From:

Charles. Wright,

Quarter Notes: Improvisations

& Interviews (1995)

Miseducation of the Poet

Prologue

First, two assumptions: one, a life is not a story; two, the poet's "life" consists of only those things that are not good enough to go into his poems. Thus, part of a life is not part of a story, and the parts that I have been able to pick up and brush off here either are not poem-worthy or were overlooked by the searchlight I have stabbed from time to time into earlier areas of my life.

Second, I want to quote a couple of paragraphs from *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue,* by Paul Bowles. Substitute the phrase "the past" for "the Sahara" both times it appears and you will understand the landscape and geography I am about to talk about.

> Immediately when you arrive in the Sahara, for the first or the tenth time, you notice the stillness. An incredible, absolute silence prevails outside the towns; and within, even in busy places like the markets, there is a hushed quality in the air, as if the quiet were a conscious force which, resenting the intrusion of sound, minimizes and disperses sound straightaway. Then there is the sky, compared to which all other skies seem faint-hearted efforts. Solid and luminous, it is always the focal point of the landscape. At sunset, the precise, curved shadow of the earth rises into it swiftly from the horizon, cutting it into light section and dark section. When all daylight is gone, and the space is thick with stars, it is still of an intense and burning blue, darkest directly overhead and paling toward the earth, so that the night never really grows dark.
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> You leave the gate of the fort or the town behind, pass the

camels lying outside, go up into the dunes, or out onto the hard, stony plain and stand awhile, alone. Presently, you will either shiver and hurry back inside the walls, or you will go on standing there and let something very peculiar happen to you, something that everyone who lives there has undergone and which the French call *le baptême de la solitude.* It is a unique sensation, and it has nothing to do with loneliness. . . . Here, in this wholly mineral landscape lighted by stars like flares, . . . nothing is left but your own breathing and the sound of your heart beating. A strange, and by no means pleasant, process of reintegration begins inside you, and you have the choice of fighting against it, and insisting on remaining the person you have always been, or letting it take its course. For no one who has stayed in the Sahara for a while is quite the same as when he came.

I. *Christ School*

Dirty Dancing is the story of a young girl's loss of innocence, a "rite of passage" film revolving around a few weeks in the summer of 1963 in a Catskills' resort. The girl, played by Jennifer Grey, has just graduated from high school and is going to enter Mount Holyoke College at the end of the summer. Of course she falls in love with the resort's chief dance instructor. Everyone lets everyone else down in small ways, but in the end—as we expect from such a movie—all is righted. In a peripheral but important way, the movie is also about dancing. Just before the closing dance number, Jack Weston, who plays the owner of the resort, turns to his longtime band leader and says: "It's all over. This sort of thing isn't going to happen anymore. . . ." But what, in the summer of 1963, was "all over"? What was not going to happen this way anymore?

That is what I want to tell you about. Precisely what was not going to happen anymore is what I, ten years earlier, in May, 1953, walked into as I left the Christ School chapel, in Arden, North Carolina. With graduation over and the sun streaming, in my gray suit and Full Cleveland (white tie, white belt, white shoes), I walked down the chapel stairs into No Sweat, an enormous country that existed in the ten-year time warp between the end of the Korean War and the death of John F. Kennedy. Jennifer Grey talked of the Peace Corps; we talked about Myrtle Beach. She lived and danced out the fantasies we had to be content merely to harbor. No Sweat was a country where things took care of themselves by natural selection and by natural progression. My progression, as I recall, was one of gravity, the route of choice for many of my generation—soon to be dubbed "The Silent Generation." Gravity meant for me a summer working on the hometown newspaper in Kingsport, Tennessee, four years at Davidson College (a period I have described elsewhere as "a time of amnesia"), another four years in the Army, and then two years of graduate school. At the very moment Jack Weston followed up his first two sentences with a third—"Families are not going to come to places like this anymore—all the kids want to go to Europe"—I was, in fact, beginning a two-year stint as a Fulbright student in Italy. Jack Weston was right in all three of his sentences—the period from 1953 to 1963 was another country indeed.

