

## **Southern tourist**

July 5, 2001

I want to float into Memphis, see it appear out of flat river bottom like Paul Simon's line -- "The Mississippi delta was shining like a National guitar." It isn't like that. The plane flies into huge upthrusting white clouds, the mist turns grey & closes in & the plane begins to bump. The pilot has the calmest voice. No one is worried. He says, "There's a sharp thunderstorm over the airport right now. We'll just go around up here for a while & wait for it to clear." We land on a wet runway that's already starting to steam under a hazy sun.

Memphis is a substantial mid-sized city. For some reason I wasn't expecting so much heavy stone architecture. Greys & browns & yellow greens predominate. Mississippi River colors. Across the street from my hotel is the river itself. On Mud Island they've built a scale model of the Mississippi from Cairo, IL (where the Ohio comes in) to the Gulf. That's 954 miles. The "riverwalk" is five city blocks. It has 20 to-scale maps of river cities like Memphis & Vicksburg & all the bridges. What a great idea! (All truly great ideas either have come or could have come from the minds of 10-year-olds.) Later I take pix of the real thing. Walking upstream, I photograph a large bridge that crosses to Arkansas. Markings on one of the pilon measure flood rise in tens of feet, up to 50. That would be something to see.

After it cools off & the light gets pretty, I walk to Beale Street. Billed as "the birthplace of the blues," it's closed to car traffic & resembles a big outdoor party. Two or three blocks of honky tonks & bars, live music coming out of most of them. Lots of neon. But with all the potential for

hokeyness & against my expectations the music on Beale St, is the real thing. The musicians are old & middle-aged black men & middle-aged bearded Dr. John-type Southern hipsters & they're playing unadorned, deeply felt blues. I photograph the Carl Drew Blues Band, who are on the street playing for tips. Drew is an old man & plays lead guitar & sings with a bass player, drummer & sometimes a 2nd singer. I'd venture that he has very few illusions left at this point, but he plays with abandon. He has a genuine damn good time.

Up the street a very short black man with an infinitely cynical face, maybe 60, dressed all in black with a black bowler hat & a silver horn, cigarette burning between his knuckles, plays & sings. I eat in the place he's fronting for -- King's Palace Cafe (another Memphis King). I order the blackened catfish & rice & some kind of cajun flavored okra & a separate bowl of greens. Good.

Who knows how the Elvis industry in Memphis (everywhere you look) fits into what I'm about to say, but my impression is that the city really has its musical head straight. Driving around, I listen to three stations on the radio -- blues, soul & country -- flipping among them. There are other stations too, but I stick with these three & they never lose it. Minimal sentimentality. Lean & clean. That's unusual on the radio. I remember Russell Banks describing Jamaica in the early Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff reggae era as a place where ordinary, average people had extraordinary musical taste. I wonder if Memphis is a place like that today.

After dinner, I walk south, following my nose, & take a few pix, but the neighborhoods turn into black slums & I'm suddenly self-conscious walking with my camera. There's a kind of Southern overgrown, ramshackle, deep poverty very different from the North's -- I remember this from when I

sold books in Virginia -- & it fascinates me visually. But probably best at this point just to look from a car at the rundown apartment blocks with their corner liquor stores, the little plywood juke joints with hand-lettered signs in weedy yards, the sagging wooden porches crowded with people fanning themselves. During the day these places seem beaten down by the heat, absolutely motionless. As night approaches, the people come outside. No one messes with me, but I feel too visible, too clearly a stranger, so I head back the way I came.

July 6, 2001

Up at 6 a.m. Comfort Inn continental breakfast means styrofoam bowls & plates & plastic knives & forks, but they have real home-made soft, fluffy biscuits, which I love. I drive south & west, looking for interesting neighborhoods, heading vaguely for Graceland & get lost & frustrated because my 3 city maps are woefully inadequate. I decide to find Rte 55, which serves as a kind of beltway around Memphis before crossing a bridge to Arkansas. I come over a rise & a huge refinery fills the sky. So I say, OK Environmental Defense, you're paying for the film, here goes. I park in an adjacent park -- Martin Luther King Park, as a matter of fact -- & get both cameras out & cranking. Then the security guy arrives in a go-cart. Face like a cured ham. He smiles & says in a soft Southern drawl, "You caint take pitchers." I put on my most innocent smile back & say I've been careful to stay on what I thought was public property. We argue politely about where that is. He says where the road forks to the park. I say I assumed it was the Private Road sign about 20 feet past the fork, which I've been careful to stay behind. He says Nope. I tell him I'm just making a living shooting stock (sort of true). He leaves

after I agree to stay back of the fork, which I do, but 5 minutes of shooting later, he's back. I have crossed the road, still behind the fork. He says the plant owns that side. "Ahm gon have to ask yew to leave." No smile. So I leave (I've got what I need), musing about the absurdity of a facility that spews smoke from a stack 10 stories high insisting it's invisible.

