Eudora at home, working in her bedroom, 1940s.

One Writer's Beginnings

Eudora Welty

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To the memory of my parents

Christian Webb Welty
1879–1931

Chestina Andrews Welty
1883–1966

to write, as I seriously did only when I reached my twenties, that I found the world out there revealing, because (as with my father now) *memory* had become attached to seeing, love had added itself to discovery, and because I recognized in my own continuing longing to keep going, the need I carried inside myself to know—the apprehension, first, and then the passion, to connect myself to it. Through travel I first became aware of the outside world; it was through travel that I found my own introspective way into becoming a part of it.

This is, of course, simply saying that the outside world is the vital component of my inner life. My work, in the terms in which I see it, is as dearly matched to the world as its secret sharer. My imagination takes its strength and guides its direction from what I see and hear and learn and feel and remember of my living world. But I was to learn slowly that both these worlds, outer and inner, were different from what they seemed to me in the beginning.

The best college in the state was very possibly the private liberal-arts one right here in Jackson, but I was filled with desire to go somewhere away and enter a school I'd never passed on the street. My parents thought that I was too young at sixteen to live for my first year too far from home. Mississippi State College for Women was well enough accredited and two hundred miles to the north.

There I landed in a world to itself, and indeed it was all new to me. It was surging with twelve hundred girls. They

came from every nook and corner of the state, from the Delta, the piney woods, the Gulf Coast, the black prairie, the red clay hills, and Jackson—as the capital city and the only sizeable town, a region to itself. All were clearly differentiated sections, at that time, and though we were all put into uniforms of navy blue so as to unify us, it could have been told by the girls' accents, by their bearings, the way they came into the classroom and the way they ate, where they'd grown up. This was my first chance to learn what the body of us were like and what differences in background, persuasion of mind, and resources of character there were among Mississippians—at that, among only half of us, for we were all white. I missed the significance of both what was in, and what was out of, our well-enclosed but vibrantly alive society. What was never there was money enough provided by our Legislature for education, and what was always there was a faculty accomplishing that education as a *feat*. Mississippi State College for Women, the oldest institution of its kind in America, poverty-stricken, enormously overcrowded, keeping within the tradition we were all used to in Mississippi, was conscientiously and, on the average, well taught by a dedicated faculty remaining and growing old there.

It was life in a crowd. We'd fight to get our mail in the basement post office, on rainy mornings, surrounded by other girls doing the Three Graces, where the gym teacher would have had to bring her first-period class indoors to practice. Even a gym piano, in competition with girls screaming

over their letters and opening the food packages from home, was almost defeated. When we all had to crowd into compulsory chapel, one or two little frail undernourished students would faint sometimes—we had a fifteen-minute long Alma Mater to sing.

Old Main, the dormitory where I lived, had been built in 1860. It was packed to the roof with freshmen, three, four, or a half-dozen sometimes to the room, rising up four steep flights of wooden stairs. The chapel clock striking the hour very close by would shake our beds under us. It was the practice to use the fire escape to go to class, and at night to slip outside for a few minutes before going to bed.

It was the iron standpipe kind of fire escape, with a tin chute running down through it—all corkscrew turns from top to bottom, with holes along its passage where girls at fire drill could pour out of the different floors, and a hole at the bottom to pitch you out onto the ground, head still whirling.

It seemed impossible to be alone. Only music students had a good way. On a spring night you might hear one of them alone in a practice room of the Music Building, playing her heart out at an open window. It would be something like "Pale Hands I Loved Beside the Shalimar (Where Are You Now?)"—she'd be imagining of course that what she sent floating in the air was from someone else singing this song to *her.* At other times, when some strange song with low guttural notes and dragging movement, dramatically working up to a crescendo, was heard later still through

that same open window, we freshmen told one another that was Miss Pohl, the spectacular gym teacher with the flying gray hair, who was, we had heard and believed, a Russian by birth, who'd been crossed, long years ago, in love. She may have indeed been crossed in love, but she was a Mississippian, just like us.

A time could be seized, close to bedtime, when it was possible to slip down the fire escape and, before the doors were all locked against my getting back, walk to an iron fountain on the campus and around it, with poetry running through my head. I'd bought the first book for my shelf from the college bookstore, *In April Once*, by William Alexander Percy, our chief Mississippi poet. Its first poem was one written from New York City, entitled "Home."

> *I have a need of silence and of stars.*
> *Too much is said too loudly. I am dazed.*
> *The silken sound of whirled infinity*
> *Is lost in voices shouting to be heard . . .*

Where I walked at that moment, within the little town of Columbus, and further within the iron gates of the campus of a girls' college at night, now everywhere going to bed, and while I said the poem to myself, around me was nothing *but* silence and stars. This did not impinge upon my longing. In the beautiful spring night, I was dedicated to *wanting* a beautiful spring night. To be *transported* to it was what

I wanted. Whatever a poem was about—that it could be called "Home" didn't matter—it was about somewhere else, somewhere distant and far.

