Patricia Foster

Where I Come From

I.

Where I come from is a land of swamps and lagoons, a galaxy of creeks and bays and rivers where brackish waters flood the banks when tropical storms arrive in late summer and early fall. Where I come from boasts fields of cotton and soybeans and potatoes, land humped up and growing from late September to early May, the soil part sand, part clay, a place where huge mossy ferns spill into our backyard and honeysuckle vines crawl up the garbage cans, circling the drainpipes and clotting the window screens my mother will have to clean. Here, people wave and shout when they first see you, then knuckle you upside the head. Black women, who once worked at my father's clinic, hug me when I come home, pulling me close to their bosoms and sinking their arms into my white flesh, humming even as they say, "Lord, look at you, girl. Just *look* how you're all grown." Where I come from people say "honey" and "chile" and "sugar" and "baby" as if this is the most natural set of words in the world, as if the comfort level is just that close, about navel level.

What I'm telling you may sound reassuring, perhaps endearing, but where I come from is also a place of danger and fury, an anguish about who has options and who needs to stand quietly in line. Growing up in the 50s and 60s, I understood this division as racial and gendered, economic and social, a Darwinian hierarchy that rarely unraveled. I remember the first time I heard about Redlining (a discriminatory policy that refused mortgages in or near Black neighborhoods), how my breath caught, and my stomach cramped, how my eyes blurred with a rush of heat. *How can this be?* I wondered, as if I hadn't driven many times through Aaronville and Beulah Heights, the segregated Black neighborhoods of our town, the dirt roads hard and rutted under a hot summer sun or slippery with mud after an early September rain, the rental houses no more than shacks on stilts with tin roofs and sagging porches, properties the landlords allowed to decay.

Racial discrimination and economic disenfranchisement are the harsh legacies of my life in Alabama, but there are also subtle dangers, thin, dark psychological scars that emerge from my not fitting into a social culture, a family culture, a narrow, provincial, Christ-haunted culture. And there's this too: the unspoken and constantly reinforced divisions of class, the caste demarcations of language and gesture,

the "right" clothes, the "right" house, the "right" family, the "right" figures of speech. Here, the words *society people* are still spoken with awe, though even as a ten-year-old girl in 1959, I knew that society people simply meant rich, white folks with social clout, people who claimed the bearing of entitlement, who sat on the boards of banks and universities, libraries and foundations, men—and a few women—who approved such policies as Redlining and even determined the rate of our library fees.

Where I come from had to be escaped. It was necessary as if something crucial might be snatched away if I stayed. I knew only my stubborn shyness, my itch for solitude, my family's insistent demand for success and recognition, but little more, and so, I left . . . left the town, the state, the South, left with a rage buried so deep I thought it was curiosity. I thought I just wanted to "see the world," to figure myself out, a 60s trope practiced in the 70s like a delayed dream. It was only after I found my way to the West Coast that I discovered I *was* Southern, that a cultural envelope could define who I was. "Oh, you're so *Southern*," people in downtown Los Angeles would say when they heard me speak. "Say y'all." And I'd dutifully perform, "*Y'all, Y'all, Y'all,*" like a wind-up toy.

Once at a movie studio where I'd gone to interview for a low-level editing job, an interviewer stared intently at me, then asked his partner, "Don't you think she looks and sounds a *little* like Sissy Spacek?" He paused, not waiting for an answer. "I mean, we could work with that," as if typecasting was relevant. As if I had no identity of my own.

I sat silent, worried. I put my hands on the chair as if a tight grip might hold me down. "I'm not like anybody," I wanted to say, but panic scratched at my throat, and for the first time, I saw something that frightened me: I saw *southern girl* as a training that had made me overly polite, had made me think in terms of appearance and expectations instead of my own desires or bad ass dreams or political demands. Bad ass wasn't even in the cards.

Sitting there, I felt a new tension, hot and raw, a resentment of the interviewers' paternalistic attitudes, their expectations of compliance. But why was I conflicted? How had I allowed such complicity? Hadn't I grown up in a white middle-class family, lived in a spacious house with professional parents, and been educated at a private university? And yet another story lay buried beneath my life of privilege, a story that simmered with anxiety about class, insecurity about caste, a subversive terror about the indignities of poverty and the insidious possibility of being cast out of middle-class life. My parents had come from miners and bakers and factory workers, from the

desperate fringes of America where hollow-eyed poverty stared back at them, where they remembered too well the outhouses, the ugly clothes, the starchy food, the dismissal from anyone with *a little education*. "Don't try to get ahead of yourself," was the gist.

But they did. My parents snuck out of those mean Dickensian towns, found a way to the University of Alabama, and hunkered down, studying their way out of poverty, hoping to be lifted eventually to that well-tended feast. They met in Tuscaloosa, married in Pascagoula, spent their honeymoon in a roach-infested motel on the outskirts of New Orleans, separated only by saw grass and road signs from the highway to Gretna. For several years, they lived in basement apartments in the French Quarter, a swirl of mold and mildew decorating the ceiling while my father finished medical school and a residency, and my mother worked as a dietician at Baptist Hospital. One day, lighting the gas stove, my mother burned off my father's eyebrows. One day, caught in a thunderstorm, my mother's new dress suddenly shriveled, crawling up her thighs. One day, they looked at a plate of red beans and rice and pushed it away—*enough!* One day, they laughed easily with all their medical school friends who were now interns and residents, ready to move out into the world.

