

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

The Difference When the Sun Goes Down

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This is for my father, who has supported me in ways I cannot explain with words. Fortunately, the Grateful Dead can help with this one:

“Wake up to find out that you are the eyes of the world,
The heart has its beaches, its homeland, and thoughts of its own.
Wake now, discover that you are the song that the morning brings.”

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Introduction

The history of Parchman Farm cannot be told through books and encyclopedias, but rather through music. Historians and archivists may have gathered all the accounts and records available, but the music that has come out of Parchman Farm seems alive, and served as one of the primary inspirations for this collection of fiction and poetry, not only in craft, but theme and tone as well. The title of my thesis, “The Difference When the Sun Goes Down,” is a line taken from one of the many originally recorded chain-gang songs from Parchman Farm. Many songs I reference in this collection were recorded out in the field by Alan Lomax, a man who spent his life capturing folk music throughout the country, especially in the South. It’s amazing how much thanks I owe to a man I never met.

Parchman Farm is an infamous prison in Mississippi that once resembled a plantation in the antebellum South, both in how it operates and in its treatment of African-Americans. It was only acres and acres of cotton fields, farmland, and sycamore trees. There were no fences or barbed wire, just nowhere to go for miles and miles. Although nowadays it resembles a traditional prison, it was a vast and beautiful landscape, and that setting is a significant part in my collection. There is a dark, racist history that haunts the prison, but those are issues I did not wish to address, even if it is embedded in the nature of Parchman. Instead my thesis explores themes of exile and isolation, and how it affects an individual and their mindset. But I write about more than just the prisoners; I write about the guards, the Warden, relatives to the prisoners, and even strangers who stumble across these men singing on an unfinished railroad. I wanted to try and figure out the different ways people try to connect to their environment, to those around them, and what happens when that fails, and why they do. When Dan O’Brien came to visit as a guest writer for the Alfred Literary Festival, he said that if you know exactly

why you're writing something, it's not worth writing about. I chose this project because I don't know the answers to those questions.

Although I relate to those themes and questions on a personal level, I was also responding to many of the writers I've read in the literature courses I've taken at Alfred University. Writers such as William Carlos Williams, Yusef Komunyakaa, Wallace Stevens, Dan O'Brien, T.S. Eliot, and Natasha Trethewey have all influenced my writing style, and how I would approach the project. I call attention to that list of poets because they realized exile is not just a physical dislocation, but an emotional one as well. Natasha Trethewey, in her book of poetry, *Native Guard*, explored how history and memory are bridges to connect ourselves with someone or the environment, and how incredibly difficult and fragile that connection is. William Carlos Williams emphasized the importance of relating to the environment through the senses, and how humans rely on the most basic sensory detail to identify their place in the world. I've taken those elements and used them in this collection, exploring what happens when someone in exile tries to build those bridges back again.

My thesis collection unofficially began in the Fall Semester of 2013 in the Long Poem, a class with Dr. Juliana Gray that dealt with writing long poems and poetic sequences. I knew I wanted to explore the theme of exile, and I wanted them to be set in a prison, but I wasn't concerned with capturing a realistic portrayal of life in prison. I also had no interest in "right and wrong" or the justice system. These pieces are not about morals. My characters may have been prisoners but they were not criminals; their crimes didn't matter to me because I was worried it would draw the reader away from the thematic elements of my poetry. This last element in particular did not change throughout the process. Whatever wrong these characters committed will not be presented in this writing.

The prison was simply a metaphor and avenue for me to unearth and discuss the aspects of exile. However, I learned quickly (through Dr. Gray's comments and class critiques) that it was too abstract, and the poems needed more detail. After some research, I came across photos of Parchman Farm in the Mississippi Department of Archives, and the environment and setting seemed unusual for a prison, and that caught my interest. Parchman Farm sits in middle of the Mississippi Delta, a rich, diverse, and vibrant landscape. From the trees and plants, to the insects and the Yazoo River, it is full of life, and the contrast to the dark and bleak nature of Parchman Farm was unsettling. Dr. Juliana Gray and Professor Susan Morehouse in *Language of Literary Art* said that there are two types of stories: when a stranger comes to town and when worlds collide. I think the story of Parchman Farm is a symbol of the latter: you have a world and situation void of hope sitting in the midst of a thriving environment and landscape. But I am secretly a history buff, and decided that incorporating a historical time period and setting would help me with the details. It allowed me to access a world I was not familiar with, and the process of writing and research about Parchman Farm mirrored my theme. I struggled with connecting to an environment, landscape, and situation I knew little about. I've never visited the South and I have never been in a prison. This was unfamiliar territory for me, but something I wanted to dive into.

