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William Faulkner

Mississippi

[A note to British readers:—There is the case of the visitor to the state of Mississippi who expressed a wish to tour Yoknapatawpha county. It was an understandable wish, and is shared by most of us who are readers of Faulkner. Unfortunately, this county, the scene of most of Faulkner's novels, does not exist outside them; and it is a tribute to his art that its reality should press so heavily on us.

There is, of course, in literal fact a state of Mississippi, with a gross area of 48,000 square miles in the heart of the Deep South, and a population of a little more than 2,000,000. It is about this home state of his that Faulkner is here writing. But not only about this state—he is also writing about a Mississippi which exists in art as well as in fact. It is *his* Mississippi which he here describes, and if it is not quite identical with the geographer's or the historian's, it is certainly no less real, and is perhaps more so. One can find out about some of the people he mentions (Bilbo, Vardaman) by consulting an American history textbook. For others (the Snopeses, for instance), we have to turn to Faulkner's novels and stories. Both are an intrinsic part of the "real" Mississippi.—Ed.]

Mississippi begins in the lobby of a Memphis, Tennessee, hotel and extends south to the Gulf of Mexico. It is dotted with little towns concentric about the ghosts of the horses and mules once tethered to the hitch-rail enclosing the county courthouse and it might almost be said to have only two directions, north and south, since until a few years ago it was impossible to travel east or west in it unless you walked or rode one of the horses or mules. Even in the boy's early manhood, to reach by rail either of the adjacent county towns thirty miles away to the east or west, you had to travel ninety miles in three directions on three different railroads.

In the beginning it was virgin—to the west, along the Big River, the alluvial swamps threaded by black, almost motionless bayous and impenetrable with cane and buckvine and cypress and ash and oak and gum; to the east, the hardwood ridges and the prairies where the Appalachian Mountains died and buffalo grazed; to the south, the pine barrens and the moss-hung live oaks and the greater swamps, less of earth than water and lurking with alligators and water moccasins, where Louisiana in its time would begin.

And where in the beginning the predecessors crept with their simple artifacts, and built the mounds and vanished, bequeathing only the mounds in which the succeeding recordable Muskogean stock would leave the skulls of their warriors and chiefs and babies and slain bears, and the shards of pots, and hammer- and arrow-heads and now and then a heavy silver Spanish spur.

There were deer to drift in herds alarmless as smoke then, and bear and panther and wolves in the brakes and bottoms, and all the lesser beasts—coon and possum and beaver and mink and muskrat (not muskrat: mushrat); they were still there and some of the land was still virgin in the early nineteen hundreds when the boy himself began to hunt. But except for looking occasionally out from behind the face of a white man or a Negro, the Chickasaws and Choctaws and Natchez and Yazoos were as gone as the predecessors; and the people the boy crept with were the descendants of the Sartorises and de Spains and Compsons who had commanded the Manassas and Sharpsburg and Shiloh and Chickamauga regiments, and the McCaslins and Ewells and Holstons and Hogganbecks whose fathers and grandfathers had manned them, and now and then a Snopes too because by the beginning of the twentieth century Snopeses were everywhere: not only behind the counters of grubby little side-street stores patronised mostly by Negroes, but behind the presidents' desks of banks and the directors' tables of wholesale grocery corporations and in the deaconries of Baptist churches, buying up the decayed Georgian houses and chopping them into apartments and on their deathbeds decreeing annexes and baptismal fonts to the churches as mementoes to themselves or maybe out of simple terror.

The Snopeses hunted too. They too were in the camps where the de Spains and Compsons and McCaslins and Ewells were masters in their hierarchal turn, shooting the does not only when law but the Master too said not, shooting them not even because the meat was needed but leaving the meat itself to be eaten by scavengers in the

woods, shooting it simply because it was big and moving and alien, of an older time than the little grubby stores and the accumulating and compounding money; the boy a man now and in his hierarchal turn Master of the camp and coping, having to cope, not with the diminishing wilderness where there was less and less game, but with the Snopeses who were destroying that little which did remain.

These elected the Bilboes and voted indefatigably for the Vardamans, naming their sons after both. Their origin was in bitter hatred and fear and economic rivalry of the Negroes who farmed little farms no larger than and adjacent to their own, because the Negro, remembering when he had not been free at all, was therefore capable of valuing what he had of freedom enough to struggle to retain even that little and had taught himself how to do more with less: to raise more cotton with less money to spend and food to eat and fewer or inferior tools to work with; this, until he, the Snopes, could escape from the land into the little grubby side-street store where he could live not beside the Negro but on him by marking up on the inferior meat and meal and molasses the price which he, the Negro, could not even always read.

In the beginning, the obsolescent, dispossessed tomorrow by the already obsolete: the wild Muskogean—Chickasaw and Choctaw and Natchez and Pascagoula—looked down from the tall Mississippi bluffs at a Chippeway canoe containing three Frenchmen—and had barely time to whirl and look behind him at a thousand Spaniards come overland from the Atlantic Ocean, and for a little while longer had the privilege of watching an ebb-flux-ebb-flux of alien nationalities as rapid as the magician's spill and evanishment of inconstant cards: the Frenchman for a second, then the Spaniard for perhaps two, then the Frenchman for another two, then the Frenchman for another two and then the Spaniard again and then the Frenchman again for that last half-breath before the Anglo-Saxon, who would come to stay, to endure: the tall man roaring with Protestant Scripture and boiled whisky, Bible and jug in one hand and like as not an Indian tomahawk in the other, brawling, turbulent, uxorious and polygamous: a married invincible bachelor without destination but only motion, advancement, dragging his gravid wife and most of his mother-in-law's kin behind him into the trackless wilderness, to spawn that child behind a log-croched rifle and then get her with another one before they moved again, and at the same time scattering his inexhaustible other seed in three hundred miles of dusky bellies: without avarice or compassion or forethought either: felling a tree which took two hundred years to grow, to extract from it a bear or a capful of wild honey.

