

BIO Sketch

80-13
MARCH 8, 1914,

I was born in Oklahoma City of parents who had gone there just before statehood from South Carolina. My father was born in Abbeville, S.C. and my mother in White Oak, Georgia. My father left home when quite young and joined the army. He was in China, in the Philippines, and he fought in the Spanish-American War. Upon his return to the U.S. he operated a small restaurant in Chattanooga and a candy kitchen in Abbeville, S.C. He and his brother also operated a hacking service there. In Oklahoma, he worked as a foreman for a construction company which built the first tall buildings in Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma. He left this job to operate a small ice and coal business in Oklahoma City. I was three years old when he died, my brother sixteen weeks. He was an avid reader and named me after Emerson.

To support us, my mother worked as a domestic, as a hotel maid, as a pantry maid in a hotel restaurant, and for seven years she washed test tubes and did other similar chores in the biology lab of the Oklahoma University hospital. Although she took care of us most of our lives by herself, she married twice after my father's death: first to a man who was murdered while waiting to testify as a witness to the murder of a police official by his wife, and some

years later to Mr. John Bell who still lives in Oklahoma.

My mother died in 1937, some months after I discovered in New York that I might have some possibility of becoming a writer. She encouraged me in this as she had encouraged my efforts to become a composer. Both my father and mother were members of large xxxxxx families.

As a boy I sold newspapers, shined shoes, collected bottles for bootleggers -- or junkmen who in turn sold them to bootleggers, worked as office boy and lab assistant to a dentist, waited tables, operated an elevator, served as a janitor for a small public building. Hunted, hiked, played varsity football, conducted the school band as student leader and held first chair in the trumpet section of the school orchestra. Was constantly fighting until I reached the age during which I realized that I was strong enough and violent enough to kill someone in a fit of anger.

Rode freight trains to get to college. Worked my way, with as much assistance as my mother and stepfather could provide, through three years as a music major at Tuskegee Institute. Read my first

Eliot there and that was the real beginning of writing

Lived one year in Gary, Indiana during the early twenties, had relatives whose home was destroyed by fire and bomb during the Tulsa riots of 1921. Entered my first library at seven years in Gary.

Spent a good deal of time around Negro professionals while working as a delivery boy and soda squirt in a friend's drugstore.

My father and mother had many white friends, some of whom used to visit us. This during my formative period. Knew many Jews and Indians, and my first stepfather, John Dowdy, was often visited by a Mexican who was involved in the revolutionary uprisings in Mexico during the 1920's. My brother and I regarded José as a romantic figure -- he always wore boots and was armed with a forty-five revolver.

I traveled around the State, and made trips to Kansas, Missouri and Colorado with school bands -- often under the auspices of the Negro Elks.

I knew jazzmen, veterans, ex-slaves, dope fiends, prostitutes, pimps, preachers, folk singers, blind guitarists, farmers, railroad

men, teamsters, mechanics, cooks, slaughterhouse and round-house workers, bellboys, waiters, headwaiters, tailors, punch-drunk fighters, both black and white, policemen, physicians, barbers, gamblers, bootleggers, and the tramps and down-and-outers who often knocked on our back door for ~~x~~ handouts. We were very poor but no one was turned away, neither black nor white. My mother was a Christian and an idealist and we were taught the idea of sacrifice by her example. We were also taught to keep our problems to ourselves and to respect the rights of others along with the dangers of pride, vanity and being quick to anger. It was while stranded for seven months in Dayton, Ohio, where I'd gone to my mother's funeral, that I turned my full attention to the task of learning to write fiction. For two weeks my brother ^{and I} had to sneak and sleep in a friend's car during eight below zero weather, but during that period I continued reading -- especially Hemingway -- and trying to write. During that period I learned to hunt in earnest, selling the birds to white ^{General Motors} officials and the rabbits, which we didn't need for food ourselves, to Negroes. My mother's death and the Depression, these formed the ground of my initiation into the agony of becoming a writer. Death

and agony, regret and the loss of one whose living had been sacrificed for me at the hands of an ignorant and negligent Negro physician who treated her for arthritis when she was suffering from a broken hip sustained through a fall off a back porch in the dark.

~~And~~ this occurring at a time when I was agitating for intervention in the Spanish Civil War, ~~thus~~ my personal loss was tied to events taking place far from these shores. Thus the complexity of events forced itself to my attention even before I had developed the primary skill for dealing with it. I was forced to see that both as observer and as writer, and as my mother's son, I would always have to do my homework.