Poems

Gunning Birds

She kept the Yankees from burning her home
by refusing to leave the bed, and when a few estates
over the gorgeous girl fainted how could even the least
gallant soldiers bear to do her harm?

Got a quarter if you bit into shot
in the Christmas goose. Maybe
a trip to the dentist. I have had

some good and high-priced wines in my day wrote Marius but nothing tasted finer than that cider from the carpenter’s shop on the island, fleeing Virginia with blockade runners on a leaky boat. Left his step-grandma the only white person on the plantation surrounded by 160 slaves, and on the ship picked fights with Northern boys.

Columns, a chimney,
no house. Curtains of moss
but no walls. The Earl

of Marsh Mud
made them make his
living in a swamp.

Drinking juleps on the porch pretending we own land “as far as the eye can see” and that our neighbors work for us amuses the out-of-town guests. He told me he couldn’t even comprehend my mother her accent was so thick, and while I wanted to say fuck you I just said how interesting, she travels all over and no one else has ever had a problem.

Huck Caines guided Bernard Baruch’s trips at Hobcaw and told Grover Cleveland who missed an easy shot he wasn’t worth a damn. Today a Caines-carved mallard decoy with a snakey neck fetches over $150,000 at auction.

I’ve got a real polite horse, said June.
He always lets me go over the fence first.

At the Memphis Country Club your salad comes with a side salad of canned fruit and another of frozen tomatoes and everything’s covered in cream cheese towers or mayonnaise florets. Scraped the smokehouse floor for salt. Said I’ve never seen her house but my housekeeper taught me about shortening in pie crust and we understand each other, I love how she says “the mens.” In the backwoods scared of being attacked they lived in a pen. Don’t care what they wear so long as it’s fancy—feathers, lace, beads. For Fetchit, Stepin, see Perry, Lincoln.

The State With the Prettiest Name

William B. Hooker, Cattle King of Tampa, built
a second staircase for his second wife’s children
so they all could ascend their own ways. Picking

blackberries won’t save us from long-term
concerns, swapping the monocle for opera glasses
to gasp at the duchess’s decolletage in a golden

box while downstage someone’s dying, last year’s
preserves staining jars in the pantry. I put on
the past as a record spins a golden thread

beat thin, sons and stepsons bumping shoulders
in the hallway of the mansion turned
Orange Grove Hotel, named for land made

plantable when Hooker fought the second
the third Seminole Wars, desiring he wrote
for his children to sit under their own vine

and fig tree, unmolested, and none to make
them afraid. A plaque by the courthouse annex
where the hotel stood and in Tallahassee

FSU fans do the tomahawk chop though Seminoles
preferred flint spears, bows and arrows flying
as Sam Cooke sings what you sing to me, Cupid

draw back your bow and stay with me
here in our rented apartment. Older arias
drift up the stairs and will keep drifting

long after I've plucked what facts I will
like stitches from an appliqué, like the two
guitar strings William B. Hooker bought in Sept.

1860, the year James Butterfield
boarded, before the war ended and he set
George Washington Johnson's poem for his

dead wife to music: *When You and I*
Were Young Maggie, when you and I grow old
but Leonard Warren collapsed before

Morir tremenda cosa, the first Mrs. Hooker
had cancer, Sam Cooke shot, Billy Bowlegs
King of the Everglades real name Halbutta Mico

Halpatter-Mico or Olactomico which mean
alligator chief, died in exile in Oklahoma
so Hooker could plant Triumph Grapefruits

and potatoes while his cattle grazed through
larger swathes of swamp with cracker cowboys
branded H with a heart around the H.

At least that's how I picture "Heart H brand"
Valentine's Day 2012 though it could've been
an H next to the heart or seared upon it

like Billy Bowlegs's image on a photographic
plate, taken once he'd seen Generals
Taylor Scott and Harney in wax at a

museum in New Orleans en route by force

to Arkansas, stopping to arrange
his daughter’s marriage with a Yankee.

Purlow Party

    Enough mosquitoes clustered on the screen
    that you don’t know when it’s night and sleep
    for three days, can’t tell the color
    of your horse, wheelbarrows cart piles

of them away and cigar smoke staves off fever. I am of good stock, wrote
Marius, descended from men who occupied prominent and respectable
positions in their country. We roamed free as birds having
as playmates
the slave boys.

