Sardis

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Easter Sunday and it's windy and cold for April in the Deep South. To make matters worse, squall lines have been blowing up from the Gulf all morning, hanging tattered clouds so low and thick they look like the soaked inside of a cotton bale. I'm on a three-day book tour—Memphis, Jackson, and Oxford, Mississippi—for *Chattooga,* a narrative about the river made famous in part by a southern writer named James Dickey. It hasn't really been a triumphant tour. On Saturday afternoon in Memphis, the Davis-Kidd chain store where I was scheduled to sign had forgotten to order *Chattooga* from the publisher. I stood around for twenty minutes while an embarrassed clerk searched for two copies of the book that the computer said were somewhere in the store. My one other stop in Memphis that evening was at an independent bookstore where, upon arrival, I discovered they'd closed early for Easter. A small handwritten sign in the window next to a nice pile of my unsigned books said, "Gone Fishin'." I am still hopeful concerning stops in Jackson and Oxford on Monday. The bookstores there—Lemuria in Jackson and Square Books in Oxford—are legendary for their hospitality to writers. Other writer friends who'd done this very tour told me I would not be disappointed by either.

Since I'm so close, I've told my Mississippi buddy Dixon Bynum that I want to paddle something of what's left of Faulkner's river bottom that made up his "Big Woods." Getting in touch with moving water will salve all my tour wounds and relax my tired mind. Dixon has set up a six-mile, half-day paddle downstream from the Sardis Dam, on what little free flow is left of the Little Tallahatchie River, which becomes the Tallahatchie thirty miles farther downstream after its confluence with the Coldwater River. It's no wilderness, but it will give me a window cracked open on what Faulkner called the "tall and endless" woods.

William Faulkner made up a mythical Mississippi county with the unpronounceable Indian name of Yoknapatawpha, and James Dickey did the same with a North Georgia river he called the Cahulawassee. Both mythical places have lived in my imagination parallel to real places. Both landscapes—the real and the imagined—have their appeal. Today I'll add the real Little Tallahatchie River to my life list of rivers I've paddled and figure out the connections to the myth of Faulkner's "Big Woods" as I float down.

Is it Faulkner's Big Woods that drowned under Sardis Lake? Not really. The big bottom of "The Bear" isn't any more a real place than Jefferson or Frenchman's Bend or the old Sutpen's Hundred. Dixon assures me, though, that southwest of here is where the real Faulkner is known to have hunted and camped along a real Mississippi river, and surely he used his experience in the Little Tallahatchie River bottom to create "The Bear" and several other stories. "Write what you know"—that's what we tell our students in creative writing classes.

I've driven out of Memphis south on I-55 parallel to the big muddy. After an hour I get off on Highway 315 and approach and cross the Sardis Dam—a vast mowed greensward of earthen construction so long that the Corps of Engineers has made a park out of the base of it with football and soccer fields. I cruise over the causeway and see that the dull brown lake on one side is humming with motorboats. The

recreation space is downslope on the other. The whole complex is like a snapshot of twentieth-century engineering logic—drown something dynamic and wild like the Little Tallahatchie River; offer car camping, fishing, boating; chalk off a playing field or two; and call it "green space."

In the Deep South little is natural about a big lake. The terrain of Mississippi remained glacier free during the Pleistocene and, if not manipulated, the local water does what it's done for hundreds of thousands of years, which is eventually find its way to the Gulf of Mexico. Even the oxbow lakes along the Mississippi River are ephemeral in geologic time, cut-off meanders filling in every few thousand years to form bogs, dells, swamps, and finally thick riparian forests of cypress and tupelo. Check out any North Mississippi lake holding enough water to slip a ski boat in, and at the outlet you'll find a water control system of some sort, a low earthen levee cutting across the stream flow, a shallow concrete dam, or a bigger dam made of earth, rock, masonry, concrete, or some combination of the four.

I don't like dams, but I have to admit I'm probably in the minority. Impoundments have been around awhile. Some say as little as one one-hundredth of all the water on the planet is available to us, not salty or frozen in glaciers, and that tiny bit of water is often not in the right place for us humans to do with it what we need for survival—drink it or use it to ensure ample crops. Human engineering of water flow dates back to the Egyptians, who built irrigation systems. When, in Monty Python's *Life of Brian,* a member of one of the numerous liberation fronts during the time of Christ answers the rhetorical question, "What have the Romans ever done for us?" he needs only one word—"Aqueducts." It gets a laugh even out of me.