Before going on, I need to rewind my film a couple of years, back to the fall of 1951. But who can remember how it was to be sixteen when you are fifty-five? Incidents, yes; details, sometimes; people, occasionally (or, at least, the people you thought they were). But *the way it was, what it was like,* is something we make up, something we reconstruct and reinvent to suit our purposes. Which is all right, I think; certainly it is easier on the ego, an organ that takes quite a pummeling at the ages around sixteen and seventeen.

In 1951 Christ School was a kind of deliverance for me. The previous year, my fifteenth, I had spent at a place called Sky Valley School, with a student body of eight souls, seven boys and one girl. Two thousand acres up around Mount Pinnacle, outside Hendersonville, North Carolina. Eight kids under the evangelical thumb of the daughter of the Episcopal Bishop of South Carolina. Age fifteen is on the outer perimeter of appreciation for such surroundings, so when I saw a school with more than one building, not to mention 143 other students, I felt I had been released.

It has been said that every one of us preserves from his

past, from memories, from quotations by which he lives, no more than a few words salvaged from a receding lifetime. If this is true, three of the words I will remember are *Campus, Claim,* and *Crumb,* the notorious three C's that augmented the three R's in my days at Christ School. They comprised the ultimate punishment short of expulsion operative in those days: restriction to *Campus,* work on a *Claim* until it was finished, and waiting on tables (removing the *Crumbs*) for the duration of the punishment.

Incidents, details, people. Surely the biggest incident—and, I now think, a fortuitous one—was the discovery of a roll of Life Savers in my dresser drawer by a nosy prefect after my first Monday afternoon in town. (We had Mondays off and went to classes on Saturdays—no doubt to avoid as much "town confrontation" as possible on Saturday afternoons.) I was, of course, immediately given an oak tree to remove (the *Claim*), a table to wait on, and an unrelieved restriction to the campus until said tree was on the ground. I learned about the school in a hurry and, as it turned out, the school learned about me in a hurry. It was the old "throw 'em in and see if they can swim" theory. By the time the tree came down, with volunteers from Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Cottages (living facilities for Upper Formers, eight boys to a cottage) hanging on ropes tied high in the tree and pushing on the trunk, I had become a member of the school in a way that little else would have made possible short of having a passing arm like John Elway's. The ordeal of agony is thicker than water. My one additional transgression during this several-week-long ordination was the liberation of Mr. Dave's axe one morning after breakfast as I was heading for my *Claim* to get in a few licks before classes. It was leaning against the doorjamb of the dining hall. Mr. Dave (about whom more later) was David Page Harris, Headmaster, teacher, and Supreme Deity of Christ School for many years: a truly remarkable man whose dedication and practices influenced the hundreds of boys who passed beneath his hands. In any case, when my roommate (who had been at the school much longer than I) asked where I had found such a fine cutting implement, and I told him, he visibly paled as he said: "That's The Man's axe." I needed no

further encouragement and had it back in place before Himself had finished his breakfast coffee.

Is it not wonderful how full of self-love memory is? Two more floes break loose from the frozen part of that first year, one another incident, the other a detail.

One of the really great things about a place like Christ School was that you could play ball even if you were not very good, which was my case: I could not see very well, but I was slow, as the saying goes. I was first-team varsity on the baseball and basketball teams both years I was there. In baseball my first year, I got one hit during the entire season. In my senior year as a starting guard, the basketball team went 0–1952/53. An amazing statistic on which I rest my case. It is true we did not have a home court for basketball that year and had to play all our games on the road—the old gym was being torn down. I have no such excuse for my batting average the year before; it must have driven Fessor nuts to keep starting me with my zero average. Fessor was Richard Fayssoux, Athletic Director and head coach of the football, baseball, and basketball teams for over fifty years. I was nicknamed Goose (for Goose Egg) and lived up to the name until the last game of the season, against Hendersonville, a huge high school with over a thousand students. We were totally outclassed except for Bill Samford and Tudor Hall, two marvelous pitchers. Somehow toward the end of the game—tight because of the smoke our guys were throwing—I came up and got my first hit of the season, ended up on second base, and eventually scored either the tying or winning run, I cannot remember which now. Where else but at a place like Christ School could such a thing happen? Even the girl I was dating—from Saint-Genevieve-of-the-Pines—was there to see it. Of such things are careers made. The next year I batted over .300, just having needed that first hit.

