Gathering Ghosts in the Delta
by Virginia Sullivan

“You could hear those hymns wafting across the fields
a mile or more” --William R. Ferris, Folklorist

Before the silence descended on the fields
and the forests of cedar and oak,
before the houses emptied and leaned
toward the earth, before falling,
before they fell, he knew they would be gone
like the footprints of the families who lived there
like the footfall of farmers, the dusty track
at the end of the field come to mud
in the hurricanes, impassable, washed away
with all the furniture, the tired old horse and the dogs.

He felt a calling to gather the words,
the tunes and voices that underlay his life,
that rose from the small unpainted churches
at the edge of the field, the preacher's voice
ready to carry you away, carried away now
and gone, buried with the bodies
gone to a luminous silence, like the panther
like the piping plovers, like clean water
like rice growing, like the Delta itself
a way of life lost, not like a coat
left somewhere by mistake, a coin spilled
inadvertently from someone's pocket
rolling and resting in a crack in the sidewalk
with a chance to be found, a chance of return.

He sensed there would be no return
from this silence, that this was a different kind
of loss, a kind of death, that the songs would not
exist without these families, these faces
these voices and their reasons to sing
their music not written down. No hymn sheet
or hymnal, no book to refer to if someone
wanted to remember but could not.
So he strode out ahead of forgetting
ahead of gone and the end of things
a long-limbed boy, brave and with his father
gathered and harvested sound, winding it on tape
making friends in store fronts and juke-joints
sharing laughter and food in kitchens
gathering the grammar: hymns, laments, the blues.

This sixteen-year-old white boy in Mississippi
prescient, knowing about silence in 1958
went and got a double reel tape recorder
and began collecting the language of his place
picking the blues at Parchman Farm Penitentiary
interviewing inmates so the imprisoned
long-dead, could sing out in the archives
he would create in Memphis, sing against
the silence of the future, pose a harmony
rare in those times.

Gracious in the giving, they were glad
to record their songs, help him salt memory
down in brine, load barrels of it onto wagons
to be laid up against a future with no memory
of the Delta, no map, no other way to get back
no understanding how the roads and rivers run
how weather and babies are born. He labored
to save the sense of this particular sun, this soil
precious, these weathered people, their hardship
the violence and the great mud river.
How it was to live there, gone. ▲▼▲