Who could dislike aqueducts? Architecturally, an aqueduct looks more like a Roman temple than does Sardis Dam. Their elegant arches show some classic sensitivity to place. They survive as ruins and in some rare instances still do what they were designed to do two thousand years ago—move water from a place of abundance to one of scarcity.

Once human beings start engineering, it's hard to stop. A direct line reaches from a marble dam built in India in 1660 for water impoundment and crop cultivation to the huge contemporary hydro projects like China's Three Gorges Dam, which has trapped whole river drainages behind its vastness. If you're a hydraulic engineer with a hammer in your hand—in this case, enough knowledge to build a dam—it doesn't take much to see dams plugging the vast river systems webbing the planet as your nails.

I know my feelings of disdain for reservoirs flow from a place of Western economic privilege. China argues it needs the Three Gorges Dam for hydropower to fuel the country's future and pull billions out of poverty. I trust when I turn on my tap at home in South Carolina that water will flow forth. When I eat a salad, I know some engineer has long ago guaranteed the lettuce will be irrigated in a semiarid California field. But it isn't these human uses that I seriously question. It's our need for impoundments like Sardis; it's the desire so many Corps of Engineers impoundments in the South articulate—rivers drowned for flood control, recreation, and aesthetics.

Construction on Sardis Dam began in 1936 as flood control for the southern Mississippi River valley after the great flood of 1927 had swamped the whole vast floodplain of the Mississippi Delta from the bluffs in Arkansas to the bluffs in Mississippi, a distance of more than fifty miles. In the wake of that famous flood, the Corps of Engineers built these now familiar dams, floodways, spillways, and levees. They stabilized and mapped the channels. They cut meanders out of the Mississippi, shortening the river's route to the Gulf by 152 miles. They tamed the big river and any tributary that might offer trouble again.

In the 1930s few doubted that "flood control" was desirable. Most years people die from floods, and property is lost. Who could argue that if engineering flood control is possible we should not do it? Recently though, "control" has been substituted for "management," and the prevailing wisdom (even in the Corps of Engineers) is that bigger dams make for greater damage once a big flood does come. Is it possible that the era of large dams for flood control and development has drawn to a close?

A few hours alone in a rental car have given me way too much time to think about all this and made me way too cynical about taming rivers and landscapes with reservoirs like Sardis. "God would have done it, if he had the money"—that's what they say about the federal agency's makeover of the world in its own image since 1865. As I drove out of Memphis I pondered the South fallen off from what, as an old romantic, preservationist anarchist, I long for. I mourn all the species lost to development, the logging, the rude runoff from paving the continent, the engineered rivers in the Mississippi River valley, and the human-manufactured lakes holding back the waters bound for the Gulf.

Though the name of Lake Sardis slightly echoes one of Faulkner's most famous families, Sartoris, I don't think the 1949 recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature would recognize much of his native county now. My friend Dixon says Faulkner knew Lake Sardis and even opposed it at first. He wrote a letter to the local Oxford paper articulating his views on what the Corps of Engineers called "progress." It's not hard to hear echoes of Faulkner's uneasy relationship with progress in the first few pages of "The Bear" from *Go Down, Moses,* first published in 1940, the year Sardis Lake's floodgates closed and water began to back up over the big bottom. In "The Bear," Faulkner describes the modern countryside around the bottom as "a corridor of wreckage and destruction" and compares progress moving through it with "the ruthless and irresistible deliberation of a locomotive, the shaggy tremendous shape." Dixon guesses that by the 1950s Faulkner must have made his peace with the lake. He often escaped from his increasing fan base by retreating to a houseboat named *Mingagery* that he kept at the Sardis marina. As one biographer says, "He spent a good deal of time on his boat, sulking, avoiding contact with the world." A famous picture shows the Nobel Prize winner plying the waters of Sardis Lake on a sailboat he owned called the *Ring Dove.* As far as I know, no photos exist of Faulkner in a canoe floating downstream toward Batesville on the Little Tallahatchie.

