In which we arrived in Oxford,
Faulkner's hometown in the rain, ready to stay put for a few days and catch up on some reading. We immediately ran to the famous Square Books, finding comfort and awe in the store revered by writers across the nation. After checking into our hotel, we wandered through the neighborhood and ate supper at a Greek restaurant, to pay tribute to Dr. Trakas’ heritage, and that night some of the boys enjoyed the culture of the hotel bar. The next morning, we visited the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, located at the heart of the Ole Miss campus. There, curator and director Charles Reagan Wilson discussed graduate school, the Center’s Southern encyclopedia, William Faulkner, and his church fan collection in his newly refurbished conference room. After a unique lunch at a local country cooking hotspot called Ajax, we visited the Faulkner house, awed by the quiet halls and the manicured lawn, and the literary history around us.

Later, we hiked back to our hotel, ready to shop and wander through the city on our own. The next day, we headed for the river in the company of Dixon Bynum. We marveled at the empty cotton fields, white farmhouses, and Parchman Prison on our way to the banks of the Mighty Mississippi. At the river, we walked across a broad stretch of sandy beach, where the river had receded but would soon rise to rule again. The boys got in touch with their inner cavemen, impressed by their ability to build a fire in the wind in such a wild and natural place. We listened to Dixon’s essays, watched the barges push down the river in the twilight, and returned in the darkness to our vans and civilization (and the end of the Carolina Panthers football game on the van radio).

On our last day in Oxford, we visited with author Tom Franklin who entertained us with stories of his own writings and his relations with some of the more colorful characters we’d met on our travels. We ate with the ebullient writer in the basement of Boure, a local French eatery, and Tom continued his antics through dinner, drawing sharks and self-portraits and laughing about the defects of his genetics. That night we wandered the streets and bars of Oxford and played one last time with our new local friends, sad to leave but ready to meet up with the friendly faces of the Wofford kids who were cleaning up the Mississippi coast after Hurricane Katrina.
Our aim was Alaska. To abandon Mobile at dawn without telling anybody, not even our girlfriends or our boss at the plant. Bruce knew a bail jumper who got a deckhand job on a crab boat off the Alaskan coast where she made five hundred dollars a day. Bruce was divorced for the third time and I’d never been married, so we planned to sell our cars and Bruce’s house trailer and buy an olive drab Ford four-wheel-drive pickup with a camper, fill it full of those sharp green pinecones hard as hand grenades. Bruce’d heard you could sell those suckers for five bucks apiece in New England.

They’re crazy up there, he said.

Driving through Georgia and Tennessee, we’d look for tent revivals where they had faith healing. If we found a good one we’d stop and visit a service. Bruce would fake heart disease and I’d be an alcoholic—to make it convincing, he said I’d have to grimace, moan, and clutch his left arm, until we had the whole congregation praying for us. When the ushers passed the KFC bucket for donations, we’d shrug and say we were flat broke, just poor travelers. Homeless.

Bruce had stolen his ex-wife’s Polaroid camera, which we’d keep handy for making pictures—hawks on fenceposts, grizzly bears, church marquees that said THE LORD IS COMING SOON, then right under that BINGO 8:00 EVERY TUESDAY. We’d have a stack of books-on-tape from the public library, too: John Grisham, Stephen King and even self-help. In the Badlands of South Dakota, when we pulled off the road to sleep in the back of the truck with our feet sticking out, we’d play an Improv Your Vocabulary Tape, learn words like eclectic and satyr.

At night we’d stop in dives, me in my dark glasses and Bruce in his eelskin cowboy boots. There’d be smoky hares of women interested in such eclectic guys, and they’d insist on buying us boilmakers. When I picked up a babe, I’d take the truck and leave Bruce arm-wrestling a drunk welder at the bar. Or if he got lucky and split with a startling honey, I’d amble to the jukebox and punch up John Prine and lure my dream girl away from the line-dancing bikers and cowboys. In the middle of the fight, I’d crawl bleeding out the back and sleep on a rock next to a cow skull and wait until the olive drab truck topped the hill in the morning.