I decided to open with a fiction piece, which bears the same title as my thesis. The outline of the story is loosely modeled after Rene Girard's theory of mimetic rivalry. His theory argues that humans learn through imitation of another, and by imitation we establish a sense of self. By mimicking our model's thoughts, there is peace and harmony. However, once we start to mimic our model's desires, that leads to conflict over the same desire, ultimately forcing the two parties into a violent confrontation. The protagonist of the story desires the position and status of

another character, and that draws out a conflict between the two. Both men simply wanted to go home, and the method to do forced them into conflict. I applied this theory because I thought it was an effective way to reveal the lengths that someone would take to find a way out of exile, to reconnect and go home. I placed the story in the beginning because it served as a good introduction to Parchman Farm; since it's a prose piece, it allowed me to establish setting and historical details about the prison for the reader. I return to many of those details in the poems, and the short story is a helpful foundation.

The fiction piece also laid the groundwork for the images and devices that would thread this collection together. For example, the short story opens with a section about noise, and that tension between noise/music and silence is one of the ways I wanted to represent connect and disconnect, and it works on a literary and historical level. During the long work days in the field, prisoners at Parchman would sing work songs together, and much like myself, that music fills a void. A world without noise is vast and empty and alien, but music allows for a sense of community. Noise and music reminds you that you're not alone in Parchman. The rhythm and momentum of the men seemed natural, and they easily became one voice together. I especially focused on this in poems such as "The Convict Shuffle," using a group as the speaker. Some might say that it takes away identity, because then you can't pinpoint an individual voice. For these men, I don't think that concerned them. At Parchman Farm, they were voiceless as an individual, but as a group, they were loud, and many could hear them. You can always close your eyes or turn away from something, but music and noise is nearly impossible to block out. It was something no one can ignore, and reminded the listener they were there. The anguish of their isolation came through song and music, and I wanted to represent that in my work. The characters yearn for music but dread silence.

I also worked with daydreams and memory. I know when I miss something or someone, I dream and think about it often, and try to remember all the details because I bring it back to that place or event. Exile isn't just trying to connect with what's around you, but what's behind you; some of my characters don't care about connection to Parchman. They care about going home and seeing their family again. That's why poems like "The Ghost of Dragonflies" or "Tin Cans and String" are all about memory, and trying to recreate scenes and moments. They also dream about simple pleasures: cold water, the shade, swimming, food, and women especially. I picked elements such as those because it's what I thought the characters would be dreaming about when they were working long days under the sun. These characters aren't thinking about the bigger picture, but rather just the immediate pleasures that would make them feel at home again. It goes back to what Williams emphasized: we connect to the world through our senses, and when we are void of sensory experiences, we feel isolated.

Although I follow a number of characters, the main recurring one is Ezra, a prisoner on Death Row. Unlike normal inmates, prisoners on Death Row are confined to a cell, and do not work in the field or interact with other prisoners. The name is a biblical reference, but I do my best to go beyond that with the character. I introduce him at the moment of his death, and then backtrack through some of his "last" things. I chose to explore his story because that's a man who will never see home again. He's not quite sure (or concerned) if he'll see salvation at the end, so it makes me wonder if dreaming is worth it. What would he dream about? What would matter to him the most in his final days on earth? That was a question I probably only partially answered, because frankly, I have no idea what that must be like. I wanted to end with Ezra's story because his questions were the toughest to ask. How do you connect with people when you are already so far gone? If humans are inherently social beings, this should be easy, but it's not,

and I can't explain why. I picked "Ezra's Last Dream" as the last poem because I think it leaves with the readers with those questions, and will hopefully draw someone closer to an answer.

The Difference When the Sun Goes Down

I need noise to sleep. I could slip beneath sound like diving in cool water on a warm night. It's a still and quiet night here at Parchman. I haven't been here for long, not even a year, but I've forgotten what Jackson sounds like. I listen for anything: men snoring in sleep too deep for dreams, the cadence of the cicadas, the chatter and whispers of passing guards. Moonlight falls through the barred windows in slants and darkens when clouds pass. Even through the light, each bunk is lost in the darkness. Am I alone? This must be another dream. But my eyes are open. I know they are. A bed creaks, but the sound is few and far between. My sheets are damp from the muggy night and my pillow is old and stiff. In Jackson, I could toss and turn in my bed as if my dreams could seep into the real world. I had a fan to keep the night cool, the mechanical hum of the blades a syncopated tune to my ears. But not here. I think of home to fall asleep. The cacophony of the city is as good as any blues tune. The rattle and hum of cars, dogs barking, children kicking tin cans down alleyways, alarms rising in the street, a lonesome train whistle. I slept well in those days.