What would William Faulkner make of the interstate highway system that brought me here or the campers parked at the foot of the 15,000-foot expanse of dam? Driving

in I see a little slice of what's left of Faulkner's countryside—dogwoods in bloom, abandoned farmsteads, closed cinderblock country stores only a few generations removed from the outfit Flem Snopes might have run, a stray black dog working the roadside for whatever scraps he can find, a vista over the newly plowed fields of the hill country around Oxford, and the dark silence of a faraway hardwood tree line in the distance. But there is also the new rural South: on the way down, signs advertising Mallard Pointe Golf Course halfway to Memphis, and a convenience stop called "The Dam Store" anchoring the turnoff for the resort on the lake's western shore. As I pull into the Sardis Dam parking lot, I think how for Faulkner the past pools in the present, wetting down the future, and never evaporates. From reading his novels and stories I know nothing's purely downstream in Faulkner's world.

I've arrived a little early, so I park the car and wait for Dixon's pickup. He's told me to look for a crew cab Toyota Tacoma, but it would be easy to spot the truck anyway because of his canoe. "By their racks, ye shall know them," said a bumper sticker I once saw on a paddler's car. I'm a little cold—dressed like a touring writer for the raw, wet, windy spring day. Though I knew I was going paddling I haven't packed well. I thought in April a pair of shorts and a t-shirt would do. Before leaving the motel at 6 am I slipped on all three dress shirts I'd brought and a wind shell, but they're still not cutting the breeze and chill. While I wait I walk down and look at the Sardis spillway to keep warm. It's wide open, booming—a massive plug of heaving Delta water from the impounded Tallahatchie River coming through every second. This chilly Easter morning locals fish the riprap banks. Just downstream a smaller, quiet lower lake spreads out, and three aluminum skiffs trawl down toward where the river flows over a lowhead dam. There's no shortage of reading material as I wait. A "posted limit" sign reminds the fishermen and fisherwomen they are allowed seven black bass or crappie per day.

Soon I'm walking back up the ramp to the parking lot, and Dixon's truck pulls in—a truck with a camper and canoe on top—followed by another vehicle. When Dixon's window comes down I hear bird calls coming from the cab. We shake hands though the open window, and Dixon sees I'm a little confused by the whistles and chirps. He explains that listening to the bootleg birdcall tapes are a habit he picked up while writing his thesis at Mississippi on Audubon. "My wife nearly left me over these damn tapes," Dixon says. "I still don't know 'em all. Get in, we're gonna run the shuttle first."

When I'm in the warm cab and buckled in, Dixon nods back to the following Suburban and says he's brought a graduate school friend, Greg Brown, along to paddle, says Greg is working on the prosody of English poetry. "A strange passion in Faulkner country," I comment, and Dixon just laughs. "It's a big department."

Dixon takes off, and we head back down Highway 315 to a cut-through gravel road that parallels the river five miles downstream to the next bridge, where we'll drop Greg's vehicle. Dixon says we'll stop along the way and walk a boardwalk through a tupelo swamp, something he thinks I should see if I'm going to visit Mississippi searching for Faulkner's big bottom. Unlike me, Dixon's dressed for the weather. He's

in two or three layers topped by a golden hunting jacket. He's got a ball cap to top off his head, blue jeans, and worn-out L. L. Bean "duck boots" to protect his feet from the wet morning as we paddle. Pulling into the parking lot for the boardwalk, Dixon explains how it's not predicted to climb above fifty today and will stay windy. "Raw spring day," is how he puts it, looking at my underdressed torso. "I've got a second paddling jacket. You're gonna need it."

