

“We see a little farther now and a little farther still”:

Rendering the South by Its Ghosts

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2019

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

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Abstract

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In this essay, I examine the ghosts of the place I’m from—Bedford County, Virginia—as well as those of other parts of the South, and argue that the haunted or ghostly is essential to getting at a true, felt sense of any region. The ghost, in my reckoning, encompasses not only the imprint of a past life long gone but also a host of absences, fractures, traumas, histories, harms, ignored bodies, and even certain manipulations of time: a way of surpassing its understood forward logic in favor of circular movements that resemble the way people move imperfectly—recursively—in and between places.

Here, I discuss works by several poets who have, at one time or another, called the South home: C.D. Wright’s book-length poem *Deepstep Come Shining* (1998); Tiana Clark’s “Soil Horizon,” from her collection *I Can’t Talk About the Trees Without the Blood* (2018); and the

self-portrait sequence from Charles Wright's *The Southern Cross* (1981). I intersperse these sections with short interludes on the photography and thought of Sally Mann. These artists' poems and photography—ghost-techniques themselves—are uniquely suited to, as Jane Wong calls it, “go toward the ghosts”: to both acknowledge and create a fragmentary yet pervasive memory of the South, as well as the selves they have fostered there.

“We see a little farther now and a little farther still”:
 Rendering the South by Its Ghosts

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*Tonight the river is at work dissolving, solving
over and over the river of its loosening.
I want to know how to hear it, and what it might teach me:
how to inhabit this thing of bone, gut, and blood,
this part of me that would not vanish if I vanished.*

—Davis McCombs, “The River and Under the River”¹

¹ McCombs 39.

Chapter 1: Where I Was Born

Growing up, I was always aware of ghosts. To pass through different parts of our house was to pass through different times, the imprints of different owners and inhabitants: viscous glass in the windows, hand-hewn nails fastening the floors and paneling, paint on the walls and tin roof layers and colors thick, the wood of the stairs softened at the centers from centuries of footfalls. From the basement, we would sometimes hear footsteps in the oldest parts of the main house; there were quick movements at the corners of eyes, inexplicable smells; one bedroom in particular, which we called the wood room, was almost impossible to sleep in for the unbroken feeling of being watched from behind one's back.

To pass outside was the same, and the trees and shrubs seemed to have been there since the house was built, or close to it. Boxwood hedges were large enough for my brother and me to use as a ground-level treehouse of sorts; a box elder sheltered the east side of the house; the Osage orange trees dropped sickly-sweet mock oranges from their gnarled limbs, which we'd throw into the Virginia creeper underneath them. A book called "*Our Kin*": *The Genealogies of Some of the Early Families Who Made History in the Founding and Development of Bedford County, Virginia*, published in 1930, refers to the vegetation around the farmhouse as already overgrown, "point[ing] heavenward, entirely unmindful of the passing years."¹

¹ Qtd. in "Jeter, Henry Pleasant b: 1744 in Caroline Co., Virginia d: 06 AUG 1821 in Bedford Co., Virginia."



views of the house in spring from the north and east, mid-2000s

I was born and lived my first seventeen years on a farm in Bedford County, Virginia, on Lizard Ridge Road, at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. My grandfather had raised beef cattle for slaughter there. By the time I was born, the only thing we grew was hay.



haying the fields, 1980s or early 1990s

The oldest part of the house dates from 1789, owned by Henry Jeter¹—who is distantly related to me, as many in central Virginia are, though the land passed out of my father’s side of the family before being bought into the other side by my maternal grandfather. My mother lived there thirty-five years: from 1973 to 2008. A 1987 book called *The Jeter Mosaic* by Grata Jeter Clark—quoted here from a personal ancestry webpage—recounts the original construction of the house, kitchen, and slave quarters:

A planter of wheat & tobacco, Henry Jeter built his home on land by a view of the majestic Peaks of Otter, one of the most beautiful sites in Bedford Co. The house was constructed of brick (made on the site) & mortar, with walls 18 inches thick. They were covered with tongue & gro[o]ve weather board on the outside & inside & sealed in between. The six inch floor planks, all joist, etc. were hand hewn & put together with pegs, some up to 12 inches long. The lower rooms of the original house (one called the Big Room) were built as a half-basement, under laid with solid soapstone. There were two small rooms on top of this level & an attic floor. The upstairs rooms were not connected, & to enter one from another, it was necessary to go downstairs & enter by the other stairway. . . . Bricks for the end-chimneys were also made on the site, & the fireplace mantles were high, wide, & simply carved. The slave quarters & the kitchen, where food was prepared to be served in the main house, were separate buildings. . . . The slave quarters are still standing in 1987, a small two-story log house with three rooms, one with dirt floor (used for curing meat, etc.), & the others with wooden floors for living & sleeping quarters.²

(My parents, though, think that the cabin was used for smoking meat and other culinary purposes and that those enslaved lived elsewhere on the land, perhaps where my parents found hearth foundations between the vegetable garden and horse stable.)

We felt presences all over the property. My brother once saw a bleeding, gray-uniformed soldier looking at him from the field. Drystones scattered in the yard marked the original kitchen foundation. The Jeter burial plot—a quarter-mile up the hill from the house and in grand view of the Peaks of Otter—felt, if not haunted, surely inhabited by people; or, rather, it always had the

¹ *Our Kin*, qtd. in *ibid.*

² Qtd. in *ibid.*

feeling that people had just been breathing there.



a view of the burial plot¹

Henry Jeter is buried there, as well as his wife Elizabeth and a few of their sons and other family members.² Henry's headstone, placed by the Daughters of the American Revolution,³ stands.



Henry Jeter's grave⁴

¹ ExTex0614.

² *Our Kin*, qtd. in "Jeter, Henry Pleasant b: 1744 in Caroline Co., Virginia d: 06 AUG 1821 in Bedford Co., Virginia."

³ AlonaShelton.

⁴ Marilyn (Radke) Greene.

In short, there were ghosts everywhere—both of the type we’re used to and in the way people change a place over and over through time. But even places not so explicitly haunted by the past are, I believe, made up of ghosts.

The idea of the ghost is a strangely pliable one. What, in all the things it’s been made to mean, is consistent in the idea of the ghost? When I talk about ghosts, I talk about a number of things: not just ghost as soul imprint, but also ghost as concept, as a way to hold a host of absences, fractures, traumas, histories, harms, and ignored bodies. The ghost is also a means to name a certain manipulation of time, a way of ignoring its understood forward logic in favor of circular movements that look more like the way people move imperfectly—recursively—in and between places.

Chapter 2: Definition of Terms: Place and Ghosts

In his seminal 1977 book, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defines place, variously, as “a special kind of object . . . in which one can dwell,” “[e]nclosed and humanized space,” “space [that] feels thoroughly familiar to us,” “a pause in movement,” “a center of felt value”—in short, as defined space, or space “marked by pauses”¹ we take. Place is a thing that we, humans, have carved from space; as such, it always carries particularly human associations. Put another way, our concept of place is a social one at heart; as sociologist Michael Mayerfeld Bell puts it, the “experience of place is the experience of people.”² We make places by personing³ them: by seeing, remembering, and making meaning of the fact that there are and have been people there.

Our experience of places is derived from our experience in our bodies and with our senses: to really, viscerally understand a place, philosopher Edward S. Casey argues that we have to have been there⁴—though I think the way poems and other art forms implicate the body’s knowledge, imagination, and sensation mean that they can, in a way, take us to the places they describe. And though we can make the mistake of ascribing place knowledge primarily to the act of seeing, knowledge of place requires all of our senses. At its base, Casey claims, the “vehicle of being-in-place is the *body*”⁵—but this relationship is reciprocal as well, a “constitutive co-ingredient”:⁶

The lived body *goes out to meet the place-world*. . . . But the body not only goes out to reach places; it also bears the traces of the places it has known. These traces are continually laid down in the body, being sedimented there, and thus becoming formative of its specific somatography. A body is shaped by the places it has

¹ Tuan, *Space and Place* 12, 54, 73, 138, 138, and 198.

² Mayerfeld Bell 821.

³ See *ibid.* 813: “Places are, in a word, personed . . .”

⁴ Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place” 18.

⁵ Casey, “Body, Self, and Landscape” 413.

⁶ *Ibid.* 406.

come to know and that have come to know it—come to take up residence in it . . . Furthermore, places are themselves altered by our having been in them.¹

We make places, yes, but places also make us. And places make us not only by their topographies and features, but also, circularly, by what we invest them with: the past, our pasts.

Historian Drew Gilpin Faust argues, “Humans must be actively remembered, but place persists as both living history and memento mori, a visual emblem of things absent and unseen.”²

Place feels almost passively remembered—as if, rather, it remembers itself *to* us. Further, Casey notes that the way place is defined and made lasting in space suits it to contain and preserve human memory:

It was . . . Aristotle’s contention that the primary action of place is that of *containing*. “Container” in Greek is *periechon*, literally a having or holding around. To be in a place is to be sheltered and sustained by its containing boundary . . . The very persistence of place helps to make it accessible in a way that is rarely true of a comparable unit of time or a given site. For place tends to hold its contents steadily within its own embrace, while site and time characteristically replace their respective contents.³

This function of place—as a container of time and its inhabitants—suits it to be a source of ready nostalgia.⁴ Especially in considering memories of a place we once called home, or still feel to be a home, it seems suddenly possible to move ourselves virtually back to the place, as well as through the overlapping times it holds. Casey calls this “an activity of *re-implacing*,”⁵ of implanting ourselves once again in a place of the past (and yet still impossibly present). We can piece a past together, in this way, truly re-member it.

We can do this, in part, because places are made up of ghosts. Sociologist Michael

¹ Ibid. 413.

² Mann et al. 131–132.

³ Casey, “Place Memory” 186.

⁴ Cf. the concept of *topophilia*, coined by W. H. Auden in 1947 and explored at length in Tuan’s *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (1974).

⁵ Casey, “Place Memory” 201.

Mayerfeld Bell explores the idea of ghosts in place at length in one essay, arguing that

ghosts—that is, *the sense of the presence of those who are not physically there*—are a ubiquitous aspect of the phenomenology of place. Although the cultural language of modernity usually prevents us from speaking about their presence, we constitute a place in large measure by the ghosts we sense inhabit and possess it. The meaning of a place, its *genius loci*, depends upon the geniuses we locate there. . . . Ghosts of the living and the dead alike, of both individual and collective spirits, of both other selves and our own selves, haunt the places of our lives.¹

These ghosts are not just remnants of the dead, as we commonly think of them, though. They are also, quite simply, imprints of people:² the sense of the social pulled like a basting stitch through the layered times of a place. Mayerfeld Bell extends the concept of the ghost to include not only the dead but also the living, not only the past but also the present and future: in short, these ghosts of place are “presences that connect the self across time.”³ They “may seem uncanny at times,” but can also be strangely “homey.”⁴

As it’s traditionally known, a ghost is the “soul of a deceased person, spoken of as appearing in a visible form, or otherwise manifesting its presence, to the living”⁵—the mark of a body’s image and essence pressed through time. Historian R. C. Finucane defines the ghost in this sense as having several basic occupations from classical antiquity to the present day, “such as informing, consoling, admonishing, and pursuing the living.”⁶ In seventeenth-century Europe, an estimated “two-thirds” of ghosts were “personally known to their percipients”; in contrast, nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts indicate that most people “had no idea of the identities of their spiritual visitors, and hardly any idea of their purpose.”⁷ Finucane accounts for this by explaining that the dead have been given an “ever-diminishing social role” in Europe

¹ Mayerfeld Bell 813.

² Ibid. 815.

³ Ibid. 823.

⁴ Ibid. 816, 834n14.

⁵ “ghost, n.”

⁶ Finucane 25.

⁷ Ibid. 150.

since the Enlightenment: they “progressively withdrew from direct involvement in familial and social affairs, becoming at the same time almost exclusively symbols or tokens of immortality for their percipients.”¹

This shift from the known visitant to the unknown phantom—not a person but rather a symbol of the permanent soul—has resulted in many similarities among ghost accounts from the nineteenth century to today. Finucane sums up the ghosts of the Victorian age as such:

Most apparitions involved figures (or other indications) of humans whose identity was unknown to the percipients. The forms tended to be insubstantial, vague, often in neutral tones of grey and black, or associated with some random luminescence. . . . When it comes to purpose, observers usually attributed no specific reason for the perceptions they reported. *Most* Victorian ghosts were perceived as having nothing to say about buried treasure, murders, revenge, legacies . . . The apparition was there; that was enough. . . . All the encrusted functions of previous centuries had been stripped away, leaving the most fundamental of all. In a Christian society assailed by scepticism and science, but influenced too by romantic hopes and visions, Victorian apparitions satisfied the thirst for immortality.²

Ghost encounters from 1970s narrations were much the same, characterized by omission (e.g., “a grey-haired lady who vanished,” a ghost that “beckons then vanishes”); silence (“silent old ladies,” “a dark-haired mute woman”)—or, conversely, inappropriate noise (“strange noises and heavy footsteps,” “heavy breathing,” “knocks”); the absence of color (“a long white dress,” “grey-haired”); anachronism (“a cloaked, hooded figure”); and the like.³ Too, there is the uncanny—even beyond Freud’s acknowledgement that many people experience the uncanny “in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts”⁴—evoked by animism in “a dead girl announcing her name” and by dismemberment

¹ Ibid. 222.

² Ibid. 211–212.

³ Ibid. 218–219.