He endured, even after he too was obsolete, the younger sons of Virginia and Carolina planters coming to replace him in wagons laden with slaves and indigo seedlings over the very roads he had hacked out with little else but the tomahawk. Then someone gave a Natchez doctor a Mexican cotton seed (maybe with the boll weevil already in it since, like the Snopeses, it too has taken over the Southern earth) and changed the whole face of Mississippi. Slaves were clearing rapidly now the virgin land, lurking still—in 1850—with the ghosts of Murrell and Mason and Hare and the two Harpes, into plantation fields for profit where he, the displaced and obsolete, had wanted only the bear and the deer and the sweetening for his tooth. But he remained, hung on still; he is still there even in the boy's middle-age, living in a log or plank or tin hut on the edge of what remains of the fading wilderness, by and on the tolerance and sometimes even the bounty of the plantation owner to whom, in his intractable way and even with a certain dignity and independence, he is a sycophant, trapping coons and muskrats, now that the bear and the panther are almost gone too, improvident still, felling still the two-hundred-year-old tree even though it has only a coon or a squirrel in it now.

Manning, when that time came, not the Manassas and Shiloh regiments but confederating into irregular bands and gangs owning not much allegiance to anyone or anything, unified instead into the one rite and aim of stealing horses from Federal picket lines; this in the intervals of raiding (or trying to) the plantation house of the very man to whom he had been the independent sycophant and intended to be again, once the war was over and presuming that the man came back from his Sharpsburg or Chickamauga majority or colonelcy or whatever it had been. Trying to raid, that is, until the major's or colonel's wife or aunt or mother-in-law, who had buried the silver in the orchard and still held together a few of the older slaves, fended him off and dispersed him, and when necessary even shot him, with the absent husband's or nephew's or son-in-law's hunting gun or duelling pistols. The women: the indomitable, the undefeated, who never surrendered, refusing to allow the Yankee *minie* balls to be dug out of portico column or mantelpiece or lintel, who seventy years later would get up and walk out of *Gone With the Wind* as soon as Sherman's name was mentioned; irreconcilable and enraged and still talking about it long after the weary exhausted men who had fought and lost it gave up trying to make them hush: even in the boy's time the boy himself knowing

about Vicksburg and Corinth and exactly where his grandfather's regiment had been at First Manassas before he remembered hearing very much about Santa Claus.

In those days—1901 and '02 and '03 and '04—Santa Claus occurred only at Christmas, not like now, and for the rest of the year children played with what they could find or contrive or make, though just as now, in '51 and '52 and '53 and '54, they still played, aped in miniature, what they had been exposed to, heard or seen or been moved by most. Which was true in the child's time and case too: the indomitable unsundered old women holding together still, thirty-five and forty years later, a few of the old house slaves: women too who, like the white ones, refused to give up the old ways and forget the old anguishes. The child himself remembered one of them: Caroline: free these many years but who had declined to leave. Nor would she ever accept in full her weekly Saturday wages; the family never knew why unless the true reason was the one which appeared: for the simple pleasure of keeping the entire family reminded constantly that they were in arrears to her, compelling the boy's grandfather then his father and finally himself in his turn to be not only her banker but her book-keeper too, having got the figure of eighty-nine dollars into her head somehow or for some reason, and though the sum itself altered, sometimes more and sometimes less, and sometimes it would be she herself who would be several weeks in arrears, it never changed: one of the children, white or Negro, liable to appear at any time, usually when most of the family would be gathered at a meal, with the message: "Mammy says to tell you not to forget you owe her eighty-nine dollars."

To the child, even at that time, she seemed already older than God, calling his grandsire "colonel" but never the child's father nor the father's brother and sister by anything but their Christian names even when they themselves had become grandparents: a matriarch with a score of descendants (and probably half that many more whom she had forgotten or outlived), one of them a boy too, whether a great grandson or merely a grandson even she did not remember, born in the same week with the white child and both bearing the same (the white child's grandsire's) name, suckled, at the same black breast and sleeping and eating together and playing together the game which was the most important thing the white child knew at that time since at four and five and six his world was still a female world and he had heard nothing else that he could remember: with empty spools and chips and sticks, and a scraped trench filled with well water for the River, playing over again in miniature the War, the old irremediable battles—Shiloh and Vicksburg, and Brice's Crossroads which was not far from where the child (both of them) had been born, the boy because he was white arrogating to himself the right to be the Confederate General—Pemberton or Johnston or Forrest—twice to the black child's once, else, lacking that once in three, the black one would not play at all.

Not the tall man, he was still the hunter, the man of the woods; and not the slave because he was free now; but that Mexican cotton seed which someone had given the Natchez doctor was clearing the land fast now, ploughing under the buffalo grass of the eastern prairies and the brier and switch cane of the creek and river bottoms of the central hills and deswamping the whole vast, flat, alluvial, delta-shaped sweep of land along the Big River, the Old Man: building the levees to hold him off the land long enough to plant and harvest the crop: he taking another foot of slope in his new dimension for every foot man constricted him in the old, so that the steamboats carrying the baled cotton to Memphis or New Orleans seemed to crawl along the sky itself.

And little steamboats on the smaller rivers, too, penetrating the Tallahatchie as far up as Wylie's Crossing above Jefferson. Though most of the cotton from that section—and on to the east to that point of no economic return where it was more expedient to continue on east to the Tombigbee and then south to Mobile—went the sixty miles overland to Memphis by mule and wagon; there was a settlement—a tavern of sorts and a smithy and a few gaunt cabins—on the bluff above Wylie's, at the exact distance where a wagon or a train of them loaded with cotton either starting or resuming the journey in the vicinity of Jefferson, would have to halt for the night. Or not even a settlement but rather a den, whose denizens lurked unseen by day in the brakes and thickets of the river bottom, appearing only at night and even then only long enough to enter the tavern kitchen where the driver of the day's cotton wagon sat unsuspecting before the fire, whereupon driver, wagon, mules and cotton and all would vanish: the body into the river probably and the wagon burned and the mules sold days or weeks later in a Memphis stockyard and the unidentifiable cotton already on its way to the Liverpool mill.

