

Three Poems from *Delta Return*

Among Ruins

It was south, above Natchez, we had our great
Plantation—an old world without profit of age:
Gray moss hung from the trees, the roads were deep rutted,
The Negroes kind but shiftless, the old house a ruin,
Vine-grown reminder of what they still called the war.

It was not a land to make money of or acquire
For any cause but madness, those myths of the past
That renewed planters in the South's cotton waste
And called young men who were doing well in practice
To the more destructive dream of public office.

My father in the governor's race went down in those
Same hills; Bilbo was theirs, who later died
(Well-chosen scourge) of cancer of the mouth.
We heard a speech he made once in full-dress.
"You folks think I'm gettin rich in Jackson," he said;

"But I tell you I'm so poor" (histing his tails)
"I have to patch my pants." He spun his rump;
And in the new cloth were patches of bright red.
The crowd roared, and one said, shifting a quid:
"That's a slick bastard; I'm going to vote for him."

Blind republic, torn by these pampered hounds,
Till the sons of worth withdraw—in the change foreseen,
Of Pericles to Plato—you floundering on
In a world of desperate need; all this I learned
Under broken columns—strange to live young, and in ruins.

Buzzards

They still circle the sky, these black buzzards.
When I was very young and that blue was heaven.
We had a colored maid who said those birds
Were as big as houses, with furnaces inside,
Where red apes roasted little boys and girls.

We did not quite believe it, but from that time,
It was taunting evil powers to lie in a field,
Still as death, until a spot way high
Would drop and widen into ragged plumes,
Then more and more, till the round sky was full,

Circling, descending; and we would leap and scream,
Cheating the darkness, that scattered on quick wings,
Gliding and beating the mild ethereal blue.
But I first felt all the horror of those things,
Heaven's hyenas, eaters of the dead,

When we were hunting once, and far in the wood,
We found a hollow stump with a nest of the young,
The old bird circling above, hooked beak and claws;
They were fluffy things, pure white, looking around
With innocent strange eyes, whom the vulture fed

On strips of carrion torn out when things die.
We had cut our way through canebrake; one of the boys
Raised the machete; he would have cleft the brood.
But a man stopped him; the law, he said, was theirs,
They were protected. The law:—then I understood Whose.

The Fig Tree

They say the fig is the symbol of life:—the largest
Fig trees in our town grew behind an old
Frame house; it was two stories high, unpainted
Wood, with gingerbread porches all around.
A family of seven lived there not far from us.

One night it burned and the firemen brought from the flames
Four small bodies and laid them in our yard
In scorched bedding, went back to fight the fire.
They salvaged what they could. It was very little.
All that was left of the family moved out of town.

That was in winter. With spring the leaves came,
And as summer advanced, weeds of all kinds grew
And took the yard head-high, and the great fig trees
Bore as never before, the purple and green,
Turning to sugar on the untended boughs.

Birds came flocking but could not eat the half;
And I, who lived that part of life in the trees,
Longing to reverse the descent of man,
Would steal out through the grass by the charred ruins,
That grown-up secret yard, and half the day,

Swing in the branches and from tree to tree,
Gathering the ripest harvest as I swung.
I thought of that night of fire, eating the fruit,
Content, an ape again, in the tree of life,
The fig that will ripen on the ruin of countless worlds.

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