A steam whistle howls at dawn and we wake to a blue light crossing the horizon like a river above the trees lines. It twists and turns and runs far off, as though it's somehow the shadow of the Yazoo cast against the sky. When we make it to the breakfast table outside, we learn Cole is dead as we eat stale biscuits and cold coffee.

The men whisper while birds flutter from branch to branch on the trees. I could hear bluebirds in the dozens. I know them by sound. The trees are full of them.

They say Cole was shot in the back. They say he barely made it half a mile before the guards saw him. They say the moonlight gave him away. Others say some other prisoners beat

him to death. Some say he went crazy, and the Lord called him away to the river. Others can't put the name and face together and do nothing but wonder. Some don't say anything at all.

But Cole was a Trusty Shooter. Why would he run? He had it good with the guards. He had bacon still sizzling on his plate and eggs and grits with real butter for breakfast every morning. At night he'd get women and then more women the next night, courtesy of the great state of Mississippi. He sat in the shade with the guards with their radio, listening to Bessie Smith and Bukka and his guitar, drinking water so fresh it seemed to glisten. He roamed Parchman on his own time. He went fishing by the river and could dip his feet in the cool water whenever he felt like it. Why would he run? That's the only heaven left on Parchman.

Lance sits next to me, already chewing his biscuit. Even sitting down, he towers over me. My arms and frame is bone-thin. "It's hard to believe Cole's dead. He's dead and gone. I wonder who's going to be the next Trusty Shooter."

"They're going to pick another one?"

He shrugs. "They need one. Cole won't do them any good now."

"How do they pick one?"

"The guards have to know they can trust you with a gun. And that'll you be able to shoot the guys you used to have breakfast with if they make a run for it." His thin lips form a grin. His sun-tortured skin almost looks red. I don't know anything about Lance except when we speak at breakfast.

I can shoot the guy I eat breakfast with.

"And I hear if you do a good job, you get a pardon," he says. "Lord, to be back in bed with my wife. I'll sell my soul for that."

I think of Jackson and chicken and collard greens for dinner again. I think of swimming. I think of Lance with his wife in the shade under a tree, the cool breeze against their skin. I wonder what she looks like. Milky smooth skin. Long legs and dark hair. I'll sell my soul for some shade. Lance and I don't speak for the rest of breakfast. I see his eyes look far away. I see he's dreaming of it.

The guards tells us breakfast is over and leads us to the cotton field, the morning sun making giants of our shadows as we walk the long macadam road. Mules dot the landscape in the distance. We pass cattle barns and men tending to vegetable gardens. Even in the early morning, the heat ripples and shimmers, like the trees and clouds and sky are nothing but reflections against water.

The sun stretches the day long and seconds move like hours now. The blue sky gazes down at us, wide and cloudless and endless. The sergeant's dog walks through the cotton field lazily, as though chasing the mirage of a cat. A man named Burndown leads the song today in the distance: *Oh wasn't I lucky when I got my time/ Babe, I didn't git a hundred, I got ninety-nine*. The men holler after the verse and continue the song once more. I don't have the strength to sing. I just stuff my bag with cotton, thinking of my fan back at Jackson. I think of swimming again.

I look at all the men and wonder who the next gunmen will be. I think about all those who dreamed of huffing it home to freedom. Everyone has. Some nights the men mumble names in their sleep. Names of women. Nicknames. Names of streets and shops. Names of shopkeepers. Names of politicians. Names of blue artists. Name of the officer who arrested you. Name of the judge who sent you here. Names of old friends from years ago you played baseball with in the

alleyway. Name of the neighbor whose window they broke while playing baseball in the alleyway. Names of Saints. Names of Priests. Names of men they only heard in passing. Names of movie stars. Names of men on death row. Names of the guards and the warden. Names of men who are now free.