At the same time, sixteen miles away in Jefferson, there was a pre-Snopes, one of the tall men actually, a giant of a man in fact: a dedicated lay Baptist preacher but furious not with a furious unsleeping dream of paradise nor

even for universal Order with an upper-case O, but for simple civic security. He was warned by everyone not to go in there because not only could he accomplish nothing, he would very likely lose his own life trying it. But he did go, alone, and talked not of gospel nor God nor even of virtue, but simply sketched the biggest and boldest and by appearance, anyway, the most villainous there and said to him: "I'll fight you. If you lick me, you take what money I have. If I lick you, I baptize you into my church": and battered and mauled and gouged that one into sanctity and civic virtue then challenged the next biggest and most villainous and then the next; and the following Sunday baptized the entire settlement in the river, the cotton wagons now crossing on Wylie's hand-powered ferry and passing peacefully and unchallenged on to Memphis until the railroad came and took the bales away from them.

That was in the seventies. The Negro was a free farmer and a political entity now; one, he could not sign his name, was Federal marshal at Jefferson. Afterwards he became the town's official bootlegger (Mississippi was one of the first to essay the noble experiment, along with Maine), resuming—he had never really quitted it—his old allegiance to his old master and gaining his professional name, Mulberry, from the huge old tree behind Doctor Habersham's drug-store, in the gallery-like tunnels among the roots of which he cached the bottled units of his commerce.

Soon he (the Negro) would even forge ahead in that economic rivalry with Snopes which was to send Snopes in droves into the Ku Klux Klan—not the old original one of the war's chaotic and desperate end which, measured against the desperate times, was at least honest and serious in its desperate aim, but into the later base one of the twenties whose only kinship to the old one was the old name. And a little money to build railroads was in the land now, brought there by the man who in '66 had been a carpetbagger but who now was a citizen; his children would speak the soft consonantless Negro tongue as the children of parents who had lived below the Potomac and Ohio Rivers since Captain John Smith, and their children would boast of their Southern heritage.

In Jefferson his name was Redmond. He had found the money with which Colonel Sartoris had opened the local cotton fields to Europe by building his connecting line up to the main rail-road from Memphis to the Atlantic Ocean—narrow gauge, like a toy, with three tiny locomotives like toys, too, named after Colonel Sartoris' three daughters, each with its silver-plated oilcan engraved with the daughter's Christian name: like toys, the standard-sized cars jacked up at the junction, then lowered on to the narrow trucks, the tiny locomotive now invisible ahead of its charges so that they appeared in process of being snatched headlong among the fields they served by an arrogant plume of smoke and the arrogant shrieking of a whistle. It was Redmond who, after the inevitable quarrel, finally shot Colonel Sartoris dead on a Jefferson street, driven, everyone believed, to the desperate act by the same arrogance and intolerance which had driven Colonel Sartoris' regiment to demote him from its colonelcy in the fall elections after Second Manassas and Sharpsburg.

So there were railroads in the land now; now couples who used to go overland by carriage to the River landings and the steamboats for the traditional New Orleans honeymoon could take the train from almost anywhere. And presently Pullmans, too, all the way from Chicago and the Northern cities where the cash, the money was, so that the rich Northerners could come down in comfort and open the land indeed: setting up with their Yankee dollars the vast lumbering plants and mills in the Southern-pine section, the little towns which had been hamlets without change or alteration for fifty years, booming and soaring into cities overnight above the stump-pocked barrens which would remain until in simple economic desperation people taught themselves to farm pine trees as in other sections they had already learned to farm corn and cotton.

And Northern lumber mills in the Delta too: the mid-twenties now and the Delta booming with cotton and timber both. But mostly booming with simple money: increment a troglodyte which had fathered twin troglodytes: solvency and bankruptcy, the three of them booming money into the land so fast that the problem was how to get rid of it before it whelmed you into suffocation. Until in something almost resembling self-defense, seven or eight of the bigger Delta towns formed a baseball league, presently raiding as far away—and successfully too—for pitchers and short-stops and slugging outfielders as the two major leagues; the boy, a young man now, making acquaintance with this league and one of the big Northern lumber companies not only co-incidentally with one another but because of one another.

At this time the young man's attitude was that of most other young men who had been around twenty-one years of age in April 1917, even though at times he did admit to himself that he was possibly using the fact that he had been nineteen on that day as an excuse to follow the avocation he was coming more and more to know would be forever his true one: to be a tramp, a harmless possessionless vagabond. In any case, he was quite ripe to make the

acquaintance of the league; it began with that of the lumber company, which at the moment was taking a leisurely bankruptcy. A lawyer had been appointed referee in the bankruptcy: a friend of the young man's family and older than he, yet who had taken a liking to the young man and so invited him to come along for the ride too. His official capacity was that of interpreter, since he had a little French and the defuncting company had European connections. But no interpreting was ever done, since the entourage did not go to Europe but moved instead into a single floor of a Memphis hotel, where all—including the interpreter—had the privilege of signing chits for food and theatre tickets and even the bootleg whisky (Tennessee was in its dry mutation then) which the bell-boys would produce, though not of course at the discreet and innocent-looking places clustered a few miles away just below the Mississippi state line, where roulette and dice and blackjack were available.

