts of the state so indelibly and not incidentally made them so interesting for historians and buffs and tourists alike.

Picayune, historyless itself, swallowed up the relicts of Gainesville and Turtleskin by offering them a place to come to to start over after being dislodged from their own history, where they had always shopped anyway. It had done that for others, too, among

them my own father who came to Picayune to start his own life over. In *Outside the Southern Myth* I talk about him in a chapter called “My Father, Flem Snopes,” because like thousands of other southerners, he and Flem left the farm in order to be city boys; Flem, as you know, has been castigated over and over again for escaping the land, for becoming a merchant, a banker, a deacon, the devil-spawn of the middle-class mind; but Faulkner told Flem’s story through other people’s reactions to him; Flem never gets to tell his side of things. When I began to understand my father, I believe I got somewhere close to Flem’s own story.

What Picayune represented to my father was opportunity: the future. He wanted to escape his past, his origins: not a bad desire, of itself, and easier to understand if you don’t – like a lot of city folks, like a lot of urban and otherwise urbane critics who have swallowed the Fugitives’ agrarian line – sentimentalize rural life. It is quite simple to understand, however, if you can see things from the point of view of the escapee, the real twentieth-century fugitive, who makes those ideologues from Nashville look like Bossman on a chain gang. I’ve no doubt that some real sense of the possibilities of the American Dream drove my father almost from the beginning; I’ve also no doubt that he was less driven by the dream than by the white-hot burning desire not to have to spend the rest of his life plowing to make a living. All of the children, he and all his siblings except his older sister moved away from farming as soon as they could. He never talked much about farming, and so I cannot identify from the highway any crop less obvious than corn or cotton in bloom. So far as I could tell, he felt no need to *be southern* in any but the geographical sense. He never mentioned Robert E. Lee or Jefferson Davis either, that I remember, and I doubt if he could have outlined the Battles of Gettysburg or Shiloh or the Wilderness. He simply didn’t have time for history, anybody’s but his own, and was running like hell from that. He was much more interested in his future and ours, was as committed to the present and the future as NASA was; he was as committed to being by God middle class and by God American and by God cityfolks as he could possibly be, and I expect he’d have willingly run every tree in Pearl River County through the planing mill to make all that happen. And I expect he wasn’t alone either.

He turned his back to, if not on, his rural origins and, like Scarlet O’Hara, swore never to be poor again. He moved to Picayune in 1939. He was twenty-two, with a high school education, a fugitive from the Depression in rural Mississippi. Picayune was actually incidental; his father came to pastor at a church in Nicholson, a couple of miles south, and he followed to seek his fortune in the big city. He took a job as a night clerk in a service station owned by Bill Alexander, spent his days moonlighting by borrowing one of Alexander’s pickup trucks and driving satsumas to Monticello to sell, so that he could visit my mother-to-be.

When he and Mother got married Alexander raised his salary from \$15 to \$20 a week. In 1943 he was inducted into the army and was wounded in Italy. After the war he worked as a chief clerk for Schrock's Western Auto Associate Store and then for a while for Bo Stevens in a similar capacity. From them he learned the trade. In 1953 he decided he wanted to be the boss himself; he bought a Firestone Tire & Rubber Company franchise, and sold Firestone tires and Philco appliances for the rest of his life.

He explained his nerves as the result of his experiences in Italy. No doubt: I have seen him tremble watching news footage of the Korean War on television; he would not, did not at any rate, talk very much about the war, and would not watch a movie in which there were battle scenes. I suspect that he suffered from a version of what we now call post-trauma stress syndrome most of his post-war life, and that that was at the base of a lot of his, and our, problems. My mother and my Aunt Virginia assure me that he returned from the War a different person. But I, of course, didn't know him before the War and so had nothing to compare him to, no reason to compare him to anything but my own need.

The store's essential product was the middle class life: we sold Firestone tires and various other appliances and devices for the good life: refrigerators, ranges, washers and dryers, lawn mowers and parts, shotguns and rifles, fishing gear, radios and televisions and hi-fi equipment. It was a small hardware version of an old-fashioned general store and a risky proposition, since there were at least three or four other similar stores in small-city Picayune, stores much larger and better equipped, much older and more established in the community, with a wider range of choices.