I see the sergeant talking to Lance. I forget the sergeant's name but his uniform is always neat, the clean brown of burnt-grass. And for some reason, he never tanned, and remained as white as smoke in winter air. Even the dust doesn't stick to him. None of the prisoners know his real name. A German shepherd sits loyally by his side, panting in the summer heat. I want to hear what they're saying but the cicadas and songs drown out their voices. They shake hands and the sergeant pats Lance on his back. Maybe it's some mirage. Maybe the sun is playing tricks on my eyes. A driver yells my name for not doing my job so I pick some more cotton and the thorns cut my fingers but I still move quickly. I risk a glance and see the sergeant leading Lance away to the shade of supervisor's quarters, a large house on the end of the field with a wraparound porch. The sergeant hands him a .30-.30 Winchester and a shirt with vertical stripes. He even pours him ice water and turns the radio up.

Lance didn't come back. The bunk next to me is empty and I am awake while the other prisoners dream of women and swimming in the Yazoo River. You hear a lot when it's quiet in the moonlight. I can't think of any names to dream about. I lie awake till morning, and lose myself in thoughts and dreams of the orange old gas lights by home, of the music of buildings and alleyways.

It's the railroad today so that means they have to strap chains around us and take us off Parchman. It's still too far gone from any town or city, so it doesn't make a difference to us. The land still stretches for miles and the sun still glows red hot in the blue sky above us. Lance meets us at Dawn, a rifle slung around his shoulder. He's no longer in his regular uniform. He wears vertical stripes now, the mark of a Trusty-Shooter.

"They picked you?" I ask as I pass him.

"Move it," he tells me.

The Trusty Shooters worship the sergeants and we're no more than strangers with dusty faces now. He looms over every prisoner, eyeing each one of us.

One spits at his feet and Lance strikes him the butt of his gun. "That's a warning."

The sergeant is outside on horseback, watching us move on. "As you can see, boys, we have us a new Trusty Shooter. You look to him now. He says when you eat. He says when you rest. He says when you stop working. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, cap'n," we all say aloud. Lance says nothing, only eyes us.

He pretends like he's better than us, like he doesn't belong in these chains with us. He believes he's worth remembering. He's just the same as he was singing with a hoarse throat and cracked hands in the field.

I tap Ross, another prisoner, on the shoulder in front me.

"Why did they pick Lance?"

"Not many men will mess with him. They need a guy who won't be pushed around."

"Do you think he'll try to run? Just like Cole."

"Shit, who knows. Lance can't read or write so he ain't got much going for him. As long as he can see his wife, he doesn't care much. He's not getting out anytime soon, not for what he

did. What else is out there anyway? It's just as lonely out there as it is in this god-forsaken place. That much I know."

There's no one visiting me at Parchman. I haven't felt the sweet skin of a woman in far too long. I can hardly remember what my home looks like. I need that gun more than he does. I need the sergeant to know who I am so I can go home.

Lance takes us to the railroad and the caller leads our song, and I find myself singing once more

*O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal oh-ah
O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal well
Go 'head marry don't you wait on me oh-ah
Go 'head marry don't you wait on me well now
Might not want you when I go free oh-ah
Might not want you when I go free well now.*

Our hammers and picks rise and fall like a current, like the crash of waves against Gulf. The wood leaves blisters and cuts on my hand but I still swing. We raise them and let them drop again over and over and over: birds flutter, the cicadas match our rhythm, a dog barks, and the chains rattle. The sun still bears over us, never moving, beating down on our backs. And I sing again:

*Raise them up higher, let them drop on down oh-ah
Raise them up higher, let them drop on down well now
Don't know the difference when the sun go down oh-ah
Don't know the difference when the sun go down well now*

"At the rate you boys are going, looks like we'll be back out here tomorrow," Lance calls out. "Who knows, maybe we'll be out here all week." I ignore him. My ears ring but I ignore him. I think of diving in the Yazoo. I think of eating shrimp and soft-shelled crabs and cold root beer. I think of riding the Trolley in Jackson, the cool wind against my skin. I think of Lance

with his wife in the dark: the soft sheets, the night breeze in the open window, and the whispers of the moving sycamores. Once more, I sing, but my voice seems to echo, as though I'm suddenly alone and everything has slowed.

*Berta in Meridian and she living at ease oh-ah
Berta in Meridian and she living at ease well now
I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave oh-ah
I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave well now*

We work until the sun moves on and we're joined by a night without moon or stars.