We’d make pictures of the girls, too. You’d be surprised how many get off from posing in motel rooms, Bruce said. He would “let on” to some of the drunker ladies that we were advance photographers for the swimsuit issue, our names Abe Z. and Horatio. At the other end of the bar I’d be telling them that we were scientists from Texas researching barn owls. But to that adventurous woman running the pool table, the redhead wearing tight cutoff jeans, the kind of woman you know has a green iguana tattooed on her hip, to her we’d tell the truth: Alaska. Bruce said she could tag along, but he was sure she’d get homesick thousands of miles before the crab boat. Imagine the scene: some dusty Wyoming ghost town and this woman sobbing and hugging our necks, angry that she’s such a crybaby. She would climb the steps and we’d watch her sad pretty face in the window as the bus lurched off, and when she was gone Bruce would sigh with relief and, after a few drinks, we’d get in the truck and go north.

I’d miss her terribly.

If we saw the right brand of dog—it was a mutt we wanted, the ugliest in the lower forty-eight— we’d stop and bribe him with fast food. He could sit between us on the seat and lick our hands, and if he farted we could look at each other and yell, “Was that you?” and crank the windows down furiously. And, of course, we’d pick up chicks hitchhiking. When we got one, she could sit between us and hold the dog (we’d name him Handsome) and coo to him. We’d go days out of our way to get her home, but we wouldn’t be crass and say, “Ass, gas or grass.” All our rides would be free.

Because manners were important, we thought. So eating in truck stops, we’d put our napkins in our laps and remove our caps and say “Yes, ma’am” to the flirting women at nearby tables, would smile and wink and gather our doggie bags and leave 50 percent tips. Our waitresses would long to follow us, and the pretty gas station checkout girls would lean over their cash registers to read our names off the backs of our belts—not only because of our unusual looks and ugly dog, but our cultured Southern manners.

And sportsmen to the end, we’d skid off the road when we saw a private golf course. We’d step out of the trees in our loud pants and vault the fence and come in between the golfers, needing binoculars to watch the hole-in-ones three hundred yards away. The serious golfers, in their berets, would frown at each other as we passed by.

“Who’s the red?” they’d whisper, and the casual players who were used to us would smile and gather our doggie bags and say, “Yes, ma’am.”

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An Interview with Tom Franklin

We met Tom Franklin in his hometown of Oxford, Mississippi, on a rainy Sunday afternoon. After walking twenty minutes from his home, he pulled us up the stairs of City Grocery, a bar known even in Oxford for its literary patronage. After quick greetings outside on the square he welcomed us to the upstairs balcony to begin our interview, a literary experience interspersed with banter and Bud Light. Tom explained to us, "I walked here to meet you guys. I like to eat. And I don't exercise. I may die. This could be the last interview with Tom Franklin."

In turn, we felt more honored by our opportunity to interview Tom. Upon hearing that we had also interviewed William Gay, Tom exclaimed, "Sucks for y'all to see him and then me! It's like a step down. Actually it's like missing a step and then falling and breaking your ankle."

Tom puts up an outrageous front. As he had a few afternoon drinks, Tom, noticing that no one else was drinking, said, "I feel like more of a drunk than normal. This is my first one today, by the way." During dinner he played up what seemed to be an exaggerated caricature of himself—the good ol' boy turned story teller, a man who can drink with the best of them and still remember enough to write it all down in his next story. Being a self-proclaimed Southerner, Tom calls his four years at Arkansas, earning his MFA in creative writing, a trip to the North. Certainly liberal compared to the rest of Mississippi, Oxford is not the South Franklin usually writes about. But underneath the bluster there was also another Tom Franklin that we met, who spoke in between crude jokes and off the cuff anecdotes, a man who used to be the quiet fifteen year old from the introduction to Poachers, who never wanted to hunt and looked at working-class Alabama with the eyes of an outsider.

Tom, most of your writings seem to fit with an emerging genre that we call "Rough South," a sort of new Southern Gothic. Why do you write in these settings, about these tough, unlikable characters?