I was ten in 1953. I spent my teen years watching and, I like to think, helping him build a business. He kept citing frightening statistics about the number of failures among newly-started businesses like his and vowing that that was not going to happen to him – us. I never did know, still don't know, how he managed to make a decent living; perhaps I don't want to know. I don't know what combination of the power of his personality, the quality of the Firestone and Philco line of products, dogged hard work, under-the-table financial deals, or simple good luck made the Firestone store a go. He did work hard. He left home early, sometimes way before dawn, and came home late, sometimes spending twenty or so hours a day at one or another aspects of the business. He could afford to employ only two or three people at any given time – a bookkeeper, a salesman/assistant manager, someone to change the tires, to deliver and install air conditioners and washing machines – so he had to tend to a lot of the store's activities himself, both managerial and menial: delivering appliances, changing tires, repairing lawn mower engines, installing TV antennas. When bookkeeperless, he would sometimes go the store at four a.m. to post the previous day's receipts, before opening the doors at seven. When he

closed at six p.m., he would come home for supper, then perhaps head back to the store to catch up on the lawn mower engines that had been brought in for repair; frequently he would then go “collecting,” looking for people who were behind in their payments, tracking them down in their homes and if necessary repossessing the item they had bought. Sometimes I would go with him, when the item to be repossessed was so large he couldn’t handle it by himself; but he could singlehandedly load almost anything into the pickup, even a large refrigerator. I could too, after some practice.

By 1968 he had indeed made a go of the store; it was beginning to pay off in all the ways he wanted it to. As he became successful, he was invited to join the Rotary Club, and was very proud to associate with some of Picayune’s older and more distinguished people. He became a deacon in the First Baptist Church. He became a Shriner. He bought nice clothes in Dallas when we went there to visit his brother, and he enjoyed telling about the shopping, the purchase. Picayune wasn’t big enough for him.

For fifteen years he worked like a dog to make a go of it, and died of a massive heart attack, his first, on a hot July day in 1968, literally from the strain of overwork, changing a huge truck tire (a very complicated and physically demanding process in those days), because there was nobody else to do it.

I fear that much in this minimalist sketch of his life will leave the impression that I accuse him of Babbitry, of a shallow chamber-of-commerce quest for material certification; that I present him as a parody of the American Dream. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, that is precisely the opposite impression I want to create. There is nothing parodic about his life, certainly not if seen from his own point of view or that of thousands of others across the South who shared that same quest. You can see the outlines of parody only if you are sufficiently a Have as to see him and his like as pretenders. He wasn’t pretending. Not a bone in his body was faking anything. He desperately wanted a share of the good life and it wasn’t his fault if he didn’t have the luxuries of place and fortune, wasn’t the prince of a Delta of Natchez plantation family, that would have allowed him some, any, distance on himself and his dream – luxuries that I do have, largely thanks to him. He was too seriously involved in escape and survival to see himself, or to allow anyone else to see him, as anything to laugh about. It is essential to grant him the absolute dignity and seriousness of purpose that he invested his own life with.

He hated life in the country, as I say, but life in the city was also a serious, serious business. He told me that he often had to do things to survive in business that were unethical, though he was never very specific about what those things were, and I have often wondered why he told me about them – to keep me from discovering them

independently, perhaps, though I did so little with the store's financial records that that was not really likely. To implicate me? I doubt it, since he knew I had no plans to inherit the store and its good will. To be honest with me about the real world? To confess?

The city presented more serious problems, too. I ran across a picture of him during his early days in Picayune some years ago when I was reading through microfilm copies of the Picayune *Item*. The accompanying story reported that he had been the victim of a holdup at Bill Alexander's service station, on the main drag of town, where Canal Street crosses Highway 11. The thieves held a gun to his head, forced him to the floor, and fled with the cash in the till and a tank full of gas. He never mentioned it and I didn't discover it until long after he was dead. I doubt that he forgot it, as I cannot.