Sometimes Lance has night duty and I see him walk the grounds through my barred windows. The days at the railroad have left the men tired, and they hardly budge in their sleep. There are different barracks across the grounds, and you can see the Trusty Shooter shacks in the distance. Their gas lamps in the windows are bright in the dark. I see women come and go. Sometimes it's with the guards and sergeants, but the moonlight only gives off silhouettes.

Lance walks by my window and I risk saying his name. I'm on the top bunk, leaning over. He stops and turns, looking at me. "Back to bed, prisoner."

"Lance, don't pretend you don't know me. Listen, I got something to tell you." Lance starts to walk away. "No wait, it's about your wife."

"What do you know about my wife?"

"The guards talked about her today. The sergeant. He's taken a liking to your wife. I heard him, I swear."

"What does he say about my wife?" He comes closer to the barred window. There metal bars are weathered from where men have gripped them, from where I hold them. "He says he's thinking of taking her for himself."

“You’re lying. I should have you whipped.”

“No, honest. I’ve never lied to you, Lance.”

He’s silent for a few moments, but I can’t read his face in the dark. He’s nothing but a towering silhouette. “I’m not saying I believe you, but I’ll keep my ears listening. Not even the sergeant can touch my wife.”

“Alright, Lance. Alright.”

“Back to bed, prisoner.” Lance continues walking, but he seems almost lost in his thoughts, not quite walking with a direction, head hung low. I listen for the wind in the trees, but everything is still and quiet.

It's Sunday, so we pray in the open field, dragonflies circling around us, cicadas screeching around us. We even watch the priest baptize a man in a muddy cattle pond. The preacher holds him under for too long, and the man gives up and pulls himself out of the water. No one is sure if it counts.

Lance isn't praying, but he stares at the dirt. He closes his hand into a fist, as though his thoughts come in waves he must push back. The air is heavy and thick so it's a chore to breathe. The sweat from my forehead drops to the dirt.

The preacher continues his sermon. I'm in front but his voice is distant. The cicadas are loud and drowns him out.

I think the sergeant has left to grab the men's wives from the nearby town. Sunday is the rest day when the women come after the sermon. I can see the men dreaming during the sermon, their eyes glazed like water at night.

The priest pauses for prayer again. He bows his head and everyone follows, but I can't help but watch a dog in the distance walk lazily through the field. Where is that dog going I wonder. Can it just leave like that? Follow the morning sun all the way till night and then keep walking through the cool moonlit air?

But after a few moments of silence, the priest falls. I just watch his body sway in a circle and hit the ground. I say nothing, but just wonder about the dog some more. No one moves until the guard points at me and Ross who stands beside me. "Grab him. It's probably the heat. We have a truck we can put him in and bring him back."

The priest is a large man; his gut swells and folds over his body and his legs and arms the width of logs. "Grab his legs," Ross tells me. We walk over and I look down at the priest on the ground. His face looks torched. His thin white hair looks burnt. I look at my bone-thin arms and take a deep breath. I crouch and grab his feet, and we try to haul him up at once. Ross is able to lift his torso but I can't move get his legs off the ground without dropping him. We try again and but my arms shake and I drop him. I wipe my forehead, already out of breath..

Lance pushes me out of the way. "We ain't got all day," he says. "And I sure ain't going to wait for you do something worth a damn." Ross and Lance manage to lift the priest up and carry him to a nearby truck. The truck rolls away and I look at my hands and I can see my pulse in my fingertips. As the truck with the priest rolls away, we see the bus with the women come toward the camp. It parks outside the superintendent's house, guards surrounding the women. Lance looks for his wife, and he sees the sergeant leading some woman down the macadam roads. His eyes narrow and he moves closer, but through the rippling waves of the heat, it's hard to see clearly.

The next day wakes with a torched sky. I don't sing. I watch Lance. He's been thinking about my words. He's been turning them over and over. I can see it in his eyes. But I work and hammer. I think of swimming again. I think of soft sheets and the night-time breeze. I imagine diving into the water, the world shattering below me as I break the surface.

Lance walks over to the sergeant and they talk for a while. Lance grips his gun and the sergeant keeps his hand near his holster on horseback. I lift the hammer again and a sharp pain stabs my shoulder. It falls to the floor and lands on my foot. I shout in pain and fall backwards. I can barely lift my arm. The men laugh and holler but I just watch Lance and the Sergeant. I have to leave. I get to my feet and try to grab the hammer. Suddenly the singing is far away. I only hear the cicadas and running water. Running water? Where is there running water? But the singing comes back, and it ruins all the senses. I lift the hammer but can barely swing it. I can't even keep up with the rhythm. I can't even sing anymore. My throat is too dry, like I swallowed dust.