Then suddenly Mr. Sells Wales was in it, too, bringing the baseball league with him. The young man never did know what connection (if any) Mr. Wales had with the bankruptcy, nor really bothered to wonder, let alone care to ask, not only because he had developed already that sense of *noblesse oblige* towards the avocation which he knew was his true one, which would have been reason enough, but because Mr. Wales himself was already a legend in the Delta. Owner of a plantation measured not in acres but in miles and reputedly sole owner of one of the league baseball teams or anyway most of its players, certainly of the catcher and the base-stealing short-stop and the .340-hitting outfielder ravished or pirated, it was said, from the Chicago Cubs, his ordinary costume seven days a week was a two or three days' beard and muddy high-boots and a corduroy hunting coat, the tale, the legend telling of how he entered a swank St. Louis hotel in that costume late one night and demanded a room of a dinner-jacketed clerk, who looked once at the beard and the muddy boots but probably mostly at Mr. Wales' face and said they were filled up: whereupon Mr. Wales asked how much they wanted for the hotel and was told, superciliously, in tens of thousands, and—so told the legend—drew from his corduroy hip a wad of thousand-dollar bills sufficient to have bought the hotel half again at the price stated and told the clerk he wanted every room in the building vacated in ten minutes.

That one of course was apocryphal, but the young man himself saw this one: Mr. Wales and himself having a leisurely breakfast one noon in the Memphis hotel when Mr. Wales remembered suddenly that his private ball club was playing one of its most important games at a town about sixty miles away at three o'clock that afternoon and telephoned to the railroad station to have a special train ready for them in thirty minutes, which it was: an engine and a caboose: reaching Coahoma about three o'clock with a mile still to the ball park: a man (there were no taxis at the station at that hour and few in Mississippi anywhere at that time) sitting behind the wheel of a dingy though still sound Cadillac car, and Mr. Wales said:

"What do you want for it?"

"What?" the man in the car said.

"Your automobile," Mr. Wales said.

"Twelve fifty," the man said.

"All right," Mr. Wales said, opening the door.

"I mean twelve hundred and fifty dollars," the man said.

"All right," Mr. Wales said, then to the young man: "Jump in."

"Hold up here, Mister," the man said.

"I've bought it," Mr. Wales said, getting in too. "The ball park," he said. "Hurry."

The young man never saw the Cadillac again, though he became quite familiar with the engine and caboose during the next succeeding weeks while the league pennant race waxed hotter and hotter, Mr. Wales keeping the special train on call in the Memphis yards as twenty-five years earlier a city-dwelling millionaire might have hacked a carriage and pair to his instant nod, so that it seemed to the young man that he would barely get back to Memphis to rest before they would be rushing once more down the Delta to another baseball game.

"I ought to be interpreting, sometime," he said once.

"Interpret, then," Mr. Wales said. "Interpret what this goddamn cotton market is going to do tomorrow, and we can both quit chasing this blank blank sandlot ball team."

The cotton seed and the lumber mills were clearing the rest of the delta, too, pushing what remained of the wilderness further and further southward into the V of Big River and the hills. When the young man, a youth of sixteen and seventeen then, was first accepted into that hunting club of which he in his hierarchal time would be Master, the hunting grounds, haunt of deer and bear and wild turkey, could be reached in a single day or night in a mule-drawn wagon. Now they were using automobiles: a hundred miles then two hundred southward and still southward as the wilderness dwindled into the confluence of the Yazoo River and the big one, the Old Man.

The Old Man: all his little contributing streams levee'd too, along with him, and paying none of the dykes any heed at all when it suited his mood and fancy, gathering water all the way from Montana to Pennsylvania every generation or so and rolling it down the artificial gut of his victims' puny and baseless hoping, piling the water up, not fast, just inexorably, giving plenty of time to measure his crest and telegraph ahead, even warning of the exact day almost when he would enter the house and float the piano out of it and the pictures off the walls, and even remove the house itself if it were not securely fastened down.

Inexorable and unhurried, overpassing one by one his little confluent feeders and shoving the water into them until for days their current would flow backward, upstream: as far upstream as Wylie's Crossing above Jefferson. The little rivers were dyked, too, but back here was the land of individualists: remnants and descendants of the tall men now taken to farming, and of Snopeses who were more than individualists: they were Snopeses, so that where the owners of the thousand-acre plantations along the Big River confederated as one man with sandbags and machines and their Negro tenants and wage-hands to hold the sandboils and the cracks, back here the owner of the hundred- or two-hundred-acre farm patrolled his section of levee with a sandbag in one hand and his shotgun in the other, lest his upstream neighbour dynamite it to save his (the upstream neighbor's) own.

Piling up the water while white man and Negro worked side by side in shifts in the mud and the rain, with automobile headlights and gasoline flares and kegs of whisky and coffee boiling in fifty-gallon batches in scoured and scalded oil drums; lapping, tentative, almost innocently, merely inexorable (no hurry, his) among and beneath and between and finally over the frantic sandbags, as if his whole purpose had been merely to give man another chance to prove, not to him but to man, just how much the human body could bear, stand, endure; then, having let man prove it, doing what he could have done at any time these past weeks if so minded: removing with no haste, nor any particular malice or fury either, a mile or two miles of levee and coffee drums and whisky kegs and gas flares in one sloughing collapse, gleaming dully for a little while yet among the parallel cotton middles until the fields vanished along with the roads and lanes and at last the towns themselves.

Vanished, gone beneath one vast yellow motionless expanse, out of which projected only the tops of trees and telephone poles and the decapitations of human dwelling-places like enigmatic objects placed by inscrutable and impenetrable design on a dirty mirror; and the mounds of the predecessors on which, among a tangle of moccasins, bear and horses and deer and mules and wild turkeys and cows and domestic chickens waited patient in mutual armistice; and the levees themselves, where among a jumble of uxorious flotsam the young continued to be born and the old to die, not from exposure but from simple and normal time and decay, as if man and his destiny were in the end stronger even than the river which had dispossessed him, inviolable by and invincible to alteration.