I check out of the hotel & drive north on Rte. 51, which runs parallel about 20 miles east of the Mississippi, which slices cleanly southward at this point. The only road on the map for hundreds of miles that goes back westward to the river leads to Ft. Pillow State Park, about 60 miles above Memphis. I have an idea of eating lunch on the bluffs there above the Mississippi, shooting some photos & then taking a good long rest in the shade.

Also, I've read about Ft. Pillow. On the Chickamauga Bluffs, its artillery commanded all boat traffic on the Mississippi in the Civil War. In 1861 the South made it their first line of defense against invasion down the river -- they called it their Gibraltar. After Shiloh, it was abandoned by the South & by 1864, Union troops, including 300 black troops, occupied it. It was overrun that year by a cavalry regiment led by Nathan Bedford Forest. He was the South's most successful general -- charismatic & brilliant by all accounts. A slave trader and merchant before the war, he lent his name afterwards to nightriders who became the Ku Klux Klan. And at Ft. Pillow, after they'd taken the fort, his men went out of control & massacred hundreds of Union troops who had surrendered. The Southerners' fury was aimed particularly at the black troops; out of 300 garrisoned at Ft. Pillow, 200 were killed. Some accounts say Forest stopped the carnage before his men killed all the Union troops. In any case, although the literature insists that it remains a controversy (at the time, the North went to great

lengths to inflate it for propoganda purposes), a massacre clearly did take place. I wanted to see how the state of Tennessee would handle it.

The road to Ft. Pillow, through rolling farmland, is almost deserted. It goes past the Tennessee state penitentiary. At many of the small houses by the side of the road the Confederate flag is flying. The state park is deep woods. At the "interactive center" there is a veritable shrine to Forest. There are three big romantic oils of him, blazing-eyed & indomitable in his cavalry grays. There's also a wall of Forrest memorabilia - letters, business documents, belt buckles, etc. Behind a counter manned by a crewcut ranger are crossed Confederate flags & Confederate-flag T shirts with the words, "Never forgive." There are no souvenirs of the Union side.

The exhibit, on the other hand, is sober & complete. The massacre story is told without fanfare -- it happened 138 years ago. I watch a video that ends with the woman narrator's slightly Southern voice saying carefully, "After examining the evidence, most of it from the Confederate side before the Union reacted, the state of Tennessee concludes that Confederate troops killed hundreds of Union troops who had either stopped resisting or were no longer able to resist." Next, a man's voice recites Sherman's "War is hell" remarks. Is that supposed to explain it? Does the audience know the words are from the man who burned down Georgia?

Watching the video with me are a Southern family. The big fleshy adolescent son is wearing a hunter's cap emblazoned with the Confederate flag. They're whispering among themselves but I can't make out what they're saying. I'd like to ask what the Confederate symbol means to them, but of course I can't. I know it's complicated. I suspect it's not strictly racism, though that's part of it. I suspect it's not really about the War; not even necessarily about the North. I suspect, in fact,

it's only marginally about the South. But I don't feel I can ask. I'm afraid it would be seen as patronizing. At the very least, it would be impolite. And down here being a Yankee is one thing; being an impolite Yankee is something else.

I strap on my backpack & hike a trail through the hot woods in search of my bluff. The only creatures beside me that seem to be moving are huge brown horseflies that drone heavily round & round my head. Two hours later, slick with sweat, I get back to the parking lot, thinking I've missed the trail. I had found only a clearing with breastworks & cannon, no remnants of a fort. The trail had turned back at the edge of a deep ravine, but there were only woods beyond. "I thought the fort was above the river," I say to the kid behind the counter. "Oh, it used to be," he says. "The river's moved about 2 miles west since that time."

I drink a Coke & head north. The landscape is like the Midwest, straight roads set at right angles, arrowing through flat croplands. Dyersburg & Union City, where I thought I might stop, are boldface on the map, but they turn out to be just ugly jumbles of fast-food joints & chain stores (admittedly, everything looks worse than usual in the hazy blaze of mid-day). In Union City I pull into McDonald's because there's nowhere else & have a coffee & look at my guidebooks & maps. I decide to head for Mayfield in Kentucky, the small town where Bobbie Ann Mason lives, described as "decidely quiet" in the guidebook. But the guidebook goes on to describe a hexagonal courthouse, a cemetery monument in which an entire family & all their pets are sculpted & a restaurant with a giant chicken on the roof. Good enough for me.