I have tried to meditate on this scene, but without much luck. I would like to structure my way into his mind as he lay on that cold floor waiting for those invasive strangers to empty the cash register and perhaps to shoot his young life casually through the head, but I cannot do it, boggling perhaps at the picture of my own life spread so receptively there upon a cold grease-stained gas station floor, my own preemption a cold barrel nuzzling behind my notyet father's ear. Perhaps it's just that I cannot impute fear or helplessness to him, not even at twenty-two. Try as I might, I cannot impose on him at twenty-two what I would have felt at twenty-two or any other age with a gun at my head (though of course that gun *was* at my head). He must have felt fear and helplessness, as he must have felt them later, during the War; this perhaps explains why he would not speak of either or at least did not, since to speak of them would admit not weakness but vulnerability – which, like respect and respectability, are different but not incompatible. What is respectability anyway but a shoring up against vulnerability?

What really terrified him in the city, I suspect, was of another order altogether. The summer following my tenth grade, I think it was, he and I worked the Firestone Store mostly by ourselves: just the two of us to do all the store's activities of selling, sweeping, installing, delivering, collecting. In some ways we were closer than ever, but the summer was unrelenting in its pressure on both of us, he to make a living, I to get along with him, to contribute. I worked most days from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. or so; it was one of those several stretches when he started at 3 or 4 a.m. and didn't come home until around midnight, sometimes later. If I sometimes went home at lunch he frequently didn't, and I'd bring him a plate lunch or a sandwich; Mother would even more frequently bring us both a meal of some sort. Usually around closing time he would tell me to bring the display merchandise – lawn mowers and cane fishing poles – in from the front, to drive the pickup home and he'd call me or Mother when he was ready to leave. We locked the rear entrance to the store from the inside, so that when we went home together in the evening,

one of us would go out the back and drive the pickup to the front while the other locked the back door and met the truck at the front.

On this evening he told me to go ahead home and he'd call. We lived barely a half mile from the store and, because I wanted to walk and dawdle and probably because I just didn't want to be obligated to come back to get him later, I brought the truck around, parked it in front where he'd have to see it, then began my mindless walk home. I had not gone five blocks when he caught up with me. He jerked the truck over toward the sidewalk I was on, slammed the brakes, and said "Get in this truck, boy." He was angrier than I had ever seen him. He spoke softly, but I could hear him over the blaring retributive squeal of the brakes. I got in, shaken, not knowing what I had done; but this was a more or less permanent condition, not knowing what I had done that would eventually turn out to be wrong. He jerked the truck into first gear, pulled off so hard my head bumped against the back window, and sped the rest of the way home as if running from something. He turned into our driveway, lurched to a gravelly stop behind our new high-finned Chrysler and said, "I don't work twenty hours a day to pay for a car and a truck so that my family has to be seen *walking*," and he leaned over me and opened the door. I couldn't even think, much less say, "But I wanted to walk. I *wanted* to." I could only get out of the truck, watch him slam into reverse, slew backwards out into the street, and gun it on back in the direction of the store.

I am still stunned by this, nearly fifty years later; even then I knew that it came from out of nowhere, both its intensity and its devastating originality. It was light years outside the widest range of errors I thought I might ever be guilty of: walking home. From this distance I can attribute motives, probable causes, and I have tried to teach myself that to understand is to forgive: who to know what encounter with what richer folks at the Rotary Club, what innocent jest, what crack, overheard by what improbable chance, had set him off, reminded him of his many long walks to town or to a neighbors' or even just of the time when he didn't have other transportation than his feet? Even so, I cannot account for, or forgive, his exceptional fury. Understanding and forgiveness are not the same, not necessarily even related.

I don't remember what passed for the next three or four hours, whether I talked to Mother about what had happened or not, whether I actually cried or, as usual, just bore it silently, loud as it was. I only remember myself in my bed in my room at the front of the house, in the dark, wide awake and wishing I – or he – were dead, wishing I could figure out how to make him happy somehow, not suspecting that he was probably even unhappier than I, more out-of-place than I, and much less likely than I ever to understand what he'd done. I lay there opening myself to hatred, almost convincing myself of its power to immobilize him, to shut him out of my emotional concerns: that

was the only power I had over him. And then came the only apology he ever offered me, an apology which, in being even more complicated than the affront, denied me that saving hatred.