⁴ Freud 241.

in “arm and hands floating in a bedroom.”¹ Overall, Finucane writes, “We have met all of these motifs before, sometimes centuries before.”²

In these perceptions of ghosts, we can distinguish the uncanny ghost—a specter with the intention to frighten, haunt, or otherwise disturb the living—from the familial or known ghost, what folklorist Gillian Bennett instead terms a “visitation.”³ In her fieldwork, carried out in Manchester, England, in the 1980s, Bennett found that the women she interviewed fell into a clear

taxonomy of the supernatural world: on the one hand, there are the loving souls of good people who come to those who loved them in life and continue to provide protection and reassurance; on the other hand, there are “THINGS in houses,” evil spirits of the restless dead who haunt the places where they have died unnaturally or committed wicked deeds.⁴

Contrary to Mayerfeld Bell’s assertion that place overlaps with both good and bad ghosts,⁵ Bennett’s fieldwork shows respondents associating visitation with known persons (“the good dead”⁶) and unwanted hauntings by strange ghosts with places—especially liminal ones, such as basements, attics, stairways, and doorways.⁷

Particularly in the postmodern lens, the idea of the ghost has come to mean far more than the appearance of a single slough of the dead. Sociologist Avery F. Gordon uses haunting as a term that refers to spectral appearances and overlays, to “exclusions and invisibilities,”⁸ to “what is gaping [and] detouring.”⁹ In the introduction to the second edition of her book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Gordon writes,

¹ Finucane 218–219 and Freud 243 (animism) and 244 (dismemberment).

² Finucane 219.

³ Bennett 24.

⁴ Ibid. 41.

⁵ Mayerfeld Bell 821.

⁶ Bennett 50.

⁷ Ibid. 44.

⁸ Gordon 18.

⁹ Ibid. 27.

Haunting was the language and the experimental modality by which I tried to reach an understanding of the meeting of force and meaning, because haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security). Haunting . . . is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. . . . The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention.¹

Gordon posits that the structured “norms of a professionalized social science,” with their “given rules of method and modes of apprehension,” are inadequate to encompass what she wishes to encompass.² In this way, haunting—an uncanny form of being drawn along, visited, spoken to—is a way of addressing what logic and reason cannot, or will not: “Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.”³ Folklorist Andrew Lang echoes the idea of this mysterious way of knowing in his explanation that “the ghostly is nothing but the experience, when men are awake, or *apparently* awake, of the every-night phenomena of dreaming”⁴—with all the inversion, strangeness, and mythos that dreams supply, all the felt impacts they can have on our waking lives.

Poet Elizabeth Robinson speaks of ghosts similarly in the essay-poem *On Ghosts*. Her definition threads the line between the “real” ghost—as it were, of the dead or another passed life—and the abstract state of haunting by oblique forces, oblique weights. The prerequisite for haunting, she writes, is a certain set of conditions that “calibrate individuals or places, make them vulnerable to the heightened perception, which is hauntedness”;⁵ these conditions indicate a

¹ Ibid. xvi.

² Ibid. 25.

³ Ibid. 8.

⁴ Lang 3.

⁵ Robinson 3.

sensitivity or willingness (or both) to the state of being haunted. Robinson likens the perceiver of ghosts to a building whose support beams have been visibly eaten by termites: the person “is prepared for this experience”—that of haunting—“on the basis of his or her having, so to speak, been eaten by pests. The condition is one of eroded defenses, of vulnerability.”¹ This vulnerability is a form of openness to outer experience by means of a slow dissolution of the perceiver’s borders as a self:

The apparition is not the entity that haunts. What it is, instead, is more like metaphysical sandpaper. It debrides, taking away all the dead tissue, and some of the living tissue. “Ghost,” with its connotation of white mist or film, is misleading. Think witch hazel or another astringent agent. Think of a scent whose sharpness makes you sneeze.

When the apparition has whittled down your resistance, then you are less of who you are than you used to be.

This lessening is the mode of haunting.²

In a way, the perceiver ultimately holds the ghost in the spaces made by this “lessening” of self. Robinson posits that “the witness, the one who walks over and through, is not a ghost, but shoulders the burdens of the ghost.”³

The commonality between these types—ghost as perceived and constructed, as in place and in philosophical space—is the way the concept of the ghost manipulates time. Media theorist John Potts argues that, with the exception of “crisis apparitions” and “harbingers”—which address the present and the future, respectively—the traditional “core of the idea of the ghost, as it appears in countless cultural contexts, is the relation to past events. . . . To be haunted by a ghost is to be haunted by the past.”⁴ Mayerfeld Bell’s concept of the ghosts of place includes the

¹ Ibid. 4.

² Ibid. 5.

³ Ibid. 41.

⁴ Potts 83.

idea of those beyond the past—“they can as well be of the present, and even the future,”¹ he writes—but these ghosts, too, speak to absence as well as closeness, what will go as well as what will come. They are “always *presences*,” though, regardless, and “as such appear to us as spirits of temporal transcendence, of connection between past and future.”² Gordon echoes the idea that, in calling attention to time as a construct, the appearance of a ghost fuses times together: “Haunting . . . alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future.”³ To control the creation or perception of a ghost, then, is to control the flow of time.

¹ Mayerfeld Bell 816.

² Ibid. 816.

³ Gordon xvi.

Chapter 3: Rendering the Ghost of Southern Place by Photographs and Poems

Ghosts are put in place already by our cultural concept; when we think of haunting, we think of one returning repeatedly to the same location, recurring in pattern. To think of a ghost is to think of a fracture in time and the semi-constancy of a soul across it. Place and ghost also contrast in our cultural understanding; as Nick Lantz writes,

A poetics of ghostliness is one that draws on the self-contained contradictions of the subject, eliciting an irreconcilable unease. What is absent but somehow present, visible but occluded, past but present. And because *place* possesses an inherent stability that can act as a foil to various forms of loss and change, it figures prominently in many poems one might describe as haunted. Place endures. . . . It is thus often what is missing from a place—the juxtaposition of endurance and loss—that makes it ghostly.¹

Lantz goes on to say, though, that place is not as permanent as we sometimes conceive of it.

“The fixedness of place gives us the illusion that the features of a place are similarly fixed,” he writes. “The realization that this isn’t so—that the natural and human contents of a site can be rubbed and swept away—is what makes the dissonance of ghostliness so haunting.”²

I love where I’m from because of its beauty, of course, among other things; now that I live in crisp-mountained Seattle, imagining the softness of the Virginian hills puts a tuck in my chest. “It was not until I began living in cities,” as C.D. Wright says, “that I became hypercognizant of the landscape I had left.”³ When I visit, I feel much like a long-haul trucker from eastern Tennessee that the poet and essayist Marilou Awiakta quotes: “Wherever I go, I got my mountains inside of me. . . . When I see that first blue line rise up, I know I’m home.”⁴ I love the isoprene haze that lifts from the trees to the skin of the mountains like blue blood rushing to a bruise; the colors in winter—yellow-green, greener green, red-brown, white—and in summer—

¹ Lantz 94–95.

² Ibid. 100.

³ C.D. Wright, *Casting Deep Shade* 34.

⁴ Awiakta 196.

bursting; the rust-colored rivers and clear mountain creeks; the way kudzu and ivy cover across the ground and up trees and telephone poles, making standing bodies beside the road, the ravine.



Madison Heights, Virginia, September 2018

I love the South, that is, despite so many reasons not to. The Jeter graveyard at the hilltop of our old farm holds the bodies of white people, seven of their names known and recorded,¹ along with several large rocks that may indicate slaves' graves. (This is my and my family's best guess; despite several message board inquiries from African American Geters whose roots are in Virginia,² no slaves are recorded as buried there.) A cabin that stood on our property until it fell down while I lived there, where a curing ham—who knows how old—hung from the ceiling,

¹ On *Find a Grave* ("Henry Jeter Cemetery Memorials"), as well as in books and on message boards.

² See George Geder (both sources) and svgoron1.

once housed slaves. Recorded in Henry Jeter's estate inventory of 1821, their names were "JIM, NED, ANTHONY, SAM, RANDOL, MOLLY & girl JULIA."¹

After we moved closer to town, my family lived two miles from Thomas Jefferson's plantation and retreat, Poplar Forest, at which he held "as many as ninety-four slaves," in addition to those he kept at Monticello and elsewhere in the state.² I attended school at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, which exploited slave labor from 1693 to the Civil War.³ We are never far from it. My parents' bedroom holds a two-hundred-year-old mirror in the corner, the silver corroding to leave dark specks over its whole surface; my father reports that a relative bought it from the estate of Governor Henry Wise of Virginia, who also served as a general in the Confederate States Army.⁴ On walks and hikes in the Blue Ridge, and in the fields of the old farm, we've found quartz arrowheads from the Monacan, Tutelo, and Saponi peoples.⁵ My father keeps Southern relics on the wall of his office: a dried tobacco leaf in a frame (with typewritten text: "PITTSYLVANIA COUNTY PROJECT: THIS TOBACCO WAS RAISED AND MANUFACTURED BY DR. WHITE, DAN RIVER DISTRICT, IN 1859 WITH SLAVE LABOR");



¹ *The Jeter Mosaic*, qtd. in "Jeter, Henry Pleasant b: 1744 in Caroline Co., Virginia d: 06 AUG 1821 in Bedford Co., Virginia."

² Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest.

³ Krauss.

⁴ Aylor.

⁵ National Park Service.

a sheet of Confederate bonds, in four- and hundred-dollar amounts; a photograph of my great-great-grandfather, Colonel William Henry Ramsey of the 57th Virginia Volunteer Infantry Regiment, who was wounded at Pickett's Charge and who my father says walked from Gettysburg back to Danville, Virginia.¹ He wears his gray uniform and holds a pistol. It's so recent that there's still family resemblance: he has my father's mouth, my uncle's cheekbones. My brother's first name.



Tintypes of other great-great relatives rest in boxes.

¹ Aylor.



John Lewis Aylor (1847–1923) and Nannie Sutton Aylor (1850–1928)

The South is a place where the past is a ghostly presence in itself, where the terms *place* and *ghost* are unopposed; time presses them together. (As Charles Wright wrote to Sherod Santos, the South for him is marked by “a dependence on memory and the past as a condition for my present well-being, an assumption that the past is where we are headed.”¹) Of course, this is true of many other places: yet the South is what I know, the place that taught me of ghosts and the place I store mine. As my father told me when I spoke to him about this project, “Growing up in Virginia, you kind of understand it without being able to explain it.”² The land is freighted by collective and individual traumas, particularly those of the genocide and displacement of indigenous peoples, slavery, the Civil War, and enduring racism and intolerance. Sally Mann writes,

¹ Charles Wright, *Half-life* 182.

² Aylor.

Living in the South often means slipping out of temporal joint, a peculiar phenomenon that I find both nourishes and wounds. To identify a person as a Southerner suggests not only that her history is inescapable and formative but that it is also impossibly present. Southerners live uneasily at the nexus between myth and reality, watching the mishmash amalgam of sorrow, humility, honor, graciousness, and renegade defiance play out against a backdrop of profligate physical beauty.¹

Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart, who studied the hollers of West Virginia for her book *A Space on the Side of the Road*, also notes the absence at the core of locals' affection for the South (especially poignant, in their case, given the coal mines and other corporate colonization endemic to the area):

culture is ruminative and filled with density and desire; it derails into magic and threat, trauma and melancholy, playful performance and deep eccentricity. It imagines itself not as finished code but as a series of encounters and sudden eruptions of signs and action out of a world got down. It follows a logic of gaps in the naturalized order of things and finds itself caught in latent force fields. And it is this that constitutes the hills as cultural "home." . . . Here, home is a vibrant space of intensity where things happened and left their mark. Home is sweet not despite the loss . . . but because of it.²

In his wide-ranging essay "Landscape, Absence and the Geographies of Love," cultural geographer John Wylie stitches the ideas of his title together through a Derridean lens in order "to offer a sort of ghosting and dislocating that . . . entwines *landscape* with *absence* . . . [T]he absencing fracture of landscape is simultaneously a sort of openness, and can be thought anew in terms of *love*."³ The definition of love that he synthesizes is one that I find useful for my purposes here. Though we often think of love "in terms of *fusion*, of self with other, with self, even with place and landscape (as for example with 'topophilia')," Wylie writes, this fusion is in fact something "that love shatters":⁴

¹ Mann, *Deep South* 7.

² Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road* 64–65.

³ Wylie 280.

⁴ *Ibid.* 284.

Far from being a gathering, the geographies of love might instead describe a separation or rupture—another articulation of distance, absence, dispersal. To be “in love” would be already to be lost, or lonely. . . . To put this more positively perhaps, the geographies of love would describe a certain *exposure* to the other. The gap, fracture or absence that is their origin equally and always entails an openness, an originary exposure of the self to externality and alterity.¹

In this way, we can see love of even such a damaged place as a form of openness to its inherent splintering despite the fact that “no complete coincidence of self and other or self and world is possible.”² In moving toward an impossible fusion, we echo an “originary fracture” that “entails a simultaneous opening-onto and distancing-from”;³ we aim for a union with place that we will not get. We know this, and love it anyway.

This disjunction seems best communicated through the forms of art that rest, in themselves, on the incomplete: which serve in themselves as fragments of time. Photography, for one, has long been understood as a ghosted medium, as art historian John B. Ravenal outlines:

From its very beginning in the 1830s, photography has been closely linked with death. Nineteenth-century photographers frequently made postmortem images in homes and later in funeral parlors, hurried out to battlefields to record the carnage, and by century’s end documented crime scenes for forensic purposes. But even when recording the living, photography inevitably casts a shadow of death. Susan Sontag called photography “a twilight art” that touches its subjects with pathos just by photographing them. “To take a photograph,” she said, “is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability.” Roland Barthes, similarly, saw death at the core of photography. He described the transformation of a living breathing subject into a fixed image as a microdeath in which the sitter becomes a specter.⁴

Poet Cameron Awkward-Rich, too, addresses the photograph in “Essay on the Appearance of Ghosts”: “Human fear,” he writes, “has not moved past this old technology of ghosting—the little girl dies & becomes an image.”⁵ As Sally Mann puts it, these images—photographs—“are

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid. 283.

³ Ibid.