I was lucky enough to have found for myself, at the very beginning, an outside shell, that of freshman reporter on our college newspaper, *The Spectator.* I became a wit and humorist of the parochial kind, and the amount I was able to show off in print must have been a great comfort to me. (I saw *The Bat* and wrote "The Gnat," laid in MSCW. The Gnat assumes the disguise of our gym uniform—navy blue serge one-piece with pleated bloomers reaching below the knee, and white tennis shoes—and enters through the College Library, after hours; our librarian starts screaming at his opening line, "Beulah Culbertson, I have come for those fines.") I'd been a devoted reader of S. J. Perelman, Corey Ford, and other humorists who appeared in *Judge* magazine, and I'd imagined that with these as a springboard, I could swim.

After great floods struck the state and Columbus had been overflowed by the Tombigbee River, I contributed an editorial to *The Spectator* for its April Fools issue. This lamented that five of our freshman class got drowned when the waters rose, but by this Act of God, it went on, there was that much more room now for the rest of us. Years later, a Columbus newspaperman, on whose press our paper was printed, told me that H. L. Mencken had picked up this chirp out of me for *The American Mercury* as sample thinking from the Bible Belt. But by chance, in the home of a town student, I had just

met my first intellectual. Within a few moments he had lent me *Candide*! It was just published, the first Modern Library book (I believe the very first)—that thin little book with leatherlike covers that heated up, while you read, warmer than your hand. Voltaire, too, I could call on.

But I learned my vital lesson in the classroom.

Mr. Lawrence Painter, the only man teacher in the college, spent his life conducting the MSCW girls in their sophomore year through English Survey, from "Summer is y-comen in" to "I have a rendezvous with Death." In my time a handsome, learned, sandy-haired man—wildly popular, of course, on campus—he got instant silence when he would throw open the book and begin to read aloud to us.

In high-school freshman English, we had committed to memory "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote . . ." which as poetry was not less remote to our ears than "Arma virumque cano . . ." I had come unprepared for the immediacy of poetry.

I felt the shock closest to this a year later at the University of Wisconsin when I walked into my art class and saw, in place of the bowl of fruit and the glass bottle and ginger jar of the still life I used to draw at MSCW, a live human being. As we sat at our easels, a model, a young woman, lightly dropped her robe and stood, before us and a little above us, holding herself perfectly contained, in her full self and naked. Often that year in Survey Course, as Mr. Painter read, poetry came into the room where we could see it and

all around it, free-standing poetry. As we listened, Mr. Painter's, too, was a life class.

After I transferred, in my junior year, to the University of Wisconsin, I made in this far, new place a discovery for myself that has fed my life ever since. I express a little of my experience in a story, one fairly recent and not yet completed. It's the story of a middle-aged man who'd come from a farm in the Middle West, who's taciturn and unhappy as a teacher of linguistics and now has reached a critical point in his life. The scene is New Orleans; he and a woman are walking at night (they are really saying goodbye) and he speaks of himself without reserve to her for the first time.

He'd put himself through the University of Wisconsin, he tells her:

> "And I happened to discover Yeats, reading through some of the stacks in the library. I read the early and then the later poems all in the same one afternoon, standing up, by the window . . . I read 'Sailing to Byzantium,' standing up in the stacks, read it by the light of falling snow. It seemed to me that if I could stir, if I could move to take the next step, I could go out into the poem the way I could go out into that snow. That it would be falling on my shoulders. That it would pelt me on its way down—that I could move in it, live in it—that I could die in it, maybe. So after that I had to *learn* it," he said. "And I told myself that I would. That I accepted the invitation."

The experience I describe in the story had indeed been my own, snow and all; the poem that smote me first was "The Song of Wandering Aengus"; it was the poem that turned up, fifteen years or so later, in my stories of *The Golden Apples* and runs all through that book.

At length too, at Wisconsin, I learned the word for the nature of what I had come upon in reading Yeats. Mr. Ricardo Quintana lecturing to his class on Swift and Donne used it in its true meaning and import. The word is *passion.*

It was my mother who emotionally and imaginatively supported me in my wish to become a writer. It was my father who gave me the first dictionary of my own, a Webster's Collegiate, inscribed on the flyleaf with my full name (he always included Alice, my middle name, after his mother) and the date, 1925. I still consult it. It was also he who expressed his reservations that I wouldn't achieve financial success by becoming a writer, a sensible fear; nevertheless he fitted me out with my first typewriter, my little red Royal Portable, which I carried off to the University of Wisconsin. It was also he who advised me, after I'd told him I still meant to try writing, even though I didn't expect to sell my stories to *The Saturday Evening Post* which paid well, to go ahead and try myself—but to prepare to earn my living some other way. My supportive parents had already very willingly agreed that I go farther from home for my last two years of college and sent me to Wisconsin—my father's choice for its high

liberal-arts reputation. Now that I'd been graduated from there, they sent me to my first choice of a place to prepare for a job: New York City, at Columbia University Graduate School of Business. (As certain as I was of wanting to be a writer, I was certain of *not* wanting to be a teacher. I lacked the instructing turn of mind, the selflessness, the patience for teaching, and I had the unreasoning feeling that I'd be trapped. The odd thing is that when I did come to write my stories, the longest list of my characters turns out to be schoolteachers. They are to a great extent my heroines.)