Lying there, in more than one kind of darkness, I had no idea of the time. I heard the house's reverberating wood signal his arrival home. He and Mother talked, I do not know about what; perhaps she remonstrated with him. Some time later, long enough for him to have stewed, bathed, prepared for bed, he came to my room. I was preternaturally aware of every sound as he walked the long hall toward my room. He knocked and I said "come in." He opened the door in the dark and I remembered in a flash that I hadn't closed the door to the cedar chest closet, which opened toward the door behind which he stood repentant. But no sooner than I regretted my carelessness, he entered the room. I heard the *bump* and then the silence, into which I plummeted in freefall. I knew from the sound that he had bumped his head and I hoped he hadn't put his eye out on the sharp shaped corner. It was bad enough but he said nothing, and after a pause, he came on to my bed. He stood there a moment; even in the dark I could tell he didn't know how to implore, what position to assume, how even to begin, so foreign was the idea of apology to him. I didn't help him; I didn't turn on the bedlight; I didn't want to see. I was still plummeting, though his footsteps had given me some purchase on time and space. He got into bed, embraced me. "I'm sorry," he said, and I bawled. "It's o.k." I said, and hoped that it was, but of course it wasn't. He lay there with me some time longer – I don't know how long; it could have been most of the night – then got up and walked carefully back to his bed: I knew his arms were outstretched to find the cedar chest before it found him; I still would not turn on the light. Next morning there was a spot of blood on my pajamas and one on my pillowcase, brown and accusing; he had a small bandaid on his forehead. We never spoke of the incident, and it has never been more than a micromillisecond or two away from my mind. The apology is constant because it was sealed in blood that I had inadvertently drawn. The affront is there to explain the apology and if the incident had not been significant enough in his own life for him to apologize for it, actually to recognize and admit culpability, doubtless I would have swallowed this too, deep-sixed this too, like everything else.

Still, it's not the apology but his virtually helpless sputtering exasperation at me for walking home, his sense that my walking home was somehow a public humiliation of him, an action that somehow excluded him from a class to which he desperately wanted to belong, a future to which he had desperately and even frantically committed himself so long ago, a future by which he would escape his own history. His helpless, desperate exasperation, doubtless more terrifying to him than it was even to me, is the center, the core, around which all my memories cohere, the vortex out of which all my meditations

about things southern whirl, in double and triple helixes, roaring soundlessly round and round in my head, and they swirl all the more complicatedly because nothing in his life seems to me now particularly southern at all. He was merely one of thousands of country boys across the nation during the Depression who figured life in the big city would have to be better than subsistence living facing the wrong end of a mule.

I never doubted that in his own way he loved me, too, but his love was always on his terms and he made it my terrifying responsibility to figure out how and when to tap that love, how to be worthy of his generosity. Still, he did the best he could, within his lights, and as I say he was often generous and supportive, even if hardly ever tender and gentle, intimate. I could just never tell which father was going to greet me each day, could never tell what inadvertence, what circumstance from a day or a week ago would bring censure or praise. How much of our problems are traceable to character, mine or his, how much of it his debilitating brushes with vulnerability during the War or on that cold service station floor, how much of it he brought with him from his relationship with his parents, I do not know. It breaks my heart to realize that knowing is hardly to the point any more: when I got old enough to understand that the problem might rather be in him than in me, he was long since dead. Even so, even knowing, I have spent hours of psychic energy trying to understand him, trying to figure out what was wrong with him, to fix *him* somehow, even in my memory, to make everything retroactively all right and, by fixing *him*, somehow to fix *me*.

In my more generous moods I can indeed think of my father as wanting something I might eventually have been able to give him had he lived long enough. He often said, and I believed, that he wanted us to have things he didn't have, and I know that he didn't mean just nice middleclass things like indoor plumbing and airconditioned houses. I think he also meant, though he would not have put it his way, to exculpate me from *his* past, to absolve me of *his* history, to give me a past less needful of escaping. Perhaps we missed each other because he could not have explained that to me in any way that I could have understood it even if he had completely understood it himself; perhaps because my need caught him at a time when he had to concentrate on the material side of his ambition, but I think it's far more complicated: in order to provide me those things he had not had he necessarily positioned me, as a city boy, to be able to want things that he, as a country boy, could not have wanted because he didn't know they were there to be wanted. We thus wound up wanting different things, things which might have been compatible had he lived long enough for us to reconcile them.