The detail—something more luminous than an incident, something that is part of the true fabric of things—concerns the old gym, the shake-sided, dilapidated wooden structure that has been replaced twice since my days there. Behind it, overlooking the football field, was where we were allowed to smoke, if we were sixteen and had smoking permission. Pipes

only. It was deep autumn or winter before I got my permission and I remember going out there after supper, in the dark, jacket turned up against the cold wind, and joining something I somehow knew was bigger than I could ever be, even though I was finally a part of it. I suppose what I was joining was Growing Up, though at the time I thought it apotheosizic. The three C's had started me on my way, but a smoking permit and the after-supper pipe (even though my head actually did spin) was the final event making me at last a true member of the school. How important that was to me, even to this day, I cannot quite express. Acceptance, as we all know, is everything at sixteen. I do not know how all this magic was worked through the windy, stolen moments behind the old-old gym, but I know it was. It was 1951 remember, a macho time in America and at Christ School: duck-tail haircuts, fourteen-inch pegged pants with welt seams and dual downs in back. Double Windsor knots, Mr. B collars. Lungsful of smoke. We were just trying to find out who we were—something no one can tell you, not even your memory. Especially your memory, that self-serving figment of someone you no longer even recognize or should even listen to.

When I think of the people at Christ School, I think first, always, of Mr. Dave, who made our classrooms so intense. I remember one big mistake I made—I took a Third Form history course my Sixth Form year. It was of course a breeze—until Mr. Dave took it over for a couple of weeks when the regular instructor, Mr. Hall, was sick. I got every question every day. Fortunately, I had a study hall the period before class, so I was able to memorize the lessons. Every day I memorized all the reading, since I would have to give it back to him word-for-word. To say that Mr. Dave got our attention is an understatement. He was also my trigonometry instructor, a course I had to pass to graduate. To say I understood nothing at all about the subject would also be an understatement. I needed a score of 66 and ⅔rds on my final exam to get out. As it happened, that was my precise score, and it was not until years later that I realized what a nice gift Mr. Dave had given me.

Mr. Dave, a name to conjure with. You never knew where he would turn up. I was convinced he had some kind of night

vision, like a cat. He would appear out of the darkness, the coal of his cigarette like a small red eye, seeking out iniquity. And then disappear. In the daylight hours he was always squinting, especially with his right eye, avoiding the smoke from the ever-present cigarette stuck in the right corner of his mouth. (Maybe it was not "everpresent"; perhaps I think this because of our fixation on smoking—especially on cigarettes, which were totally taboo.) With a two-day growth of beard and the scowl of concentration on his face as he tried to find Sid, the handyman, or get the coal cars unloaded, or get to class, or get what was broken fixed, or what was wrong righted—a teacher's suicide, a student's girlfriend's pregnancy, a drunk and disorderly in Fourth Cottage—Mr. Dave seemed invariably on the move. Everything bent a little when he passed.

The Man was everywhere, imperturbable if he had to be, otherwise if he had to be. The school seemed to operate out of his body. Nothing happened without him—each meal, each meeting, each church service, and, if you were not careful, each illicit thing you were right on the verge of doing, just as you started doing it. There was The Man. Never have I felt such presence, such all-encompassing presence and power, since then—except possibly in the Sistine Chapel in Rome in 1959. Mr. Dave, as they used to say, was something else, and I treasure his memory. No matter what, he always met you halfway. In my case, of course, he came two-thirds of the way. Which brings me back to where I started.