My father did not bring it up, but of course I knew that he had another reason to worry about my decision to write. Though he was a reader, he was not a lover of fiction, because fiction is not true, and for that flaw it was forever inferior to fact. If reading fiction was a waste of time, so was the writing of it. (Why is it, I wonder, that humor didn't count? Wodehouse, for one, whom both of us loved, was a flawless fiction writer.)

But I was not to be in time to show him what I could do, to hear what he thought, on the evidence, of where I was headed.

My father had given immense study to the erection of the new Lamar Life home office building on Capitol Street, which was completed in 1925—"Jackson's first skyscraper." It is a delicately imposing Gothic building of white marble, thirteen stories high with a clock tower at the top. It had been designed, as my father had asked of the Fort Worth architect,

to be congenial with the Episcopal parish church that stood next door to it and with the fine Governor's Mansion that faced it from across the street. The architect pleased him with his gargoyles: the stone decorations of the main entrance took the form of alligators, which related it as well to Mississippi.

At every stage of the building, Daddy took his family to see as much as we could climb over, usually on Sunday mornings. At last we could climb by the fire escape to reach the top. We stood on the roof, with the not-yet-working clock towering at our backs, and viewed all Jackson below, spread to its seeable limits, its green rim, where the still river-like Pearl River and the still-unpaved-over Town Creek meandered and joined together in their unmolested swamp, with "the country" beyond. We were located where we stood there—part of our own map.

At the grand opening, the whole of the new building was lighted from a top to bottom and the Company—its business now expanded into other Southern states—had a public reception. My father made a statement at the time: "Not a dollar was borrowed nor a security sold for the erection of this new building, and it is all paid for. The building will stand, now and always, free from all debt, as a most valuable asset to policy-holders."

It was a crowning year of his life. At the same time that the new building was going up, so was our new house, designed by the same architect. The house was on a slight hill (my mother never could see the hill) covered with its

original forest pines, on a gravel road then a little out from town, and was built in a style very much of its day, of stucco and brick and beams in the Tudor style. We had moved in, and Mother was laying out the garden.

Six years later, my father was dead.

The Lamar Life tower is overshadowed now, and you can no longer read the time on its clocktower from all over town, as he'd wanted to be possible always, but the building's grace and good proportion contrast tellingly with the overpowering, sometimes brutal, character of some of the structures that rise above it. Renovators have sandblasted away the alligators that graced the entrance. But the Company still has its home there, and my father is remembered.

My father's enthusiasm for business was not the part of him that he passed on to his children. But his imaginative conception of the building, and his pride in seeing it go up and his love of working in his tenth-floor office with the windows open to the view on three sides, may well have entered into his son Edward. He went on to become an architect, especially gifted in design, who had a hand in a number of public buildings and private houses to be seen today in Jackson. Walter was a more literal kind of inheritor; after taking his master's degree in mathematics he went into the office of an insurance company—not the Lamar Life, but another.

Plans for the Company had included the launching of a radio station, and its office was a cubbyhole installed in the base of the tower. After my father was dead and the Great

Depression remained with us, I got a part-time job there. My first paid work was in communications: Mississippi's first radio station, operating there under the big clock, to which he would have given his nod of approval.

My first full-time job was rewarding to me in a way I could never have foreseen in those early days of my writing. I went to work for the state office of the Works Progress Administration as junior publicity agent. (This was of course one of President Roosevelt's national measures to combat the Great Depression.) Traveling over the whole of Mississippi, writing news stories for county papers, taking pictures, I saw my home state at close hand, really for the first time.

With the accretion of years, the hundreds of photographs—life as I found it, all unposed—constitute a record of that desolate period; but most of what I learned for myself came right at the time and directly out of the *taking* of the pictures. The camera was a hand-held auxiliary of wanting-to-know.

It had more than information and accuracy to teach me. I learned in the doing how *ready* I had to be. Life doesn't hold still. A good snapshot stopped a moment from running away. Photography taught me that to be able to capture transience, by being ready to click the shutter at the crucial moment, was the greatest need I had. Making pictures of people in all sorts of situations, I learned that every feeling waits upon its gesture; and I had to be prepared to recognize

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this moment when I saw it. These were things a story writer needed to know. And I felt the need to hold transient life in *words*—there's so much more of life that only words can convey—strongly enough to last me as long as I lived. The direction my mind took was a writer's direction from the start, not a photographer's, or a recorder's.

