

Duck River Latitudes



Mile 98 087° 5' 13" W

McEwen Bridge: washed away in the 1948 flood: two opposing pilings now
Old Gordon's Ferry Bridge: built 1896, washed away in the 1902 flood
Gordon's Chickasaw Ferry: had a handcrank
Natchez Trace ford: crossable in the dry season

black-blue-blush	morning light rumours	nests	the river
the fisher otter drops	in the hornbeams	lichen	crested 5:47
splashless beneath it	so then too greeny	grass and	am
(into the floodflow)	blowsy-breasted wood-	spider	seeped into
	pewees	silk	the local
	fleshing air		blazed
			fields

there were no more
birds than usual I think
the day the bright lazy
day

river 9.7 feet too high
saucebottle floated by
errant

the farmhands
building a wall of
sand
near the thin
bottomless keelboat
on the shore in
the evening
limping by into
aftermath
(there for 100
years)

skip to the torrential
humid
twilight skip to the
dumbfounded
night skip to the viperish
starfall turned in the
sky
crickets laughed with
throbbing
hum cicada the smirking
syncopation between the
two

the farmhands had built
a pyre
burned the keelboat
I'm in with the flames
now
and the loss I should
have walked
there into their
bustling bag-
filling
and said stop

the farmhands had
raving
eyes of undertakers
whose
fingerbones had
already broken

instead
slept to the spill

downstreaming into the
Tennessee
see less than
ten, no see
even less stars through
the leaves
the sophist tuliptree
drooping into floriferous
crowblack
sleep-

eyes in a gooseleafed
bed
seesawing while they
burned
more wood and in the
barn
horses haunched in their
stalls

Mile 99
087° 15' 51" W

End of Shelby Bend/Old Church's Bend

and I went
sucking into the
patchwork
birds, crested
while they
sung in the beeches
hung over the
river

no one remembers
the rationale of the names
of these places, I was
finally
in the sun-honeyed detour
of the last twenty miles of
history

on the aerial map
faint wagon tracks
ended at the
shores

shores. What can be said
about this analogy? I see
the cobble of my life
versus
the loud welcome of the
future?
I want to ping solemnly
into
the sixpenny leaves
with the northern flickers
unable to dust out the mites?
this is the sum-

at the known
sturgeon hole
dropping bait
into a black green
window
into the current

where you reflected
a combination of happy and
sad
returned

sublime is
a delicately braided
explanation
in the genes

to tackle it
to demand more
from it
be the outsider
you needed to un-
bend

a bethlehem cloud formed far away (thunder behind
its threat)
your stomach was speaking its own needs
you wanted to slay every impulse
you hesitated
you insisted

this is the sum

you could not pull
from the hole

ancient & bottomfeeder
& bony plates & scutes
& spaded snout to stir up
silt
& barbells

roe on a plate
& isinglass in a
bottle
& oil burning in the
steamboat

-you packed it up you figured (the disclosure) was the effort after the
experience the eastern shadows along the banks

the distant smoke venting from a smokehouse on Good Samaritan Ridge you saw

Church Bluff

turning throne-gold that evening Hicks Bluff purpling you saw straight wispy lines in the sky

lancing like every pink cardinal you enforced it: no shoals at mile ninety-nine-

Mile 100
87° 42' 30" W

Rough shoals

Remains of an incomplete lock built by the Duck River Slack-Water Navigation Company, which sought to "mortgage upon the works of the Company— upon the negroes now owned, and upon those it designs purchasing with the larger portion of funds arising from the sale of the Bonds. It will, if desired, stipulate in the mortgage, when the work is completed, to sell the negroes, under the supervision of an Agent ... and with the proceeds buy up the same amount of Bonds loaned it, and deliver them to be cancelled; until which time the State shall retain her lien on the Works, Stock and Negroes of the Company, which now owns, and has engaged on the works, eighty-two able-bodied negro men, together with four women, cooks."