What was I taking with me as I walked down those sun-drenched stone steps that morning in 1953, besides a stunning insensitivity to style and fashion, a diploma, an addiction to tobacco? The usual response is a Big Word, a Fundamental Value—Truth, Honesty, Integrity, Determination, Et cetera. Was I, for instance, determined to become a writer when I left? Probably not (but if I had been, it would have been because of my mother, not the school). As I remember, I was determined mostly just to get to Myrtle Beach for a week. Still, Mr. McCullough and Mr. Hale, my two English teachers, did nothing to hinder the writing possibility. Did my affinity for the spiritual side of things come from my days at Christ

School? Probably not, but it certainly was not hindered there. Again, my earlier upbringing is probably more important. Did my love of country music come from my days at Christ School? Actually yes, thanks to two friends—Bill Covin and Clem Webb. So Merle Travis and Hank Snow, plus an easy first year in college, where we repeated all my Sixth Form courses, was what I was taking with me into the Country of No Sweat. And one more thing. An abiding affection, a True Affection, if you will. For whatever reason, or reasons, I loved my two years there when I left. Everything about it, except for breakfast. All those biscuits!

Interlude

When tears come down like falling rain,
You'll toss around and call my name.
But sleep won't come the whole night through,
Your cheating heart will tell on you.

The song was usually into its second verse by the time we had been fully and oh-so-painfully awakened. Every morning, from the café juke box underneath the rooms we had rented for the week. Hank Williams and "Your Cheating Heart." Every morning well before 7:00 A.M., the same song, the same heat, the same taste of Myrtle Beach sand-dune grit in our mouths. I cannot remember just how many of us there were in that little apartment facing the beach, over the main road, over the café: all I know is that, as in the Rhymer's Club in turn-of-the-century London, there were too many. Sleeping on couches, beds, chairs, the floor, and occasionally in the bathroom, we had come down from the mountain for a week. Mostly to get drunk, as I recall. Down the chapel steps, a quick kiss and handshake for the beaming, apprehensive parents, into a couple of cars and then, So Long, Oolong: Hendersonville, Flat Rock, the Saluda Grade, Spartanburg, Columbia, zoom . . . Jose Stuntz, Chip Hartenstein, Tommy Kirkland, Tudor Hall, Cutler Ham, Mac Hines, Jerry Knight, Bubba Tyler, Charlie Dameron . . . zoom. . . .

Well, sort of. By now, of course, that trip and that week and those people exist in another place—a place, as Paul Bowles intimates, that is so "other" it has stopped belonging to us and who we were and has become a zone, a region south of the past that lies at the edge of a mythic expanse of light, and which we more often talk of and then turn away from than we journey through. Who knows what we did: we came, we saw, we threw up, a perfectly sane and surgical battle plan to a seventeen-year-old boy, thorough idiocy to a fifty-five-year-old man as he stares out from the fort onto that hard plain, the sound of his heart beating more often arrhythmically than not, the sound of his breathing noticeably more noticeable than before. Who can remember? But the names remain, several of them candidates for the Great Names Hall of Fame—Lycurgus Cutler Ham, Huger Tudor Hall, Jose Stuntz—and the one song remains, forever associated with headaches, a queasy stomach, and an uncontrollable desire to lie down somewhere and go to sleep. Stuntz, Hartenstein, and Hall were famous in our school for a Christmas trip to Havana. All three came back with the clap, not to mention irresistible stories about naked female dancers picking up quarters with no hands, no feet, no teeth; stories about the amazing, pre-Columbian, ur-sized male members on display in the next floor show.

So we sat around Myrtle Beach and drank Cuba Libres all day—or as much of all day as we were able, probably about an hour. After getting badly sunburned on the first day, we had to avoid the beach or appear fully clothed, neither of which was conducive to meeting girls. But that was just as well; despite our stories and our imaginations, most of us were terrified by the mere thought of meeting strange girls. So we sat on the beach with our clothes on, telling ourselves what a great time we were having, praying that nothing more substantial, female-persuasion-wise, would have to happen.