Judge, give me life this mornin' the men call out.

No one notices Lance or the Sergeant. No is looking at me anymore. No one is looking at each other. Their eyes look out far, following the blue sky to the end of the earth.

Lance needs to know. No one is watching. The guards are all gone except for Lance and the Sergeant. They start arguing and the sergeant climbs off his horse, yelling at Lance. No one is watching. I can't hear what they're saying but they are close. The sergeant stands in Lance's shadow, but doesn't back off. He controls Lance, and they both know it. But Lance pushes the guard, and we know in that moment he will never leave. Lance. Me. The sergeant. Even his wife probably knows. Lance isn't going home. Not even Lance. I don't watch to see what happens. I don't look this time.

I drop my bag and run for the water. I know the river is this way. I can hear the water. If I get the past the river, I'm free. I'll be back in Jackson by nightfall tomorrow. I can run all the way there, and feel the wind kiss my skin. The men are still singing and they are loud. I hear the water get closer as dash through the cotton field, a sea of white swaying under the sun. I hear the dogs and cicadas again. I hear everything. A gunshot clips my leg and I fall, but I still feel like I'm falling after I hit the ground, slowly, like through water, the surface shattering below me. I think of swimming again. I can't move but I pull at the earth, moving closer and closer to the sound of the water.

The Ghosts of Dragonflies

I: The Warden

Even I daydream:

At your last hour while the priest
 Squandered your minutes and the guards
 Adjust their hats, tempted to take
 The empty guest seats in the chamber,
 I saw the still salt water in the rusty bucket
 We used to soak the sponge,
 And thought of dragonflies.

*I try to remember my father's face
 When he took me out to meet the red
 Morning sun in the salt marsh near our home.
 We crouched in the cordgrass, rifles in hand,
 Watching the waterfowl before they took flight.
 They kept diving, diving under the dark, still water
 As dragonflies brushed the surface, the ripples gone
 Before I finished a breath, as if ghosts.
 I looked at my father, and the red light wrapped
 Around him. He barely moved or breathed
 I thought he had turned to clay.
 Suddenly, he stood, his shadow stretching to the horizon
 And fired. My ears rang. Birds broke from trees.
 I saw one fall from the sky, vanishing in descent.
 My father left to find his prize.
 I could not follow then.*

He dropped the dead bird

*Beside me. "You'll learn, don't worry.
My old man taught me around your age."
His hands were blackened with gun powder
And blood; he walked to the water,
Bent low, and washed his hands,
Brushing away the dragonflies
As they spiraled and spiraled around him.*

I'll never remember your face, Ezra.
You vanished from memory
the moment you were taken away.
The room bore no trace of you when the guards cleaned the chair,
as though your flesh had no weight,
and you were nothing but smoke and atoms.

II: The Convict Shuffle

We swing down at metal,
 And even with dry throats,
 Our voices are loud,
 Echoing across the field
 As though singing ourselves
 Back into existence.
 We keep rhythm while the dust rises
 Like cruel hands spread out, welcoming our return.

These chains are our guitar,
 This railroad our drum.
 The sun breaks our backs
 And burns every color out of the sky.
 And yet the sycamores offer no shade for us.

“Dead by law,” the Deputy calls us.
 As he marches along the tracks,
 His eyes shadowed under the rim of his hat
 With his rifle on his shoulder
 Aimed at the gray sky.
 “Dead by Law” he says again.
 If he keeps saying it, the earth
 Will crack beneath our feet.

*I want you go out and bring me Lazarus
 Bring him dead or alive,
 Lawd, Lawd
 Bring him dead or alive, we sing.*

Come on Deputy, we could use the company and a good story.

Still, we keep rhythm, praying someone

Will grab the sun and pull it below the horizon.

III: Tin Cans and String

Colman in cell 107 no longer remembers what it's like to feel
The tall fescue against his fingertips when he walked
under the falling red sun at dusk.
Sometimes he stands on his bed and peaks
Through his window to watch the sycamores
In the wind move like the swing sets
He built for his son's tenth birthday;
(He must be married now).

Since Colman can't sleep at night,
He sings devil's music:
*Judge give me life this mornin',
Down on old Parchman's Farm.
I'm down on old Parchman's Farm,
but I sure wanna go back home.*

But his voice is always quiet and hollow,
As though singing
through tin cans and string.