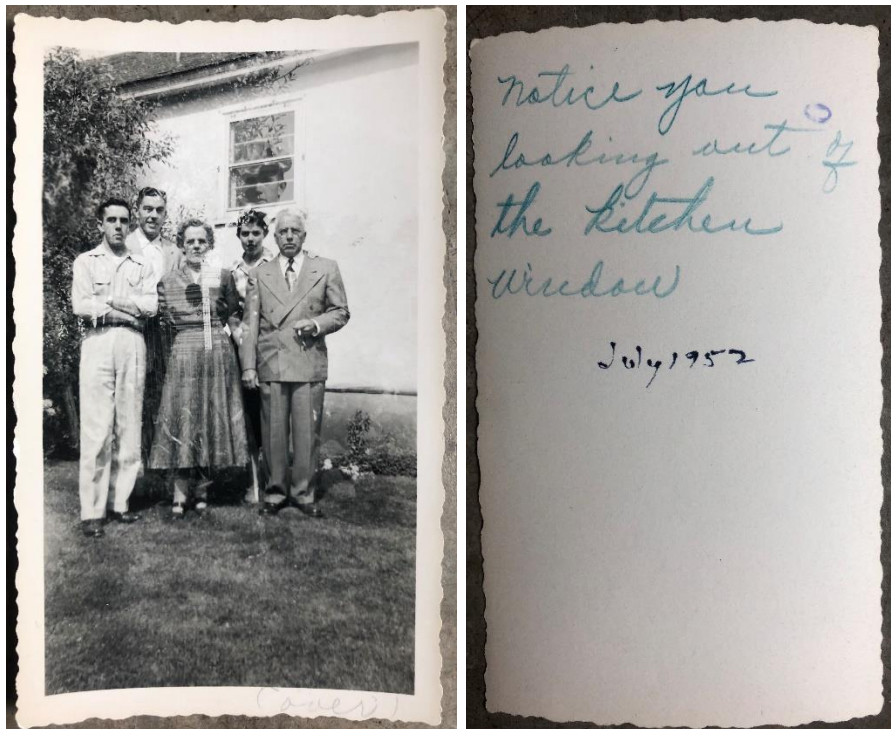
⁴ Mann, *The Flesh and the Spirit* 40–41.

⁵ Awkward-Rich 62.

always moments more or less illusorily abducted from time's continuum."¹ In showing an imprint of a person in the world, in persisting past its time, the photograph itself is a ghost.



found at the Fremont Sunday Market, Seattle, November 2018



from the same market, April 2019

¹ Mann, *Hold Still* 151.

Given that a ghost is a fractured body, a manipulation or folding of time, poems are ghosts, too. What makes the photograph so ghostly, after all, is not just that it preserves history and image past death: it is also that the photograph only partially saves a moment of time despite all attempts to catch the original light—the bodies, objects, and land as they were. A poem is also a unit of time, a method of preserving a short, spoken place within which the poet’s mind makes a unique motion. It is replicable, yes, by rereading—but the images communicated could never create exactly in a reader’s mind what they create in the poet’s own. In addition, like a photograph, a made poem begins to overtake the ordinary memory; just as we sometimes remember static photographs instead of mobile memories of the same event, the language a poem uses to conserve and recreate experience can also alter and fragment it.

A technology of ghosting, which I argue is a created thing that makes a remnant from an attempt to record and keep time—such as, in this case, photographs and poems—is ultimately a technology of imperfect preservation. The uncanny sense of a time gone overlaps with that of time uneasily retained: held back from where it was supposed to go without a lasting trace, except perhaps those left on human memory, subject to the brevity of our lives.

Even in those moments where the poem communicates what the poet wants—those collected moments of “sensual residues” and “spaces of non-reality—superreality,” as Dorothea Lasky calls them¹—it has still preserved a time that is no longer accessible, a time far gone by the time another person reads it. Anne Carson describes reading a successful poem as a process of imitating the poet’s gesture:

I think a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when he engages it, has to enter into that action. His mind repeats that action and travels again through the action, but it is a movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you get to the end you’re different than you were at the beginning and you feel that difference.

¹ Lasky.

. . . The writer did it a long time ago, but you still feel when you're in it that you're moving with somebody else's mind through an action.¹

In the same way a photograph can show the viewer a person as they never will be again, even an instant after it is made, a poem shows a path that the poet has made and moved from. As C.D. Wright puts it, “In photography, silence is a given and an effect. In poetry it is a state of mind and an effect.”²

In this essay, I will discuss the work of several poets who have, at one time or another, called the South home: C.D. Wright, born and raised in the Ozarks, who described herself as, “irrevocably, a purebred hill person”;³ Tiana Clark, who spent years in Nashville, Tennessee, and whose great-great-grandmother, Freeloove, lived in Lenoir, North Carolina;⁴ and Charles Wright, who grew up on the seam of North Carolina and Tennessee⁵ and now lives in Charlottesville, Virginia. I will intersperse these sections with short interludes on the photography and thought of Sally Mann—born and still at home in Lexington, Virginia. Mapped, these points curve near the 37th parallel, stitched along the Appalachian and Ozark mountains of the southeastern United States. These artists' poems and photography—ghost-techniques themselves—are uniquely suited to, as Jane Wong calls it, “go toward the ghosts”:⁶ to both acknowledge and create a fragmentary yet pervasive memory of the South, as well as the selves they have fostered there.

¹ Carson 203–204.

² C.D. Wright, *The Poet, the Lion* 61.

³ C.D. Wright, “hills” 11.

⁴ Clark, “This Is What Black Burnout Feels Like.”

⁵ Charles Wright, *Halflife* 59.

⁶ Wong 20.

Chapter 4: “In the hither world I lead you willingly along the light-bearing paths”:¹
Voice as Ghost in C.D. Wright’s *Deepstep Come Shining*

We see a little farther now and a little farther still²

Avoiding any kind of line.³

Astonishing our earthliness.⁴

We are crossing over one by one.⁵

—*Deepstep Come Shining*

I first read C.D. Wright’s *Deepstep Come Shining* (1998) on the Seattle city bus, going to and from, circling over two days. This mode seems right to the book-length poem: reading in early light cut through the windows, leaving my neighborhood, and then in the half-light of the bus home in the dark; holding the book against my coat, a dispatch from a different weather—my body’s home weather. Wright wrote notes toward *Deepstep Come Shining* on a 1996 road trip through the Carolinas and Georgia to view the work of outsider artists with photographer Deborah Luster.⁶ She then composed the book at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in Amherst, Virginia. “I had a white wall on which to mount my poem,” she recalled in an interview. “I stared at it every day, like the painters in the Center were doing. I worked on it in an expressly visual way. It is my outsider painting, untrained, unfettered.”⁷

¹ C.D. Wright, *Deepstep* 107. Throughout this section, references without an author specified refer to C.D. Wright’s work.

² *Ibid.* 7.

³ *Ibid.* 67.

⁴ *Ibid.* 5.

⁵ *Ibid.* 63.

⁶ Interview with Paul Magee.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Deepstep Come Shining is a consciously difficult text—not, I think, that it is meant to be impenetrable, but that it resists many of the impulses we bring to reading long works: the impulse to shift sense, find narrative, impose order. It knows this. It subverts these impulses, too, by existing mainly in the long line, the end-stopped line, the no-line-at-all (through prose-formatted paragraph-stanzas). This is a trip that resists tracing. A faithful line along it would need to be stippled or detoured; its coordinates would form a “map that folds in on itself at various points,” as Jennie Berner writes.¹ Robert Baker places the poem somewhere between “lyric intensity, the romantic quest, the modernist collage, [and] the realist testimony”;² Berner echoes this liminal assessment by placing it on the negotiated, abstract bridge between documentary and lyric forms of poetry³—between, for example, the first and second lines of the first page:

Meanwhile the cars continued in a persistent flow down Closeburn Road.

The refrain to the rain would be a movement up and down the clefs of light.⁴

This project of limning real and poetic truth is also mirrored in the role of “Deepstep” in the book: both a town in rural Georgia and a place to put the impulse for meaning, for God.

Several statements from Wright’s metapoetic writing in the years since *Deepstep Come Shining*’s publication bear on its tactile, encompassing project:

— The goal is to make not sense but art of this story. The goal is not to make a story but to experience the whole mess.⁵

— Much has been declared about the musicality of poetry. Not so much about the physicality. The adamant practice of poetry as it pertains to touch—an impression of which can be lifted off the ends of the fingers.⁶

¹ Berner.

² Baker 219.

³ Berner.

⁴ *Deepstep* 3.

⁵ *The Poet, the Lion* 7.

⁶ *Cooling Time* 7.

— . . . a phrase is a sensory unit, physical but furthermore felt, not simply syntactic.¹

— What landscape is: not a closed space, not in fact capable of closure. With each survey the corners shift. Distance is the goal; groping, the means.²

Too, we can look to the work itself for a metaphor of the way we might experience it:

It's the year of the magicicadae. Seventeen years underground. Boring slowly upward. Ever so slowly. To get to the surface in the spring of the seventeenth year, it will scabble through pavement. With not a minute to spare except for sex and song.

It must escape the carapace. Quickly. We must all escape our carapace. Come shining.³

The sense of a long-waiting but also newborn creature echoes Wright's words above on feeling or groping toward—*something*. It is a haunted movement, as well as a haunted sort of insect. I remember several locust (as we called them) or (as science does) periodic cicada emergences from my childhood—perhaps the very emergence Wright refers to, which seems to me to be the Brood II appearance of 1996 that stretched from Connecticut and New York down through to North Carolina.⁴ I remember the way the insects left their hollow exoskeletons clung to trees and fallen to the ground after they'd molted: how delicate and specific the amber-honey skeletons were, and easily crushed. Reading through *Deepstep Come Shining* feels like leaving a husk behind, like an imagined sensitivity of skin new to the air; Carol Muske writes that the text supplies an “altered state of attention” in which the body “‘feels’ its way through the senses, exactly like a baby discovering and exploring the world.”⁵ The use of the synesthetic in this poem, fittingly, is a ghost-sense in itself: to “see it feelingly,” as Gloucester does in the book's

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid. 39.

³ *Deepstep* 22.

⁴ WCVE.

⁵ Muske 161.

epigraph¹—much like to see time spread over place, a wash of color.

Perhaps because Luster was Wright’s companion on its originary road trip, *Deepstep Come Shining* is concerned with photography and with the absolutes of things, with their light and imagined innate color. The poem itself acknowledges that

It is not that we live in a world of colored objects but that surfaces reflect a certain portion of the light hitting them. It’s all whiteness. Here, in Ultima Thule.²

In this vein, and by my count, the great majority of the colors referred to in the text are indeed white. Others tend to be black, green, and blue, but there are far fewer of these recurrences, and vegetable matter tends to be the referent for most—that is, perhaps, as the most natural form of the color, the absolute reference even assuming that these things themselves hold no color. (For example: “chlorophyll” as a continual means of evoking green,³ eyes and a swimsuit both described as “blue as the chicory in yonder ditch” or “chicory-blue,”⁴ “Trumpet-flower orange.”⁵) To me, the proliferation of white in comparison with the relatively restrained use of other color mirrors the way death has its bodied presence in life—both because of the whiteness or blankness of many of Wright’s recurring uncanny images (shining or light, mirrors, ghost hair, bones, hands, etc., as I will discuss) and because of the specific images used in the most common manifestations of white, as Baker explains:

The mother of Deborah Luster, Wright’s companion on this journey, was murdered in her bed when Luster was a teenager. The story—which is associated with a white piano her mother played, a piano in turn associated with a swan struck by lightning—recurs as a burden throughout the book.⁶

¹ *Deepstep* 1.

² *Ibid.* 79.

³ *Ibid.* 3, 31, 38, 62.

⁴ *Ibid.* 7, 61, 62.

⁵ *Ibid.* 77.

⁶ Baker 224.

Too, the poem's interest with the emanating light of particular objects (e.g., “magnolia-light,’ ‘leglight,’ ‘lotuslight,’ ‘cornlight,’ ‘onionlight,’ ‘alligatorlight,’ ‘Formicalight’”¹), Berner argues, “almost exclusively represents an optics of embodiment, not reflection,”² even despite Wright's acknowledgement (see previous page) of the scientific truth of its impossibility. Berner ties this obsession with light, embodiment, and the absolute to Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, particularly the section in which he argues that “the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent”³ and that “a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.”⁴ Light, here, is a tactile haunting, shared among our bodies; its embodiment is a large part of Wright's project: the South not as usually seen, not as understood from an outside point of view, but as embodied, which is from her vantage the only way to experience a place.

Throughout *Deepstep Come Shining*, Wright shows an interest in photography that is less literal (there are few actual photographs referred to in the poem) than it is about the way light writes on the eye—or, for instance, about the way silver nitrate is used in the manufacture of film as well as in relation to other recurring concerns of the poem (e.g., to drop in the eyes after birth “[i]n case of syphilis,” to silver mirrors, to dye hair, to plate silver).⁵ As I quoted in my introduction to this essay, Wright has written that, “In photography, silence is a given and an effect. In poetry it is a state of mind and an effect.”⁶ She expands on this idea later on in *The Poet, the Lion*: “Poetry, I have tardily determined, not only seeks silence, it aspires to silence. I mean not that it aims for perfection but for an opening, an unofficial opening, a zone wherein the

¹ *Deepstep*, qtd. in Berner.

² Berner.

³ Barthes 80.

⁴ *Ibid.* 81.

⁵ *Deepstep* 57, 73.

⁶ *The Poet, the Lion* 61.

language affords unexpected associations and alternative outcomes.”¹ That is, Wright’s poetry “tries to insinuate itself in the cracks”; “[i]t tries to initiate cracks”; it “advocates the lost road”;² it creates silence and presence that happen to be native to the photograph. It does not direct you to an experience; the poem is not merely a portal. Rather, the poem is an experience in itself: not of the places where its ordinary road trip happens, necessarily, but of the accumulated and incarnated feeling. To this end, Wright opens spaces like apertures, as if for us to look through and place ourselves inside.

Wright enacts these openings in part through the use of spatial ghosts: absences and spectral presences on the page. As Baker outlines, the poem’s text uses “four distinct forms of patterning”: first, the “catalogue in single-spaced lines”; second, the “aerated lyric of a page or less, usually in double-spaced lines or in couplets”; third, “the prose meditation, usually between one-fourth and one-half of a page long, always placed at the bottom of a right-hand page, always set off from the rest of the poem by a blank verso page and a blank top half of the page”; and fourth, the most common mode, “the page or pages of notebook-style phrasings.”³ Where “facsimiles of long, thin strips of old steno-type paper produced by Wright’s mother, who was a court reporter in Arkansas,”⁴ recur, they do so opposite the third type of writing (the prose meditation),⁵ thus replacing potentially blank space with what Berner calls “the hand of Wright’s mother.”⁶ In addition, as Baker notes, the 107-page poem includes 27 blank and many more partially blank pages; “It’s as if the whole poem were swept by air,” he writes.⁷ Wright’s use of artifacts mediated by a passed-on family hand and of white space left open, as if to allow the

¹ Ibid. 90.