He manifestly wanted me to succeed and to be happy and productive, took pride in the little I accomplished before he died. What I wanted was not in him to give or to accept, probably not in me to articulate in any way that either of us at the time could

have understood. I am sure that he knew then, as I was to learn only later, that to need is to be vulnerable. So far as I could tell, he did not need from me either understanding or any form of love that I could have described: respect and obedience were as close as either of us could have come. I therefore insulated myself from him and his volatility by withholding my love. I am now no more permeable to love or hate either than fifty years ago. He beat them out of me, or perhaps rather drove them indelibly inward. Perhaps he did this deliberately, even if not consciously; perhaps he was protecting himself, too, from vulnerability: from my love, by quashing it in me.

In ways I am still stuck in that darkened room, waiting for another apology, which will never come and which I can't move on without. Mostly now, I don't feel much of anything for him: neither love nor hate, fear nor pity nor pride, pain nor pleasure, not even indifference. When I let myself feel anything, it is not even regret so much as a constant ponderable sadness at whatever of family we didn't have because he had his history and I had mine, he was he and I was I, blood be damned, and because each of us desperately needed the other to be something that he was not and could never be.

I had not the leisure, in the trenches of the fifties, to worry overmuch about his history, much less his parents, who died before I was 4 years old; I was too engaged in the daily act of making myself invulnerable to him. But knowing his history, understanding him, would not have helped me one little bit, there, in the trenches of the daily raw-nerved confrontations, major and minor: my understanding of him would not have changed one thing about him, would not have given me the power over him, over myself even, that I so desperately needed; understanding him then would have complicated my life, since knowing his history would have asked of me the impossible: to pity him, and pity him I could not, so it was pointless to try to know him: nothing could absolve me of him or him of me. So maybe the sanitized bubble of historylessness that I thought insulated Picayune was rather my own opaque bubble that insulated me from lots of things. Maybe I had no history because there were things I did not want to know, about him or about Mississippi, for fear I would inherit a history which nothing could absolve me of, and which I could not change. Maybe I feared the outrage and the helplessness I would feel if I knew how my antecedents of blood and region had helped to create the conditions which were already beginning to explode in Mississippi, literally and figuratively, as I entered my teen years. Maybe I was scared that I would be called upon to *do something about* it, that having a history I would be called upon to *be responsible to it*. And in Mississippi in the fifties and sixties, how terrifying was *that*? So maybe it was not a protective bubble I grew up in but a womb taking its own good time to birth me into my history; or maybe not a bubble or a womb either, but a simple hole in the sand in which I buried my head.

When my Polk grandparents were moving to Picayune, I have been told, my grandmother put the suitcase holding all the family photos and mementoes on top of the car; the suitcase fell off as they turned one or another bend on the way. Gasoline was very expensive, and they were very poor, so when they discovered the loss they did not turn around to look for the lost suitcase: they kept moving forward. I suspect my family has lost lots of pictures on the various radii they have travelled and have likewise wasted little time in search or in regret.

I've always taken that incident as almost too perfectly symbolic: the history, the documents, at any rate, that get lost along the road to somewhere else, but symbolic nevertheless of my own history. I have made some half-hearted efforts to discover my Polk roots, but have never been able to go backward further than about 1880, or forward later than 1830 or so, and never able to connect up either of the strands, so I sort of gave up, and to tell the truth was not all that interested, since James K. Polk had no children and clearly so I was not presidential timber.

But going through my mother's papers just last week – she died in October at the age of 82 – I discovered that she had become something of a closet genealogist, and had tracked down her – and my – Hamilton and McDaniel ancestors. Our Hamiltons, four brothers' worth, had come by way of Ontario down the Mississippi; three of them settled in East Feliciana Parish Louisiana, where one of them built a house that still stands. The fourth was my great great great great grandfather, Hance Hamilton, who bought some land in Pike County in 1820 and built a home there, making him one of the earliest settlers in Southwest Mississippi. I have to admit, that's pretty nice to know: Hance Hamilton's very name entrances and en-Hances me!. Maybe I have a history in spite of myself, in spite of Picayune. Maybe I'll have some history yet.