TF: Well, I like those rough characters. If a character is too nice, I just don't find him very interesting. And I really can't write about "nice" characters—I've tried, and it just doesn't work for me. A good thing for writers to remember is that no person is completely good or completely bad—almost everyone has a little of both in them. If your characters are too nice, no one will believe that they are real. Of course, the same goes for characters that are too bad—they become caricatures of villains. You have to actually care about the characters, or no one will keep reading. So I try to keep a balance, and I try to make sure that even my more despicable characters have some interesting and redeemable qualities.

Of course, most of these characters are at least partly me. Any character you create is going to have a little part of you in it. I guess I hate myself deep inside and it shows in
these characters. A lot of my writing is autobiographical in some sense. Most of these people and events are based on things that have happened to me and people I know. The three brothers from Poachers are based on three brothers who were my neighbors, the boys I described in the introduction of that collection. I played and fished with the Wiggins boys, and they were already expert hunters and fishermen when we were kids. Kent Wiggins could point at a spot, say “fish there,” and sure enough, when he cast to that spot, he caught a fish every time. They became the Gates brothers in Poachers. Snakebite, from “Grit,” was an actual man I worked with, at that same grit factory, and he was enormous, and he did have lots of knives, and he actually did have a tiny head. I’ve gotten into trouble for writing about people I know, or historical people, and writing too closely to the folks, or actually using their real names, idiot that I am.

Given all that you just said, it seems that your experiences growing up and working in Alabama are an integral part of your fiction. What advice would you give to other young writers for gathering the material for their fiction?

TF: Work lots of really weird jobs. I mean, you’ve read “Grit.” I actually met every one of those people. There’s plenty of good stuff out there without making anything up. You just have to find it and write it down. Of course, getting your heart broken is pretty good for a writer too.

Your stories tend to be based on real people and scenarios, but how do you actually go about writing them?

TF: It’s a lot of hard work, mostly. Fun, but really hard. Some people call fiction an art, but I think it’s a craft—you have to carefully sculpt your pieces, fit them together, make connections and smooth edges. For a long time I struggled with fitting together the pieces of my stories and making sense out of everything I wanted to write down. I had been working on Poachers for years, trying to find out why my characters showed up and did what they did. It took another writer’s advice to show me how a character’s past emotional makeup and past experiences formed the basis for his future actions thus making the story move forward. “It’s called plot,” he said to me, but at the time it was a sort of revelation. When I write, I have to rework stories over and over again until all the events fit together smoothly and make sense. You have characters, they come into conflict, and a series of events results based on how those characters behave in the face of that conflict. I think the best example for a beginning fiction writer is Dr. Seuss’s “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” In the first two lines of the story, you have an instant conflict, and everything else that happens occurs directly because of that conflict.

You’ve been open and forthcoming about all kinds of things. Are you equally willing to talk about the meaning of your stories?

TF: It’s fine to talk about theme and symbol, but mostly I try to leave that to critics. A fiction writer’s first job is to tell a story. That’s why it’s a craft—before anything artistic comes out, you have to construct a story that makes sense and is entertaining. That’s not all there is, of course. You can’t have a really good piece of fiction without good use of language. I rely heavily on my wife when I’m reworking stories, finding the words and phrases that will give the right mix of clarity and beauty to the language. Even with language, though, there’s an element of craft involved. Concrete words, nouns and verbs will always win out over abstract terms and meaningless adjectives.

Any final words on writing?

TF: Go out, live in the world, see some stuff, and you’ll have something to write about. My life and my writing both have been like an unplanned road trip—you don’t know exactly where you’re going to end up. You have to write, and write, and if you’re like me, a lot of it will end up discarded. But you have to just do it. Go stand in toxic waste up to your waist, drive around with a psychotic neo-Confederate, and then sit down for some long, hard work. Then you’re ready to be a writer.
Sweet tea, fried chicken, collard greens, cornbread, and banana pudding all are decidedly Southern dishes. During our trip, I was shown a new definition of the "rural South" through its authors and food. The meals we ate during our ten-day road trip and three day-trips, which spanned several thousand miles of roads through the heart of Dixie, were amazingly diverse. From curried goat at a Jamaican place in Greenville, South Carolina, to Elvis Presley’s favorite “dough” burgers at Johnnie’s Drive-In in Tupelo, Mississippi, to the best sushi I’ve had since a vacation in Honolulu, Hawaii, at Akai Hana Japanese Restaurant in Carrboro, North Carolina, none of it was traditional, yet all of it was somehow Southern. But it turned out that Oxford, Mississippi gave me my greatest insight into the culinary smorgasbord that is the rural South.