Dixon, Greg, and I walk from the parking lot toward the boardwalk. The sun's out, and it's warmer. Greg's a friendly guy, dressed like Dixon for the weather. Dixon tells him I've commented on the oddness of a scholar of English poetry prosody in Faulkner country, and Greg makes it clear that while not studying English poetry he gets in as many canoe expeditions as possible, day trips and overnights, the rhythm of canoe paddling blending nicely with all the conventional rhythms of poetry. On the way in Dixon says both he and Greg get to walk here more often than they get to canoe. This boardwalk is only twenty minutes from Oxford and affords a nice escape from graduate school. He directs my attention to two large clusters of buckeye growing near the parking lot, already boasting a showy display of dangling red blooms. I wish for a moment I had a concordance of all Mississippi writers so I could see ways they've used plants in their fiction. Is there any place in Faulkner where a character comments on buckeye blooming in the spring? Does Eudora Welty weave the buckeye into any story, or does a range map of her fiction leave the buckeye high on the bluffs above the river?

When we enter the swamp proper, Dixon points to tupelo leafing out in the marginal forest, and I know I'm in the Deep South. The rough buttressed trunks of the tupelo are dark grayish, still wet from the rain that blew through in waves this morning. Is this the remaining Mississippi equivalent of the mythic forest Faulkner found "somber, impenetrable" in "The Bear"?

We circle out on the wooden boardwalk to the middle of the swamp, where the walkway terminates at two large observation platforms. Taking up the center of the swamp is a large beaver pond. I look around. Two great blue herons fish in the shallows just far enough away to be undisturbed by our presence. A kingfisher cackles as we pause. Dixon has brought his field glasses, and he swivels them to his eyes to scan the distant tree line where he knows from his other visits there is a beaver lodge.

"Look at that," Dixon says, in a moment or two, pointing toward the middle of the pond. With my bare eyes I can see what look like two muskrats on steroids that have risen out of the pond to frolic on a hummock of brush. "Nutria," Dixon says. "Two big ones. It looks like they are grooming each other." Dixon hands me the glasses, and I watch intently. They are not Old Ben, the bear of the big bottom, but the wild nutria will have to do for megafauna today. As I watch, Greg gives me a little natural history. The rodents—close kin to beavers and muskrats—were introduced as a furbearer to the Gulf states from South America in the early 1900s. They've worked inland, from freshwater marsh to freshwater marsh, for a hundred years, helped along the way by a storm surge or two. Herbivores, they eat pickerelweed, cattail, and arrowhead, and in

the winter gnaw the bark from wetland hardwoods. Nutria have long yellow incisors like beaver and graze up to 25 percent of their body weight in a single day.

Dixon adds that they are not beloved wildlife in the Delta. They destroy wetlands with their voracious grazing of aquatic plants, and the young become sexually mature at only four months. If the nutria is an indicator species for anything, it's how quickly things can get out of control when we try to engineer natural systems for our own good. The nutria is sort of a dark twin to Faulkner's bear roaming the big bottom for generations in spite of, as Faulkner beautifully puts it, "man's puny gnawing at the immemorial flank" of the bottom. Now we've gnawed practically everything away and sent in the mercenaries—the nutria, the Asian clams, the kudzu, and the Japanese honeysuckle—to gobble up and colonize what's left.

On the drive down to the take-out bridge we pass still-active farm fields, newly plowed. Dixon points out an old abandoned silo with "white power" scrawled in black paint across the curving concrete. As we pass closer I see it's also riddled with large-caliber bullet holes. "Well, it's still Mississippi," Dixon says, laughing. The scene chills me a little though, a hangover from *Mississippi Burning.* Violence is always right here, in the imagination, just below the surface in the countryside—bullet holes and racist slogans—and any protection that being an outsider to it affords drains away.

We drop Greg's truck at the take-out, transfer his boat, and drive back to Sardis Dam. With gulls circling overhead and a two-foot dead gar, empty-eyed, bobbing at the water's edge, we put in at the boat ramp on the lower lake. Dixon and I push his fourteen-foot Old Town tandem out from shore as Greg steps into his Mad River Intrepid setup to paddle solo. A bass boat launches right as we do, and the local boys can't resist getting in a shot at our mode of travel. "You boys might be needing a tow back," yells the Mississippi Bubba in camo bib overalls as we begin to stroke across the lake.

First two miles downstream, the Little Tallahatchie, set free from the Sardis impoundment, meanders through forested banks of what Dixon calls "the Corps land," and if I squint it's possible to imagine I'm paddling some primordial bend in an ancient southern river. I ask Dixon where the Delta officially begins, and he repeats historian David Cohen's famous comment from 1935—"In the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis"—and then gives me the answer I'm looking for—"twenty miles southwest, but ecologically, it's right here. This is a fringe Delta stream, and it shares many of the Delta's characteristics—tupelo and other bottomland hardwoods, but it's also got the northern Mississippi species, like the dogwood."