Not even Driscoll who passes his cell
Each night on guard duty hears his voice.
He's wanders in dreams of the Yazoo,
Dipping Water as the foliage
Scatters the sunlight.
Driscoll can hear the running water,
the murmurs of trees in the wind by the river.
and when he finally remembers where he is,
Colman has stopped singing.

The Deputy's Night Shift

Even the cicadas are gone.

All I can hear are the distant whispers
of the wind move through the sycamores
until the breeze dies, but then, nothing.

Where are the other guards?

The yard is empty.

Maybe they have all left.

I can only see

as far as the yard light reaches.

Maybe I should leave too.

I can go home and fall asleep to the radio
on the couch. At least then there will be noise.

A Letter to my Husband at Parchman Farm

I have been wondering
if your hands are still cool
from our water garden
after you planted the lotus blossoms
for the last time.

I have been wondering
if you still smell like the
honey locust we had to cut down
and burn to keep the house
warm in the winter.

The scent lingers on your clothes.
When I go near them,
it is as if you are still playing with the kids,
hiding in the closet until they
count to 10.

I have been wondering
if your voice still
sounds as smooth as the Yazoo
at dusk, where we used to sit
and watch the dragonflies
brush the water until the moon joined us.

I have been wondering if I will
ever see your face in the morning
half-hidden in the pillow again,
your slow and calm breathing
in tune with the robin's call.

This will be my last letter to you.

I have been wondering if you're still dreaming of me,
and how much longer you'll cling onto that.

I'll no longer wait for to step across the front porch,
And walk back into my living room,
Letting the screen door slam behind you
Even though it always made the dog bark.

I can now finally return
to the moonlit river
without thinking of you.

Ezra's Last Note

My name is Ezra.

ez-ruh, that is.

Say it slowly, repeat it.

The Warden is coming now.

I can hear the guards pouring salt water
into metal buckets.

What I learned reading this book:

Yahweh has suffered the worst fate;
No one knows how to say his name,
and I know it haunts him to this day.

Parchman Farm World Series

You play like the sycamores cheer for you.
You play like the trees will rip themselves
from their roots for a foul ball and wait
for you to get an autograph while the ball
is still caked with dirt from the burnt
and parched field.

You play like children
in the streets of Jackson, hyped
and wild from dreams
of home runs that'll soar
through high cloud.

You play as though you'll grace
tomorrow's headlines, photos of you
sliding into base, dirt rising like the wind
just barely keeps up with you; photos catching
you in mid-swing, arms and legs bent like ancient warriors
charging into imagination and myth.
as you crack another RBI for the lead.

You play as though children
in the streets of Jackson
hunt for 5-cent bottles to buy your
next baseball card, and your
number and name will never
fade like the dust you must
brush off from your hand.

Ezra's Last Confession

*And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
-Langston Hughes*

The priest walks into my cell,
holding the Bible like a souvenir
and I tell him not to waste my time,
but he's stubborn, and wants me to spill
my soul, like it's as easy as kicking
over a bucket of water and onto
the cold concrete floor.
He asks me if I have any confessions
for the Lord, to repent for my sins.
Why am I talking to you then, I want to ask.
But I humor the old man, and I tell him about
when I was a child in the streets of Jackson,
where the restless and fleeting dusk made giants
of our shadows along the sidewalk. I stole
some bottles of coke from a store,
and the shopkeeper chased me down the block,
but I flew back in those days.
I rounded the corner and heard an old man
singing a mellow tune under the dull pallor
of gas lights. But I knocked
right into this couple, and they fell,
onto this old man and broke his guitar,
the strings snapped and wood splintered
into pieces. I forgot all about the coke
and the shopkeeper and running, and
I just listened to all of Jackson go quiet.

The Gandy Dancers

On my way through Mississippi,
I heard a mellow tune
of men building a railroad.

I couldn't see their faces, only
the birds that fluttered away when each
hammer fell hard on the rocks and steel

The early morning sun hung high
and the cicadas sang loud, with dogs
hollering at the shaking chains.

But the men were louder in their black and white:

*"Don't know the difference when the sun go down oh-ah
Don't know the difference when the sun go down well now"*

I didn't see them for long,
but I heard them far after the sun fell,
far after the stars and moon went out.

Ode to the Cicadas

I never see you
but I chase you through
merciless midday heat
and in the moonlight
As I fall asleep.

