The chickens came home to roost. I am back in the South. I had my head grabbed by a high-stationed man at a dinner party. Another man, a professor, screamed at me over drinks. I’ve never lived in a place where it takes so much energy not to feel. Not to hear the crickets crackling like banshees outside. Not to look. There is no real light in Nashville. The sky is rarely blue. In the morning it comes out dull white like bad milk in a glass. But it was not always like that. Somehow the return, and its discontent, is wrapped up in a memory of horses.

I used to ride horses. That’s why I left the East Coast and returned to the South, my childhood place of horror. I was young then and people were mean to me. Horror is the word that comes to me now as the heat rises in Nashville. Horror was feeling always on the outside of everything that mattered, whether the women with translucent white faces or the clubs where people rode to hounds, the parents who could not bear to look at me, or the swagger, click of the hand, and sway of the hips of my mother’s friends.

So I came to Nashville. But I don’t ride horses any more. I married a man who took me away from the dream I thought I had
begun to live: a dream of horses, fancy dress, intensely white women, and imprudent men. Wrapped up in the gauze of illusion, I thought that once in the South I would become beautiful. I would be what my mother had dreamed for herself and had become until decay set in. Slowly I realized where I was. I had come home. Whenever I think about my mother, I think about horses: unflagging in beauty, ready to die for someone else’s desire.

The women wear big hats. The men’s faces shine from drink. How much do you love horses? Enough to watch them die. Bones break. Horses, stricken from too much heat, fold into death. Nashville’s Iroquois Steeplechase began in 1941. It has run continuously every May for seventy-four years except one year during World War II. An old tradition, once set against the background of horses running and jumping for three miles in Percy Warner Park no matter the heat, becomes a very human rite of spring. On a grass track of different elevations, horses try to clear four- to six-feet, six-inch hurdles of artificial brush and timber. The finish line is called “Heartbreak Hill.” But most people don’t watch the horses anyway. They drink, flirt, gossip, and bet on a winner. Choice setting for human dominion, the race is grueling for horses that must run rain or shine, but high romance for guests.

When my mother began to lose her memory, one song stayed in her mind. She looked at me and sang, as if throwing a curse: “The old gray mare she ain’t what she used to be. Ain’t what she used to be. Ain’t what she used to be.” Old age had always been the thing to be feared. She tried to keep it at bay, pumping her palm under her chin, sleeping on her back so wrinkles couldn’t set, putting the whites of eggs under her eyes. The inevitability of rot hung like a pall over our house. Everyone, she told me, would end up with loose jowls and cheeks caved in, bags under their eyes and a shuffle in their walk. No one could be young forever. And “no one,” she whispered, “loves you when you’re old and gray.”

As I remember my mother and her broken life, I can’t stop thinking about horses. I remember the dazzling War Emblem. Like the shadow of a bird in flight, he haunts me. He was fierce. Some say ill-tempered. In 2002, I watched this roaring beauty of a horse win the Derby and the Preakness only to miss the Triple Crown because of a sudden drop to his knees when he tripped out of the gate at Belmont. He rose up, tried to run, but could not
sustain his speed. He was a horse of big heart and kept going after stumbling, his nose scraping the dirt. He came in eighth. Retired to stud in Japan, he didn’t like most of the mares. So he’s coming home to Kentucky. Four years later at the Preakness, Barbaro broke his right hind leg in more than twenty places when he prematurely broke from the gate. A year later, Eight Belles, a filly, came in second at the Kentucky Derby. Just as she crossed the wire at the finish line, she suffered compound fractures in both ankles. She could not be moved off the track. Instead, euthanized at once, she took her last breath where she fell. The horses keep dying. The humans keep watching.
Overbred and made beautiful in appearance but weak in the legs, horses are instruments of possession, reflecting the marvelous cruelty of ownership. My father loved my mother as long as her dependency was assured. A plump rather rounded woman of just seventeen, she was chosen by a man some twenty years older. Just a couple of years after marriage, the soft face of a woman beguiled became impenetrable in its beauty. A veneer set in over her luscious skin, hardness seemed to take over eyes that were once inviting, her smile frozen for the camera. And the body, sculpted into the image of my father’s dream, with hair done up so that it flowed too perfectly, appears brittle in its elaborateness. I think of her now like a hobbled horse.