² Ibid. 32.

³ Baker 227–228.

⁴ Berner.

⁵ See *Deepstep* 18, 66, 74, and 106 (on the final spread of the poem).

⁶ Berner.

⁷ Baker 228–229.

reader to ruminate or be revisited by what has come before, creates ghosts within the place that is the bound book.

Conversation is another central concern of the poem, though its conscious fragmentation, interruption, and placement in the unbroken river of the poem (usually without italics, quotation marks, or other markers) make it recognizable as such only within its flow. But this, too, is emblematic of conversation: not only do the people in the text talk, the text itself talks—and to itself.¹ In the mountain South, as Kathleen Stewart points out, “the sense of place is lodged in precise ways of attending to things. It begins and ends in an incessant compulsion to story things . . . It tracks along through an endless process of remembering, retelling, and imagining.”²

Wright echoes this impulse in an interview and speaks to her intent to tilt the familiar Southern current of narrative:

From my warren, people are talkers. . . . They like to tell a story, much more the case than in the city. Storytelling is mother tongue, mother’s milk of the American South. I always had the impulse. I just never knew how to tell a proper story. So I both deliberately subvert the story, and involuntarily subvert the story.³

Much of the talk placed in *Deepstep Come Shining* falls in a register familiar to me; it’s not usually written in a dialect that changes spellings, but particular phrasings and idioms are just as emblematic of the South as representing the accent would be. A sampling:

Where does this damn stupid thing go. For god’s sake. Are you sure you want to wear that.⁴

O lucky stars.⁵

Don’t park in the shade on my account.⁶

¹ See Wright’s note on composition in an interview: “I went forward to get through it and let pieces wheel around. Then the positioning. I put it on the wall in columns. I made the columns talk to one another” (“Trace of a Tale” 21).

² Stewart, “An Occupied Place” 140.

³ Interview with Paul Magee.

⁴ *Deepstep* 10.

⁵ *Ibid.* 13.

⁶ *Ibid.* 16.

If we let the windows down we can hear Cape Fear. Exhaust stink. Or is that Hog Waste Lagoon. Man alive, that's foul.¹

Where do you folks live at. Between the *a* and the *t*.²

This is my number one guitar.
I bought it in downtown Macon in 19 and 42.³

Let me put my arm up here.
Let me rove over to my good side now.⁴

These gourds are kindly expensive. But would you wont anythang that wasn't.⁵

These utterances are interspersed with all kinds of others. Baker catalogues just some of the poem's "verbal field" as follows: "fragments of car-talk and southern conversation," "jokes," "images of the natural world," "straightforward statements of fact," "surprising statements bearing ample voice and some relationship to fact," "plain, riddling, or profound philosophical aphorisms," "biblical and oracular voicings of doom or disclosure," "signs accompanied by commentary," and "prayers to powers beyond one-dimensional sight."⁶

The most explicitly ghostly of Wright's poetic techniques in *Deepstep Come Shining* is among these utterances: the seemingly irresistible drive to repeat phrasings and images, to create a spectral web of the same. As she writes later in *The Poet, the Lion*, "Some words should be said more than once for their effect, *river river*. Said once, it quickly shivers and stops. Seconded, it begins to flow."⁷ Attempting to map the poem's repetitions is overwhelming; it's nearly impossible to "catch" everything. This is not only because of the sheer number of overlapping repetitions but also because of the way they alter, subvert, and grow: between

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid. 23.

³ Ibid. 47.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 64.

⁶ Baker 226–227.

⁷ *The Poet, the Lion* 63.

My hands have changed. The fingers limber and lengthen.¹

and

My hands have changed. Deepstep baby. It's zero visibility. And the fish aren't biting.²

and

See this hand. See this. Come shining.
 The hand that peeled the bark from my birches. . . .
 That picked my bones (white). . . .
 That took me in deep (step by step).
 That prepared my colors.
 That picked my brain (clean).
 The hand that pulled my last Vidalia out of the garden and ate it dirt, bulb, and
 green.
 That spread itself out on my window.³

—between these, we begin to feel unsure, our awareness spread over so many pages. It's less of a repetition, here, and more of a thematic rhyme or echo. We don't know without tracking it how much is original utterance and how much is repeated; this mirrors the way we don't know exactly what is others' utterance (as listed in Wright's pagelong list of "Stimulants, Poultices, Goads" at the back of the book⁴) and what is Wright's. In relation to her repetitions and permutations of "Now do you know where you are" / "Now do you know where we are"⁵ and "I was there. I know" / "I remember. I was there,"⁶ Berner writes, "In effect, the only time and space the reader can be sure of occupying is the time and space of the poem itself."⁷

The endless, multi-threaded flow of repetition in the poem comes quickly to feel uncanny. As Freud describes this effect,

¹ *Deepstep* 32.

² *Ibid.* 61.

³ *Ibid.* 100.

⁴ *Ibid.* 109.

⁵ *Ibid.* 8, 22, 37, 89.

⁶ *Ibid.* 5, 25, 107.

⁷ Berner.

The factor of the repetition of the same thing . . . does undoubtedly, subject to certain conditions and combined with certain circumstances, arouse an uncanny feeling, which, furthermore, recalls the sense of helplessness experienced in some dream-states. . . . [I]t is only this factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of “chance.”¹

Though of course Wright’s placement of these repetitions isn’t “involuntary” (nor is our reading of it), in the flow of the text, it begins to feel that way, as if we as readers are being made to make connections. The ghosts recur in front of us; their afterimages overlap. The feeling of fate comes on, helped by recurring characters, like the boneman, who make charms and spells, as well as an interthreaded suite of repeated images.

Wright gives us these recurring images, uncanny in themselves for their relation to death and haunting, as a means of bringing us not to the place she was but rather to the place she creates by the poem. She gives Deepstep’s “shining,” light that seems both emanated and reflected; white bones; hands given agency, oddly changing. Every ten pages or so, she gives ghost hair—commonly compared to the lowlands’ hanging Spanish moss and explicitly connected to the death of Luster’s mother, possibly to the suicide of Wright’s friend Frank Stanford,² and to death at large:

Did you know a ghost has hair. A ghost has hair. That’s right.³

The silver threads of Spanish moss dripping from the telephone wires. It flies here. In pianolight. Like ghost hair.⁴

The white piano *is* her mother. And it fills with petals. Ghost hair. Who shot the piano. Killer the mother. And made the daughter to suffer.⁵

¹ Freud 236–237.

² See Baker 224.

³ *Deepstep* 8.

⁴ *Ibid.* 16.

⁵ *Ibid.* 22.

Ghost hair nestled in streamers across the strings.¹

Moss flew to the clotheslines on Ann Street on silver operatic wings.²

Ghosts have hair you know. It flies in on silver operatic wings.³

Some ghost hair flew into the room and collapsed over the lampshade.⁴

For I am the cipher in the story in which she robbed his grave of its voice and appears herself as an old angel. All that is there is the ghost of his breath. The hair of his ghost got caught up in my lines. In the night it flew here. It is the hair that makes it so mysterious.⁵

She gives mirrors reflecting each other, ourselves, death, prayer—recurring in passage after passage:

The boneman said he would take the blinded into the river. With a mirror. And then what.⁶

Take a mirror to the river. Then what.⁷

I said I had a mean streak. Whom do you meet in the mirror.⁸

I couldn't miss a mirror. I'd miss everything else. The whole chlorophylled sward.⁹

. . . baby spoon, mirror shards . . .¹⁰

Lead me to the river with your mirror.

Unwrap the sudarium from my face.

Lead me, guide me, to the faraway deep down. Then steal away in alligatorlight.¹¹

It is the hand that will lead me to the river. Lead me along your light-bearing paths. Do you leave the mirror in the river.¹²

¹ Ibid. 34.

² Ibid. 42.

³ Ibid. 52.

⁴ Ibid. 62.

⁵ Ibid. 78.

⁶ Ibid. 7.

⁷ Ibid. 23.

⁸ Ibid. 37.

⁹ Ibid. 38.

¹⁰ Ibid. 40.

¹¹ Ibid. 77.

¹² Ibid. 78.

And she gives us the title, *Deepstep Come Shining*, continually recurrent, repeating in “nineteen variations” by Baker’s count.¹ Literally, Deepstep is a town in rural Georgia; on another level, though, Baker argues that Deepstep

is a power that breaks through the closed, whether in ecstasy, in prayer, in conversation, in healing. . . . Deepstep, on another level, appears to be a sort of immanent god, an addressable light that touches a person, a power to shake a life. . . . Deepstep can be found anywhere. It comes with the depth of love, with the depth of seeing into the life of things. It comes, amid all the darks and griefs, where a life is awakened.”²

In these repetitions and permutations of “Deepstep” and “come shining,” we are unsure if we, as readers, are Deepstep, or if the figure is beyond us. I feel that Deepstep is a reminder of the immanent, some kind of God of the place Wright creates (and which echoes the South), as in “Deepstep, Baby. Deepstep”³ and “Deepstep now baby deepstep. Bear me along your light-bearing paths. Come shining.”⁴ I also feel that Deepstep is a mode of instruction to us—as in, set on its own, imperative to the reader, “Come shining.”⁵ Deepstep and the recurrences thereof ultimately conjure a tender ghost, a container for belief, a refulgence that reminds me of the watered air of the South: a shine as if off air-scattered, warm water.

I have to imagine that a map of all the repetitions (and permutations thereof) in *Deepstep Come Shining* would look laced like a first frost, or looped perhaps like the ghost hair, coating a page in a web. By the end, they’re pitched so high⁶ that they feel as if they’re slipping by you like telephone poles from the moving car, gone gone gone gone in a row. You could never catch them all in your hands. In this way, they mimic the experience of Wright’s journey itself and,

¹ Baker 235.

² Ibid.

³ *Deepstep* 7.

⁴ Ibid. 49.

⁵ Ibid. 16, 22, 41, 49, 100.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.* 37 (“Which is pitched higher crepe or crape”) and 77 (“Which is brighter g-r-a-y or g-r-e-y. Which is pitched higher”).

further, the experience of place. As I wrote in my introduction, true experience of place is not just seen or heard: it is fully embodied, and (per Edward S. Casey) the “vehicle of being-in-place is the *body*.”¹

Wright’s faithfulness to the conversant, multivalent, ghosted sound as well as sight of the “vernacular parts”² of the rural South evokes the sense of being-in-place more closely than the visual alone; as ethnomusicologist and anthropologist Steven Feld writes: “experiencing and knowing place—the idea of place as sensed, place as sensation—can proceed through a complex interplay of the auditory and the visual, as well as through other intersensory perceptual processes.”³ In addition, Wright’s emphasis on evoking the Southern tongue, voice, and story—not smoothed together but fragmentary and polyvocal, piecemeal and accumulative—helps to assemble place from its ghosted pieces.

The poem’s many voices allow it to be many things; its circled focus on love, death, and light crack open what a place can be as it creates a new one in its text. Reading the poem in full is an encompassing, embodied experience, a spell in the old-magic sense: “a roving and recalling and widening,” as Baker puts it.⁴ The people here are both true and created, all marked by Wright’s hand, all full of an implaced warmth:

There are enough signs. Of the lack of tenderness in the world. And yet. And yet.
All you have to do is ask. Anyone here can extol the virtues of an onion. Where to
get barbecue minced, pulled, or chopped. The hour of the day they have known
the thorn of love.⁵

In *Cooling Time*, Wright describes her home place, the South, as follows:

This landscape, its inhabitants, hew to used things, worn things, handmade things.
Hew to objects loved by the maker even if shot full of holes by the maker’s hand

¹ Casey, “Body, Self, and Landscape” 413.

² *Steal Away* 74.

³ Feld 98.

⁴ Baker 230.

⁵ *Deepstep* 29.

via the maker's eye: a riddled wooden deer made by hand to be a target, to be shot full of holes. Follow the wooden curve of this world.¹

Deepstep Come Shining is that made thing, and it was created to bear enough marks of place that we might experience it not as abstract, but as incarnate—a body itself.

¹ *Cooling Time* 102.

interlude: Sally Mann's Southern eye

And so in 1998, right after bluffing Virginia Farm Credit out of the loan for the farm, I set out on the first of my several trips down into Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

—Sally Mann¹



Deep South, Untitled (Scarred Tree), 1998²

¹ Mann, *Hold Still* 225.

² Mann et al. 119.

Profligate physical beauty is easy to find in the South, but what gins up the ecstasy is the right light, the resonant, beating heart of the light, unique to the South. . . . To whatever extent it is possible to photograph air, I was going to try to do it, and to whatever extent photographs can reveal the dark mysteries of a haunted landscape, I set out to make them.¹



Deep South, Untitled, published 2005²

¹ Mann, *Hold Still* 213.

² Mann, *Deep South* 25.

I was moving among shades, aware, always, of their presence. . . . One death in particular had haunted me since childhood, that of Emmett Till . . . On my way there, I traced the route his murderers had taken in his last hours, beginning with the fateful (and possibly apocryphal) wolf whistle in Money, Mississippi, passing along the Tallahatchie River, and winding up on a balmy, serenely yellowish afternoon at the very boat lock from which fourteen-year-old Emmett was heaved into the river, naked, blinded, beaten, a cotton gin fan lashed with barbed wire to his neck.¹



Deep South, Untitled (Bridge on Tallahatchie), 1998²

¹ Ibid. 234–237.

² Mann et al. 121.

When I was shooting with collodion, I wasn't just snapping a picture. I was fashioning, with fetishistic ceremony, an object whose ragged black edges gave it the appearance of having been torn from time itself.¹



Deep South, Untitled, published 2005²

¹ Mann, *Hold Still* 224.