Every night we would go to the dance rink, an outdoor, wooden, decklike affair by the water, and watch the college students dance to "Shake, Rattle and Roll," the big tune. After having spent countless hours bopping in practice back at school—left hand on the post of the double-decker bunk, right

hand on our waists, back and shuffle, let-loose-and-pivot, up-on-the-toes, knees-together-boogie, drop-and-spin—we were ready for the big time. Or so we thought. Oh, we could have wailed—for sure with a bedpost to hang onto—but the girls were all so *old,* and the guys were all so *big.* And both were all so *unknown.* One time I did make a move. One time. After several evenings of standing around, trying to work up the gumption, I finally cut in on one girl. Both she and her partner looked at me as though I had brought them a dead dachshund to examine, then turned away.

My most vivid recollection of that entire week is the arrival of a 1954 Mercury hardtop convertible. We must have been sitting on the balcony looking out at the afternoon when it came down the road, very slowly, wanting to be looked at. Deeply into cars, we yelled at the driver, shouting out questions. He stopped, and we got to check out the first of the year's new cars. Here was something that *really* mattered. I remember remarking about the taillights, something about their new shape and something about how much better looking they were than those of the '53s. Serious conversation. Then the driver got back in and pulled back onto the highway. Slowly, very slowly, for full effect. I remember the taillights lighting up when he put on his brakes down the road. So red. So big and so red.

2. *The Kingsport Times-News*

One particularly warm evening in, I think, September of 1959, after supper and a solitary liter of wine, I was wandering through the back streets of Rome, around the Pantheon, and suddenly found myself in Piazza Colonna, in front of the House of Deputies. Off to my right I began to hear a familiar sound over the zip and spurt of Fiats and Vespas: the faint but unmistakable roll of a printing press. Approaching, I saw a large sign, "Il Popolo," on the side of a building. Light was coming out of a barred basement window, and I could see newsprint like a swift Mobius strip pathwaying out of sight. Outside the window, at the edge of the piazza, between the

parked cars and the window light, reading fresh copy and wearing a newsprint watchcap, one of the pressmen sat in a cane chair, smoking. Having just the perfect amount of Frascati under my belt, I engaged him in conversation—in my Italian still fresh from a course at the Army Language School in Monterey, California—about my glory days in the newspaper game. Like all Italians I met in those days, he indulged me, offered me a smoke (but took one of my American, PX ones), and pretended that what a slightly drunk twenty-four-year-old American had to say about the romantic aspects of a job that probably had whittled his own life down to a stob was of interest. We passed, for my part, a pleasant hour together before I grained out into the darkness back toward the Pantheon and the bars of Piazza Navona. Bless him, whoever he was, kind and indulgent to callow youth.

I was talking about the three months I had spent working on my hometown paper in the summer of 1953, six years earlier, cleverly disguised to myself as a newspaperman. I worked the nightside for the *Kingsport News*—first as a backup and then as police reporter for the morning paper. The title "police reporter" is of course misleading, though at the time I considered it appropriately romantic and fitting. What the job required was checking the police blotter each evening; I found drunks and an occasional drowning, hit-and-run, or shooting. Most of the regular staffers worked the dayside. I was part of the downsized, nighttime holding crew, midnight's minions. Best job I ever had.

It began rather ominously. I was asked, my first afternoon there, to type something, and I said, "Type?" They said, "What?" And I said, "I can't. I don't know how." Imagine getting a summer job at a newspaper and not being able to type! So they said, "Start learning." And, for the next few days, I did; I typed, memorizing the keyboard. To this day I type with the three-finger style I taught myself there.

"There" was the newsroom on the second floor of a downtown brick building: two windows in front overlooking the street, the back giving onto the press room, where the linotype operators worked, which in turn gave way to the room containing the printing presses themselves. This was before

air-conditioning, before aluminum cans. Coca-Cola came in six-ounce green bottles, as God intended. I worked through many six-Coke nights that July and August, a nickel a pop from the machine. The newsroom itself, as I have mentioned, was staffed by remarkably few people: a night managing editor, Rudy Burke; a sports editor, Jack Kizer; a photographer, Lyle Byland; and a police reporter, me, "Chuck" Wright. I am sure they must have had a couple of real reporters, people who actually knew what they were doing, people who actually knew how to type, but naturally I do not remember them: memory's star is the Great Me. But I remember Janice Vaughn, my dayside counterpart on the woman's page. She was a sophomore from Mt. Holyoke College, a gorgeous and unapproachable older woman.