And that’s why the horses come back to me, an appeal to freedom that always bit the dust, a possibility of glory that could only be realized in the gaze of others. The South was not kind to my mother. It lured her with a nature that she could never be part of, a community of women that would always be closed. I too look at the pale gossamer creatures with faces never threatened with sweat. And the lonelier I become, the more I understand the lineaments of discrimination. There are places that I can never be. Out in the green fields, hills, and valleys of the “Hillsboro Hounds,” foxes are still chased by the most glorious dogs to the sound of “Tally-Ho,” and anyone well outfitted and saddled posh enough can look forward to the Hunt Ball at the Belle Meade Country Club.

Something about the club lured me when I first got to Nashville. I remember a dinner during my first year here. In a wood-paneled room with large paintings of Nashville elites’ founding fathers, a black man dressed formally in what I recall as a tuxedo, but it might have just been a black dinner jacket, took our orders. It reminded me of a club I knew well in Atlanta. The Standard Town and Country Club, originally on a great deal of greensward with a roiled and challenging golf course and swimming pool, used to be a place where I could be served. Whether in the locker room or at the bar, a black person, man or woman, was at the ready. A Jewish club, it was founded in answer to the exclusive Piedmont Driving Club and Cherokee Town and Country Club, which allowed only white Christians.

Nashville, the “It City” so popular with *The New York Times,*
reminds me of Atlanta in the sixties. To explain why would take me away from horses, hunts, and the triumphant beauty of old money, along with that politeness that covers contempt, or worse, disregard. Yet a few things take me back to when I learned to covet what I was not and could never be. Too many blondes with long straight hair; a quiet assumption of place, the easy and alluring confidence of good breeding, a heritage of immaculate inclusion that was never at risk. Not even if you sleep with your best friend’s husband or drive too fast, wrecking a stranger’s car and killing the person inside it.

Such aplomb and ease come with the long history of the South, a tradition described by words like *chivalry, bravery, beauty,* and *grace.* Outside all that, I lived out my life in Atlanta as a child and teenager, watching, and in the quiet of my room, pretending that such a heritage was mine. Such pretense never worked. How could
it, when my mother came into my room, grimacing as she bent over, dragging her feet as if pulling something of great weight? That grinding shuffle terrified me. Not just because of my mother’s quick transformation from beauty into beast, but most of all because she reminded me that no matter what we did, how we looked, what we wore, we would always be nothing more than bodies gone to rack and ruin.

The only time my mother smiled during her last days of slow but steady dissolution, when she stopped talking or eating, was when she sang the words about that horse. It was eerie to watch her living so fully again only to belt out a song that drew attention to her decline. And she knew as she kicked one leg out in front of her that she was punching out every last day of her life in time with the mare’s thrust at the whiffletree.

The old gray mare,
She kicked on the whiffletree
Kicked on the whiffletree
Kicked on the whiffletree

I stared as she stamped her feet in time with the words, “She kicked on the whiffletree / Kicked on the whiffletree / Kicked on the whiffletree.” I’m sure she had no idea what the word whiffletree meant. I always thought it must be a tree that had been hobbled. In those days I would have said beaten. The horse was beaten. The tree was beaten. The horse was kicked. It was a world without mercy.

Curiously enough, until now I never thought about the song’s meaning, never questioned its insistent hum in my mind. I never thought about the words I kept repeating, not knowing until now that hobble is not just a limp but also something pertaining to animals, most especially horses. It means to tie or strap together the legs. They are hobbled. They can’t move. They can’t stray from their fixed place. Why, a friend once asked, are you so compelled by this old gray mare? Only now do I know what it means to be held by a past that can be captured, all of it, in just a few words. Late in life I know that they alone hold some kind of key to what really matters. Transfixed but unable to know exactly why, I am never free of their grip.

