

GRAVITATIONAL COLLAPSE

By

Robert Morgan Fisher

I walked from Natchez
To Hushpuckena
I built a fire by the side
Of the road

~“Pony” by Tom Waits

Seventh son of a sharecropper has but one dream: to be a guitar-picker on the radio.

His favorite station broadcasts out of Natchez. To organize a career in the public eye, there is but one place.

Father forbids him to go. Mama secretly helps: new shoe leather and a hat. She irons his white shirt until it's as stiff as a diploma. In black pants, with suspenders, he cuts a fine, professional figure. She kisses him goodbye, presses all the money she has into the pale palm of his otherwise ebony hand. Puts a dollar in his shoe, 'case he gets waylaid. Wires from the screen door to use as replacement strings. A catalog guitar: sere, seasoned, sweet of tone. He slings lil' bitty box across his back and leaves before sunrise in early March, smell of rain on the wind. When drops begin to fall he turns it over, so the inside won't fill up with rainwater and warp.

Due south from Hushpuckena, he keeps to the shadows, dusty woods, and back roads. He pats an old toothbrush in his shirt pocket.

Shelby, Gunnison—good distance first couple of days. Sleeps in the grass, plays to a smiling sky, meanders down long, empty stretches of red road. Rides get fewer, faces less friendly. In Rosedale, musk of the mammoth Mississippi. He takes the River Road.

Whenever he senses a friendly house, he approaches the porch, hat in hand, asks for a cup of water. More often than not, the water becomes lemonade or iced tea and a slice of pie, followed by a request for a song. He can fake any song there is. Always ends with a hymn. Once, he's chased off and almost gets an ass full of rock salt.

Another time, a pretty sharecropping widow asks him to kiss and touch her. And he does. Afterwards, she boils and irons his clothes. He retakes the River Road, unaware the woman is already carrying his child. Peacock and six peachicks appear and walk alongside for a mile before disappearing into a purple field of verbena, ironweed, and spiderwort.

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Takes two months to reach Natchez.

It's not the shining metropolis he pictured. Natchez is ordinary and contains far too many people. Walks straight to the radio station and is turned away. Not even one song. Sitting on a park bench, he hears music. Follows the sound and comes upon a boardwalk with dozens of performers. Coins and occasional bank notes fall into open instrument cases, whatever singers can coax out of the pockets of passersby. He has no guitar case, so he uses his hat.

His guitar technique is an original invention, born of necessity. He doesn't know how to calibrate his instrument, so he makes up tunings. Whatever sounds good. He intuitively fingerpicks and invents pleasing chord formations. Sometimes he takes a knife blade or a bottle neck and plays long sonorous notes that echo haunting trills of his husky voice.

Headlong style, robust—innocent, handsome authority on his smiling face.
Big healthy teeth like ivory piano keys.

White man stops to listen. Hook nose, wiry black hair like a gypsy. He likes what he hears and says so. Asks if he can record some songs. Has a room at the Confederate Hotel. There will be pay.

Man provides barbecue and a bucket of beer.

In the room, microphone attached by wires to a machine. Young man examines setup like it's a magic trick he can't quite trust. It takes hours of stops and starts, but the man captures several songs that satisfy him. He asks for song titles, spelling of the young man's name, home address. He copies it down in a notebook. Man pays as promised: twenty dollars. More money than the young man has ever possessed or even seen.

Long after they part ways, those songs are replicated into the grooves of a few hundred 78 rpm phonograph records. These are then played on gramophones throughout the region. And also by the very radio station which turned him away. Over time, other songs, styles and singers predominate. His entire form of music falls into disrepute and even ridicule.

Decades later, a lone surviving 78 is bought by a collector in London. He seeks out any and all 78s with the young man's name on it. The collector is successful in transferring and resurrecting these few songs into new technologies, preserving them. The musty smell of the 78; the proud, faded, official-looking label with the song's title and his name—those essentials gone forever.

Practical purity of the songs contrasts so greatly with the frenetic, current state of the world that the young man's primitive style is embraced, emulated, even worshipped. The case is made for re-evaluation, commodification and, after lengthy litigation, a legacy of mind-boggling wealth for shocked descendants.

One of his songs is packed into a rocket and blasted to another galaxy.

But the young man has no knowledge of all this on that hot July day. He squanders every last bit of the twenty on liquor, cigarettes and women.

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Standing at a crossroads, he's cornered by three sweaty, drunk, white men.

They drag him into a copse of sycamore, smash his guitar and beat him to death, not even bothering with the dollar hidden in his shoe. They lurch away, laughing. He hangs like limp Spanish moss while they roll dice and fight among themselves.

Hours later, he extricates himself from the rope and gently floats to the ground. Lands on his feet, now shod in brand new shoes. White shirt crisp and clean once again. Unburdened—at one with the eternal, sated. Never was there a breeze this cool, ground so soft. First and final ecstasy. Using his splintered guitar as kindling, he builds a fire by the side of the road. Brand new guitar materializes. He sings a song he's always known but has never heard. No words, just melodious moans from essential earth. He has no thirst.

In the morning, Biloxi. If things go well, on to Pascagoula, Tupelo...a distant star.

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Robert Morgan Fisher won the 2021 Montana Humor Prize, the 2018 Chester Himes Fiction Prize, was shortlisted for the 2019 John Steinbeck Award and was Runner-up for the 2021 *Saturday Evening Post* Great American Fiction Prize. His fiction and essays have appeared in numerous anthologies and literary journals including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Upstreet*, *Pleiades*, *The Arkansas Review*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *The Missouri Review Soundbooth Podcast*, *The Seattle Review*, *The Spry Literary Journal*, *34th Parallel*, *The Journal of Microliterature*, *Spindrift*, *The Rumpus* and many other publications. He teaches creative writing at UCLA and Antioch University. (www.robertmorganfisher.com)