Boy Reporter: First Story

End of June. An accident at Cherokee Lake. The Boy Reporter is given the story and must find out: Who, What, When, Why, Where, and How.

Who: subject unremembered.
What: a drowning. The Boy Reporter got that right on the first telephone call to the police station.
When: the Boy Reporter forgot to ask, so that was the first callback.
Why: the Boy Reporter forgot to ask, so that was the second callback.
Where: the Boy Reporter forgot to ask, so that was the third callback.
How: the Boy Reporter forgot to ask, so that was the fourth callback.

Four callbacks to the same policeman! That is how the Boy Reporter learned the basics, meanwhile suffering acute and un-run-away-fromable embarrassment. But apparently I got enough of it together to make a readable piece, as, the next morning, there on the front page was the story, such as it was, with the byline: *By Chuck Wright, Times-News Staff Writer.* Nothing since has ever been so beguiling in print to me.

Boy Reporter: The Challenge

Night editor Rudy Burke—the Boy Reporter's ever kind, gentle, and helpful mentor—was of course "working on a novel." He was also, at least that summer, something of a drinker, and one evening he drank a lot. He came in drinking and would have left drinking had he left walking. It took a while for the rest of us to understand what was going on. But by about 9:00 P.M., we were beginning to catch on. When Lyle Byland came in from a shoot, he allowed as how Rudy was not long for our company and wondered where the bottle was. By the time Lyle found the empty under some stuff in Rudy's drawer, Rudy had already taken himself away by putting his head down on his desk, as he must have done long before in kindergarten, and going to sleep. Deep sleep.

Right after Lyle and I got back from taking Rudy home—his wife met us at the door in her bathrobe, but nothing much was said, there not being much to say—they turned to the Boy Reporter and said: Well, you've got to put the paper to bed now. What! Icicles, from stomach to colon: I've only just learned to type, and now I've got to be the editor? On Rudy's desk was the dummy for next morning's front page, half-blocked-out already and crinkled and smudged from his nap. They gave me a ruler. Someone said something about measuring the spaces for the cuts (the photographs); someone else said something about heads (headlines), column widths, and cutlines. Oh my. Time for the Boy Reporter to spring into action; time for the miraculous transformation. Cameras were rolling; it was Action City. Alas, the Boy Reporter resembled Jimmy Olsen more than Clark Kent, much less Superman. He tried, he really tried, but no sight was ever more welcome to his eyes than that of the Sports Editor, stumping up the stairs like Winnie-the-Pooh on his gimp leg, back from covering another dismal Class D, Kingsport Cherokees baseball game. To him, the front page was no more of a challenge than the sports page, which he plotted, measured, and graphed every night. Saved from disaster, the Boy Reporter leaned back, wiped the sweat from his brow, and watched Jack pound out his own column and put his own section to bed; watched Lyle

slip out the back way when everything was under control, probably off to the Moose or the Elk's Club; watched the linotype operators setting the type; and finally watched the white stairs of the moving paper climbing and settling into cut stacks. At last I watched the lights in the newsroom go out on the only edition of a newspaper I ever had a hand, however small and pink, in editing.

Boy Reporter: The Movie (Stills)

Lyle hung out in the darkroom, and since he was the easiest, freest, loosest, hippest character at the paper—just the "ests" I too wanted to be—I hung out in the darkroom as much as possible myself. Lyle was a character straight out of *The Front Page,* Ben Hecht's famous play: he carried a Speed-Graphic camera, was a sloppy dresser, drank a little all the time, and had a "gruff exterior and a heart of gold." At least to me he had those two attributes, and that was all I cared about. He took me, as the saying goes, under his wing, a wing I found to be slick and dark and exciting.