I feel better as soon as I pass the Kentucky line & pick up Rte 45. The land begins to roll a little & woods alternate with fields & meadows. It helps that the shadows are starting to lengthen. I

stop a few times for roadside shots, something I rarely do at home -- because it means turning the car around, going back, turning it around again & pulling off the road. I find that my eye is good. Most of the time it's worth it. What the Bible Belt presents to the traveler. And Mayfield looks good in last light. A real brick & storefront downtown with modest homes spreading out in neatly laid-out neighborhoods with numbered streets. Unfortunately, one whole block of downtown storefronts is empty, & there are for-rent signs in all the windows. It's the first of the little dying country downtowns I will see. I rent a room at a Super 8 motel run by an Indian family (Mississippi Masala), eat a bad meal at a pizza place where the menu offers pasta ("What's in the pasta alfredo?" I ask. "I don't know, but I could go read the can," the proprietor tells me). Watch a beautiful smeary magenta & yellow sunset out the motel window. A long day. Sleep.

July 7

Up & out by 7:30. I have till 11 for checkout from the motel. I photograph in downtown Mayfield & then walk in the neighborhoods. The homes are small & plain & the streets are peaceful. There's a sense of grace before the day's heat gathers & the day's activities begin. This is the heartland all right. Barely middle class & the good life is almost palpable (assuming you're part of the Christian consensus). When things seem this safe & pleasant, no wonder change seems threatening. Of course they voted for W. Keep those crazy foreigners & especially those California-New York liberals out of here & we'll be OK. Unfair generalization, I know, I know, but not completely off the mark. Isn't this what American conservative culture is? - - a commitment to sticking to what one knows by rejecting what one doesn't? Here it doesn't feel

aggressive. These are genuinely nice people. You ask for directions & they squat down by your car & go over it for you, slowly. They're really concerned that you get there. But why can't I find a bookstore or even a newsstand & why is the food so hideously bad (at least for travelers) & why, if everybody is a Christian, do they need to keep bludgeoning you with bibles & crosses every time you turn around? I suppose the reasoning would go: you don't have to read the New York Times, eat Thai food, study Buddhism because -- well, why would you? You don't need them. You have your family, your community, your God. What's wrong with you? What are you missing that keeps you from fitting in here?

A cop car drives by me 4 times checking me out, but I don't feel the menace as in the old days. My hair is gray now. I'm a family man with family pictures -- and a Visa card -- in my wallet. Thirty years later, I can look you in the eye now, Southern cop. I'm just a tourist out for a stroll.

All the towns in this part of Kentucky have tall white water towers with the town's name lettered on them. They loom over everything like the Martian machines in War of the Worlds. Mayfield's tower becomes the backdrop for most of the pix I take. I love these architectural regionalisms, I guess you'd call them. For instance, here the churches are typically modest little brick-&-glass buildings, like elementary schools, with small -- no more than 15-20-foot-high plain white steeples that come to a pin prick point. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of them -- I've never seen so many churches (& signs for churches) anywhere -- which must be why they stay so small. Biologically speaking, if there is heavy competition to sow the seed, spread the word, shouldn't the steeples be bigger?

I ask around & find my way to the graveyard & photograph the stone family, the Woolridges, &

their horses & puppies. I find the giant chicken too. As I'm driving out of town, I also stop to photograph another type of cemetery, one I've seen down here but nowhere else. This type seems to have supplanted the traditional stone headstone style in the area. A Jesus statue raises 2 fingers in blessing over a field of metal plaques set into the ground. From each plaque rises a metal vase containing permanent bouquets of bright flowers with fabric petals. The effect is truly weird, at least to someone seeing it for the first time. These flowers are good, resilient fakes; their colors stay bright for years. So the cemetery resembles a strange, minimalist garden with every flower always blooming -- presumably forever. This one is called Mayfield Memory Garden.

