

HOW WE GOT HERE

Four stories from a Mississippi family

BY B. BRIAN FOSTER

Harry "Slim" Foster shows off a slab of ribs during a hog killing in Shannon, MS, circa 1994.



This is a work of nonfiction. The author spent two months reporting the details: talking with nearly two dozen members of his family, reading oral histories and reviewing archival documents and items, and spending significant time in each of the places that *are mentioned*. Each section is rendered as a note from a different person and a different time. The recipient of the collection of notes is unnamed, save the sole mention of "you," which comes at the end. The style has elements of ethnopoetry, which here means, among other things, that the way that language is presented is as much a part of the story as the characters, places, and scenes.

1

HOW WE GOT HERE?

WE TRAVEL. UNDER NO DAY AND cotton in the back of a freight wagon, no different from the tree wood. Pap come first. Took his hands but left the gun. Say why he need it ran out. Ma Fanny and us, the children, left quick, too. But not with Pap. Killing take its own time.

It come 100 miles from Alabama to Mississippi, that ole wagon, like a boat without a head. Road like ocean when God sleep. We left a place they took for one that's stole. My memory still. Ma dress bunched up at the back, blood clotted at the hem. Seem like I kept hear a moan, like here. Can't been us 'cause we don't breathe and can't talk. We just sit. Wonder is we ate? Cottonseed poison. Pulpwood splinter. Rat teeth cut. We just ride. We met back with Pap in a town where the name fit: Plants'ville. That's where we planted and growed. And Picked. Plowed. Trumped.

I never say all what I saw, but the smell in my grave. Cast iron, sweat, sorghum and butter biscuits, fresh kill. When it rain, the blood come back thick and sticky like sap. I see it off the porch still. It don't drip it just sit, smell like all the ones that died come back to meet the ones that did't, to say how. A bullet between they eyes. A rope in a noose knot. The men wore work shirts that's dirty, they face empty. The ladies kept

the little ones. When they leave, they stay, like buzzards. They call.

Somebody else's—

They quit before they stop.

Pap and Ma was born before they say we people, after they stop saying slave. Ma died when Deac went in the war. Pap did after Q come back. I think he know Q was me. All mine had his hands and Ma Fanny eyes. Q had something different though, my mind. He saw work like me, like the sun, and everything up under it his. Pap knowed. Verlene, Vivian died, he ain't cry. He don't fuss. Yella couldn't get the city out, he just sit. Pap know.

Him and me watch Q listen. Watch him walk out over the place, hear the ducks, one his dogs run by, stop on the killing spot, pass the cutting table. Q get low in the garden 'tween the okra and the snap beans, touch his hat, pick up the dirt and pinch with his fingers like they rain. Stand look for a long time, hold his hands 'hind his back like they gold. He know, too.

That's how we get here. Build a world on a briar bush, our place at the top, all Pap's and mine in the bottom by the slough hunting bullfrogs. Take 'em for the legs, take turns at the pear tree, bust pecans with they fist. Growed apple trees from a dirt road. My Johnnie walk in that orchard come back with a lemon icebox pie or peach cobbler. Faye pass the straw - berry patch where the shadow come off the honeysuckle. Tempie in the house, ain't no sink 'cause all the greens. Lue with cans of scufadine preserve sittin'

on purple hull peas that took the born and dead to shell all the way. Muscadine so strong, my son's son's son blow in the wind, three or four sheets, talk like he come before and after.

Mo' tomatoes than family.
Time a run out fo' we do.

2

OUR HANDS?

THEY TALK. HOW WE GET HERE. Talk family. Talk land, who sold and who stole. Pap's place was Creek, then Chick - asaw. A white man stole ours before Daddy and Uncle Yella stole his, with a trick and a grin.

My wife Mama, build her a place that's hers, with a smokehouse off the side, a barn for the tractor that we take part and put back whole, and dig. And Haul. Pull. Bush.

We killed.

First time I 'member was '36. I was fourteen. I know 'cause that was after the one what happened in Oxford. Talk it come a hundred fifty, tricked him woke. Dragged him to the woods, a big Oak, made him like that ole cheap cowhide. They different from us. We kill on Saturday. They to see dead. So cold, it feel through wool, like that ice storm after the last time. Don't gotta touch shit to know it's shit.

'Fore the sun, I walk out just to look, touch my hands close to it, the fire. The ashes. I seen Daddy used to put some in the pot. He say that make the hair come loose. It ain't time yet. I watch when I was here before. The water boil. The skin swell and peel back slow, like morning daylight. Wonder why the ashes stay, like a tick, why least one don't leave and come back like Pap and Daddy say everything do, like the bo' after he hung.

It was eleven a us, two died, and seven



Scenes from a Foster family hog killing circa February 1994. TOP: Quincy Paul "Q" Foster; BOTTOM (l to r): Joe, Arthur, "Q," and Benny Foster

of mine. All them hands? Don't say shit 'bout tired! Two tote the wood. Three pump the water. My oldest come with a young'n that won't watch. He me.

It ain't time.

I call.

HereHere. Huh. It see me. HereHere. Huh.

I kill.

Ain't that many birds out here, 'bout the only good from that bypass 'side the money. Only way to know it's done is the rest run back. The trees hold they breath. The cold stretch out and stay. We take

the water from the pot to a barrel, take a butcher knife big as two hands, take both of 'em to scrape, so sharp come blood just from looking at it. Need eight for the next.

Jook.

Jook.

Jook.

My boy kept a straight back. Not yet.

Jook.

Two get that leg, two get one leg, four get the back. I bring the tractor I built my first time. Sometimes that tractor a tree. It hold the biggest and the littlest, both dead. I hold my nose when it rain 'cause I know. Time keep the dead.

The straight back cut from tail to where the head missing. That's my boy.