Definitive meal one: Oxford, an amazing mecca of writers, scholars, and artists, and home to literary legend William Faulkner, painted one of the most interesting pictures yet of the South through its many varied restaurants. After a stop in Hohenwald, Tennessee, to meet William Gay, where we ate at an uninspiring Mexican restaurant, and also a night spent in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, where we ate at a disappointingly mediocre barbeque joint, Oxford’s food was a refreshing change of pace. Author Tom Franklin recommended we try the Ajax Diner. I later learned that Prince Edward had stopped in for lunch there a little less than a year before our visit.

Our group of thirteen was lucky enough to find seating on our third attempt to eat there; both of our other attempts were thwarted by hour-long wait times. Our waitress recommended “The Big Easy.” The “burger” consisted of a piece of country-fried steak covered in a dollop of homemade mashed potatoes, a spoonful of homemade gravy, and lima beans, all sandwiched together between two hamburger buns. Served with a house salad and French fries that the Food Network has listed as some of the “world’s best,” the dish put a new spin on several Southern favorites.

The service was great, as well as the presentation of the restaurant and bar. The most unique aspect of our experience came when we looked up and saw literally thousands of toothpicks mysteriously lodged in the ceiling tiles. It only took ten college students and three professors about fifteen minutes to discover the secret to the toothpicks. By placing one end of the straw in your mouth, then dropping the toothpick into the straw, then placing a finger over the open end and blowing furiously to build up pressure, then quickly removing the finger, we shot our of Taylor, Mississippi, located about ten miles from Oxford. Though we were basically in the middle of Nowhere, USA, we were intrigued with the small town, home to Old Taylor Grocery, serving the best fried catfish in Mississippi and possibly the world. Every author we met, upon telling him or her that Oxford would be one of our stops, told us to make sure we ate there. When our group tried the previous evening, the wait was already up to two hours at only 6:15. But Mark and I were surprised to find the restaurant open, especially since the hours posted on the door told us it was closed. We called the group, but they would not be able to make it down to Taylor before they closed that afternoon, so Mark and I decided to sample the famous fish as a sacrifice for the sake of the class. Upon entry, the owner kindly said, “Y’all find a seat wherever y’all like, ya hear?” There were no menus; the waitress told us we could have either the catfish or the buffet. We both opted for the catfish. Within ten minutes, and after an interesting conversation with a woman sitting at the table next to us who had been a lifelong customer, a Styrofoam plate piled high with crispy, golden-fried catfish fillets topped with a couple pieces of raw onion, hushpuppies, fries, coleslaw,
and tartar sauce was set down in front of us on the plastic red and white checkered tablecloths. It is little wonder the food is so famous; fried to perfection, with just the right amount of crunch, the sweet, mild, and flavorful fish simply melted in our mouths once our teeth penetrated the crunchy, salt and peppered breading.

The restaurant has seen many famous literary legends. Rumor has it that they call the tartar sauce “Dickey Sauce,” in honor of a drunken James Dickey consuming three or four cups of it and declaring that it was “the best damn soup I’ve ever had!” The restaurant is a favorite of New York Times best-selling author John Grisham, and I also heard that award-winning actor Morgan Freeman sometimes drops in for a catfish plate when he is in the area.

Definitive meal three: We spent a rainy afternoon with author Tom Franklin on the balcony of City Grocery, his favorite bar and grill, while he sipped on a Bud Light. We had a very lively and entertaining discussion with him on subjects that ranged from his book Poachers, to fellow author William Gay, to the difficulties of creating characters different from himself. When the rain slacked off, we walked to Botre’s, a local steakhouse only a city block away from both City Grocery and from our hotel. There I had a dish that epitomized the collision of old South and New—Cajun fried crawfish with teriyaki dipping sauce. A marinated sirloin, grilled to a perfect medium-rare, followed, but the taste of what the dish meant in terms of our quest to define the South stuck around the table much longer than the actual dish.