By noon it's getting too hot to be in the sun & I check out & head up 45 to Paducah, a small city on a bluff (my bluff!) where the Ohio & Tennessee rivers come together. It's a pleasant, easygoing mid-sized city that reminds me strongly of Montpelier, VT. Big straight streets radiating back from the river. City docks & warehouses (a deep water channel between Paducah & Owens Island is filled with barges & tugs, as it has been since the mid 19th century) & a railroad depot west of town. The architecture is 19th century red brick mercantile, again like Vermont's small cities. Names on the lintels. Beautiful decorative stonework. They've built a thick cement river wall about 15 feet high, back 3 or 4 hundred yards & probably 50 or 60 feet above the water line, so the river must get really wild from time to time. On the back side are wonderful murals by an artist from Louisiana, Robert Dafford -- historical boosterism but with style & humor -- Hart Benton without the grotesquerie. I wonder what they plan to do with the art if there's a monster flood?

After all the hodgepodge neon dreck that lined the road getting here, I'm delighted by Paducah. I

feel bad to see that downtown is obviously dying. Two blocks away from the water the beautiful buildings display for-rent signs & the windows are blocked with butcher paper. A few blocks further & bricks are falling, the wooden doors are flaking & peeling & vandals have been busy. The warehouses too are decrepit, the old signs fading on the walls.

Everything is happening on the strip west of town near Interstate 24 at THE MALL. That's where my motel, A Best Inn, is (there's no downtown hotel). It's like every other mall in America, sprawling & ugly, a vast parking lot with cookie cutter outlets of the same chains as the malls in Oregon or Florida or Maine. This Saturday afternoon it's undeniably alive, full of cars, people, shouts, radios playing. But, like all these malls, it makes me feel I've entered some nether world, some purgatory, in which I'm only allowed to be half-alive.

Is it just me? I don't get it about these malls. In fact I'm completely bewildered. Why do people choose them? Because they DO choose them. They choose to go to the mall, not downtown Paducah. In this case it's not the convenience of being able to shop by car. There are marked & unmarked parking spaces all over downtown Paducah without a single meter & a huge parking lot at the end of the main street, down by the river wall.

Personally, I can't do the postmodern ju jitsu to find beauty or even irony in the malls. I don't know how to shop in them. Worse, I can't avoid feeling slightly disgusted in a plastic booth in a generic happy happy bright colored Taco Bell or Burger King. If this makes me an aesthetic snob, so be it. It certainly puts me in the minority. Malls have already won in most places in America, particularly in places that play country music on the radio (everywhere I've been on this trip).

There are still big cities like New York & small cities like Montpelier that have spawned malls but still retain their downtown vitality. And then there are thousands of places like Paducah. Go figure. It's the new American way, I suppose.

Not that there's no resistance. It's Saturday night & Paducah is having a festival to try to lift its lagging fortunes. The shops & bars & restaurants that still do business are open & the streets are crowded. A parade of mostly oldtimers in vintage cars toots down Broadway (main street) & circles & parks with their hoods open. The old fellows walk around peering at each others' shiny engines while their women chat. There's music everywhere. A stage set up down on the riverbank hosts a succession of good blues bands. At a bandshell in town a DJ makes jokes & plays country fiddle tunes & a troupe of middle-aged moms do complicated line dances, kicking & sashaying, giggling & whooping.

They block off Broadway to make it a pedestrian mall. Amateur music acts immediately start to set up every few blocks. Pretty soon they're all going at once -- rock, "new" country, bluegrass, even a very funny & entertaining art rock band. Most fascinating -- because they're excruciating -- are the solo singers, backed by lush country arrangements they've taped. One guy in a black sleeveless sweatshirt with a deep Elvisy-Johnny Cash voice belts out the sappiest tough-guy-goes-tender love songs in the canon. Two women sing on & off for hours -- one long-haired, brunette, sexy in leather pants & a silk blouse, with choreographed stage moves & pleading catch notes, the other blond & perky in a short skirt, smiling endlessly. The people stream by these acts all day, not even bothering to mute their conversations, but the singers trouter on, as though they just KNOW they're going to make it in the end. "I've been cheated/been mistreated/when will I be loved?" sang

Linda Ronstadt. Phil Everly, a good Tennessee boy, wrote it & it covers the ground. Someday... someday it will happen -- the audience at the Grand Old Opry will rise shouting & applauding as one, tears streaming down their faces...

And then, as night falls, there's the kiddy act -- a little blond ringleted Jon Benet-type in a cowgirl blouse & skirt, switching the mike from hand to hand in practiced moves, flipping off her cowboy hat & kicking her little butt at you as she hits the chorus, "Let's rip it up - and ball tonight!" with a cute little play-sexy growl. I feel a little creepy photographing her, but I do it anyway. She gives me the full pearly klieg light smile. Her mother is right behind her, grinning at me too.