Rock wall (2' high) no record

Was this an operation?
so stacked the rocks
like a child, *that* sort of
unskill,

it looked
without exactness,
without purpose.
Balancing had swerved.

Another kind of beauty
was master here, slave
breath burning back over.
At the sight of it
my fortunes orbited or twisted,
devaluing. The master would

drive a whale into a brook
and not say sorry.

Fatigue mattered
over fidelity-

wall

was cipher.

Site of McGraw's Ferry; no record other than named on map

Statement of Poetic Research

Richard Greenfield
Writing *Duck River Latitudes*

The province of the poem is the world.
When the sun rises, it rises in the poem
and when it sets darkness comes down
and the poem is dark...

-William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, Book II

August of 2010: I am standing on Kettle Mills Bridge, a single lane spanning the narrow of the Duck River. Forty feet below, three indistinct turtles lie in the sun on a log stranded on a shoal. An uprooted tree hangs in the trusses of the steel bridge—at road level—its roots feeding on the wet air above the water, its limbs still holding green leaves two months after the spring flood. I slide down the embankment next to the river and step into the black silt and find the empty shell of a river mollusk, hollow and black, formed in automatic calciferous layers, in the deep of the river. *In the deep of the river (Genesis)* I imagined it scraped its pallid tongue like a tiny spume, unnerved, awake, waiting for me on the bottom. It will not be entirely forgotten by me, even as I return it to the murk. It is made again here, in my writing. I'm *writing* the river. I am constructing a landscape.

I conceived of the series of poems as a lyric travelogue, in which, mile by mile, the speaker positions himself on a raft floating on the Duck River, or on its banks, or beneath its surface, or no more than a quarter of a mile from the river. The longest river in the state of Tennessee, the Duck is prone to severe periodical flooding. In the language of a brochure, *It is the most biologically diverse river in the United States—home to unique species of mussels and fish. South of the Cumberland Plateau, its water irrigates the rich bottomland farms of Middle Tennessee, etc.* Early white settlers of the Cumberland drove out the Chickasaw and established large plantations. Near the small community of

Williamsport, one large oxbow of the river forms what is known as Greenfield Bend.

My sources for the poem are a number of local and historical maps of the river overlain with a Google Earth map to provide longitude and latitude and estimates of mile markers from a USGA survey topographic map. For example, at mile 98 (98 miles from the Duck's confluence with the Tennessee River), at 087° 5' 13" W, is an area with many historical crossings (bridges and fords) of the Natchez Trace used variously over the last 200 years. Through research in the Tennessee State Library I found historical accounts of a ford near the Natchez Trace which was crossable in the dry season, long before the ferries and bridges were to be built. Writing the "Mile 98" section of the series, I wanted to invoke violent oppositions of birth and death, use and waste, drought and flood, heat and cold, or past and present. The poem cycles from morning to night and from spring to late summer, spanning at the same time both the 1902 and 1948 floods. I used early accounts of native flora to influence my selection of local species (hornbeams and tuliptrees) as well as field guides (otters and arcing pewees) and archived advertisements for keelboat services that were common on the river in the 1890s. I used notes from my last three summer experiences along the river. For example, in the summer of 2008, near mile 98, I noted "a capped whiskey bottle floating down the river" (the "saucebottle" in the poem). There was an account in a Columbia, Tennessee, newspaper of the 1948 flood. In the article, men were filling sandbags just south of the Natchez Trace section of the Duck River, the same "mile 98" area of focus. Of course, the infamous flood of spring 2010, the dreaded "hundred-year flood," was covered by many news sources, but then there is the immediate experience, too, of seeing the tree hung in the truss of a bridge. And then there is the history of my family, whose last name imprints the community's locales with their long history in the area: Greenfield Bend Road, Greenfield Bend Cemetery, Greenfield Bend Church.