She kicked on the whiffletree. Or is it at the whiffletree? I was astonished this spring when the horses ran again at the Stee-
plechase to discover in casual conversation with a neighbor that a whiffletree had nothing to do with trees. But it did have to do with death and unseemliness nevertheless. And yes, it does have to do with trees too. Dead trees. Trees chopped down. Draft horses — the horses that carried the loads for humans — were attached by a harness to a crossbar made of wood called the whiffletree, which was then fastened to the center of whatever was being pulled. Whether they pulled vehicle or plow, cart or sulky, these mammals, with the whiffletree positioned between hock and upper thigh, labored heavily or moved briskly under the load. Either way, it was tough for the horses, at work or in sport.

Whether tree or horse, both suffer for our whims. I was right all along. The tree was beaten. The horse was kicked. I won’t say crucified, since that would be granting something momentous to what is commonplace. Whether cut down or flogged, trees or horses, these things didn’t matter much to the minds of humans.

On a hot Nashville day, I decided to return to my mother’s song, which meant thinking again about that soft, gently winding track, where horses ran, folks cheered, and money was made. It is a history of America after all, not just the South of azaleas, rhododendron, and magnolia buds. Here is the full version I am tempted to believe she might have heard back in the 1940s, when she married my father and moved to Atlanta.

The old gray mare
She ain’t what she used to be
Ain’t what she used to be
The old gray mare,
She ain’t what she used to be
Many long years ago.

The old gray mare,
She kicked on the whiffletree
Kicked on the whiffletree
Kicked on the whiffletree
The old gray mare
She kicked on the whiffletree
Many long years ago.
Not a children’s song with all the possibilities of changing words and phrases in rowdy innovation, but rather a recitation that closed down hope, a forlornness driven home with the chant, “The old gray mare / She ain’t what she used to be / Ain’t what she used to be.” That is the lesson I carried with me: No matter what you do or how you live, the only certainty is that you will always lose the ground from under your feet. The refrain has to do with damage and defect, a leaning always into a state of mourning, the loss that comes with a glance in the mirror.

But I also began to realize that in thinking about my mother I had blocked out some of what matters most about the song. The posture of ruinous pleasure contains a history of pain that has much larger significance than mere pathos. To recognize the identity and reach of the old gray mare is to seize upon servile creatures, lost causes, and genial disregard.

Who wrote the song? No one seems to know. It’s not Stephen Foster, but his “My Old Kentucky Home” holds a key to a possible origin of the song about the old horse gone to seed. I just learned that it’s likely that Thomas Francis McNulty wrote the song during the reelection campaign of the aging Ferdinand Claiborne Latrobe for Democratic mayor of Baltimore in the 1880s. Old Mayor Latrobe used to go around in a carriage that was drawn by an old mare. Folks were so entranced by the song and the tumbledown mayor and his horse that he was reelected not just once but twice more. What manner of mare (or mayor) is this? I found it impossible to believe in this neat story as the real mystery behind the words. Or maybe I should say that it’s not the gray mare I came to know.

I became consumed in a way I could not have imagined, captivated by the early southern country fiddlers who sang about this mare along with possums and niggers. It was a constellation of things that led to decrepitude and disdain, but all covered over by the patina of glory, the spark of fame, the lure of courtliness.

Nostalgia seems to hark back to something thrown out as if “long, long ago,” but more than longing for something past it is actually what remains so very present, kept alive and kicking in the strangest of bodies, that of the old gray mare. Perhaps everyone, or at least most southerners of a certain age, found a dream of something in that song. What has been lost? What ideal van-
quished? Could “gray” signal not just aging, but something more portentous, something bigger than what I understood as a child? I began to think that the story of the Confederacy might be locked in that song. A battle lost, a region ruined, along with all the horses that once ran so beautifully in the big races.