There's something really sad about all this steely ambition backed by so little talent. But, I have to say from my own perverted perspective, I have a soft spot for it. At least these kids are going to take a shot. At least they aren't going to give in without a fight. My guidebook, a Fodor guide to Kentucky by Susan Reigler, says of the city: "Paducah's major employer for the past four decades has been the Uranium Diffusion Plant on the western outskirts of the city, and revelations of safety violations at the uranium enrichment facility have been widely reported."

July 8

At 7 o'clock the morning news says today's temperature will be 98 degrees. I've already figured out the only way to work in this heat is to start early & knock off by 11, then start up again about 4. I'm back downtown before 8. Paducah is so empty it feels like science fiction -- you know, an alien plague has wiped out all the residents, but I alone, for some exotically random reason, have survived. I take photos as the temperature rises,

then head back to the mall, also empty (where is everybody?), which I photograph too, & finally to my motel room. I don't have to vacate till noon so I've decided to "lay up," as Huck Finn would say, for the hottest part of the day. I organize my stuff & write on the computer. Check for messages at home (none). I still can't get though on email. The little room is cheesy & bleak & the only sound is the whooshing AC. Where to next? I pore over the guidebook & maps & decide on Henderson, KY another river town upstream on the Ohio, about 3-4 hours drive on the back roads. I'm not done with the river town fantasy. It comes from Huck Finn, let's face it, the only book I've read more than 5 times (not counting "Good Night Moon" & "The Runaway Bunny," etc.) I should add that the last 3 times I read it, I had to quit when Jim gets captured & that twit Tom Sawyer arrives. I couldn't bear having to forgive Twain again for writing like a god for two thirds of a novel, then turning into a fallible human author who just needed to finish his goddamn book.

I'm discouraged as I drive. The country is pretty & the people farm with a kind of compact graceful pragmatism, which, again, I associate with Vermont, but I'm having trouble staying awake. By now the country music bores me, & what the hell did I think I was doing taking this trip anyway? I pin my hopes on the John James Audubon Museum in Henderson, where he lived & worked on "Birds of America" for nine years.

I arrive 45 minutes before closing. The museum is charming, somebody's idea of a little chateau, built of red brick by the WPA, & it's cool & dark inside, surrounded by deep woods, the Audubon Park. The exhibit is modest but very good. In his own time Audubon was respected but also seen as an obsessive & an eccentric. He was one of those men who cared so passionately about what he was doing he dragged everyone else in his life, his whole

family, along to help him do it. In the end he died broke. His son's health broke trying to pay off his debts & he died young. The exhibit doesn't shy away either from the fact that this great saint of environmentalism, the man the Audubon Society was named after, was also a great killer of birds. He typically shot 20 a day every day, some days many more. He painted them dead of course.

But what paintings! The best thing is the original prints on the walls & an original edition of the "Birds of America" book (Bien edition, it says), the color plates of which are maybe 3 feet by 4 feet. I'm the only visitor that afternoon, alone in silence with this dramatic sensual work. I think of Shelley's "To a Sylark" & its 2nd line, "Bird thou never wert." Well, these birds ARE. They're ornithologically correct in every minute detail. Audubon was fussy about this. He had actually completed two full-scale paintings of what he speculated were new species for Birds of America, but when it turned out they were juveniles of a known species, he threw out the plates. So this is science. But there's something more here too -- what makes these images different from every other bird image you've ever seen. What Shelley was writing about.

And then I drive into Henderson. Like Paducah, it's a perfect 19th century three-four-story-high city on the banks of the Ohio, but smaller, population 30,000, maybe six square blocks of downtown with residences spreading out a mile or two from there, & then the farms begin. The shop fronts seem fully occupied. I don't notice any for-rent signs. There's a sweet shady park in the center of town with a gazebo, built in 1797, it turns out, the first park west of the Alleghenies. And there's a bluff (my bluff!) with another park overlooking the river. To the west the Ohio curves away into woods & fields. In the other direction,

where the river loops north, there's a multi-humped bridge to Ohio.

As in Paducah, there's nobody around. This is so strange to me, given my solitude the last few days. It makes me a little giddy, a little disoriented. But it's no longer a mystery. It's Sunday. In this part of the world Sunday really means something, even late in the afternoon. The empty streets are washed by warm light & I photograph happily, then wander down to the river. There's a few boaters & one kid swimming. He asks me to take his picture & I take 2 or 3. Is the water really clean enough to swim, I wonder?