You drown out the dreams of
guards and chained men
with godless croons into
the anarchy of heat,
and although you allude us,
you haunt us like ghosts
in our ears.

You abandon old bodies in
the torched grass of the field—
your shell means nothing to you .

But it is you who fills us the air
when we sit in the shade
of the sycamore for lunch,
when the men are quiet
and all noise has left us.

Ezra's Last Meal

I want some real butter, I tell the guard.
Grits and collard greens with some bacon
still sizzling on my plate. Let everyone on the row
know that there is something worth hoping for.
I want chicken soaked in barbecue sauce
like it was just baptized and enough
key lime pie that you'll have to wheel
me out when I clear my plate.
No, there won't be leftovers.
I want soft-shelled crabs and shrimp
so fresh I can still smell the salt of the Gulf
and I want barrels of crisp root beer
so cold my teeth chatter.
Most men want buckets of beer
in their last hour but hell,
I want to be sober when I go
so I can remember the best of it.

Mirage

I am out in the field and Bessie Smith
is beside me, singing. Long dark feathers
wrap around the shoulder of her dress
as it trails along the burnt grass
when she walks around me, her cold fingertips
sliding across my sun-tortured neck and I am
suddenly swimming.

My heart is now a drumming song inside my head
and I learn of salvation and ruin all at once because
she fades and shimmers like the heat from the sun,
and suddenly it is quiet again.

Ezra's Last Dream

I walk past the cotton fields as bone-thin
sycamores lean forward like men
reaching for water in the Yazoo.

There are no barbed wire or fences
or deputies on horseback,
just miles of magnolias blooming
as dawn breaks through the foggy air.

The dragonflies circle just above
the tangled grass as if in slow-motion,
lost in the thick shroud of the morning,
unable to see or hear those right next to them.

My hands touch everything:
the rough grooves along the bark of the trees,
the silk of the flower petals,
the cool dew off the grass.

But there is a familiar cadence,
the rhythmic metal against metal:
I follow the sounds and before I know it,
I hear my own voice again.

Notes

“The Difference When the Sun Goes Down”

Much of the historical details from the story were found in the book *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* by David M. Oshinsky.

Unless they were on death row, prisoners were housed in large cabins and barracks. They were segregated by race and gender. It was a cheaper for the state to house them in that manner, but it also led to more violence among the prisoners.

Parchman Farm was far from a traditional prison. It resembled more of a plantation, so it would be common to see farm animals and fields of oat, vegetables, and cotton across the landscape.

Trusty Shooters were inmates appointed by the Sergeants to watch over the other prisoners, and became an unpaid member of the prison staff. They were given better food and living quarters, they could move freely about the camp, and could spend extra time with their wife or lover. They were given uniforms with vertical stripes, as opposed to the normal horizontal uniforms for the regular prisoners. Trusty Shooters were chosen for their ability to intimidate other prisoners.

During the day, prisoners were either in the field picking cotton or working in a chain gang on railroads. Each work song was led by a caller, who would create the flow and rhythm of the songs.

Preachers gave prisoners sermons on Sunday mornings in the field, and would even baptize inmates in the cattle ponds.

“The Ghost of Dragonflies”

To help with conductivity, prison staff would soak the sponge with salt water when executing a prisoner on an electric chair.

“Parchman Farm World Series”

In the Mississippi Department of Archive’s digital collection, there is a large catalog of photos of Parchman Farm from the early 20th century. One of them is a photo of inmates playing a game of baseball in their spare time.

“Ezra’s Last Confession”

Epigraph taken from “The Weary Blues” by the great Langston Hughes

“Mirage”

Bessie Smith was a popular Blues singer in the 1920s and 1930s.

Songs

The first song the prisoners sing in the story is called “Berta, Berta” from August Wilson’s play *The Piano Lesson*.

The lyric “*Oh wasn’t I lucky when I got my time/ Babe, I didn’t git a hundred, I got ninety-nine*” was a work song listed in Oshinky’s book, but no song title was provided.

The second song is, “Parchman Farm Blues” by Bukka White, who was once an inmate of Parchman Farm. This song is also referenced in the third section of my poem “The Ghost of Dragonflies.”

In the second section of the poem, “The Ghost of Dragonflies” the song referenced is called “Po’ Lazarus.” It was originally created by James Carter, an inmate at Parchman, and recorded by Alan Lomax in the field. It was made famous in the opening sequence of the film *O’Brother Where Art Thou?*