As the staff photographer, he was out much more than in, which was certainly all right with him. But because his pictures were mostly human interest or architectural, we seldom, if ever, worked together: the car crash shots were done solo and the stories written up from the police reports, for instance. So most of my exposure to him was in the darkroom—or the newsroom, where he would walk in saying deliciously outrageous things about the world in general and the *Times-News* and Kingsport in particular. Back in the darkroom he would get his chemistry going, both for the photos and for himself. The pint bottle was always near to hand, either in his pocket or in a handy drawer. But he never went over the line at work. That darkroom is where I was initiated into the joys of "nipping," little quick pulls washed down with Coke. It was where Lyle disabused me of the notion I had about continuing in newspaper work and not going to college. It was where, in the almost-dark, I began to see the faint outlines of the real world. It was where, at seventeen, I went for sustenance and was never let down, a place, as time went on, harder and

harder to come by, a place, nowadays, cut into a light section and a dark section, where the curved shadow of the past rises through it. I will always see him with his sleeves rolled up, reaching me the half-empty bottle through the querulous glow of the safelight: "Here, kid, this'll take care of what ails you." It would not, of course, but the gesture did. God rest him all road ever he offended.

Boy Reporter: The Supper

Summers in Kingsport are a lot like summers elsewhere in the South: hot as hell. Each night I would eat my supper—a sandwich—in the front seat of a '52 Oldsmobile I had driven to work and parked on Center Street. For some reason I always left the sandwich, in its brown paper bag, in the car, on the front seat. By the time I got to it around 7:00 P.M., it had been blasted by the heat into an unimaginable limpitude, the lettuce hot to the touch, bread sagged and sogged, the whole affair untoothsome and unrelieved. I sat in the front seat of my car, ate my sandwich, drank my Coke, and read. It was the reading that was the important thing. I wish I could say this was the time I discovered the Classics, that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are alive to me today because of those heat-defeated sandwich suppers in the summer of 1953. The fact is I read comic books—comic books and the novels of William Faulkner. I read most of Faulkner that summer. And a lot of comic books. One evening I remember finishing *As I Lay Dying* and then going up to the corner of State and Center Streets to ask the man-in-the-street what he thought about the Korean War ending that day. Faulkner should have inspired my best story, but he did not: my questions were no better, and the answers they elicited no better, than what we see on television today: inarticulate, intrusive, and stupid. Maybe if it had been a comic book supper I would have been more in synch and less intimidated. To this day I cannot smell bread or lettuce left out in the sun too long without that '52 Olds rising through the deeps to float in my mind's eye, with Flem Snopes and Wall Street Panic Snopes sitting in the front seat. Good grub.

He played golf. He did not write stories, he did not write poems, he did not read books (except more Faulkner, when it rained). He just played golf. He did not hang around "colorful characters," he did not have a secret "old hat" he went to visit and talk to. He just played golf. No Possum, No Sop, No Taters. Just golf.

And in September, heeding Lyle's advice and his parents' expectations, he quit his job and his adolescence and went away to college, where he drank some beer, read a few books, played some golf, and never again wrote another news story. Not ever. Not to this very day. Still the best job he ever had.

Epilogue

I do not know what any of this has to do with the fact that some years later I began writing poems. I also do not know what any of this has to do with being Southern, other than that each of the three occasions happened in a Southern state—North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. None of the clichés and received "rites of passage" are necessarily indigenous to the South, though they are that too: all of them could have happened—God forbid—in New Jersey as well.

Thinking about the past is inherently sentimental—one always wishes things had been more of the same, less of the same, or partially or altogether otherwise, if only because we somehow believe the past, our past, still cares for us, as we care for it. This differs it from thinking about the desert, which we know does not care anything about anyone, anyway, or anyhow. One likes to think that the eye one casts on things above and below is the eye the desert casts—cold, hard, and unencumbered by time and events. Alas. The twin cataracts of desire and sadness all too often filter and realign the view. Probably just as well. The contour map of the past, with its transverse mercator projections, is the toughest terrain there is. To visit it seriously is literally to take your life in your hands. I remember once, some years ago . . .

The New Poem

It will not resemble the sea.
It will not have dirt on its thick hands.
It will not be part of the weather.