I photograph till last light & then check into the Downtown Motel, which is not really downtown but walking distance at least. It's funkier than the chains but fine at \$35 a night & the old lady who checks me in has time to talk. She says her grandson went to New York with his father and loved it. Now he wants to go there to live. New York is great for young people, I offer. The whole world comes to New York. I'm not sure if that's what she wanted to hear. So I ask her a question. I've read about a Kentucky dish called burgoo -- a kind of meat stew, originally made with squirrel. My book says I can get it in Henderson. Does she know where? She shakes her head sadly. "They'll make it sometimes," she says. "They'll have a dinner to raise money for the high school (ha skool) or something like that (thet) & they'll make it. But you don't get it like you used to."

The malls are winning, though downtown Henderson may actually be holding out. But regional cuisine is clearly history.

In the night a stupendous thunderstorm settles into hard steady rain.

July 9, 2001

I wake up before dawn under cool sheets to the sound of water sluicing off the roof. I can't think of anything more luxurious. I go to the office & drink the motel coffee with powdered creamer & grab a couple of the generic Delicious apples. I can't eat the wetly sugary pastries in individual plastic bags so I take the coffee back to my room & eat bread & a banana from my own stash. Look at maps. Write. Repack. Outside it's clearing, though it stays overcast. I check out & drive into Henderson. I'm pleased to see it's full of cars & people on Monday morning. Moving at a slow pace by New York standards but clearly doing business.

At the library I inquire about connecting to the internet & a smiling librarian asks if I'm a resident of Henderson. I say No. Well, that's OK, she says, we'll make you a temporary card. Then she gives me a form to fill out & bustles away with it. A few minutes later she comes back with a laminated card. I'm a friend of Henderson Library. Yes, I am, especially after a second librarian leads me to a late-model Gateway & logs me onto a high speed connection. You have an hour, she says. After that you can be bumped by a newcomer in the order you came in. I look around the room. There's 10 machines & one kid surfing the web. There seem to be 5 or 6 librarians. Maybe 3 patrons in the whole building.

So I'm sitting in this quiet, well-appointed library. My car is parked for free outside in a shady spot on the park. I'm looking at online pictures of Kyla's chorus in Germany (they won 2nd prize in their division!), writing an email to Lucy -- missing them, missing my stressful, overcomplicated New York life -- & wondering if we could live more simply in a place like this. All it needs, I'm thinking, is some diversity, some brown-skinned people, some Asians, some gays & lesbians, a few tatoos & piercings (I need something to be tolerant about), artists, musicians, a good

coffeehouse or two, a good music bar, photography, book & CD stores, good restaurants, especially sushi (I'm dying for a California roll). We'd need people we could really be comfortable with -- well, our friends would come, wouldn't they? -- & then -- whoa, what is this, cultural cleansing time? Henderson is not a fantasy. It's not a private utopia. It's doing just fine on its own. Perhaps the internet will start to change it. Perhaps hard times will come & that will change it. Right now it's lovely & fresh & orderly & there's enough room & things are easy & everything works. But I'd be bored by nightfall.

An hour later I'm speeding south on Rte. 41 through what the books call "the great western Kentucky coalfield." But I don't see any coal. I'm about to pass through Muhlenberg County & I think of the John Prine song, "Oh daddy, won't you take me back to Muhlenberg County/down by the Green River/where Paradise lay? /Well, I'm sorry, my son, but you're too late in asking/Mr. Peabody's coal train has taken it away." I can't find Paradise on the map & I don't see any trains, but I have an image in my head of Kentucky miners with coveralls & tin hats & coal-blackened faces. Could that be eastern Kentucky? The method here is strip mining. They just use big machines to take off the tops of the hills & extract the coal. It's probably going on behind screens of trees along the roads, the way they conceal clearcuts in Northern California. But I see no signs of it. I see some gorgeous farm country & stop a few times to photograph the graceful double-winged barns they have in this region. I think of Levon Helm as Loretta Lynn's (Sissy Spacek's) father in "Coal Miner's Daughter" looking at the wild young Tommy Lee Jones, who is courting his daughter, & repeating the grim accepted wisdom of that time & place: "Coal mine, moonshine or get on down the line." Could that have been here?

Then I look to my left & see the biggest power plant I've ever seen belching huge torrents of grey-brown smoke into the sky. I pull over & watch huge trucks from the south turn & grind slowly toward the plant. Each of the trucks is piled high with hills of glistening black coal.