² Mann, *Deep South* 69.

. . . we can only hope that the evocative Welsh word hiraeth will somehow be preserved. It means “distance pain,” and I know all about it: a yearning for the lost places of our past . . . it always refers to a near-umbilical attachment to a place, not just free-floating nostalgia or a droopy houndlike wistfulness or the longing we associate with romantic love. No, this is a word about the pain of loving a place.¹



Deep South, Untitled, published 2005²

¹ Mann, *Hold Still* 175.

² Mann, *Deep South* 9.

Chapter 5: “Yes, I’m always looking back // at my dead”:¹
 Body as Ghost in Tiana Clark’s “Soil Horizon”

There is always a word I’m chasing inside
 and outside of my body, a word inside another word²

I carry her for miles
 in my blood³

the ground is swollen with your name⁴

—*I Can’t Talk About the Trees Without the Blood*

Tiana Clark’s *I Can’t Talk About the Trees Without the Blood* (2018), her debut, is weighted by many kinds of ghosts: the sort that Avery F. Gordon argues “has a real presence and demands its due, your attention.”⁵ These are ghosts, of course, of the dead, but also of legacies that many, particularly in the South, deny or cover over: of Blackness, of biracial identity, of slavery, of the Civil War, of continued prejudice and hatred, of the weight placed on women’s bodies, of the maiden name,⁶ of pain itself. Many of these hauntings are inherited—“I am talking about the damage passed like a little gene,” Clark writes in “After *Amistad*”⁷—and many of Clark’s poems speak to these absences and forgettings. Notably, a series of poems called “Conversation with Phyllis Wheatley” allows Clark to imagine missing responses to Wheatley’s letters—some from herself and one, “#14,”⁸ from Obour Tanner, “Wheatley’s only known

¹ Clark, *I Can’t Talk* 49 (from “After *Orpheus*”). Throughout this section, references without an author specified refer to Clark’s work.

² Ibid. xiv (from “Nashville”).

³ Ibid. 91 (from “Freelove in Retrograde”).

⁴ Ibid. 34 (from “800 Days: Libation”).

⁵ Gordon xvi.

⁶ See “The Rime of Nina Simone”: “What the hell is your maiden name? she says. // Knight // Why did you change it? // Thought I was supposed to— / wanted to be married so damn bad / that I . . . I didn’t think about saving my name” (*I Can’t Talk* 66).

⁷ Ibid. 94.

⁸ Ibid. 21–23.

correspondent of African descent. Wheatley's letters are all that survived their seven-year correspondence (approximately 1771/72–1778).¹ The long poem “The Rime of Nina Simone”² is also a powerful animation of many phantoms: of Simone's ghost and Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, most obviously, but also of many texts woven through the poem (including Lorca's “Theory and Play of the Duende,” Edwards' “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Dickinson's “You cannot put a Fire out—,” and Hayden's “Middle Passage,” among others³) and ultimately of Black women's—and Clark's—pain and survival. The collection's title reverberates in this excerpt:

Because
 I listen to the trees
 humming through the poplar leaves
 and Southern magnolias. Bloated faces,
these beauteous forms, still swinging,
 limp pendulum, waxy bleach-white blooms,
 egg whites inside hardboiled eyes
 sway and rock, roll forward, fragrant.
 I'm ready to find the ruined churches.
 (*In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
 felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.*)
 I have a second stomach now. Now
 I can look at my dead and listen.
 Listen, I'm transcribing the soaked,
 splattered leaves— . . .
 I can't talk about the trees
 without the blood.⁴

¹ Ibid. 105n.

² Ibid. 51–68.

³ Ibid. 107n.

⁴ Ibid. 61–63.

Tiana Clark notes that *I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood* centers around both her “origin story in the South” and “survival”: “The seed of this collection,” she says, “is about poetry as a means of persistence, Black persistence: the extreme hyperbole of Black persistence itself, a tenacious ontological resolve, built and bred from struggle and resistance.”¹ Claire Oleson writes that Clark’s book is “part autobiography, part dialogue between a mottled history and a contemporary persona”;² by the collection’s end, it becomes clear that, while neither of these elements overshadows the other, they can’t be separated, either. As Oleson puts it, “no body exists without historical association and context in this world and, more specifically, this America which is anything but post-racial.”³ What Clark calls her “love-hate relationship” with the South⁴ is just this: the South is her history, her family home, her context—and also a source of unending pain and systemic violence. It is the contemporary poet’s duty, as Clark communicates throughout the book, to remember and re-create this context, particularly when others (often white Southerners) ignore the imprints left by both historical and contemporary Black bodies on the earth.

John Potts writes that the concept of recording ghosts using electronic means “partakes of the ancient mystical traditions of spirit of place and earth memory.”⁵ Clark’s poem “Soil Horizon” works within this vein, communicating an earth-deep memory that belies insistent white forgetting. The full poem is below:

¹ Interview with Dana Isokawa.

² Oleson.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Tiana Clark Reads Natasha Trethewey, with Kevin Young” 00:23:25–00:23:59.

⁵ Potts 89.

Soil Horizon

. . . the ghost of history lies down beside me,
rolls over, pins me beneath a heavy arm.

— *Natasha Trethewey*

My husband's mother wanted to take the family portrait
at Carnton Plantation. I was the only person she called to ask

if it was okay. She said *We could redeem the land with our picture—*
my brown skin acrostic to the row of their white. She said *Can't we*

just let the past be the past? I was silent, my cell phone glowing
warm against my cheek. I was driving, red light—then go. She said

It's practically in my backyard and that her boy splayed on buckled
fields of green graves growing up—*There are so many fun places to shoot!*

*Oh and that big magnolia is in bloom—*fragrant milky petals and waxy
greens by the red brick house, and the large front porch with rocking chairs

tipping back and forth above the purpled stains of Confederate blood. I
said it was fine as long as we weren't by the slave cabins, and she laughed

and I laughed, which is to say I wasn't joking at all. She kept saying:
redeem, as if to say, we'll make it acceptable: restore and atone, buy it

back, pay it off, *we'll redeem it*, she said again. Her voice swelling,
like she was singing, and as if we really could. . . .

How do we stand on the dead and smile? I carry so many black souls
in my skin, sometimes I swear it vibrates, like a tuning fork when struck.

~

*A staff officer wrote, "the wounded, in hundreds, were brought to [the house]
during the battle, and all the night after. And when the noble old house could
hold no more, the yard was appropriated until the wounded and dead filled that. . . ."*

~

The plantation was named after cairns, prophetic stones marking a mass
grave still speaking. How the body leaves its mark on wood—plum dark

and greasy from the shot stippled and amputated. My tongue was cut off
when she asked me again *Are you sure it's okay?* I was waiting at the red

light, my cell phone burned from the hot battery in my hand. Even the dark
layers of dirt must testify—how the Battle of Franklin turned the farmstead

to a field hospital, thousands of casualties during the war for states' rights
the brochure said, and now it's sold out for summer weddings with mint

juleps in sweating silver cups, cannon bursts from weekend reenactments,
and photo shoots for graduation, pregnant couples, and my new family.

~

It's raining. The photographer is snapping and directing us toward the daffodils,
the shutter opening and closing like a tiny guillotine—clicking.

I'm staring at the black eye, clutching my smile. Light drizzle turning my pressed
hair slowly back to curls, the water percolating—weathering its way down

to the bright green topsoil, fertile with the past: organic and holy, wet as Dixie
myth—mixing with iron, clay, aluminum, and revision—romancing the dirt

and undead, churning the silt in the subsoil, steeping further down—deep, deep
into the dark pocket of earth, to the parent material, layers of large unbroken rocks,

down to the antebellum base, the bedrock of Southern amnesia. *Can't we just let
the past be the past?* she said. Her voice swelling, like she was singing,
and as if we really could.

~

In the portrait, my husband is holding my hand—his hand that dug for bullets as a boy.¹

The poem's title—"Soil Horizon"—refers to the geological term, meaning "Any of
several layers in the soil which lie roughly parallel to the surface and are distinguishable by
differences in physical properties, as colour, texture, or structure, or in chemical reaction."² This

¹ *I Can't Talk* 13–15. Clark notes that the italicized excerpt is "from the Battle of Franklin Trust website" (ibid. 105n).

² "horizon, n."

relates to the different realities experienced by the speaker and by her husband's white family in the story related in the poem: they are parallel, but different in context and color. They are kept separate, but adjacent; they are smoothed beneath a surface—though the poem itself will uncover and point out their separations. The idea of the soil horizon also holds within it the general horizon, which serves in a landscape as a kind of boundary. But, unlike a true limit, Edward S. Casey writes, “the horizon does not merely close off the landscape; it opens it up for further exploration, that is, for bodily ingression.”¹ A horizon is something we want to see beyond, something we hold (or hope) to be permeable, breachable. In the same way, Clark allows ghosts of the land to rise through the poem.

The poem is arranged, for the most part, in cleanly separated couplets formed of long lines (most fifteen to twenty syllables each): like soil horizons themselves, separated by white space. The couplets hold a looping, slouched heaviness, as if to reenact in their weight the burden of history—and the expectation that the speaker should forget it, that “*We could redeem the land with our picture,*” as her mother-in-law says. The epigraph adds to this feeling of being trapped under a weight: with it, the lines themselves and what they contain become as Trethewey's “ghost of history.”

The poem is organized roughly from the past to the close present, with a detour to the further past of Carnton Plantation's history as a Civil War field hospital. In this ordering of time (which moves past → continual present → further past → past → continual present → present at the time of the photograph → even closer present, after the photograph is printed), Clark creates a stratigraphy of weight. The speaker's mother-in-law's choice of location (posed as a request) burdens the further past of the Civil War, which in turn burdens the present, placed below it in

¹ Casey, “Body, Self, and Landscape” 417.

our reading. We as readers are laden with it, too.

Carnton Plantation is south of Nashville, and as Clark writes, it served as a field hospital for the nearby Battle of Franklin, as well as a place of burial, during the Civil War. By noting the brochure's language, which refers to the "thousands of casualties during *the war for states' rights*" (emphasis mine), Clark refers to the revisionist history practiced by those who own and promote the place—as well as many others in the contemporary South, such as the speaker's mother-in-law, who asks, "*Can't we // just let the past be the past?*" Indeed, aside from the speaker's comment about not taking pictures "by the slave cabins," slavery isn't mentioned explicitly in the poem at all: just "buckled / fields of green graves," "Confederate blood," "the noble old house," the "plantation," "weekend reenactments," the "bullets" in the ground. We see only the white dead clearly. But we know better than to think that this place isn't haunted by the Black souls that inhabit the land—and the speaker, who says,

How do we stand on the dead and smile? I carry so many black souls
in my skin, sometimes I swear it vibrates, like a tuning fork when struck.

They are there, too, in the "dark pocket of earth," remembered by the soil if not by those who commodify it.

And commodify it they do. At present, the Battle of Franklin Trust's Carnton Plantation webpage begins, "Carnton was built in 1826 by former Nashville mayor Randal McGavock (1768–1843)."¹ In the main historical overview the Trust gives of the plantation, there is not a single mention of slavery—nor of the slaves who built the place. On the website's sidebar, there are pages listed for "Slavery in America" and "The Enslaved at Carter House & Carnton." While the former provides a fairly thorough, 1500-word overview of the horrific human rights abuses

¹ "Carnton: History."

and constitutional inconsistencies of the institution,¹ the latter contains no information at all: the page simply reads, “Coming soon.”² On every part of the website, though, the navigation bar prominently features a “Weddings” link.

The prominent attention paid to the white, Confederate dead of Carnton Plantation—and the simultaneous erasure of the lives and deaths of the slaves who built and maintained the place—recalls Michael Mayerfeld Bell’s point that most sites with any kind of history try “to summon up the ghosts of the place for tourists.”³ As he points out, “The ghosts of place are not only a matter of social sentiment, however. They are also commodities, and increasingly so.”⁴ Directly after recounting the horrors that took place there (“How the body leaves its mark on wood—plum dark // and greasy”; “thousands of casualties”), Clark highlights Carnton Plantation’s capitalist use of the sterilized history of its dead:

. . . now it’s sold out for summer weddings with mint

juleps in sweating silver cups, cannon bursts from weekend reenactments,
and photo shoots for graduation, pregnant couples, and my new family.

The juxtaposition between the marks of the body on the land and the ignorant Southern genre of the plantation party is stark—and yet unsurprising for the place, one marked by the Southern tradition of smoothing over the past for the comfort of its white inhabitants.

By Clark’s careful curation of accreting pain, the poem’s arc gains violence after violence. From the beginning, where the speaker’s “cell phone glow[s] / warm against” her cheek, the contrast between the South’s horrifying past and commodified present is carefully paced and placed into relief: Clark remarks that the speaker’s husband and his brothers “played

¹ “Slavery in America.”

² “The Enslaved at Carter House & Carnton.”

³ Mayerfeld Bell 828–829.

⁴ Ibid. 828.

on buckled / fields of green graves growing up”; notes the cannons and battle reenactments; recounts the mother-in-law’s darkly punning utterance, “*There are so many fun places to shoot!*”—which presages the turn toward violence within photography in the poem’s final two sections. These twists toward pain are often enacted by Clark’s line breaks. At one point, the speaker’s mother-in-law keeps saying

redeem, as if to say, we’ll make it acceptable: restore and atone, buy it
back, pay it off, *we’ll redeem it*, she said again.

—the break emphasizing the sense of buying not only the place but its pain, again using money to excuse the erasure of memory.

The penultimate section of the poem depicts further violence through the medium of photography: the camera’s “shutter opening and closing like a tiny guillotine,” the “black eye” of the camera staring back at the speaker. The whole section is in the present tense, using gerunds as if to emphasize the ongoing and continuous (that is, never resolved) present that is people’s ignorance of the bodies kept in the earth of the plantation. “It’s raining,” Clark begins, and the rain serves as a vehicle to bring the poem’s eye downward, its water first turning the speaker’s “pressed / hair slowly back to curls” and then “percolating—weathering its way down” through the grass. Thus begins the poem’s longest sentence, which spans four couplets and mimetically takes us further into the ground as the sentence progresses, line by line, through dashes and colons and connective clauses: first the topsoil, then the line-broken “Dixie / myth,” the “dirt // and undead,” the “subsoil,” and even further down—

. . . deep, deep
into the dark pocket of earth, to the parent material, layers of large unbroken
rocks,
down to the antebellum base, the bedrock of Southern amnesia.