It will not reveal its name.
It will not have dreams you can count on.
It will not be photogenic.

It will not attend our sorrow.
It will not console our children.
It will not be able to help us.

Childhood

Shrunken and drained dry, turning transparent,
You've followed me like a dog
I see through at last, a window into Away-From-Here, a place
I'm headed for, my tongue loosened, tracks
Apparent, your beggar's-lice
Bleaching to crystal along my britches leg:

I'm going away now, goodbye.
Goodbye to the locust husk and the chairs;
Goodbye to the genuflections. Goodbye to the clothes
That circle beneath the earth, the names
Falling into the darkness, face
After face, like beads from a broken rosary . . .

Driving through Tennessee

It's strange what the past brings back.
Our parents, for instance, how ardently they still loom
In the brief and flushed
Fleshtones of memory, one foot in front of the next
Even in retrospect, and so unimpeachable.

And towns that we lived in once,
And who we were then, the roads we went back and forth on
Returning ahead of us like rime
In the moonlight's fall, and Jesus returning, and Stephen Martyr
And St. Paul of the Sword . . .

—I am their music,
Mothers and fathers and places we hurried through in the night:
I put my mouth to the dust and sing their song.
Remember us, Galeoto, and whistle our tune, when the time comes,
For charity's sake.

Self-Portrait

In Murray, Kentucky, I lay once
On my side, the ghost-weight of a past life in my arms,
A life not mine. I know she was there,
Asking for nothing, heavy as bad luck, still waiting to rise.
I know now and I lift her.

Evening becomes us.
I see myself in a tight dissolve, and answer to no one.
Self-traitor, I smuggle in
The spider love, undoer and rearranger of all things.
Angel of Mercy, strip me down.

This world is a little place,
Just red in the sky before the sun rises.
Hold hands, hold hands
That when the birds start, none of us is missing.
Hold hands, hold hands.

THINKING OF DAVID SUMMERS AT THE BEGINNING OF WINTER

December, five days till Christmas,
mercury red-lined
In the low twenties, glass throat
Holding the afternoon half-hindered
And out of luck.
Goodbye to my last poem, "Autumn Thoughts."

Two electric wall heaters
thermostat on and off,
Ice one-hearted and firm in the mouth of the downspout
Outside, snow stiff as a wedding dress
Carelessly left unkempt
all week in another room.

Everything we desire is somewhere else,
day too short,
Night too short, light snuffed and then relit,
Road salted and sanded down,
Sky rolling the white of its eye back
into its head.

Reinvention is what we're after,
Pliny's outline,
Living in history without living in the past
Is what the task is,
Quartering our desire,
making what isn't as if it were.

IN THE KINGDOM OF THE PAST, THE BROWN-EYED MAN IS KING

It's all so pitiful, really, the little photographs
Around the room of places I've been,
And me in them, the half-read books, the fetishes, this
Tiny arithmetic against the dark undazzle.
Who do we think we're kidding?

Certainly not our selves, those hardy perennials
We take such care of, and feed, who keep on keeping on
Each year, their knotty egos like bulbs
Safe in the damp and dreamy soil of their self-regard.
No way we bamboozle them with these

Shrines to the woebegone, ex votos and reliquary sites
One comes in on one's knees to,
The country of *what was,* the country of *what we pretended to be,*
Cruxes and intersections of all we'd thought was fixed.
There is no guilt like the love of guilt.

Ars Poetica

I like it back here

Under the green swatch of the pepper tree and the aloe vera.
I like it because the wind strips down the leaves without a word.
I like it because the wind repeats itself,
and the leaves do.

I like it because I'm better here than I am there,

Surrounded by fetishes and figures of speech:
Dog's tooth and whale's tooth, my father's shoe, the dead weight
Of winter, the inarticulation of joy . . .

The spirits are everywhere.

And once I have them called down from the sky, and spinning and
dancing in the palm of my hand,
What will it satisfy?
I'll still have

The voices rising out of the ground,
The fallen star my blood feeds,
this business I waste my heart on.

And nothing stops that.