I have to photograph it of course. That's what I'm here for. But this time I don't want to. I want to stay relaxed. I want to drift on by. I don't want to confront authority. I grab the FE & screw on the long lens, lock the car, walk into the field across the street & start shooting. I'm too far away, but I shoot anyway. I go back to the car, arguing with myself, knowing I have to do more & then realize I don't have my car keys. There's a moment of bone-deep panic & then I feel faint with humiliation & self-hatred as I see the keys on the dash. I just locked my keys in the car! I leap around, yanking the doors & -- thank god -- the rear driver's side opens. I was so rattled I couldn't even lock the doors right! I climb in & crank the AC up high & just sit & breathe for a long time.

What's going on? I know it's important. This account is not supposed to be therapy, but the moment has a lot of history. My mother's fear of offending, my father's contempt for anything that didn't succeed on the world's terms are part of it. My own failure as a photojournalist & commercial photographer by stubbornly blowing the big assignments, the big shots, are part of it too.

I'm someone with a history of choking -- or sometimes of defiantly walking away -- under pressure. As an athlete, at every important business meeting I ever had this pattern has bedeviled me. I pretty much gave up photography in the 80s except for pictures of Lucy & Kyla. I was only able to start taking pictures of the world seriously again in the 90's by downplaying their importance -- shooting for fun -- on family

vacations in France, Ireland, Vermont, Cape Cod, Hawaii. I found my "24 mm. tourist" style doing that & I was able to shoot again in New York by saying I was "taking my camera for a walk." The main rule was that the shooting had to be for me, not someone else (hence, Not Dot Com Pictures).

But I need to do this. Forget ED & stock & publication. I've published hundreds of photos. I haven't actually failed at anything. That's not it. I need to take these pictures as well as I can precisely because one or more security guards will be watching with binoculars & at least one of the coal truck drivers will lean out his window at the entry gate & say to the guard, "How you doin', buck? There's someone out there takin pitchers. Thought you ought to know."

So I drive down the road with the trucks to get closer & I stop to photograph the plant carefully from two vantage points, then come back to 41 & park & walk to the head of the road to shoot the trucks bringing the coal with the plant in the background. This is the one of course & the professional photo editor (for Christ's sake!) should have known it right away. This is the story & I shoot it. It turns out later when I look at the slides that I'm still pretty rattled because my bracketing is all screwed up & I only have one good exposure of most shots. But at least I have that. I walk back to my car, feeling pretty good, not surprised that a black pickup has pulled over to block it. Of course he's there. I now know, from the refinery & this place, that you have about 15 minutes before the security guy arrives.

Amazingly, I'm not scared. I'm actually looking forward to it. The man who gets out is young & trim with graying hair. It helps that he doesn't look like a nightclub bouncer. How you doin'? I say & start right in talking. I'm a stock photographer & I was just passing by & I saw the plant & knew some of my clients might be interested so I stopped to

take a few shots. He's not accusatory. They said somebody was out here taking photos, he says. Where you from? It turns into a conversation. I'm from Brooklyn. Brooklyn? You're a long ways from home. I'm just touring the area, heading down to Memphis. He asks a few discreet questions. No, I didn't even know the plant was here, just took the opportunity. No, I don't have a card, it's just a sideline for me (my first outright lie; I have an Environmental Defense card -- giving it to him would not a good move). We talk some more. What's the name of this place anyway? I ask. He laughs. We're Western Kentucky Electric. Just so you know, we haven't been in the news lately. Tyson's been in the news. IBP (?) has been in the news. Not us. I guess that's good, I say, & then I'm happy to add, By the way, I'm done. I was just about to leave. He says, Next time you should call us & we'll give you a tour. Then he reaches out his hand & we shake.

He's right. Next time I should give them a call.

I take a lot more roadside pictures in places like Ft. Campbell, KY (near the military base) & Clarksville, TN. More crosses & signs & barns. A giant horse at a stable & a giant pink elephant at a used-car lot. What the road presents to the traveler. In TN I pick up Rte 13 & take it down to 40, which I ride west about 15 miles (my only stint on an interstate) to Rte 69. I eat a steak at a truck stop cafe called The North Forty & spend the night at a motel in Holladay, TN.