This amnesia is then underlined by a repetition of the speaker's mother-in-law's obtuse plea from the beginning: "*Can't we just let / the past be the past?*"

The answer to her question, silence at the poem's beginning, is by the end the family portrait and the final image of the poem: the speaker's Black hand in her husband's white one, "his hand that dug for bullets as a boy." The hand, with its twin powers for tenderness and violence; the violence encoded within even her husband's white body. The poem does not give easy answers to either the solidified soil histories of bodies in the earth or the willful ignorance that allows white Southerners to forget that their ancestors fought to preserve an institution that allowed the wealthy to own Black bodies.

But as Clark's collection progresses, it does offer a kind of hope. *I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood* is organized in three sections, named "I Can't Talk," "About the Trees," and "Without the Blood." Clark notes that the "triad structure helped to define the themes and movements of each section and to guide the flow of the book."¹ "Soil Horizon" appears in "I Can't Talk," which addresses unanswerable silence, violence, and pain to a greater degree than the other sections. By the final section, some sense of hope is presented in the form of individual difference, knowledge, and understanding. In the poem "I Started Praying for You," in which the speaker recounts first wanting to marry her current husband, their hands meet at an individual and intensely tender place:

What is God to us now?
We stopped going
to church. In bed

our hands still
find each other
to send up

¹ Interview with Dana Isokawa.

prayers like we
did that first night—
when I touched

the aching thing
inside the dip
of your chest.¹

¹ *I Can't Talk* 92–93.

interlude: Sally Mann's battleground photographs

... the whole question changed from "what does the earth do to a dead body?" to "what does a dead body do to the earth?"

—Sally Mann¹



Battlefields, Antietam (Starry Night), 2001²

¹ Jones.

² Mann et al. 151.

I would never be free of the memory of what happened there. But would a stranger, coming upon it, say, a century later, somehow sense the sad, lost secret of the place, the sanctity of this death-inflected soil? . . . does the earth remember? Do these fields, upon which unspeakable carnage occurred, where unknowable numbers of bodies are buried, bear witness in some way?¹



Battlefields, Antietam (Cornfield), 2001²

¹ Mann, *Hold Still* 410–411.

² Mann et al. 147.

Seeking not what was seen but what was invisible and felt—those intangible and ineffable traces of emotions and experiences that linger in the land—she used riptides of collodion in several as if to suggest . . . the pain forever exuding from these tormented places. . . she added texture and grit by coating them with a varnish made from diatomaceous earth . . . These works thus mimic the cyclical nature of life itself, echo the funeral service in the Book of Common Prayer—earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust—and are composed of the very soil they depict.

—Sarah Greenough¹



Battlefields, Cold Harbor (Battle), 2003²

¹ Ibid. 45.

² Ibid. 153.

Mann's landscapes are indeed challenging. They deliberately transcend the convention of photography as a record of observable reality, on the one hand eliding forms and withholding information, on the other transfiguring ordinary objects into highly suggestive presences. . . . What Mann has realized . . . is that the most effective method for conveying the emotional resonance of places (in the case of Last Measure, those hallowed by human sacrifice) may just be to obscure vision and limit clarity, to hint and use a sidelong glance—as if looked on straight on, the magnitude of feeling represented by these sites would evaporate, leaving us only with the peaceful, even mundane, experience afforded by historic battlefields seen in the present. The deep shadows and rich atmosphere that make these images hard to read also draw the viewer in, inviting imagination to project into places where time seems estranged from the normal flow and the uncertainties of sight and memory are materialized in deeply embodied visions of the land.

—John B. Ravenal¹



*Battlefields, Antietam (Trenches), 2001*²

¹ Mann, *The Flesh and the Spirit* 55.

² Mann et al. 157.

Chapter 6: “I back off, and the face stays”:¹
 Self as Ghost in Charles Wright’s *Southern Cross* Self-Portraits

Each year the dead grow less dead, and nudge
 Close to the surface of all things.²

Mothers and fathers and places we hurried through in the night:
 I put my mouth to the dust and sing their song.³

Here is the truth. The wind rose, the sea
 Shuffled its blue deck and dealt you a hand:
 Blank, blank, blank, blank, blank.⁴

*Remember me, speak my name.*⁵

—*The Southern Cross*

A poet of the dead as well as of the South, Charles Wright’s work is well-versed in the ghost. In his earlier work, particularly in *Bloodlines* (1975), he often invokes familial specters, as in “Delta Traveller,” dedicated to his mother’s memory:

I lie down with you, I rise up with you.
 If a grain turns in my eye,
 I know it is you, entering, leaving,
 Your name like a lozenge upon my tongue. . . .

And so with the dead, the rock dead and the dust:
 Worm and worm-fill, pearl, milk-eye
 And light in the earth, the dead are brought
 Back to us, piece by piece—
 Under the sponged log, inside the stump,
 They shine with their secret lives, and grow
 Big with their messages, wings
 Beginning to stir, paths fixed and hearts clocked,
 Rising and falling back and rising.⁶

¹ Charles Wright, *Country Music* 108 (from “Rural Route,” in *Bloodlines*). Throughout this section, references without an author specified refer to Charles Wright’s work.

² *The Southern Cross* 4 (from “Homage to Paul Cézanne”).

³ *Ibid.* 31 (from “Driving Through Tennessee”).

⁴ *Ibid.* 53 (from “The Southern Cross”).

⁵ *Ibid.* 5 (from “Homage to Paul Cézanne”).

⁶ *Country Music* 79–81.

The Southern Cross (1981) marks a shift, both structural and thematic, in Wright's poetry. Many of its ghosts are still of Wright's family lineage (particularly in "Virginia Reel," "Driving through Tennessee," and "The Southern Cross"¹). Others, however, evoke remoter ghosts—as in "Homage to Paul Cézanne,"² which gathers a more abstracted assembly of spirits—or, conversely, closer ones, as in the scattering of self-portraiture throughout the collection. Wright did compose explicit self-portraits in his earlier work, including "Self-Portrait in 2035" from *China Trace* (1977), which imagines his buried corpse in the third person:

The root becomes him, the road ruts
That are sift and grain in the powderlight
Recast him, sink bone in him,
Blanket and creep up, fine, fine . . .³

However, in addition to "Portrait of the Artist with Hart Crane" and "Portrait of the Artist with Li Po,"⁴ which Wright intended "to be portraits with people I could not ever have been with,"⁵ the sequence of five poems titled "Self-Portrait" in *The Southern Cross* marks a clear attention to the mode itself.

Intimated in any autobiographical art form is the paradoxical transfer of private truth to public format. William Howarth compares works of literary autobiography to painted self-portraits, whose instability and partial presentation he describes:

No longer distinctly separate, the artist-model must alternately pose and paint. He *composes* the composition, in both senses of that verb . . . In a mirror he studies reversed images, familiar to himself but not to others. . . . The image resists visual analysis; as he moves to paint a hand, the hand must also move. The image is also complete, and entirely superficial; yet he must begin with the invisible, with lines more raw than bone or flesh, building volume and tone, sketch and underpaint, into a finished replica of himself. So he works from memory as well as sight, in

¹ *The Southern Cross* 20–21, 31, and 49–65.

² *Ibid.* 3–10.

³ *Country Music* 113.

⁴ *The Southern Cross* 38–39.

⁵ *Half-life* 144.

two levels of time, on two planes of space, while reaching for those other dimensions, depth and the future.¹

Implicit in any self-portrait, James McCorkle writes, are “the dynamic energies of repression, selection, and revelation,” as well as “the provisionality and fragmentation of self and narrative.”² In layering the disjunction of time over the instability of self, a self-portrait is a haunted form—and a poetic enactment of it even more so. The speaker we see is constructed by the poet we cannot, yet the poet is present everywhere in the rendering.

Wright’s self-portraits take advantage of this inherent splintering to enact a goal he stated in a 1981 interview: “to somehow merge the physical and the interior landscapes that we all have in our lives.”³ In his *Quarter Notes* commonplace book, he writes, “The past is the one mirror that never releases its images. Layer and overlay, year after year, wherever you look, however you look, whenever you look, it’s always your own face you see there. All those years, and it’s still your own face.”⁴ This lasting self, however, can be folded into the landscape to create a kind of post-romantic halfway point between the dissolution and assertion of the individual, a contrast Wright sets between Keatsian “negative capability” on one hand and Wordsworthian “egotistical sublime” on the other. As he writes in his *Halflife* commonplace book: “In our time, surely some fusion has occurred, some kind of Egotistical Capability, where the ‘I’ both is the speaker per se and is, to a lesser degree, subsumed in the landscape. Or a Negative Sublime.”⁵ It’s an idea he picks up again in “A Journal of the Year of the Ox,” from *Zone Journals* (1988): “I find myself in my own image, and am neither and both.”⁶

¹ Howarth 364; emphasis in text.

² McCorkle 157.

³ *Halflife* 103.

⁴ *Quarter Notes* 83.

⁵ *Halflife* 34.

⁶ *The World of the Ten Thousand Things* 168.

Wright's five self-portraits alternate with four other poems¹ in Part Two of *The Southern Cross*. Each self-portrait is below, in the same order as in the book:

Self-Portrait [1]

Someday they'll find me out, and my lavish hands,
 Full moon at my back, fog groping the gone horizon, the edge
 Of the continent scored in yellow, expectant lights,
 White shoulders of surf, a wolf-colored sand,
 The ashes and bits of char that will clear my name.

Till then, I'll hum to myself and settle the whereabouts.
 Jade plants and oleander float in a shine.
 The leaves of the pepper tree turn green.
 My features are sketched with black ink in a slow drag through the sky,
 Waiting to be filled in.

Hand that lifted me once, lift me again,
 Sort me and flesh me out, fix my eyes.
 From the mulch and the undergrowth, protect me and pass me on.
 From my own words and my certainties,
 From the rose and the easy cheek, deliver me, pass me on.²

Self-Portrait [2]

Charles on the Trevisan, night bridge
 To the crystal, infinite alphabet of his past.
 Charles on the San Trovaso, earmarked,
 Holding the pages of a thrown-away book, dinghy the color of honey
 Under the pine boughs, the water east-flowing.

The wind will edit him soon enough,
 And squander his broken chords
in tiny striations above the air,
 No slatch in the undertow.
 The sunlight will bear him out,
 Giving him breathing room, and a place to lie.

¹ That is, "Mount Caribou at Night" (*The Southern Cross* 14), "Holy Thursday" (16–18), "Virginia Reel" (20–21), and "Called Back" (23).

² *The Southern Cross* 13.

And why not? The reindeer still file through the bronchial trees,
 Holding their heads high.
 The mosses still turn, the broomstraws flash on and off.
 Inside, in the crosslight, and St. Jerome
 And his creatures . . . St. Augustine, striking the words out.¹

Self-Portrait [3]

The pictures in the air have few visitors.

Sun drops past tie-post in the east shallows,
 Moon rises to camera range. Over the zodiac,
 The numbers and definitions arc,
 Hiwassee at low tide, my brother one step up the cleared slope.

Winter on top of the Matterhorn,
 Sun-goggled, standing the way our father stood, hands half in his pockets.
 Behind him, the summer Alps
 Fall down and away, little hillocks of white on the noon sky
 Hiding their crosses, keeping the story straight.

Like Munch, I languish, my left cheek in my left palm,
 Omniscient above the bay,
 Checking the evidence, the postcards and the photographs,
 O'Grady's finger pointing me out . . .

Madonna of tenderness, Lady of Feints and Xs, you point too.²

Self-Portrait [4]

Marostica, Val di Ser. Bassano del Grappa.
 Madonna del Orto. San Giorgio, arc and stone.
 The foothills above the Piave.

Places and things that caught my eye, Walt,
 In Italy. On foot, Great Cataloguer, some 20-odd years ago.

San Zeno and Caffé Dante. Catullus' seat.
 Lake Garda. The Adige at Ponte Pietra
 —I still walk there, a shimmer across the bridge on hot days,
 The dust, for a little while, lying lightly along my sleeve—
 Piazza Erbe, the 12 Apostles . . .

¹ Ibid. 15.

² Ibid. 19.

Over the grave of John Keats
 The winter night comes down, her black habit starless and edged with ice,
 Pure breaths of those who are rising from the dead.

Dino Campana, Arthur Rimbaud.
 Hart Crane and Emily Dickinson. *The Black Chateau*.¹

Self-Portrait [5]

In Murray, Kentucky I lay once
 On my side, the ghost-weight of a past life in my arms.
 A life not mine. I knew she was there,
 Asking for nothing, heavy as bad luck, still waiting to rise.
 I know now and I lift her.

Evening becomes us.
 I see myself in a tight dissolve, and answer to no one.
 Self-traitor, I smuggle in
 The spider love, undoer and rearranger of all things.
 Angel of Mercy, strip me down.

This world is a little place,
 Just red in the sky before the sun rises.
 Hold hands, hold hands
 That when the birds start, none of us is missing.
 Hold hands, hold hands.²

The series of self-portraits enacts a paradox of consistent fragmentation: the self constant, its features and presentation inconstant. The basic formal regularity in the poems' uniform fifteen lines—a length which not only recalls Wright's "Tattoos" sequence, as McCorkle remarks³ (and its interest in memory as mark-maker on the present poet), but also creates symmetry within the series of five self-portraits—is placed in direct contrast with their structural rejection of boundary. The lines range in length from four to eighteen syllables, the particularly long ones

¹ Ibid. 22.

² Ibid. 24.