Then, having proved that too, he—the Old Man—would withdraw, not retreat: subside, back from the land slowly and inexorably too, emptying the confluent rivers and bayous back into the old vain hopeful gut, but so slowly and gradually that not the waters seemed to fall but the flat earth itself to rise, creep in one plane back into light and air again: one constant stain of yellow-brown at one constant altitude on telephone poles and the walls of gins and houses and stores as though the line had been laid off with a transit and painted in one gigantic unbroken brush stroke, the earth itself one alluvial inch higher, the rich dirt one inch deeper, drying into long cracks beneath the hot fierce glare of May: but not for long, because almost at once came the plough, the ploughing and planting already two months late but that did not matter: the cotton man-tall once more by August and whiter and denser still by picking time, as if the Old Man said, "I do what I want to, when I want to. But I pay my way."

And the boats, of course, they projected above that yellow and liquid plane and even moved upon it: the skiffs and scows of fishermen and trappers, the launches of the United States Engineers who operated the Levee Commission, and one small shallow-draught steamboat in paradox among and across the cotton fields themselves,

its pilot not a riverman but a farmer who knew where the submerged fences were, its masthead lookout a mechanic with a pair of pliers to cut the telephone wires to pass the smokestack through: no paradox really, since on the River it had resembled a house to begin with, so that here it looked no different from the baseless houses it steamed among and on occasion even strained at top boiler pressure to overtake, like a mallard drake after a fleeing mallard hen.

But these boats were not enough, very quickly not near enough, the Old Man meant business indeed this time. So now there began to arrive from the Gulf ports the shrimp trawlers and pleasure cruisers and Coast Guard cutters whose bottoms had known only salt water and the mouths of tidal rivers, to be run still by their salt-water crews but conned by the men who knew where the submerged roads and fences were for the good reason that they had been running mule-plough furrows along them or up to them all their lives; sailing among the swollen carcasses of horses and mules and deer and cows and sheep to pluck the Old Man's patient flotsam, black and white, out of trees and the roofs of gins and cotton sheds and floating cabins and the second-storey windows of houses and office buildings; then—the salt-water men, to whom land was either a featureless treeless salt marsh or a snake- and alligator-infested swamp impenetrable with trumpet vine and Spanish moss, some of whom had never even seen the earth into which were driven the spiles supporting the houses they lived in—staying on even after they were no longer needed, as though waiting to see emerge from the water what sort of country it was which bore the economy on which the people—men and women, black and white, more of black than white even, ten to one more—lived whom they had saved; seeing the land for that moment before mule and plough altered it right up to the water's receding edge, then back into the River again before the trawlers and cruisers and cutters became marooned into canted and useless rubble too along with the ruined hencoops and cowsheds and privies; back on to the Old Man, shrunken once more into his normal banks, drowsing and even innocent looking, as if it were something else besides him that had changed, for a little time anyway, the whole face of the adjacent earth.

They were homeward bound now, passing the river towns, some of which were respectable in age when South Mississippi was a Spanish wilderness: Greenville and Vicksburg, Natchez and Grand Gulf and Petit Gulf (vanished now and even the old site known by a different name) which had known Mason and one at least of the Harpes and from or on which Murrell had based his abortive slave insurrection intended to efface the white people from the land and leave him emperor of it—the land sinking away beyond the levee until presently you could no longer say where water began and earth stopped: only that these lush and verdant sunny savannas would no longer bear your weight. The rivers flowed no longer west, but south now, no longer yellow or brown, but black, threading the miles of yellow salt marsh from which, on an off-shore breeze, mosquitoes came in such clouds that in your itching and burning anguish it would seem that you could actually see them in faint adumbration crossing the earth; and met tide and then the uncorrupted salt: not the Gulf quite yet but at least the Sound behind the long barrier of the islands—Ship and Horn and Petit Bois, the trawler and cruiser bottoms home again now among the lighthouses and channel markers and shipyards and drying nets and processing plants for fish.

The man remembered that from his youth too: one summer spent being blown innocently over in cat-boats since, born and bred for generations in the north Mississippi hinterland, he did not recognise the edge of a squall until he already had one. The next summer he returned because he found that he liked that much water, this time as a hand in one of the trawlers; remembering: a four-gallon iron pot over a red bed of charcoal on the foredeck, in which decapitated shrimp boiled among handfuls of salt and black pepper, never emptied, never washed and constantly renewed, so that you ate them all day long in passing like peanuts; remembering: the predawn, to be broken presently by the violent near-subtropical yellow-and-crimson day almost like an audible explosion, but still dark for a little while yet, the dark ship creeping on to the shrimp grounds in a soundless sternward swirl of phosphorus like a drowning tumble of fireflies, the youth lying face down on the peak staring into the dark water watching the disturbed shrimp burst outward-shooting in fiery and fading fans like the trails of tiny rockets.

He learned the harrier islands too; one of a crew of five amateurs sailing a big sloop in offshore races, he learned not only how to keep a hull on its keel and moving but how to get it from one place to another and bring it back: so that, a professional now, living in New Orleans, he commanded for pay a power launch belonging to a bootlegger (this was the twenties), whose crew consisted of a Negro cook-deckhand-stevedore and the bootlegger's younger brother Pete: a slim twenty-one-or-two-year-old Italian with yellow eyes like a cat and a silk shirt bulged faintly by an armpit-holstered pistol too small in calibre to have done anything but got them all killed, even if the captain or the cook had dreamed of resisting or resenting trouble if and when it came; the captain or the cook would extract the pistol from the holster and hide it at the first opportunity (not concealed really: just dropped into the oily bilge under the engine, where, even though Pete soon discovered where it would be, it was safe because he refused