The ladies take the guts. Wanna see a stank get clean? Cut one. Watch 'em work. I seen 'em soak the guts in a milk churn filled up with salt, water, and something else. They say it was like it always is, but it won't. It touch different, like magic. Seen 'em pump the well to it go dry, then whisper and call the water back. Like magic.

Jook.

Take the little ones from the big gut, pull lights and liver and heart. The rest of the inside be clean, yeah. Mama fry the brain down in a skillet—with eggs from Daddy chickens.

3

'BOUT THE LAST TIME?

MORNING NIGHT. AND COLD. WE had a pretty sombitch spread out on that cutting table. Big Daddy come in the room, say the time, the year, was right come a bad winter, a ice storm. I knowed what he wanted 'fore he finished. I beat him to it. I took his .22 on the way, straight back in my ass pocket.

He the kill man. I'm the gut man.

Anybody a say, I was the fastest and strongest one on the place when I was a boy, both times. I make a muscle. It make a muscle. I catch the chickens. I run the guineas. I wrestle with the devil and won, know Big Daddy want the mount oysters. My nephew don't. He cut 'em fo' three weeks. Tractor ran off in the bottom, I picked up the front end with my hands, ain't need my back.

I lost a side my last trip come. My right side. Seen Chief's son's son. He showed me me from now. I run laughing.

I tell 'bout his daddy, we call him Dirty Harry. Sombitch. One day he out with Big Daddy 'n'em, go to patch. I come out, see his Opel Kadett, lime green I never forget. He must'a left the keys! Vroom. When they come, before they got out good, he come. Dirty. Mufucka been in my car! I kill y' mufuckin' ass! He Chief the second time, say the whole part quick in one. Killy'goddammufuckinass. Next thing, he come got a .44. Skyow! Skyow! He shoot four, five times. I run laughing. Run so good, all hunnid fifty scatter. It take all of them, just six a us.

We caught the first one, it was night. Finished it fo' day. I don't care 'bout no cold. That sombitch cut rough though, made my knife bend. The second one we worked—me, Benny, all us. After Big Daddy hatchet and spread him open, we went to dressing. We chopped the first one, so we rib that one. Cut enough ham and bacon to last two Junes. Take a hand grinder for the sausage—sage and black pepper to taste, like Kool-Aid.

Joe take the cracklins. His knife ain't sharp like mine, but it's hot, make the skin peel back quick. Put 'em in the pot like my granddaddy. The ashes flare up. They a bat.

See slick no good ass coming, just like Uncle Phillip was. Just like they say Yella was. He come and talk. He look. Might hold the knife. But that sombitch won't

cut shit. Ain't worth a damn, but he know good. He come with a stick in his hand a Salem on his lip. That's all he smoke, like he still up North. Tell that mufucka this ain't Chicago. He know good though. He do like us, cut a piece, wrap it up in some 'luminum foil with some pepper, inch it off in Big Daddy ashes that come back.

4

HOW I KNOW?

I SAW. WHEN I WALKED IN THE smokehouse, the meat was still hang - ing—a slab and bacon—still saw loose salt in the salt box. I picked it up and pinched it. I stepped and nothing moved, stood and the wood cracked like it was some fire under it. That house a wagon with no front. Everything smell like nothing. I was glad it didn't rain, and it wasn't no sound, except some wasps kept buzzing, remind me of them damn mosquitos by the lake with the big croppy.

Savannah granddaddy say how long. Six to eight weeks, sometime longer. Daddy say everything. Sugar-cured salt, put the ham out there, sometime ya bacon, every thing else in the deep freezer with every thing else. Everybody say why. Every - body—my first cousins, second cousins, aunts and great uncles, Dex, Grandpa and Momma, Pap and Ma Fanny, Big Daddy Rob and Ma Johnnie, the land. Uncle Bob watching something he can't name, like where Pap left the gun. The lemon trees by the house Uncle Q built, his "Mama" sitting where she always do.

B. Brian Foster is a writer and storyteller from Mississippi whose first book, *I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black Life* is forthcoming from UNC Press in December 2020. He works as an assistant professor of sociology and Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi. Visit southernfoodways.org to read a note from the author on the family history and Afrofuturist themes that inspired this piece.

Why.

To live.

We travel. They talk. We plant. Grow. Dig. Shoot. Run. And we kill.

To live.

Our people drank they whole life, and they eat, and they talk shit, and we bitter, and we wish we ain't see, and people hope they can't remember so much; but we not looking. Why would we look for something—call it traces of history—that's inside of us. In our blood I guess.

The place ain't space. The road ain't ocean. God ain't sleep. It's us. Ours—a nightmare, but ours. Great Granddaddy Rob and Yella passed. We worked, from generations back to the next, and the next, to the futures. That Junior on the fo' wheeler? All us still on the hill? Aunt Anne still watching. Don't forget about us. We always do? Soybeans still down at the bottom? We was in the woods too? We came in the wagon too?

How do we imagine ourselves?

How do we hope for us?

How they ain't kill Ma Fanny? How Deac ain't die fighting to help somebody else keep what they stole? How daddy ain't kill at least two men? How the men kill the boy, but his family still here? How everybody got a smokehouse? How we say the same thing?

And this still somebody else's?

What was

Cannot

Come again.

What's here ain't gotta worry 'bout coming.

The world a run out before we do. We put back for you. 🍷



CAN A DINNER SERIES CATALYZE CHANGE?

The possibility of Brown in the South

BY CHANDRA RAM

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Chefs Vishwesh Bhatt, Meherwan Irani, Samantha Fore, Maneet Chauhan, Farhan Momin, Asha Gomez, and Cheetie Kumar outside the Brown in the South "Holi Grail" dinner, Raleigh, NC, March 2019

Photos by Molly Milroy