Last night at a little past midnight, Jason, Natalie, Wilson and I drank liquor at William Faulkner’s grave in the moonlight. I had intended to have a nice quiet late-night walk around the town square, but, the moment I left Wilson at the hotel and headed towards the parking lot, Natalie and her friends showed up. I suspect she was there to see Jason, since they ARE soul mates, which Jason declared no less than twenty times after we met Natalie. So after the pleasantries and hugs, we mutually decided that it was far too nice a night to stay in the hotel, and we made a rather impromptu decision to go visit William Faulkner’s grave, since the weather was nice and the spirits equally pleasant. We quickly rounded up Wilson and Jason. The walk to the graveyard was half the fun—we all kept wondering if we could find the grave at all since in the moonlight the graves all looked the same. By the time we reached the graveyard we had split up; Wilson and Jason walked around the upper level, and I went with Natalie.
down to the lower level. We found Mr. and Mrs. Faulkner after a few minutes, thanks to the handy “historical monument” marker, and I set Natalie down on a stone bench and went to grab Wilson and Jason.

So within a few minutes the four of us found ourselves sitting by Faulkner’s grave, saying a few spur-of-the-moment (but in my opinion very worthy) tributes to Faulkner, commending him for inspiring us to read Southern literature. Jason, Wilson and I poured a few shots of rum on his marker (Mrs. Faulkner only got one since she’d been a prude and apparently had a frosty relationship with her husband). It was such a carefree, wonderful moment. I think that single escapade really encapsulated what college is all about: that adventurous, intrepid appetite for growth and new things. It was very peaceful just to sit with the cold January breeze at our backs and talk about Faulkner while listening to Natalie’s French accent as we discussed writing and the concept of immortality.

Relaxed and carefree, the four us lay back in the grass and dead leaves and passed the bottles around as we shared stories and thoughts. It was amazing, gazing at the moon as silvery clouds passed under it, arguing over whether the trees looked Burton-esque and wondering what it was like to be dead. I was surprised that the Faulkners had such a simple grave marker; you’d think that someone of his reputation would have something really grand, but it was no different from the hundreds of others around us. I found it quite reassuring to know that people who had every right to be arrogant were content to rest in a simple coffin and not on a bed of laurels.

It was around one thirty by the time we left, and it was nearly two before we came to the hotel. I think I knew right then and there that this would probably be the most memorable moment of the trip, barring something random like the bus tipping over or Louis getting knocked out by a Frisbee. If Faulkner were alive, I like to think he would salute our little adventure with a shot of rum. If his spirit gets restless, well, there’s always the bottle of rum we left at his grave.
William Faulkner surveys the Oxford Square
far top left: Laura Vaughn taking a much-needed break on the windowsill of Shenanigan’s restaurant in Sewanee, TN
left top: A little girl playing on the same windowsill shortly after Laura
left bottom: Produce vendor at the Pickens County Flea Market
bottom: Hallie Sessoms, caught deep in thought, downtown Chapel Hill, NC
above: Creek scene from the Ellicott Rock Wilderness
left: Heron tracks on the Pascagoula coast
top: Panoramic view of the Mississippi River and bank

above: Art in motion, Nashville, TN
below: The afternoon sun filtering through stained glass windows in the cathedral on the campus of the University of the South
bottom: Jars of sourwood honey at the Pickens County Flea Market

above: Hands for sale at the Pickens County Flea Market
above: A neighborly warning from Layfayette County, MS
above: Just off the square in Oxford, MS

top right: Downtown Milledgeville, GA
bottom right: Interior of Taylor Grocery, outside of Oxford, MS
above: Ocoee River at dawn, low water
right: Signs on the back dirt roads somewhere in Lafayette County, MS

previous pages: Reflection of trees in Sweetwater Creek, along the Natchez Trace