On their honeymoon in Gretna, their room was so small, the double bed took up almost every inch of available space. The mattress, lumpy and thin, caved in in the middle, the bedspread puddled in wrinkles of cloth. When they snapped on a light an army of palmetto bugs flew toward them, a buzzing crackle just above their bed.

"Gotcha," my father said, slapping some with his shoe.

"Please," my mother said softly, "I don't ever want to be poor."

"No," he said. "We won't."

And they dreamed themselves into another life. That is, they worked hard and prospered: joining a medical practice, having children, buying a house, and entering the middle class, my mother returning to teach biology and science in the public schools when we, the children, were older. And yet in the basement of their psyches, in the dark, muddled places of memory lived that other life, the formative life, the can't-talk-about-it-life that said, "You're nothing."

To my surprise, as I sat in the interview room, I felt a shiver of recognition, an understanding that this fear was in me too, a fear of being dismissed, disrespected, even destroyed. "You have to be good. You can't mess up because those in control will cast you aside." It wasn't only my *southern girl* training but also our family fear that had encouraged me to play-act goodness as if such behavior would pass for virtue and gain me respect.

Startled, I forgot for a moment where I was. When I looked up at the two men waiting for my response, I made an excuse and walked

out of the movie studio, thinking the first bad ass thought in my life. "I don't need you people." At that moment, I understood that I'd have to find out what I thought about myself and my family and the place I come from.

II.

Where I come from is a haven of stories, of drama, of "Oh, don't you know about his *sweet* lady-friend?" gossip, of whispering secrets and shouting threats, of sitting on the porch and talking the afternoon away, a glass of iced tea loose in your hand, of family talk around the dinner table every night. Not some nights. *Every night*. Of ghost stories and gothic tales, of "way before you were born" epics and ancestor histories, of "don't ever tell" confidences and backdoor conspiracies and furtive revelations. Growing up with all that talk, there was another surprise, one so unexpected and subversive I couldn't have imagined it: I became a writer. I became a writer because I desperately needed to burrow deep into that past and uncover the predictable and peculiar ways it had shaped me. That is, I became a writer because I was confused, deeply muddled but secretly hopeful that I might figure out my life. Though my writer friends tell me stories of being besotted with language even as children, of being "called" to the work as if undergoing an initiation rite, my siren call was more elemental: if I didn't unravel my family's past and my southern past, I thought I might die.

"Perhaps a bit melodramatic," I imagine my writer friend Jim saying.

Maybe so, but metaphorical death looms large for some of us. Scratch the soul of a shy, precocious girl and you will find dreams of glory. Scratch the soul of a shy, precocious girl and you will find terror, failure swinging its blade through the air.

And of course, I didn't figure it out. I haven't figured it out. Not really. Not fully.

What I figured out is a way of thinking, a close reading of my perceptions and a willingness to be alone with my thoughts, to be still and listen to my body and let the feelings rise uncensored to the surface. What I figured out is that experience can be apprehended through memory and what can't be remembered can be researched and studied and sometimes seduced from a meditative mind. What I figured out is how important the questions and how thin the answers, how aching the need. What I figured out is that the stories we tell ourselves matter, stories shaped as much by our imaginations as by our memories.

"Good writing is clear thinking about mixed emotions," a well-known writer once said, and I've spent forty years pledged to that sentence, worrying myself and my motives, loving and hating where I come from and the people who raised me until finally I began to "see" myself, that is, to see my many selves, awkward and intense, frightened and insatiable, resentful and curious, and to distill from them an autobiographical "I." It was only after I was able to do this—to imagine not a cohesive self but a writerly self—that I discovered a deep, aching love and unfathomable gratitude to my family and the place I come from. Without their influences—that strong ethos of love and loyalty, the endless arguments and storytelling, the loneliness and theatrical re-creation—I wouldn't have become a writer, wouldn't have written essays and stories and novels, wouldn't have found the courage to reveal an inner life, to see beneath the surface of myself. And now, so many years later, I'm glad for being raised in the cultural envelope of the South, proud to have suffered the growing pains of a born escapee.

III.

I live in Iowa City, Iowa, a Midwestern college town of 74,000 souls, a thousand miles from where I grew up, and though I've lived here for thirty years with a kind of harmonious contentment I never expected, I've always returned to the place I come from. I've returned for birthdays and weddings, for Christmas and Easter and summer vacations. I've returned for caretaking and funerals, for anniversary parties and graduations and family disputes. I've returned to run headlong into the Gulf of Mexico and body surf all the way back to shore. I've returned to drive the backroads, to pass the horse barns, the JESUS LOVES YOU signs, the endless fields of goldenrod, the ditches thick with kudzu, the bugs twitching and gasping. I've returned to take care of grand-nieces and risk permanent injury in trampoline parks and to make body-sized drawings with colored pencils. I've returned during hurricanes and hot spells and decades-rare days of snow. I've returned to do readings at public libraries, to give lectures at universities, to laugh with my sister at family quirks and encourage my mother to use a rollator.