³ McCorkle 159. "Tattoos" originally appeared in *Bloodlines* (1975) and is reprinted in *Country Music* 56–76.

drawing attention to themselves as exploring, per McCorkle, “the edge, the frame, and the boundary of self, language, and page.”¹ In four instances, the line length exceeds the margins of the printed page,² creating a direct contrast with lines as short as “Evening becomes us” and “Hold hands, hold hands” in the fifth self-portrait. Too, our sense of time is continually shifted both within and between the self-portrait poems—from future tense in the first ten lines of the first self-portrait to present tense in its final five lines; from the past of “20-odd years ago” in the fourth self-portrait to the present-tense “—I still walk there.” As time shifts, so too does place, though the places remain close to Wright’s chest: to name a few, we’re in southern California, where Wright wrote these poems; in Italy; in the Alps; in Murray, Kentucky.³ In accumulation, these knots of steadiness and fragmentation create “an assurance of presence and memory in spite of the fragmentation and dispersal of the idea of the author,”⁴ as McCorkle puts it; they pull echoes across the poems and create an oblique, yet somehow basically clear, portrait of the poet. As Wright remarks in an interview with David St. John, Francis Bacon’s series of fragmented self-portraits are an influence on his own series:

Francis Bacon has done a series of self-portraits (3–4 in a series) in which the image is broken down and distorted a little more in each succeeding picture, all the while retaining the central focus and outline of the picture as a whole and as a composite. If brushstrokes and brushwork can be equated, in this case, with language, and form can still be considered form, then I’m after something like this.⁵

After Bacon’s example, Wright’s self-portraits emphasize the simultaneous stability and instability of the self across time and place. The first and fifth self-portraits seem to enfold or

¹ McCorkle 159.

² See line 9 of the first self-portrait, line 4 of the second, line 7 of the third, and line 12 of the fourth, all of which had to be dropped down in *The Southern Cross*’ original publication.

³ See the jade, oleander, and pepper tree of the first self-portrait; the second and fourth self-portraits; the third self-portrait; and the fifth self-portrait, respectively.

⁴ McCorkle 162.

⁵ *Wright: A Profile* 43, qtd. in Denham 97.

frame the whole section by their shared dream-logic and liturgical resonance, which I'll return to in a moment. I'll begin my discussion with the second, third, and fourth self-portraits, which work in modes of accumulation and association that mirror the construction of self over time and memory.

The Southern Cross begins with a dedication: "FOR H. W. WILKINSON." In his 1989 *Paris Review* interview with J. D. McClatchy, Wright explains the name's provenance:

Near the desk, at the end of a daybed, is what looks like an old tin footlocker. Stencilled on the front of it is the name H. W. Wilkinson. It rings a bell.

INTERVIEWER

May I ask what you keep in the box?

CHARLES WRIGHT

Of course. Family things, mostly. Old letters, land grant deeds in Arkansas, a couple of family trees. That sort of stuff. . . . The whole lot was in a bottom drawer of my father's desk when he died and I've just rather unceremoniously stuck it in this tin box I bought in an antique shop in California. Family letters in almost indecipherable hands from the mid-1800s in Arkansas, a couple of documents from a great-aunt of mine tracing the family lines on my father's side, from Maryland to Virginia to Tennessee and finally to Arkansas. A lock of Robert E. Lee's hair, if you can believe that! . . .

INTERVIEWER

Now I remember. You dedicated *The Southern Cross* to the same mysterious H. W. Wilkinson whose name is stenciled on that tin locker. It's meant, then—that dedication—as a gesture to your past? This trunk is really a sort of voice-box, a memory and a throat for the past. . . .

CHARLES WRIGHT

Mr. Wilkinson is as mysterious to me as he is to you. His name was on the box when I bought it, and that's all I know about him. *The Southern Cross* was dedicated to the box, actually, as you surmise, and not to Mr. Wilkinson per se: he's just a stand-in for a catch-all, if such a thing is possible. A voice-box is a nice way to put it, although it's been more so in the past than it is now. . . . But, as you say, the real gesture was to my past, a way of letting those speak whose voices are too faint to hear.¹

¹ Interview with J. D. McClatchy 187–189.

The Southern Cross is also preceded by an epigraph in Italian, an excerpt from Dante's *Purgatorio*, translated below by Allen Mandelbaum:

Now he had bent to kiss my teacher's feet,
 but Virgil told him: "Brother, there's no need—
 you are a shade, a shade is what you see."
 And, rising, he, "Now you can understand
 how much love burns in me for you, when I
 forget our insubstantiality,
 treating the shades as one treats solid things."¹

The front matter of *The Southern Cross* serves to state Wright's goals for the book—to honor the dead, to "gesture" to his past, to treat "the shades as one treats solid things." These goals are especially prevalent in Wright's second, third, and fourth self-portraits. By allowing various voices and items to speak and resonate in these three poems, rather than working in a more traditional self-portrait modality, Wright shows the self as an accumulated residue of the past: of both personal and inherited experience.

Indeed, Willard Spiegelman frequently notes the absence of the *person* of the poet—if not his imprints—in each of these three self-portraits. Regarding the second, he writes, "the poet in the present is the *hardest* thing to see. He seems to bracket himself in the blank space";² the third "does not even mention the poet until its third stanza, as if getting to him randomly in a list of other people."³ These two self-portraits alienate us from their subject by placing us within the position of the poet: we see "Charles" in the third person in the second self-portrait, as if within a memory kept in the self; in the third, we see the poet both in memory and, later, at the time of the self-portrait's composition, "[c]hecking the evidence"—a doubling movement, seeing him in two times and two roles (that is, portraitist and subject) at once.

¹ Alighieri, Canto XXI, ll. 130–136.

² Spiegelman 175.

³ Ibid. 176.

Both the second and third self-portraits enact an associative movement through places: in the second, we begin in a Venice of memory—“on the Trevisan,” “on the San Trovaso, earmarked”—and in the third, we move in the same sentence, a dreamlike stepping-over, from “Hiwassee at low tide” (presumably the Hiwassee River of Wright’s childhood in Tennessee, or the lake made by its dam) to the “summer Alps,” places linked by the presence of Wright’s brother above the speaker’s vantage: “my brother one step up the cleared slope” and “on top of the Matterhorn.” In both poems, we then drop quickly to remnants of a “collectable past,”¹ made of postcards, pictures, and memories in the present: in the second self-portrait, images of reindeer and saints which Spiegelman confirmed with Wright are “in the form of postcards that hang above his desk, one from Finland, two from Venice reproducing Carpaccio’s figures of the church fathers”;² in the third, the poet himself moving over “the postcards and the photographs.”

Both self-portraits also give images of death and dissolution: in the second,

The wind will edit him soon enough,
 And squander his broken chords
in tiny striations above the air,
 No slatch in the undertow.
 The sunlight will bear him out,
 Giving him breathing room, and a place to lie.

(The above also marks the only appearance of Wright’s now-signature dropped line in these five self-portraits, giving what Wright calls “the energy of absence”³ to this image of the poet’s dissociated, third-person death.) In the third self-portrait, we move quickly from “the summer Alps, / Fall[ing] down and away” through the image of the poet himself composing the portrait,

. . . my left cheek in my left palm,
 Omniscient above the bay,
 Checking the evidence, the postcards and the photographs,
 O’Grady’s finger pointing me out . . .

¹ Ibid. 175.

² Ibid.

³ *Quarter Notes* 173.

Madonna of Tenderness, Lady of Feints and Xs, you point too.

This is the Eastern Orthodox *Eleusa* icon of tenderness, in which the infant Jesus Christ is pressed against the Virgin Mary's cheek,¹ here used for "Feints and Xs": blows and removals, losses in the life of the poet.

The fourth self-portrait is largely devoted to a catalogue of Wright's memory-landscape of one important site,

Places and things that caught my eye, Walt,
In Italy. On foot, Great Cataloguer, some 20-odd years ago.

Spiegelman writes that this self-portrait gives (in a similar vein to its neighbors) "[p]hrases instead of clauses, names instead of actions, places instead of people, moments instead of extended linear narratives: thus Wright begins to locate himself amid flashes, collected and set aside like candid snapshots in an album."² In this piece, which Spiegelman marks as "emblematic of Wright's newer methods of painting a self into a poem by largely ignoring it," "the first-person self makes the briefest appearance . . . And then it vanishes from the poem."³ Indeed, the fourth self-portrait includes only a few spare references to the self: two *mys*, one *I*. One of these references to the self places its past in the present: "—I still walk there," Wright writes, before again moving away from the depiction of the self and into the list of its perceptions and memories. This, too, is a mode of self-portraiture: we aren't looking *at* the poet. Rather, we are looking *with* him at a significant part of his past. In this time, McCorkle writes, "The place has hardened into the minim of the name . . . They are signposts, directions, signals of the eye-I's travels."⁴ The poem serves as a series of personal symbols. Of course, these places

¹ Denham 94.

² Spiegelman 176.

³ Ibid. 176–177.

⁴ McCorkle 160.

exist in the world we share with Wright, but we can't access them in the way he can: and so this poem marks self-portraiture as a personal endeavor, meant primarily to define the self to the self rather than to onlookers—or, rather, to convey to us the sense of inaccessible and subterranean meaning, what Wright describes elsewhere as the “subnarrative”¹ of his own life.

The final two lines of the fourth self-portrait read:

Dino Campana, Arthur Rimbaud.
Hart Crane and Emily Dickinson. The Black Chateau.

Spiegelman dismisses these lines, writing that the poem here “retreats into the randomness of naming.”² However, the importance of these five personae to Wright is clear and carefully chosen. In 1984, he will publish a volume of translations of Dino Campana’s poems;³ Rimbaud and Crane are two of his favorite poets;⁴ and the Black Chateau most likely refers to *Mont Sainte-Victoire and Château Noir* (ca. 1904–1906) by Paul Cézanne,⁵ who is a touchstone for Wright’s method of writing associative poetry as if slipping brushstroke over brushstroke in a painting. Dickinson, too, holds a singular place of honor: in *Halflife*, Wright writes that “Emily Dickinson is the only writer I’ve ever read who knows my name.”⁶ In his 1981 interview with Sherod Santos, Wright remarks specifically on these final two lines:

The reason those five are there is because it was a poem about landscapes. It was a poem enumerating landscapes that I had loved in my life. Then, when it ends on people, they become landscapes that I have loved in my life. Landscapes that have nourished me, landscapes that I have walked through, landscapes that have remained with me. Their works are landscapes. They become objects in my life and not just somebody I read. They become part of the landscapes that mold me into who I am.⁷

¹ Interview with J. D. McClatchy 216. Also described as “non-surface narrative” (ibid. 215), “subterranean . . . nonnarrative” (*Halflife* 140–141), etc.

² Spiegelman 177.

³ Campana.

⁴ *Halflife* 104–105, 119.

⁵ Denham 96.

⁶ *Halflife* 54.

⁷ Ibid. 104.

The dead and the art of those dead he has loved *are* a landscape, to Wright: a physical sort of past that he moves through, as much so as any view apprehended with the eye. They mark a pervasive horizon of the self. Just as the Trevisan in Venice serves in the second self-portrait as a “night bridge / To the crystal, infinite alphabet of his past,” these names bridge Wright to home and to a way of thinking and being that rhymes with it.

While the second, third, and fourth self-portraits recall the past as a way of marking the present and future, the first and fifth self-portraits feel as if they do the opposite: they bring the future to bear on the present, creating the fragmentary self both forward and backward in time. Spiegelman argues that all of Wright’s self-portraits are marked by the “desire to be delivered, whether by God, ancestors, progeny, readers, or unnamed spiritual forces that will shape his ends”;¹ I feel that most in these two. Both work with a similar structure: fifteen lines, as all the self-portraits are, but cleanly broken into three five-line stanzas. Spiegelman writes that, in the first self-portrait, the first stanza marks “a realization of discovery . . . and death”—remarkably, in the future tense—, the second “an accommodation in the present,” and the third “an invocation.”² The same structure applies to the fifth self-portrait, which begins with a memory shading into present-tense recognition, moves to an abstract imagining of the self (“I see myself in a tight dissolve,” Wright says, and the fantasy of this envisioning is layered on top of the present tense), and ends with a sort of prayer. In a 1976 interview, five years before the publication of *The Southern Cross*, this structure is on Wright’s mind: “I feel comfortable at fifteen lines or thereabouts,” he says, and goes on to say that a three-stanza structure allows the poet to “present something in the first, work around with it a bit in the second, and then release

¹ Spiegelman 176.

² Ibid. 174–175.

it, refute it, untie it, set fire to it, whatever you want to, in the third.”¹

These two self-portraits express a tender closeness to the dissolution and deliverance—in plain terms, death—of the self and are emblems of what Julian Gitzen calls “Wright’s bond with the dead.”² (As Wright says in 1985 about the composition of “Homage to Paul Cézanne,” the dead are “the most tactile abstract thing I could think of.”³) Conversely, McCorkle argues that the end of the first portrait is in fact a departure from the idea of death: “Movement, synonymous with transformation,” he writes, “rescues the poet from stasis and death.”⁴ However, McCorkle seems to take death as a static and negative concept, whereas Wright himself clearly does not. The poem’s very first line—“Someday they’ll find me out, and my lavish hands”—indicates waiting for a thing to come, and the first line of the second stanza (“Till then, I’ll hum to myself and settle the whereabouts”) amounts to twiddling one’s thumbs, waiting for death—“[w]aiting to be filled in,” as the poet’s “sketched” features in the sky. In Wright’s cosmos, death, signaled by “ashes and bits of char,” “will clear my name” (stanza 1); in the final stanza, he presents the deliverance “[f]rom my own words and my certainties” as a positive clearing-out, a shift away from the earthly concerns of the owned name, its false certainty. Indeed, this kind of death *is* the transformation McCorkle sees as its opposite, a metamorphosis in the passing.

In both the first and the fifth self-portraits, the hand is presented as a symbol both of this transformative death and of an ultimate, even human, connection implicit within it. The final stanza of the first self-portrait reads:

¹ *Halflife* 72.

² Gitzen 195.

³ *Halflife* 155.

⁴ McCorkle 161.

Hand that lifted me once, lift me again,
 Sort me and flesh me out, fix my eyes.
 From the mulch and the undergrowth, protect me and pass me on.
 From my own words and my certainties,
 From the rose and the easy cheek, deliver me, pass me on.