A short history of the Greenfields of Greenfield Bend: In 1812 my great great grandfather, Dr. Gerrard Greenfield, arrived here and established a large plantation. He and his sons cut down acres of woods and built a massive mansion with scores of slaves brought with him from his native Calvert County, Maryland. They filled the house with furniture from the plantation home he had sold in Maryland. And like Lear, when he died, he divided the plantation between two sons and a daughter. The eldest, James, continued living in his father's home, while Thomas Gerrard Truman (known as Tom) built his own much more modest plantation home closer to the river in what some consider to be the richest farmland of the state. The daughter, Jane, married soon after, and she and her husband built a plantation home on the high bluffs to the east, farthest from the river and fertile soil. Between the three plantations, the Greenfields enslaved over two hundred men and women. When the Civil War erupted, James and Jane signed loyalty oaths to the Union. Tom supplied local guerillas allied with the Confederacy. Toward the end of the war, the Union

Army, informed of this, burned his plantation and set his slaves free. Tom moved to Lawrence County, and the farm went into neglect, so Jane and James sued Tom for ownership of his lands, litigation lasting twenty years. Eventually, Tom lost his land. His eldest son, Gabriel Gerrard Greenfield, my great-grandfather, married young to a Mormon woman, survived a Mormon-hating mob who burned down his house. When he was 28, in 1896, he died of typhoid (the same year Tom died), survived by his wife Louella and two sons, Gabe and Walter. Gabe was my grandfather. Less than a year old, his mother left him (and his brother) to be raised by her father because her new husband would not accept her infant sons. Gabe was in his twenties when he met my grandmother, Agnes, who was 14 when they married and had her first of seven sons. The seventh son was my father, Robert. By the time my father was born, they had finally left "the Bend," as it had come to be known among my family, moving one county south to a farm high in the hills near the Elk River.

In the sequence of poems, the speaker dwells in all times at once, as if he sees the past, present, and the future all at once. My goal is to conflate all of time, all of history, not in a relativist way but in a manner suggestive of simultaneity and duration. I view the poem as a meditation on the passage of time, the recovery of time, and the imaginative projection of unknown time at once (there is much I don't know, and there is much I will never know). The form, a kind of patterning spread of relatively similar small-sized stanzas that can be read both vertically and horizontally on the page, tries to enact this sense of time. In some ways I am indebted to poet Charles Olson (also a noted scholar of history) for locating the page as a "field" of time(s). His notion of what he terms "projective verse" necessitates open-ended writing where each poem determines its own needs. Assuming that the page is an energy or thought "field" within which the poem is composed (a field composition), and assuming that "form," as Robert Creeley says, is "never more than an extension of content," then my hope is that the poem enacts the simultaneity of time and the wreckage of the flood that scatters the contents of flooded homes on the surface of the river.

In the white space, memory loss, erasure, and repression of undesirable, irreconcilable history is silence, nothingness, whiteness, the unspoken, the null. Thus, here is a poem that is only a title: "*Site of McGraw's Ferry; no record other than named on map.*" Connection (connecting)-writing- begins within flimsy hypotheses- the empty jars that have filled a hutch. Of course there is the "blood-delight" in finding communion with those who were *you* before *you* were *you*. But we in the *now* are only blanks, temporary beings washed down the river in a flood of time. We in the *now* live within the difficulty of holding the past together. I have tried to find the ghost frequencies, to tune in to these people, and I always predict failure in finding the truth. Such is the definition of *historiography*. In such erasures, I prophesy and project a history I know is as true as fiction. This is the case of the "*Rock wall (2' high) no record*" poem- wall whose source or function is now lost in time. I

project the poetic purpose of the wall, stones stacked by

...a child, *that* sort of
unskill,

it looked
without exactness,
without purpose.
Balancing had swerved.