I've returned because I wanted to, because I was needed and welcomed, and because, even when I didn't want to, I couldn't stay away.

"It's in your DNA," David, my husband, says as he puts my suitcases in the trunk of our car before another trip to Alabama.

IV

But now. What brings me back are the graves—the long dead and the newly dead resting side by side, buried beneath the earth, their graves marked in elegant and humble ways. When I kneel before them, I feel their earthly weight, knowing they are the ones who taught me to have a big hunger, to fight and survive, even to psychologically survive them but never to let them go.

It is July 2021, and once again, I've come back, the air thick with moisture, my eyes following the tangled green vines that snake up a tree, the ferns that push against a bird bath in someone's back yard, the gauzy nests of webworms hanging from branches of a pecan tree. David and I drive down a narrow blacktop to a cabin on the far side of the Magnolia River where we'll stay for a week. I've come to hold a memorial service for my mother, a ninety-seven-year-old woman so integral to the place I'm from and the person I've become, I don't know how to let her go. She died and was buried in November in the middle of the pandemic in a small, intimate service at the gravesite.

It wasn't enough.

I needed more.

And yet, as I write this, it isn't my mother's memorial service—a joyful celebration of her life—that I remember so vividly, but the night preceding her memorial.

That evening, I sit with David outside our lighted cabin watching the silent progress of a kayak being paddled through the quiet water as warm air presses close to my skin. At age seven, I lived on this river with my family, and its beauty is both familiar and foreign to me, the bluish-brown slow-moving water, the leaping mullet, the vines wrapped around trees, and anything abandoned: chairs, tables, shoes, hats. I've just gotten comfortable, listening to the buzz of the night when my cell phone rings, the voice revealing a slight change to the procedure in my mother's memorial that must be made tonight.

Damn! There's no wi-fi in this cabin, which is in the back of the beyond, and now I'll have to scout out a place with internet, send an email, and wait for a response. It's after 8 p.m.

"I'll come too," David says.

Five miles and five turns later, I sit outside the door of an upscale restaurant in the wealthy retirement village of Magnolia Springs, my laptop perched on my lap, the receptionist having given me permission to use their wi-fi and take care of the changes for tomorrow. Once finished, David and I agree we absolutely *must* get take-out—fresh chicken salad, two apples, a half a loaf of sourdough—but as this fancy restaurant is too damn expensive, we drive six miles to the town where I grew up.

With the bag of food in our car, we're back on the two-lane country roads to the cabin, past the fancy restaurant, a thicket of trees on each side, oaks and pines interrupted only by narrow driveways of oyster shells, and then an armadillo in my headlights, its squat, ugly body upturned, its tiny feet oddly vulnerable. As I go over three speedbumps, I note the County Highway 26E sign that signals a turn to the left as I cruise through the thickening night, listening to the raucous hum of crickets, the constant croak of frogs. My first turn—County Highway 26W—will be another half mile, a right turn that'll take us over small creeks, around sharp curves, and to a rough paved road, a bumpy dirt lane, a grassy driveway, and finally, a jolting path to the cabin.

Nervous, I'm chatting with David about tomorrow's memorial. "What if *nobody* comes?" I ask. "Or what if *everybody* comes?" worrying not only about crowd size with the Delta variant rising in this area, but also about the sequence of speakers. "Do you think I've asked too many or too few people to speak?" I sigh. "Oh, I don't know how to *do* these things." Maybe it's because I'm in the grip of uncertainty that I miss the County Highway 26W sign, my only guidepost to this pivotal turn. There is no stop sign. No blinking yellow light. I've forgotten the darkness of a country road—no white lines, no oncoming cars, no nearby houses lit from within—only a velvet cloak of blackness broken by the beam of my headlights.

Getting lost feels like a slow-motion parody of uncertainty—*I should know where I am* followed by a burst of recognition: *I don't know where I am*.

To my surprise, the mass of trees and bushes stops abruptly, the land flattening into fields and crops. Now I creep along, knowing I've overshot the turn as I search for a place to circle back. And finally, yes, there's a crossroads with a small store just ahead, closed now but with a graveled driveway where I can turn and head back in the right direction. My sense of relief is palpable. And yet I *can't* get my bearings. Uncertain, I drive five miles in the direction from which we came, then stop suddenly in the middle of the road.

"*What?*" David asks, looking at me with concern. "Did something happen?"

But I shake my head, closing my eyes, listening to the motor's hum. What can I say? I want to call my mother. I want to hear her soft, southern voice, then listen to her clear her throat, a raspy, catching sound. I want to hear her say quietly, "You'll be fine, honey. Don't worry."

You see, it's only here, stopped on a dark road late at night, that I feel the force of my mother's death, the weight of it, the

irreconcilable loss, its imprint startlingly fresh and raw and sharply comprehensible to my psyche. Only here, in the middle of nowhere, do I recognize that I’m deeply alone, the last of my generation in this family, the only one who will ever need to return.

To visit the dead. To tell their stories. To find my way in the dark.