—and of the fifth:

This world is a little place,
 Just red in the sky before the sun rises.
 Hold hands, hold hands
 That when the birds start, none of us is missing.
 Hold hands, hold hands.

These uses of the hand—as lifter of the self, sorter, flesher-out, deliverer, agent of connection—

recall the hand in a poem from *Hard Freight* (1973):

Primogeniture

The door to the book is closed;
 The window which gives on the turned earth is closed;
 The highway is closed;
 Closed, too, are the waters, their lips sealed;
 The door to the grass is closed.

Only the chute stays open,
 The ruined chute, entering heaven—
 Toehold and handhold, like an accident,
 The rain like mosquitoes inside your hair,
 You stall still, you suffer it not.

—Rose of the afterlife, black mulch we breathe,
 Devolve and restore, raise up:
 Fireblight and dead bud; rust; spot;
 Sore skin and shot hole:
 Rechannel these tissues, hold these hands.¹

The “[r]ose of the afterlife” and the “mulch,” too, recur in the final stanza of the first self-portrait. These images and others—the rose; the hand; the mulch; the world and our small ways

¹ *Country Music* 44.

of moving, connecting, growing, and dying in it—are pieces of Wright’s cosmology, pieces of belief in, if not a specific afterlife, a meaning and ultimate significance in both life and death.

In addition, all three of these final stanzas—in their plain, liturgical rhythms and heavy use of anaphora—recall the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*. Wright, who attended an Episcopal boarding school in North Carolina,¹ must be familiar with the text, as I am from my own religious upbringing; part of the reason I think I return over and over to Wright’s self-portraits is that they seem to me like psalms, or a replacement for psalms in which I no longer believe. Wright’s poems echo excerpts from Psalm 51, given for mornings’ “daily devotion” and expressing a similar wish for deliverance and ultimate meaning:

Open my lips, O Lord,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence
and take not your holy Spirit from me.
Give me the joy of your saving help again
and sustain me with your bountiful spirit.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.²

Psalm 31—given for Compline—sounds particularly similar to the first self-portrait in its verbs (“deliver me” especially, which appears in both), use of the hands as an image of safety and close solace, and quiet plea for spiritual salvation:

Psalm 31 *In te, Domine, speravi*

In you, O LORD, have I taken refuge,
let me never be put to shame:
deliver me in your righteousness.

Incline your ear to me;
make haste to deliver me.

¹ *Half-life* 59.

² The Episcopal Church 137.

Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,
 for you are my crag and my stronghold;
 for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me.

Take me out of the net that they have secretly set for me,
 for you are my tower of strength.

Into your hands I commend my spirit,
 for you have redeemed me,
 O LORD, O God of truth.¹

Though all of Wright's sequence of self-portraits share this sense of seeking for protection or salvation from an abstracted higher power, their rootedness in place—in Italy, Tennessee, Kentucky, California, the Alps—and in the haunting and constant mutability of the self give them a fragmentary solidity. They are ghosts of the self before salvation; they are ghosts of the self during it; they are ghosts of the self after. And they are ghosts of the self here on earth. Yes, we move all the way up to the “spider love, undoer and rearranger of all things” and the plea “Angel of Mercy, strip me down” in the fifth self-portrait—but then we return to earth, the world that is “a little place,” given the manageable scale and human ghostedness of place, upon which all we can do is “[h]old hands, hold hands” in bodily prayer.

In my introduction to this essay, I mentioned Michael Mayerfeld Bell's concept of place as space that is “personed,”² made human. Just as we see places haunted by other people—in all times, from past to future—we can also see them haunted by our selves. Mayerfeld Bell writes, “The ghosts we sense in places . . . may also include our own ghost, the ghost or ghosts of our own past lives.”³ In Wright's self-portrait sequence, the self is given as a ghost to the many places that have made it by way of the medium of language, which Wright describes as pre-elegiac, almost, close to salvation and death both:

¹ Ibid. 129.

² Mayerfeld Bell 813.

³ Ibid. 823.

Language is the element of definition, the defining and descriptive incantation. It puts the coin between our teeth. It whistles the boat up. It shows us the city of light across the water. Without language there is no poetry, without poetry there's just talk.¹

In this creation of the self in place through language, the relationship circles, becoming reciprocal: the haunting self ultimately makes the place real.

In helping to create the hyperspecific places of memory, Wright's self-portraits also recall humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's concepts of the places of *cosmos* and *hearth*: "Hearth offers security," Tuan writes, and "cosmos adventure."² In the scale of the hearth—a place that corresponds to the body and the past—Tuan argues that

one's identity . . . is not an effect of personal struggle and definition; rather, one is born into it and raised to have it. Identity is bestowed by one's kin and neighbors and by material objects that one's ancestors, rather than oneself, have made. If, for some reason, one's sense of self dims, one can simply rekindle it by foraging in the attic.³

Wright has access to this hearth in his H. W. Wilkinson trunk, of course, and in his memory of personal and familial place. The "binding powers of hearth are nearly inexorable," Tuan says:⁴ the way of defining ourselves by what we have been, what our lineage has given us. But Tuan notes that identity gained through moving out from the home place—to the cosmos, associated with the mind and the future—rewards further: "identity gained through adventure in the cosmos requires effort, individual or group; and it is effort with no guarantee of success. . . . If, however, one *is* successful, a strong sense of self accrues."⁵ Ultimately, Tuan argues, we need both:

Knowing places other than our own is a necessary component of the concept of "cosmopolitan hearth." The unique personality of our small part of the earth is all the more real and precious when we can compare it with other climes, other

¹ Interview with J. D. McClatchy 220.

² Tuan, "Introduction: Cosmos versus Hearth" 322.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Tuan, *Cosmos and Hearth* 183.

⁵ Tuan, "Introduction: Cosmos versus Hearth" 322.

topographies. . . . [E]xploration (moving out into the cosmos) enables us to know our own hearth better—indeed, “for the first time.”¹

In their totality, Wright’s self-portraits create this “cosmopolitan hearth”: a true self-definition, not definition by inherited context but by a chosen way of being in the world, of knowing and being known.

In the long poem “Skins,” from *Bloodlines*, Wright addresses this twinned, fragmented creation-inheritance of the self:

There comes that moment
 When what you are is what you will be
 Until the end, no matter
 What prayer you answer to—a life
 Of margins, white of the apple, white of the eye,
 No matter how long you hold your hands out.
 You glance back and you glance back. . . .

And what does it come to, Pilgrim,
 This walking to and fro on the earth, knowing
 That nothing changes, or everything;
 And only, to tell it, these sad marks,
 Phrases half-parsed, ellipses and scratches across the dirt?
 It comes to a point. It comes and it goes.²

What it comes to, often, is the mutability of the self: the haunting by its particular concerns, but also the body and the specific consciousness—those things which we take as permanent, or set, but are actually changed often, with or without our notice. We are always defining and redefining ourselves; our selves, in turn, are always changing, a change that our depictions can’t keep up with, a change that can be moved. As Wright wrote in “Roma II” (from *The Other Side of the River*),

¹ Tuan, *Cosmos and Hearth* 183. The quote at the end refers to T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” which humanistic geographers are especially fond of: “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (Eliot 59).

² *Country Music* 82, 101.

How silly! And still they call us
 Across the decades, fog horns,
 Not destinations, outposts of things to avoid, reefs
 To steer clear of, pockets of great abandon.

I back off, and the face stays.
 I leave the back yard, and the front yard, and the face stays.
 I am back on the West Coast, in my studio,
 My wife and my son asleep, and the face stays.¹

The face, here—a “wedge of light” itself, the vulnerable intimation of the poet’s child-self serving as a proxy for connections to his history, past, and family—recurs much like the symbolic writing of the indoor light on the surfaces of the outdoor leaves, an image which mirrors the way the poet’s interior is written on the land and place he loves. The face sticks in the poem’s field of vision—and the poet’s life—like a sunspot. However, the self it represents cannot persist far past death except through the forms of permanence we attempt: writing and otherwise recording ourselves, however fragmentary. Throughout his work, Wright’s self-portraits not only contain but are ghosts themselves. They create “an elegy for the self”;² they remember an absolute self³ as if in retrospect, but do so in past and future time.

McCorkle argues that Wright’s autobiographical poetry “is not meant as a purely confessional mode”; rather, it “situates the self within the energies and erosions of language” in order to record “the making of the poem and the irreducible energy of mortality.”⁴ Wright expresses a similar idea about the constructed element of autobiography in his 1989 *Paris Review* interview:

INTERVIEWER

Autobiography seems central but intermittent in your poems. Is that a fair estimate?

¹ *Country Music* 107–108.

² McCorkle 178.

³ I mean this in the sense of an absolute in perfumery—a distilled essence of a thing.

⁴ *Ibid.* 155–156.

CHARLES WRIGHT

I think so. In fact, that's a splendid way of putting it. Central because it's always there, intermittent because it doesn't always show. Rather like the progression of the story lines in the poems themselves—central but intermittently in evidence. A submerged narrative, as it were. A kind of minus tide that runs just under everything and adds by subtraction. Anyone's autobiography, at least in his own eyes, is made up of a string of luminous moments, numinous moments. It's a necklace we spend our lives assembling. . . . But that "I" isn't *I* anymore. It's someone else, the character who plays me, someone who's a better actor than I could ever be. I'm just the writer. Someone else is starring in my part. I remember him just well enough to try to write about him. A case of the negative sublime. I guess art's always after the fact. The real is imaginary, or imagined. Reconstitution, reconstruction, representation is all we're left with. Autobiography becomes biography in the end.¹

In a way, Wright's self-portraits are documents of a kind, composed and fractured proofs of existence. They feel like signs, a spellwork that directs offerings or tokens toward the reader, as well as back at himself. They recall those signs of the family dead in "Virginia Reel":

. . . Just down the road, at Smithfield, the last of the apple blossoms
Fishtails to earth through the shot twilight,
A little vowel for the future, a signal from us to them.²

The movement there is backwards from what we might expect: rather than the dead giving us signs, we make signs for the dead. In this way, we haunt *them*: we look after; we take care.

It's as Wright told Sherod Santos in a 1981 interview about *The Southern Cross*, explaining that the landscape—and, behind that, the dead—are the energies he hopes to contact through his poems, perhaps the people he hopes to haunt with his own personal ghosts:

I'm not trying to *talk* to my parents. I'm not trying to show Emily [Dickinson] how good I've become or haven't become. Somehow I do feel, however, that they are the perfect audience. And not because they can't talk back. Lenny Michaels once said, "The great ones always speak from the other side." If that can be worked backwards, then you can always try to talk to the other side. When I write to myself, I'm writing to the landscape, and the landscape is a personification of the people on the other side. That would be my ideal audience. One writes for

¹ Interview with J. D. McClatchy 205.

² *The Southern Cross* 21.

approval, in a strange way. And I'm trying to tell them that I understand and that I'm doing the best I can.¹

¹ *Half-life* 112.

interlude: Sally Mann's self-portraits

Mann exploits the capacities of this unusual photographic medium, called ambrotype, to create severe distortions of her features across the rows of degraded likenesses. The effect seems to materialize the ravages of time on mortal being. At the same time, a ghostly quality, recalling nineteenth-century spirit photographs, hints at the presence of otherworldly forces.

Contrary to first impression, and crucial to understanding Mann's work, is the fact that these distortions do not come from manipulating the plates after the image is taken. The blurring, fading, scarring, and peeling of the images are "honest" artifacts, purely the accidental effects of this collodion wet-plate technique, an obsolete and cumbersome nineteenth-century process . . .

The repetitive display of degraded images calls to mind discards from a mid-nineteenth-century photo studio—plates flawed by the sitter's movement or the medium's unstable actions, of which they present a catalogue: pitting, scarring, scratching, streaking, graininess, blurriness, erosion, fading, haziness, delamination, overexposure, and underexposure. This antiquation suggests not nostalgia for times past but time's actions in the present, its corrosive effects on matter and its essential fluidity.

—John B. Ravenal¹



Untitled (Self-Portraits), 2006–2007²

¹ Mann, *The Flesh and the Spirit* 3–4, 12.

² *Ibid.* 14–15.

Where does the self actually go? All the accumulation of memory—the mist rising from the river and the birth of children and the flying tails of the Arabians in the field—and all the arcane formulas, the passwords, the poultice recipes, the Latin names of trees, the location of the safe deposit key, the complex skills to repair and build and grow and harvest—when someone dies, where does it all go?

Proust has his answer, and it's the one I take most comfort in—it ultimately resides in the loving and in the making and in the living of every present day. It's in my family, our farm, and in the pictures I've made and loved making. It's in this book. "What thou lovest well remains."

—Sally Mann¹



Untitled (Self-Portraits), 2006–2007²

¹ Mann, *Hold Still* 429.

² Mann, *The Flesh and the Spirit* 152–155.

Chapter 7: Where I Am Now

I began the first draft of this essay in Seattle and finished it back home in Virginia, looking through the window to a low fog, spiced boxwood, fence vines, aching winter limbs of deciduous trees, red clay dirt, *plat* of rain colliding with the waxed tops of magnolia leaves.

While I was home, I found a clutch of old photographs at the Estates & Consignments store in downtown Lynchburg, a stone's throw from the James River. Many are of the same young woman in the 1950s, posing in places I recognize: the careful neighborhoods of the city, the Blue Ridge Parkway,



the graceful yet crabby way of the ground.



It reminds me of how Sally Mann describes having taken the exact same picture of the banks of the Maury River near Lexington, Virginia, as the photographer and Civil War veteran Michael Miley had in the 1860s: “As I held those dusty Miley plates to the light, in the same careful way I now hold my own glass negatives, I found myself weirdly shifting between the centuries. In that same time-warpy way, the view we see now from the cabin deck has remained virtually unchanged for 150 years.”¹

So much has changed, I know. But in the photographs I found, the winter trees are the same. The Parkway is the same: its feeling of falling upward into the light. The generous river

¹ Mann, *Hold Still* 96.

and its banks' rocks: the same. I did not live here when these were taken, and now I don't again—but the place haunts me from wherever I am. It stays.



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