to thrust his hand and arm into the oil-fouled water but instead merely lay about the cockpit, sulking); taking the launch across Pontchartrain and down the Rigolets cut to the Gulf, the Sound, then lying-to with no lights showing until the Coast Guard cutter (it ran almost on schedule; theirs was a job, too, even if it was, comparatively speaking, a hopeless one) made its fast haughty eastward rush, going, they always liked to believe, to Mobile, to a dance; then by compass on to the island (it was little more than a sandspit bearing a line of ragged and shabby pines thrashing always in the windy crash and roar of the true Gulf on the other side of it) where the Caribbean schooner would bury the casks of green alcohol which the bootlegger's mother back in New Orleans would convert and bottle and label into Scotch or Bourbon or gin. There were a few wild cattle on the island which they would have to watch for, the Negro digging and Pete still sulking and refusing to help at all because of the pistol, and the captain watching for the charge (they couldn't risk showing a light) which every three or four trips would come—the gaunt, wild, half-seen shapes charging suddenly and with no warning down at them as they turned and ran through the nightmare sand and hurled themselves into the dinghy, to pull along parallel to the shore, the animals following, until they had tolled them far enough away for the Negro to go back ashore for the remaining casks. Then they would heave-to again and lie until the cutter passed back westward, the dance obviously over now, in the same haughty and imperious rush.

That was Mississippi too, though a different one from where the child had been bred; the people were Catholics, the Spanish and French blood still showed in the names and faces. But it was not a deep one, if you did not count the sea and the boats on it: a curve of beach, a thin unbroken line of estates and apartment hotels owned and inhabited by Chicago millionaires, standing back to back with another thin line, this time of tenements inhabited by Negroes and whites who ran the boats and worked in the fish-processing plants.

Then the Mississippi which the young man knew began: the fading purlieus inhabited by a people whom the young man recognised because their like was in his country too: descendants, heirs at least in spirit, of the tall men, who worked in no factories and farmed no land nor even truck patches, living not out of the earth but on its denizens: fishing guides and individual professional fishermen, trappers of muskrats and alligator hunters and poachers of deer, the land rising now, once more earth instead of half water, vista-ed and arras-ed with the long-leaf pines which Northern capital would convert into dollars in Ohio and Indiana and Illinois banks. Though not all of it. Some of it would alter hamlets and villages into cities and even build whole new ones almost overnight, cities with Mississippi names but patterned on Ohio and Indiana and Illinois because they were bigger than Mississippi towns, rising, standing today among the tall pines which created them, then tomorrow (that quick, that fast, that rapid) among the stumpy pock-age to which they were monuments. Because the land had made its one crop: the soil too fine and light to compete seriously in cotton: until people discovered that it would grow what other soils would not: the tomatoes and strawberries and the fine cane for sugar: not the sorghum of the northern and western counties which people of the true cane country called hog feed, but the true sweet cane which made the sugarhouse molasses.

Big towns, for Mississippi: cities, we called them: Hattiesburg, and Laurel, and Meridian, and Canton; and towns deriving by name from further away than Ohio: Kosciusko named after a Polish general who thought that people should be free who wanted to be; and Egypt because there was corn there when it was nowhere else in the bad lean times of the old war which the old women had still never surrendered; and Philadelphia where the Neshoba Indians whose name the county bears still remain for the simple reason that they did not mind living in peace with other people, no matter what their color or politics. This was the hills now: Jones County which old Newt Knight, its principal proprietor and first citizen or denizen, whichever you liked, seceded from the Confederacy in 1862, establishing still a third republic within the boundaries of the United States until a Confederate military force subdued him in his embattled log-castle capital; and Sullivan's Hollow: a long narrow glen where a few clans or families with North Ireland and Highland names feuded and slew one another in the old pre-Culloden fashion, yet banding together immediately and always to resist any outsider in the pre-Culloden fashion too: *vide* the legend of the revenue officer hunting illicit whisky stills, captured and held prisoner in a stable and worked in traces as the mate to a plough mule. No Negro ever let darkness catch him in Sullivan's Hollow. In fact, there were few Negroes in this country at all: a narrow strip of which extended up into the young man's own section: a remote district through which Negroes passed infrequently and rapidly and only by daylight.

It is not very wide, because almost at once there begins to the east of it the prairie country which sheds its water into Alabama and Mobile Bay, with its old tight intermarried towns and plantation houses columned and porticoed in the traditional Georgian manner of Virginia and Carolina in place of the Spanish and French influence of Natchez.

These towns are Columbus and Aberdeen and West Point, and Shuqualak, where the good quail shooting is and the good bird dogs are bred and trained—horses too: hunters; Dancing Rabbit is here, too, where the treaty dispossessing them of Mississippi was made between the Choctaws and the United States; and in one of the towns lived a kinsman of the young man, dead now, rest him: an invincible and incorrigible bachelor, a leader of cotillions and an inveterate diner-out since any time an extra single man was needed, any hostess thought of him first.

But he was a man's man, too, and even more: a young man's man, who played poker and matched glasses with the town's young bachelors and the apostates still young enough in time to still resist the wedlock; who walked not only in spats and a stick and yellow gloves and a Homburg hat, but an air of sardonic and inviolable atheism, too, until at last he was forced to the final desperate resort of prayer: sitting after supper one night among the drummers in the row of chairs on the sidewalk before the Gilmer Hotel, waiting to see what (if anything) the evening would bring, when two of the young bachelors passing in a Model T Ford stopped and invited him to drive across the line into the Alabama hills for a gallon of moonshine whisky. Which they did. But the still they sought was not in hills because these were not hills: it was the dying tail of the Appalachian mountain range. But since the Model T's engine had to be running fast anyway for it to have any headlights, going up the mountain was an actual improvement, especially after they had to drop to low gear. And coming from the generation before the motor car, it never occurred to him that coming back down would be any different until they got the gallon and had a drink from it and turned around and started back down. Or maybe it was the whisky, he said, telling it: the little car rushing faster and faster behind a thin wash of light of about the same volume that two lightning bugs would have made, around the plunging curves which, the faster the car ran, became only the more frequent and sharp and plunging, whipping around the nearly right-angle bends with a rock wall on one hand and several hundred feet of vertical and empty night on the other, until at last he prayed; he said: "Lord, You know I haven't worried You in over forty years, and if You'll just get me back to Columbus I promise never to bother You again."

