

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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When I arrived at Mississippi State, I was twenty-two years old, naïve, and hopelessly in love with the sound of my own voice. So of course I entertained vague notions of becoming a poet. The words of Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop spoke to me. I cottoned to their poems about animals—the fish and armadillos and moose. I thought often about how I could spend the rest of my life describing wild hogs, slain deer, pregnant skunks, the fauna of my childhood. It didn't seem like such a bad row to hoe, all things considered.

I grew up about an hour and half from Starkville. The town was called Possumneck—but “town” might be an embellishment. Let's call it a network of paved roads in the hill country, just outside the Delta. There were fields in front of my home and piney woods behind it. There was the Big, Black River, and there was my family, a host of aunts and uncles on my mother's side, all of us living next door to each other, our own familial neighborhood in the middle of nowhere—but “nowhere” might be a slight. Because to me, it was the beginning and end of everything I knew of the world.

My childhood will not sound unique to those who, like me, grew up in rural parts of the country. My folks were just shy of poor. Oh, there were some in our family who had a little more than we did, but we didn't like them very much, and always found cause to avoid them. Anyway, both of my parents worked, but “worked” might not fully convey the amount of toiling it took—week after week after week—to keep the lights on and enough food in the freezer. My father slogged away for many

years at the Attala County Co-op, driving these big trucks that spread seed in the fields. Then, he sold four-wheelers and tinkered on the small engines of lawn mowers and weed-eaters before finally earning his commercial driver's license to drive semis. I cannot pass a NAPA Auto Parts and not think of him and of how his hands always smelled like grease and rubber. My mother worked, too: first, in a lamp factory for many years, then she became a salesclerk at a local office supply store a mile or so away in the town of Kosciusko—and by “town,” I mean an honest-to-god one, as they had a courthouse and a post office and a Wal-Mart Supercenter. I learned my parents had two modes of being: at work, and at rest. All this to say, they didn't teach me to read, or instill in me a love of reading—this is not that kind of essay and we are not those kinds of people. But they labored away their lives, so I didn't have to, so I could have the time and opportunity to find books on my own. They created a space for me, their son, to value my own education.

I showed up in Starkville, ready to begin my master's degree, well-read and eager, but not really understanding what it meant to become a writer—not yet, anyway. The professors in the English Department challenged, terrified, worried, and inspired me—sometimes all at the same time. I spent my two years in the program in a state of wonder. It felt like a great luxury, to be able to talk books all day with such great thinkers and artists, who never patronized or belittled me for my ignorance. Learning to write was hard, and what's more, it should have been. Michael Kardos,

in one of the first workshops I took at MSU, said that writing fiction requires more from us than time. Working closely with him, Becky Hagenston, and poets Rich Lyons and Catherine Pierce, I learned that creating art with words should require everything we have to give, and if we are lucky, it will push us beyond the limits of our own intellectual and emotional capabilities.

But maybe that is too highfalutin, so let me say it another way.

At Mississippi State, I learned that lying was an art. “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that tells the truth,” Picasso said, or maybe he didn't. Point is, it sounds like something Picasso would say. The quote strikes at the very paradox of fiction, this knot we storytellers must learn (and continually relearn) to untie.

How do we get these truths? Where do they come from?”

Well, I am not sure. If I knew the answer to this, I would either be much richer than I am now, or dead. Universities and colleges don't provide us with easy answers—nor should they. Places like Mississippi State have another, perhaps more important goal: they help us find the questions. The great and good professors in the English Department did this for me. And in gratitude, I try to do the same for my own students.