I make a survey of the ecological zone we're passing through. The dogwoods Dixon has mentioned are blooming in the understory. Swallows work the surface of the river for insects. Then the trees disappear, and the vista opens up onto newly plowed farmland, and the banks that upstream were held in place by trees and understory vegetation are here, where the farmers have planted row crops right up to river's edge, deeply eroded. "They all know about best management practices," Dixon says, "but they choose to ignore them."

For an hour or so we talk about whatever is passing—a deer breaking through a thicket, great blue herons fishing in the shallows. Halfway down we take Greg's lead and follow him up a tributary creek coming in from the left bank. It quickly narrows down to ten feet, but we begin to see more birds in the denser cover—kingfishers, green herons, more great blues. Before we turn around, we even spot the distinctive flared trunks of some mature cypress.

As we float, Dixon talks about how much he loves a day on the river, any day. I ask if he's ever taken his canoe out on the Mississippi, and he recalls a race he'd been in, the only time he'd ever really paddled the big river in a canoe. He also talks about a long wild trip on the Pearl River in southern Mississippi that he and Greg have been planning—six days, all the way to the Gulf, from Jackson on down. He seems to anticipate these canoe trips the way the narrator of "The Bear" anticipates the yearly journey into the Big Bottom to hunt. The Big Bottom might be gone, but the yearning to get out in the dense woods is still around.

We've soon left the little tributary, and we're back to the river proper and headed downstream. We stop for water and some crackers on the only gravel bar we've seen—all river sand everywhere else. Here, the water rushes over a beach of dull cobbles, not so much many colored as variations on a shade of brown, and Dixon mentions that "Tallahatchie" is an Indian word that means either "river town" or "rock river." I pick up a stone the size of a baseball and feel the curve worn smooth by tumbling. The smoothness is a fossil of passing time, this chunk weathered or eroded out of an outcrop somewhere north of here and rolled along the river to end up at our feet.

Dixon says twenty miles to our southwest the Little Tallahatchie enters the Delta proper and begins its run over deep sediments laid down by thousands of years of Mississippi floods, the rich black alluvial soil where the blues grew alongside cypress, cotton, and soybeans. The Delta loam downstream birthed a culture, birthed a way of life, but the hill country we're floating through south of Lake Sardis did all right as well. It birthed Faulkner, an intellectual industry, birthed a place inhabited by stories, what historian Don H. Doyle calls "the most Southern of all places."

I'm out of place here, a native of the upper South plunged deep for a day in a landscape and topography I'm unfamiliar with. Though I can name a few, the riverside trees are still a little foreign, as is the weight of the air, the pitch of the horizon. If Doyle is right and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, laid mythically on top of Dixon's real-life Lafayette County, is the essential South, then I have a right to feel like I'm a visitor. I settle back to appreciate it. I look south with the flowing river. The sun falls in glittering slats across the surface. The water surges over the cobbles at the edge of the bed.

But soon it's time to come back to the river and its flow, step in the boats, and let the current take us downstream. Knowing too much can tear you from the moment, can get you lost in ideas and speculation, and when you finally do look around, you have to blink hard to get some focus again. As we head downstream I see the ridges are a quarter-mile distant from the channel here. In the old days, before flood control, the

river took every inch of the space between the ridges during high flow. Now the Corps controls the river through the spillways at Sardis Dam. I ask Dixon if he's ever seen the river high, and he says higher than this but not much, not out in the fields laying down silt like it used to every spring. This makes me think about the river moving us downstream and the action of the ancient current. I remember how the river channel is almost completely absent from Faulkner's account of hunting in the Big Bottom. You know the river's there because it has to be, but McCaslin never describes it. McCaslin's attention is on the woods, still thick and mysterious in the floodplain before the loggers take it down, not on the river running through it.