And now the young man, middle-aged now or anyway middle-aging, is back home, too, where they who altered the swamps and forests of his youth have now altered the face of the earth itself; what he remembered as dense river-bottom jungle and rich farmland is now an artificial lake twenty-five miles long: a flood-control project for the cotton fields below the huge earth dam, with a few more outboard-powered fishing skiffs on it each year, and at last a sailboat. On his way into town from his home the middle-aging man (now a professional fiction writer: who had wanted to remain the tramp and the possessionless vagabond of his young manhood but time and success and the hardening of his arteries had beaten him) would pass the back yard of a doctor friend whose son was an undergraduate at Harvard. One day the undergraduate stopped him and invited him in and showed him the unfinished hull of a twenty-foot sloop, saying, "When I get her finished, Mr. Bill, I want you to help me sail her." And each time he passed after that, the undergraduate would repeat: "Remember, Mr. Bill, I want you to help me sail her as soon as I get her in the water": to which the middle-aging would answer as always: "Fine, Arthur. Just let me know."

Then one day he came out of the post office: a voice called him from a taxicab, which in small Mississippi towns was any motor car owned by any foot-loose young man who liked to drive, who decreed himself a cabbie as Napoleon decreed himself emperor; in the car with the driver was the undergraduate and a young man whose father had vanished recently somewhere in the West out of the ruins of the bank of which he had been president, and a fourth young man whose type is universal: the town clown, comedian, whose humour is without viciousness and quite often witty and always funny. "She's in the water, Mr. Bill," the undergraduate said. "Are you ready to go now?" And he was, and the sloop was, too; the undergraduate had sewn his own sails on his mother's machine; they worked her out into the lake and got her on course all tight and drawing, when suddenly it seemed to the middle-aging that part of him was no longer in the sloop but about ten feet away, looking at what he saw: a Harvard undergraduate, a taxi driver, the son of an absconded banker and a village clown and a middle-aged novelist sailing a home-made boat on an artificial lake in the depths of the north Mississippi hills: and he thought that that was something which did not happen to you more than once in your life.

Home again, his native land; he was born of it and his bones will sleep in it; loving it even while hating some of it: the river jungle and the bordering hills where, still a child, he had ridden behind his father on the horse after the bobcat or fox or coon or whatever was ahead of the belling hounds, and where he had hunted alone when he got big enough to be trusted with a gun—all this now the bottom of a muddy lake being raised gradually and steadily every year by another layer of beer cans and bottle caps and lost bass plugs. And the wilderness, the two weeks in the woods, in camp, the rough food and the rough sleeping, the life of men and horses and hounds among men and

horses and hounds, not to slay the game but to pursue it, touch and let go, never satiety—moved now even further away than that down the flat Delta so that the mile-long freight trains, visible for miles across the fields where the cotton is mortgaged in February, planted in May, harvested in September and put into the Farm Loan in October in order to pay off February's mortgage in order to mortgage next year's crop, seem to be passing two or even three of the little Indian-named hamlets at once over the very ground where, a youth now capable of being trusted even with a rifle, he had shared in the yearly ritual of Old Ben: the big old bear with one trap-ruined foot who had earned for himself a name, a designation like a living man through the legend of the deadfalls and traps he had wrecked and the hounds he had slain and the shots he had survived, until Boon Hogganbeck, the youth's father's stable foreman, ran in and killed it with a hunting knife to save a hound which he, Boon Hogganbeck, loved.

But most of all he hated the intolerance and injustice: the lynching of Negroes not for the crimes they committed but because their skins were black (the lynchings were becoming fewer and fewer and soon there would be no more of them but the evil would have been done and irrevocable because there should never have been any); the inequality: the poor schools they had then when they had any, the hovels they had to live in unless they wanted to live outdoors: who could worship the white man's God but not in the white man's church; pay taxes in the white man's courthouse but couldn't vote in it or for it; working by the white man's clock but having to take his pay by the white man's counting (Captain Joe Thoms, a Delta planter though not one of the big ones, who after a bad crop year drew a thousand silver dollars from the bank and called his five tenants one by one into the dining room where two hundred of the dollars were spread carelessly out on the table beneath the lamp, saying: "Well, Jim, that's what we made this year." Then the Negro: "Gret God, Cap'n Joe, is all that mine?" And Captain Thoms: "No, no, just half of it is yours. The other half belongs to me, remember."); the bigotry which could send to Washington some of the Senators and Congressmen we sent there and which could erect in a town no bigger than Jefferson five separate denominations of churches but set aside not one square foot of ground where children could play and old people could sit and watch them.

But he loves it, it is his, remembering: the trying to, having to, stay in bed until the crack of dawn would bring Christmas; and of the other times almost as good as Christmas: of being waked at three o'clock to have breakfast by lamplight in order to drive by surrey into town and the depot to take the morning train for the three or four days in Memphis where he would see automobiles, and the day in 1910 when, twelve years old, he watched John Moissant land a bicycle-wheeled aileronless (you warped the whole wing-tip to bank it or hold it level) Bleriot monoplane on the infield of the Memphis race track and knew forever after that someday he too would have to fly alone; remembering: his first sweetheart, aged eight, plump and honey-haired and demure and named Mary, the two of them sitting side by side on the kitchen steps eating ice cream; and another one, Minnie this time, grand-daughter of the old hillman from whom, a man himself now, he bought moonshine whisky, come to town at seventeen to take a job behind the soda counter of the drugstore, watching her virginal and innocent and without self-consciousness pour Coca-Cola syrup into the lifted glass by hooking her thumb through the ring of the jug and swinging it back and up in one unbroken motion on to her horizontal upper arm exactly as he had seen her grandfather pour out whisky from a jug a thousand times.