July 10

Sleep late & get up slowly. Picking up my coffee and packet of creamer (yuck!) at the motel office, I realize I've had enough. I'm ready to go home. I'm 150 miles from Memphis & a day & a half from takeoff back to New York. I drive to Shiloh, where 109,000 men tried to kill each other for 2 days in

1862 -- Midwesterners against boys from Tennessee and Mississippi mostly -- & the North won its first big victory of the Civil War. The spread-out battlefield is admirably marked. There are cannon & monuments & a graveyard, but the weather is just too hot & airless, I can't get into it, despite excellent, if perhaps a bit gleefully gory, demonstrations of firing a rifle & a cannon by 2 young rangers. I drive the designated car tour of the battlefield & feel a frisson at the Hornet's Nest, still a "sunken road" through dense woods, where up to 20 thousand died. I eat my lunch in the shade at Fraley's Field, where the advancing Confederates first met Union scouts & the battle began, but it doesn't mean much to me today -- just a hot, dry Tennessee field -- & I leave, having taken only a couple of pix. I drive west on Rte 64 into a building thunderstorm, which finally breaks so savagely I get off the road & let it drum on the windshield till it slackens. I get interested editorially when I see the signs that Memphis is sprawling westward -- "for-sale" signs on roadside farm land, tract houses going up, traffic density & "New Houses!" developments & I spend the day photographing it. Finally I'm back in the city. I have four rolls left for Graceland in the morning, so I put away the cameras & concentrate on getting a hotel room (I end up at the Wyndham Garden, a little too posh), then take the trolley to Beale St. & eat red beans & rice at BB King's club & listen to a set of blues by the Ruby Washington Band, 2 guitars, a bass, drummer & a trumpet. I pack for the plane & go to bed early.

July 11, 2001

I'm there when the doors open at 9 a.m. What can I say about Graceland that somebody hasn't already said better? It's certainly strange all right. You haven't lived till you settle down to take a dump

in the restroom & the first words of Elvis' deep rockabilly voice singing "Hound Dog" racket into the stall. But I end up liking the place & would recommend it. I don't feel superior, as I realize, somewhat guiltily, I have much of my life.

I'm here because I never understood why the whole world is so wild for Elvis. From adolescence I have a vague memory of "Hound Dog" & "Love Me Tender" & "Don't Be Cruel," but then Elvis doesn't register again till the truly bad movies he made in the 60's. At that time the anthems of the Beatles, the Stones, the Doors, the Airplane were swelling my head. The world I wanted, the world to come, I believed would be like Dylan's line from "Tangled up in Blue" "... music in the cafes at night/ revolution in the air." Elvis & his greasy hair & his silly teased-blond movie love interests & their schmaltzy boy-girl plots seemed nothing short of ridiculous. They still do. But it's interesting to find out that at the time he was making those movies Elvis found it demeaning too, that he worked to get out of those contracts & back on the road. He started his '68 tour in Vegas, which was enough at the time to guarantee I wasn't going to pay attention, except with maybe a sniff of contempt, but then he wasn't interested in me. He was interested in the people just a few years older -- say 5 or 6 years -- just on the other side of that great, uncrossable 60's divide. They were the ones who loved him.

At Graceland I spend a lot of time watching Elvis perform on old clips (there are monitors all over the place). I begin to realize that the musical part of his legend is real. I'm not going out to buy his CDs, but I finally see what the excitement was all about. And I see something else -- that he had musical taste.

Not that he had any other kind. The furnishings & wardrobe displayed in Graceland are indeed a kitsch-monger's dream. They're hideous, in fact

beyond hideous, beyond criticism. My favorite is his "meditation garden," where underwater lights illuminate fountains in blue-green pools surrounded by white marble cherubs & shrubs manicured into heart shapes. It's where he's buried under heaped floral tributes & teddy bears, along with his mother & father, to be gawked at daily by thousands of picture-snapping, sometimes weeping & praying pilgrims -- except on Christmas, the only day Graceland closes its doors. Meditate on that.

You see why Elvis impersonators, cross-dressers, transvestites -- any kind of dress-up freaks -- love him. But seeing this excess for the 1st time as it was created & not through filters of irony & mockery is instructive. Primitive & clueless or not, he man had force. He did everything full-on. When he decided to take up riding, he went out & bought a horse for everybody in the house, had stables built, ordered equipment, laid out trails, hired trainers & organized races. And he rode avidly the rest of his life. That IS the way a King is supposed to act. I think by contrast of George W at about the same time, dawdling around his frat house at Yale, that simpering grin on his face as he sipped a brewski & decided what TV show to watch to avoid studying. A lower-case king for our post-modern world.

OK, enough. I'm through. I head my trusty rental car to the airport & get in line. Three or four hours later I'm looking down at Manhattan Island. The temperature when I land is 79 degrees. It's good to be home.