But today we are canoeists, not hunters, and so we make our recreation in the river channel. For Faulkner, "The Bear" is a eulogy to a lost way of life, a time when once a year men retreated to the pure Mississippi wilderness to hunt for a month at a time while living in a camp. We retreat with river running, paddling stretches of territory where it's possible to forget the university and the soccer fields and the spillways and the big dam upstream. Outdoor recreation has become our passage, our deliverance from town life.

As we float along Dixon gets quiet, listening for birds he can recall from his Audubon tapes, and it gives me time to conjure some half-baked theory about Faulkner's writing and how it is like a last big wild river being dammed. All those Mississippi stories from Chickasaw and Choctaw times, forward flowing around and through him, finally ending up in more than a dozen novels and a hundred short stories. Now, fifty years later, he's a cultural lake, an impoundment of ideas and images and stories, and all the graduate students at Mississippi and all over the world are out sport fishing on Lake Faulkner.

Soon we see the bridge in the distance, and we know the six-mile float is over. A local is fishing next to where we take out, and Greg drops a paddle as he steps from his canoe. We all watch it circulate in a strong eddy just out of reach. If it were warmer we'd just jump in and grab it, but we made it this far high and dry. Finally we borrow the guy's fishing net to pull the errant paddle back to shore.

As we ride back up to Sardis Dam, I register with my paddling buddies Dixon and Greg a little exhilaration brought on by our canoe trip, but I admit to them that I'm not feeling very Faulknerian about the Little Tallahatchie. I write personal essays and prefer nonfiction narratives about nature to fiction leaning heavily on setting or place, like *Go Down Moses* or *Deliverance.* I don't make up rivers. I paddle real ones. After I get off the living stream I worry the recorded details of my river trips into stories. A river is an ancient thing, much more ancient than the human impulse to craft experience into narratives. Some writers (and I've come to realize I'm one of them) are captive to what Harvard eco-critic Laurence Buell has called the "environmental imagination," an impulse to see an encompassing nature as the great background for the fairly short-lived history of human endeavor. Faulkner believed in his Nobel Prize eternal verities, the "human heart in conflict with itself," the country of the human imagination, but I just can't trust it the way he did.

As I pack up to drive down to Jackson I think how in one odd way I'm very "Faulknerian," still susceptible to eternal verities. I think I really believe a good writer can redeem a diminished landscape through writing it, that as a nature writer I can visit a place like the Little Tallahatchie, and write it and return to those who read what's lost in this country on the fringe of the Delta. I can find, so to speak, the wildness in it and concentrate on that. But what really remains of a scrap of storied wilderness once the logging trains and skidders move in on it? What's lost once the Corps of Engineers has dammed the river? My day on the river has shown me it's more than we often think.

As soon as I get in my rental car to rejoin my book tour and small-scale literary life, the redemption I've gained diminishes with every mile I drive away from the river. Out to the interstate I try to hold it by remembering how Dixon told me about the Little Tallahatchie, how it flattens out, slips down the Yazoo bluffs, and joins the Yazoo River, and then how the Yazoo slides out on the vast Delta floodplain, bends into deep meanders, and slows to a sluggish crawl south before disappearing ceaselessly into the Mississippi's deep dark flow.

But as we floated along, Dixon also reminded me that real rivers work hard for a living in Mississippi, absorbing fertilizer runoff, pesticides, anything that industrial agriculture puts on that drains off crops and soil. "One big field curving into the body of the continent"—that's how Dixon describes his home country, the lower Mississippi Delta.

Driving my rental car and touring around on the interstate, I'm no redeemer. I'm only an active member of that continent's living body who cares for rivers, an interested visitor from far away. There's something in the force of that caring that makes even a brief float like this one part of something important. Waters still flow, even in the overworked, overburdened Delta.

On the highway driving down to Jackson my mind plays a trick on me. The asphalt is dark water and the eighteen-wheelers are industrial barges rolling past. My fantasy leaves me longing again for transformation, not simply redemption. I have to admit I want real rivers to run free. I want all the dams gone and all the fields free of the industrial chemicals that follow gravity into streams through runoff. Then Interstate Man has finally become River Man again, and I remember my day with Dixon and Greg on the Little Tallahatchie and something in that experience, that flash of memory, gives me the will to drive on.

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