    Poured molasses
    on her ham and eggs.

    Coats in winter
    make a man weak.

My grandmother bounced my niece on her knee
singing Jump Jim Crow. The children

    of the wilderness moan
    for bread. Marius loved his wife

        and bought her so many jewels you’d confuse her with an electric
light display at the St. Louis Exposition. Keep clocks on a gallop, pretend
your food is fancier than it is so it’ll taste better.

    Or worse. Could grow potatoes in their ears.
    Left the jail open so the mob
    could get him. Our shoes were made

from leather tanned on the farm but the cloth for our shirts came from
Richmond.
The traveler said they danced as if they did not know they were in bondage.

Shirley Temple, the little militant, charms the whole plantation,
sings I feed my pigs molasses yams/They should be sweeter than
they really am.

    Find a patch of forlorn corn
    Rub two kernels on a knot
    Bury those two kernels

The knot will disappear

We peel the meat/They give us skin.

He don’t know my mind.

Collecting scuppernongs that pooled on the sides of the river. Sang
Meet me dear little Lindy by the watermelon vine. He sat in a spare
and bottomless chair, his knees up by his chin, and in his hunger
for bacon and cornbread cared not. They named their dog Teddy
but after Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to the White
House they changed the dog’s name. We wanted to smell magnolias
but we smelled sulfur. They say it quenches your thirst but I don’t
intend to try it.

Statement of Poetic Research

Whipsawing

As Huck Finn found out after telling Jim they’d ride a raft to freedom, the Mississippi only flows in one direction: south. If a flatboatman sailed all the way to New Orleans in the early nineteenth-century, he’d need a new way to reach the rest of America. And if he’d blown most of his money on wine, women, and the sporting life, his best option might be to go in on the cost of a horse with a couple of friends and whipsaw his way home.

Whipsawers, named for the same two-manned handtool that must’ve cut the lumber for many a flatboat, made their way across the backroads of the South in a jagged collective. One man would ride a horse for a few hours, tie it to a tree, and start walking. When the second man walked his way to the horse, he’d climb on, ride a while, bypass the first man, and tie the horse to a tree for the third man. Barring selfishness or attacks by bandits, they kept on taking turns.

Robert Frost gave American poets license to think of themselves as manual laborers—writing is like chopping wood and making hay!—but I like the idea of turning the hand tool of poetry into travel. Traveling alone can be isolating, but whipsawing guarantees companionship. Of course, your journeys won’t quite match up: the field through which you amble may be one through which your buddy

gallops. When you pass by a gnarled live oak and think of pinning sonnets to your beloved on its trunk, he might be wondering whether he can stomach another supper of spit-roasted squirrel.

In these poems, I try to get at something like those divergent but overlapping experiences of place, though if I really want the metaphor to hold, I should add something about the centuries of folks who have walked down the same Southern roads or who walked down similar roads in other places or down roads they wished were similar, or who wished they were walking down roads when they were actually sitting on a couch in California listening to mp3s of Caetano Veloso when they should probably be listening to 78s of Jimmie Rodgers yodeling so they could figure out how to emulate, in writing, his quick switches between somber chest-singing and high-flung notes from the throat, which, by the way, Sly and the Family Stone also do, in the song “Spaced Cowboy,” with an odd, jaunty ghostliness.

My poems—which, like that parade of pedestrians, would-be pedestrians, and singers, yoke together different experiences, times, locations, and voices—have to do with how history builds up in place. They’re set primarily in the South, both because it’s the place I know best and because people generally think of it as the country’s most “placed” place. Fifty years ago, C. Vann Woodward, in his essay “The Search for Southern Identity,” argued that in spite of industrialization’s homogenizing force, the South remained a distinct region—not necessarily because of its present particularities (though there were, and are, plenty of those) but because of its unchangeable history. This history, Woodward wrote, provided a vital counterweight to the myth of American exceptionalism: Southerners, who generally have less money and less education than the rest of the country, understand defeat. And beneath a ham and biscuit-scented haze of moonlight and magnolias, Southerners know, too intimately, America’s great sins of slavery and racial violence.