Along Mississippi roads you'd now and then see bottle trees; you'd see them alone or in crowds in the front yard of remote farmhouses. I photographed one—a bare crape myrtle tree with every branch of it ending in the mouth of a colored glass bottle—a blue Milk of Magnesia or an orange or green pop bottle; reflecting the light, flashing its colors in the sun, it stood as the centerpiece in a little thicket of peach trees in bloom. Later, I wrote a story called "Livvie" about youth and old age: the death of an old, proud, possessive man and the coming into flower, after dormant years, of his young wife—a spring story. Numbered among old Solomon's proud possessions is this bottle tree.

I know that the actual bottle tree, from the time of my actual sight of it, was the origin of my story. I know equally well that the bottle tree appearing in the story is a projection from my imagination; it isn't the real one except in that it is corrected by reality. The fictional eye sees in, through, and around what is really there. In "Livvie," old Solomon's bottle tree stands bright with dramatic significance, it stands vulnerable, ready for invading youth to sail a stone into the bottles and shatter them, as Livvie is claimed by love in the

bursting light of spring. This I saw could be brought into being in the form of a story.

I was always my own teacher. The earliest story I kept a copy of was, I had thought, sophisticated, for I'd had the inspiration to lay it in Paris. I wrote it on my new typewriter, and its opening sentence was, "Monsieur Boule inserted a delicate dagger into Mademoiselle's left side and departed with a poised immediacy." I'm afraid it was a perfect example of what my father thought "fiction" mostly was. I was ten years older before I redeemed that in my first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman." I back-slid, for I found it hard to save myself from starting stories to show off what I could write.

In "Acrobats in a Park," though I laid the story in my home town, I was writing about Europeans, acrobats, adultery, and the Roman Catholic Church (seen from across the street), in all of which I was equally ignorant. In real life I fell easily under the spell of all traveling artists. En route to New Orleans, entertainments of many kinds would stop over in those days for a single performance in Jackson's Century Theatre. Galli-Curci came, so did Blackstone the Magician, so did Paderewski, so did *The Cat and the Canary* and the extravaganza *Chu Chin Chow*. Our family attended them all. My stories from the first drew visiting performers in, beginning modestly with a ladies' trio of the Redpath Chatauqua in "The Winds" and going so far as Segovia in "Music

from Spain." Then, as now, my imagination was magnetized toward transient artists—toward the transience as much as the artists.

I must have seen "Acrobats in a Park" at the time I wrote the story as exotic, free of any experience as I knew it. And yet in the simplest way it isn't unrelated. The acrobats I led in procession into Smith Park in Jackson, Mississippi, were a *family*. They sat down in our family park, eating their lunch under a pin-oak tree I knew intimately. A father, a mother, and their children made up the troupe. At the center of the little story is the Zorros' act: the feat of erecting a structure of their bodies that holds together, interlocked, and stands like a wall, the Zorro Wall. Writing about the family act, I was writing about the family itself, its strength as a unit, testing its frailty under stress. I treated it in an artificial and oddly formal way; the stronghold of the family is put on public view as a structure built each night; on the night before the story opens, the Wall has come down when the most vulnerable member slips, and the act is done for. But from various points within it and from outside it, I've been writing about the structure of the family in stories and novels ever since. In spite of my unpromising approach to it, my fundamental story form might have been trying to announce itself to me.

My first good story began spontaneously, in a remark repeated to me by a traveling man—our neighbor—to whom it had been spoken while he was on a trip into North Mississippi: "He's gone to borry some fire." The words, which carried such lyrical and mythological and dramatic overtones, were real and actual—their hearer repeated them to me.

As usual, I began writing from a distance, but "Death of a Traveling Salesman" led me closer. It drew me toward what was at the center of it, to a cabin back in the red clay hills—perhaps just such a house as I used to see from far off on a train at night, with the firelight or lamplight showing yellow from its open doorway. In writing the story I approached and went inside with my traveling salesman, and had him, pressed by imminent death, figure out what was there:

> Bowman could not speak. He was shocked with knowing what was really in this house. A marriage, a fruitful marriage. That simple thing. Anyone could have had that.

Writing "Death of a Traveling Salesman" opened my eyes. And I had received the shock of having touched, for the first time, on my real subject: human relationships. Daydreaming had started me on the way; but story writing, once I was truly in its grip, took me and shook me awake.

My temperament and my instinct had told me alike that the author, who writes at his own emergency, remains and needs to remain at his private remove. I wished to be, not effaced, but invisible—actually a powerful position. Perspective, the line of vision, the frame of vision—these set a distance.