Before he became president, the strapping Andrew Jackson helped set up the Clover Bottom Track at Nashville. Racing was big in the South. Black slaves rode southern horses. Horses mattered to the myth of beauty stored in the sinews of men: their loins astride their mammalian mount. They also bore the pesky contradictions of slavery on their backs. Slaves were used to care for and train horses. And when they weren’t in the fields, some became remarkable riders. Even after Emancipation and right up to Jim Crow segregation, all or most of the jockeys were blacks, riding fifteen of the first twenty-eight Kentucky Derby winners. Horse-racing and slavery seemed to go hand in hand. By the 1920s and 1930s, like a noose being tightened, hate strong as the lash made the Georgia-based Skillet Lickers famous with songs such as “Run, Nigger, Run” and “Nigger in a Woodpile.” By that time, lynching or, if you were favored with life, a gift of mules with forty acres had replaced the violence of slavery.

With the soft shoe of minstrel insult and the meticulous terror of the KKK, history took a turn into a dream of wisteria and lazy laughter. Even in what might seem like poverty and dead-end living, Gilbert James (“Gid”) Tanner, chicken farmer and lead fiddler of the Skillet Lickers, could belt out with gusto these unexpected refrains to their country version of the inimitable “Old Gray Mare.” She kicks at the whitetree in dilapidation that somehow energizes instead of enfeebling: “I danced all night with a hole in my stocking, / Down in Alabama”; “I got a great big house with nobody living in it, / Down in Alabama”; “I got nothing and nowhere to put it, / Down in Alabama.” White lives also still found excitement in the gasp of a good race and the lure of courtship set against the breathless run of horses. When the South lost the war, its brutal, sweet, and vanishing world was kept alive in their gently curving haunches.

I learned about the high, nearly magical sentience of viscera and flesh as early as elementary school. I am still entranced. The fragile fiction of high-minded defeat was captured in portrayals of
General Robert E. Lee astride his warhorse, Traveller, a gray American Saddlebred known for his high spirit, eagerness, and endurance. So imagine with me now.

The loss of the war meant the loss of that old way of life. I grew up knowing that I was a not quite right white, but proud nevertheless to be witness to something steadfast if not serene. When the South fell in the Civil War, what I knew as “the War of Northern Aggression,” I along with my classmates – I won’t say friends, I had no friends – held on to a drowsy kind of knowledge. In the sound of crickets and the smell of magnolia, I became part of a stubborn dream. I wanted a horse. I lived for horses. My breath caught when I first put my foot in a stirrup and lifted myself onto that wondrous heap of flesh.

So now I am driven by the obligation to know not only why the old gray mare had to grow so old, but most of all how one of the legendary race- and even warhorses had become in my memory the most sorry and forlorn of animals. But that was my mother’s lament, in the old days, long ago, not exactly the way I see it now. The oppression so manifest across the borders of human and horse
gets concealed under other stories. These accounts stay before me like a relentless narrative of displacement. It never ends.

General Lee’s courageous horse Traveller remained unknown, overtaken by the earlier tough and winning mare, Lady Suffolk of Long Island. The black jockeys who ran the best horses before the Civil War and after, winning the Derby in legendary races, were displaced by white jockeys during Jim Crow and turned into lawn jockeys, known for their bulging eyes and lips with too broad a grin. But in the midst of all these stories, the song stubbornly remains, its creator as unknown as ever.

Lady Suffolk, the old gray mare of Saratoga Springs, who raced under saddle or with a two-wheeled sulky, is usually identified as the real source of the song. In *They’re Off! Horse Racing at Saratoga*, Edward Hotaling devotes a chapter to Lady Suffolk. But her story suggests nothing about waning strength or loss. She keeps winning until her death at the age of twenty-two, carrying her cart and beloved by all who saw her. A northern horse, she captivated at a time when southerners still traveled north to the track at Saratoga in the 1840s. Even Edgar Allan Poe came up from Philadelphia in 1842.