Any place is a story people make up, sometimes together, and sometimes in spite of each other. But that doesn’t make our experiences of place, or our stories, less powerful. Woodward also described a set of anxieties that may be even more familiar now than they were in 1960: “Has the Southern heritage become an old hunting jacket that one slips on comfortably while at home but discards when he ventures abroad in favor of some more conventional or modish garb? Or is it perhaps an attic full of ancestral wardrobes useful only in connection with costume balls and play acting—staged primarily in Washington, D.C.?” I’ve kept these concerns in mind too, though I’m less concerned than Woodward is with the authenticity of performance. Faux-backwoods politicians drive me crazy, but sometimes the pap on pop-country radio makes me homesick.

I rummaged around my own ancestral attic (a filing cabinet in my San Francisco apartment) to find fodder for poems: unpublished memoirs by my great-uncle and great-great-grandfather, nineteenth-century legal documents, my grandparents’ letters and diaries. I’ve also turned to travel narratives, history books both scholarly and chatty, broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry, WPA oral histories,

songs, films, and gossip from my life, the lives of people I know, and the lives of people I'll never meet. The poems proceed largely by association. It's how the mind works, and how cultural history, at some stage, gets written: you comb through the archive, looking for patterns.

History and poetry both provide records of experience, but they have different conventions. Prose promises causes, effects, plots and explanations, while poetry can thrive on gaps, cuts, and suggestion. I cull from both genres here, flirting with narrative and relying heavily on parataxis, which helps us see different pieces of place and time before they've been shaped into an orderly story. I'm interested in how the past feels—sometimes close, comforting, and explanatory, and sometimes alien, estranging, or altogether lost.

Ezra Pound famously called "a poem including history" an epic, but these poems, encountering history, are closer to lyric. Instead of trying to account for the grand march of time, I've explored how history haunts us. After all, poetry is a haunted genre. A sonnet can be about anything, but it can't help being about love, because of all the sonnets that came before it. Thanks to Dante, any set of tercets could make you think about journeying into the afterlife. And couplets, no matter your intention, will call attention to rhymes, doubling, correspondence, or a lack thereof. Haunting can be more literal, too: these poems are largely peopled by the dead. While some of them make repeat appearances, I've also included floating actions, ideas, and artifacts, because even a past that's been neglected or expunged can have an echo.

I feel a great debt to, and identification with, record-keepers and hoarders. I've tried to play the part of a hostess who has occasional access to a séance table or time machine, though I might be more like the old woman my father saw in his early days of social work who plastered her walls with society pages from the newspaper and talked about the Country Club set as if they were her closest friends, though she'd never met them. Some of these people had attended my parents' wedding.

Further reading

Herbert Asbury, *The French Quarter* (New York, 1936); "Billy Bowlegs in New Orleans," *Harper's Weekly Magazine,* June 12, 1858; W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941); "Domestic Intelligence," *Harper's Weekly Magazine* (June 19, 1858); Marius Harrison Gunther, unpublished memoirs (1921); Clifton Johnson, *Highways and Byways of the South* (New York, 1904); Stetson Kennedy, *Palmetto Country* (New York, 1942); Alberta Morel Lachicotte, *Georgetown Rice Plantations* (Georgetown, S.C., 1955); *The Littlest Rebel,* directed by David Butler (1935); Lil McClintock, "Please Don't Think I'm Santa Claus," *Music of the Medicine Shows, 1926-1927*. Old Hat Records, CD 1005, 2005; John Muir, *Thousand-mile Walk to the Gulf,* ed. William Frederic Badé (New York, 1916); Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom* (New York, 1861); Rpt. Modern Library, 1969; John Solomon Otto, "Florida's Cattle Ranching Frontier: Manatee and Brevard Counties (1860)," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 64: 1 (July 1985):

48-61; *The Carolina Low-country,* Society for the Preservation of Spirituals (New York, 1931); Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro, *Random Shots and Southern Breezes,* vol II (New York, 1842); Kyle S. VanLandingham, "Captain William B. Hooker: Florida Cattle King," 2003, accessed February 2012; *These Are Our Lives,* Var. (Chapel Hill, 1939); YouTube broadcasts of June Carter performances in the 1950s.