William Carlos Williams finds in *Paterson*, "Stones invent nothing, only a man invents." This is the divide between *object* and *subject*, between interpreted and interpreting. Sometimes, I insist on the "—the subject, the witness, the center." Other times the object is to be simply received, such as in the "Mile 100" poem and its focus on an "incomplete lock." Here the poem is no more than the historical document itself—the text of an application for a grant from the state to complete the lock. One sees the outcome in the fact of the incomplete lock on the river. This evidences the poem has the capacity to absorb these sources without lyric interpretively framing time.

Growing up, I never knew any of the Bend's history. My father himself knew little—only fragments or vague accounts that his own mother had told him. My father wasn't a talker—even less so about his childhood. His father had died while he was in the eighth grade, and he dropped out to work on the farm, never returning to school. His childhood had been difficult and he had spent his life regretting his origins. Perhaps for this reason I felt the subject was off-limits.

The accident of a job landed me a few hundred miles from my family's roots. In 2005, having recently finished a Ph.D., I was hired by a small liberal arts college in Tennessee to teach creative writing and composition. I had grown up in the West, in California and Washington, and had spent my entire adult life living in the West. After my father died in the spring of 2007, I felt ready to investigate origins. I knew my father had been born near Prospect, Tennessee, in Giles County. I looked for my father's farm on Google Maps—to visit the farm?—to understand something about my father I had never understood before?—I'm not sure I know. I could see, against brilliant high-res greens, a dirt road named "Greenfield Road," and several farms. A week later I returned to the search, this time trying Google Maps for "Greenfield Road." One of the hits was for "Greenfield Bend Road," in a community in Maury County to the north. I would later find a birth certificate for my grandfather showing he had been born in Greenfield Bend, and I instinctively knew then that this place was rooted in the history of my family, or at least, my family was rooted in the history of this place. On my journey to my father's birthplace, I visited the Maury County archives and began researching and in less than a few hours had

located historical records of the Greenfields—an article here, a local historical reference there. Over the next three summers, I would return to the Maury County Archives and the Tennessee State Library, opening jars. This past summer, I found a record that T.G.T. had been charged with the crime of rape. Though the record was erroneously noted by the county archivist as coming from the chancery court records, I tracked down the chancery court file anyway, to see what might be there. The file was stored at the State Library in Nashville, so I drove north, along the Williamsport Highway and crossed the Duck River and then drove north along the Natchez Trace National Scenic Parkway, following its natural undulations toward Nashville.

At the library, I loaded the sprockets of the fiche and scrolled to the catalog number. There I discovered over ninety pages of letters, court transcripts, and ledgers belonging to the Greenfields, spanning 1850-1870: all of the names of slaves, and the Christian names they had bestowed on their very livestock, and every piece of furniture listed—*listed* in *this* order—all of the unconscionable belongings of their world listed there for me to transcribe, to absorb into my *project* and my self, this census of bondage written in a fine cursive scrawl on onion-leaf, both sides, both slants of hand, every page a palimpsest. I could see through it.

Once, when I was sixteen in the bed of my parents between my brother and father, listening to the thrum of winter rain on the tin patio roof outside, what did I think? I want to know now. The room was dark except for the street light seeping between two houses on the next street over, a pocket of yellow over the face of my father who drew on cigarettes with his eyes closed. We were there because he wanted us there—so we were quiet, listening too, and warm at the arms where we touched. I heard the mumbling of the neighbor's bedroom TV through the duplex wall. And only *there* was where he would softly speak of his childhood on a farm in the hills of Tennessee. I heard but I heard nothing, nothing of the particular rain of *then* as it pattered against the barn's roof above the loft where he hid from his father and his work, where he hid his first cigarette from his father and hid his resentment, how the low grunts of the horse in the stalls and the circling flies would separate through the high shoring, becoming poverty and abundance at once. I see. And I see none of it.

This article originally appeared in January 2011.

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2009, he has been a professor at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. With Mark Tursi, he is a founding editor of Apostrophe Books, a small press of poetry, which began publishing books in 2007.