So the lady gone gray with age, the trotting Lady Suffolk of northern fame, replaced the gray stallion of the South’s greatest
general in the imagination of Americans. What does it mean and why should it matter that the lady of the North obscures for all time the warhorse of the Confederacy? In a letter to the artist Markie Williams, General Lee described his horse in exquisite understatement, as he remembered the long night marches and days of battle: “I am no artist Markie, and can therefore only say he is a Confederate gray.” After the war, Traveller accompanied Lee to Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. There admirers, mostly students, pulled out the hairs of the horse’s tail for souvenirs, giving the horse, in Lee’s words, “the appearance of a plucked chicken.”

Lee’s denuded gray stallion led me to another gray horse that thundered onto the scene of battle, the mare that fought at the front during World War I. In “The Old Gray Mare” Newsletter, published in January 2002, there is a loving farewell — “Best Wishes, Old Gray Mare” — to a sixteen-year-old mare ridden by Colonel Millard D. Brown, as he led his troops across the Italian front. His infantry, the 109th, was nicknamed the “Old Gray Mare Regiment.” You can hear this version of the song on the Web. Sung by Arthur Collins and Byron Harlan and recorded in 1917, the words are punctuated by the sound of guns, the neighs and hooves of horses.

The old gray mare was
Fighting at the front
Fighting at the front
Fighting at the front
The old gray mare was
Fighting at the front
Many long years ago
Many long years ago.

Men kill and sing. The horses carry, rear up, and die. Songs get written. Everything animal that is not human becomes material for our entertainment or pleasure. Nothing wrong with that, I guess. But in reflecting again on my mother’s life, I can’t help but think how we so casually take sheer beauty and grind it into the dirt or, more exactly, use it as ballast so that we can float through the carnage we wreak instead of sinking into it.

So perhaps the gray mare is just a token, an excuse for me to
wallow in what I thought I wanted to escape. My mother’s liveliness and her gorgeous self deteriorated like the gray that began at the roots of her hair. But what is that to me? I can never leave the South. I am held to its rotten romance even though I know the vileness beneath. I also realize that the damage done to the bodies of horses often needs to happen against a backdrop of laughter.

Southerners like the macabre, and that’s why the best jokes—and some of the oldest songs—begin in the least likely of places. Out of the rapid-fire joining of cruelty and pleasure comes the peculiar lilt to a song like “Oh Susanna,” as well as “Run, Nigger, Run.” This perfection of white power is not unfeeling. That is the terror. Instead, listen closely to the music and you realize that what really gives the chill is the affection, the near empathy with the lost, the stricken, the harrowed.

These songs are not soothing. And perhaps that is why the high and changing old irrational violence of the South never quite goes away. It remains locked in the senses, this way of life, even for those who claim to abhor its catastrophic racism. I recall Al Jolson in blackface in his last appearance. In Darryl F. Zanuck’s Swanee River, which appeared in 1939, but I watched first in the late fifties, I learned that I could never know one moment that would be genuinely free of fear. Something about his eyes rolling and what I always saw as his white tongue led me to understand how gaiety meant nothing but misfortune and trouble.

Yet I grew up in a dazzling social surround quite unlike the hurt and harm of my home life. In that larger world people lived as if high spirits must always win out. The enigma of lightheartedness kept these folks aloft above all the evil. They knew how to feed on the remains of what cried out in suffering or died unnaturally, lost to calculated harm. So on the bus up to camp in Asheville, North Carolina, we sang loudly the raucous songs of the South. They were actually laments, but I didn’t know that then. “My Old Kentucky Home.” “Mammy.” “Dixie.” “Way Down upon the Swanee River.” We never sang “The Old Gray Mare.” Only my mother sang that.

I’m back in the South, where it’s impossible not to think about how the domesticity and chatter and ease are almost always accompanied by something gross. The sweetest habit of ladies depends on the shattered life of whatever is granted neither leisure
nor mercy. A few days ago a friend told me about something her mother had found after a long search. She had bought an object from some time after the Civil War, though it persisted in homes through the fifties, kept close by all women who darn or sew. It comes in all colors and sizes. It’s an antique, a thing to be cherished. Though I never saw one before, I gradually understood that I can’t kick myself free of its traces. My whole life has shrunk to this one icon, now faded but once blood red: a velvet pincushion in a horse’s hoof.