Even while hating it, because for every Joe Thoms with two hundred silver dollars and every Snopes in a hooded nightshirt, somewhere in Mississippi there was this too: remembering: Ned, born in a cabin in the back yard in 1865, in the time of the middle-aged's great-grandfather, and who had outlived three generations of them, who had not only walked and talked so constantly for so many years with the three generations that he walked and talked like them, he had two tremendous trunks filled with the clothes which they had worn—not only the blue brass-buttoned frock coat and the plug hat in which he had been the great-grandfather's and the grandfather's coachman, but the broadcloth frock coats which the great-grandfather himself had worn, and the pigeon-tailed ones of the grandfather's time and the short coat of his father's which the middle-aged could remember on the backs for which they had been tailored, along with the hats in their eighty years of mutation too: so that, glancing idly up and out the library window, the middle-aged would see that back, that stride, that coat and hat going down the drive towards the road, and his heart would stop and even turn over. He (Ned) was eighty-four now and in these last few years he had begun to get a little mixed up, calling the middle-aged not only Master but sometimes Master Murry, who was the middle-aged's father, and Colonel too, coming once a week through the kitchen and into the parlour, saying: "Here's where I wants to lay, right here where I can be facing out that window. And I wants it to be a sunny day, so the sun can come in on me. And I wants you to preach the sermon. I wants you to take a dram of whisky for me, and lay yourself back and preach the best sermon you ever preached."

And Caroline too, whom the middle-aged had inherited too in his hierarchal turn, nobody knowing any more exactly how many more years than a hundred she was. But not mixed up, she: who had forgotten nothing, calling the middle-aged "Memmy" still, from fifty-odd years ago when that was as close as his brothers could come to "William"; his youngest daughter, aged four and five and six, coming in to the house and saying, "Pappy, Mammy said to tell you not to forget you owe her eighty-nine dollars."

"I won't," the middle-aged would say. "What are you all doing now?"

"Piecing a quilt," the daughter answered. Which they were. There was electricity in her cabin now, but she would not use it, insisting still on the kerosene lamps which she had always known. Nor would she use the spectacles either, wearing them merely as an ornament across the brow of the immaculate white cloth—head-rag—which bound her now hairless head. She did not need them: a smoulder of wood ashes on the hearth winter and summer in which sweet potatoes roasted, the five-year-old white child in a miniature rocking chair at one side of it and the aged Negress, not a great deal larger, in her chair at the other, the basket bright with scraps and fragments of cloth between them and in that dim light in which the middle-aged himself could not have read his own name without his glasses, the two of them with infinitesimal and tedious and patient stitches annealing the bright stars and squares and diamonds into another pattern to be folded away among the cedar shavings in the trunk.

Then it was the Fourth of July, the kitchen was closed after breakfast so the cook and houseman could attend a big picnic; in the middle of the hot morning the aged Negress and the white child gathered green tomatoes from the garden and ate them with salt, and that afternoon beneath the mulberry tree in the back yard the two of them ate most of a fifteen-pound chilled watermelon, and that night Caroline had the first stroke. It should have been the last, the doctor thought so too. But by daylight she had rallied, and that morning the generations of her loins began to arrive, from her own seventy- and eighty-year-old children, down through their great- and twice-great-grandchildren, faces which the middle-aged had never seen before, until the cabin would no longer hold them: the women and girls sleeping on the floor inside and the men and boys sleeping on the ground in front of it, Caroline herself conscious now and presently sitting up in bed: who had forgotten nothing: matriarchal and imperial, and more: imperious: ten and even eleven o'clock at night and the middle-aged himself undressed and in bed, reading, when sure enough he would hear the slow quiet stockinged or naked feet mounting the back stairs; presently the strange dark face—never the same one of two nights ago or the two or three nights before that—would look in the door at him, and the quiet, courteous, never servile voice would say: "She want the ice cream." And he would rise and dress and drive in to the village; he would even drive through the village although he knew that everything there would have long been closed and he would do what he had done two nights ago; drive thirty miles on to the arterial highway and then up or down it until he found an open drive-in or hot-dog stand to sell him the quart of ice cream.

But that stroke was not the one; she was walking again presently, even, despite the houseman's standing order to forestall her with the automobile, all the way into town to sit with his, the middle-aging's, mother, talking, he liked to think, of the old days of his father and himself and the three younger brothers, the two of them, two women who together had never weighed two hundred pounds, in a house roaring with five men: though they probably didn't, since women, unlike men, have learned how to live uncomplicated by that sort of sentimentality. But it was as if she knew herself that the summer's stroke was like the throat-clearing sound inside the grandfather clock preceding the stroke of midnight or of noon, because she never touched the last unfinished quilt again. Presently it had vanished, no one knew where, and as the cold came and the shortening days she began to spend more and more time in the house, not her cabin but the big house, sitting in a corner of the kitchen while the cook and houseman were about, then in the middle-aging's wife's sewing room until the family gathered for the evening meal, the houseman carrying her rocking chair into the dining-room to sit there while they ate: until suddenly (it was almost Christmas now) she insisted on sitting in the parlor until the meal was ready, none knew why, until at last she told them, through the wife: "Miss Hestelle, when them niggers lays me out, I want you to make me a fresh clean cap and apron to lay in." That was her valedictory; two days after Christmas the stroke came which was the one; two days after that she lay in the parlor in the fresh cap and apron she would not see, and the middle-aging did indeed lay back and preach the sermon, the oration, hoping that when his turn came there would be someone in the world to owe him the sermon owed to her by all who had been, as he had been from infancy, within the scope and range of that fidelity and that devotion and that rectitude.

Loving all of it even while he had to hate some of it because he knows now that you don't love because: you love despite; not for the virtues, but despite the faults.

[End of *Mississippi*, by William Faulkner]