

TUCKAHOE

"Wisdom is oft-times nearer when we stoop
Than when we soar"

-- *The Excursion*, 1814

R. D. Madison

Frederick Douglass
1818-1895

Contents

I	Surroundings
II	Grandmamma Betsey
III	Harriet
IV	February 1818
V	Days
VI	Demarcation
VII	The Ladder
VIII	Stray
IX	Dust
X	Lessons
XI	Tell-Tale
XII	Lunar
XIII	Lightning
XIV	Red-Wings
XV	The Net
XVI	Tetuckough
XVII	Midnight
XVIII	Caulking
XIX	The Path
XX	Blacksnake
XXI	Flowers Mill Road
XXII	Passengers
XXIII	Bluebottle
XXIV	Sweet Potatoes
XXV	Lee's Mill
XXVI	Queen Anne Tractor
XXVII	Premonitory

XXVIII	Fences
XXIX	Isaac, Four A.M.
XXX	Hillsborough
XXXI	North
XXXII	Thimbletown
XXXIII	Hester
XXXIV	Harriet 1826
XXXV	Sheep
XXXVI	Vernacular
XXXVII	Escape
XXXVIII	New Bedford 1841
XXXIX	England
XL	Rochdale
XLI	In the Quarry
XLII	The War
XLIII	Admiral Buchanan
XLIV	Anne Catharine Buchanan
XLV	Monadnock
XLVI	Chapel District 1878
XLVII	River
XLVIII	Tappers Corner
XLIX	Haiti 1818
L	Haiti 1891

Notes on *Tuckahoe*

Surroundings

"Tuckahoe, r. Md. which runs into Choptank River."

--Morse's *Universal Gazetteer*, 1823

Talbot County,
Eastern Shore,
State of Maryland near Hillsborough
And Easton, county town.

Worn out, sandy desert--
Dull, flat, unthrifty--
Farms and fences dilapidated.

Thinly populated,
Indigent and spiritless,
Indolent and drunken
To a proverb.

Ague and fever.
Lazy, muddy stream.
Tuckahoe.

III

Harriet

"My father was a white man."

The damp impression where you lay,
The twin furrows of your heels
Soft in the mud of Tuckahoe--

Did you hold him too?
Or was this passionless for you?

Footprints leading channel-ward:
Not all the water in this muddy stream
Will wash away this certainty.

The tide rises, the moment is forgot
Beneath the silent flood of Tuckahoe.
But deep within your belly you can feel
The tremors of nativity whose star
Is fixed in the North,
And needs no Magi.

IV

February 1818

"Frederick Augustus son of Harriott Feby 1818."

--Anthony Papers

But February wasn't much--just cold,
The coarse nap of stubble speckling the frost
That gripped the fields of Tuckahoe; the ice
So thick that you could walk to Hillsborough
And never leave the creekbed. Overhead
Snow geese eddied and barked: a Breughel world
Of black and gray and white.

In Betsey's hut

Your moans were muted in the steam that rose
From the hot rags that Betsey Bailey wrung.
And then it's done.

Two newborns in the cabin now. Jen's first,
A girl, and yours. None of you cared that day
Who would be carried North, who South, or who
Would live and die at Tuckahoe.

Days

"His days, when the weather is warm, are spent in the pure,
open air, and in the bright sunshine."

Holly leaf, prickly, and sweetgum ball;
The thistle, provoking and comely;
Rough-wings nesting in holes in the riverbank;
Crescent moon, planet, and shooting star.

The zebra swallowtail,
Paler, rarer, gone;
The hog-nose, slight and sufficient,
Nearly blinding you.

The well, and the skyward-pointing beam,
Light to your touch;
The woodsmoke, lilac, and honeysuckle,
Hoecake and sweat, and the brandied breath of the overseer.

These, and the geese *en route* to the Canadas.
These, the days that await you in Tuckahoe.

Demarcation

"Yet I cannot say that I was very deeply attached to my mother; certainly not so deeply as I should have been had our relations in childhood been different."

You dared not guess how many children lived
In Betsey's house. Not hers, but grandchildren:
Dogs bark incessantly; the voices of
A clutch of whining youngsters intersect,
Each gaining strength from each until
Brought to their highest pitch they burst like waves
Rebounding from a sea-wall. Harriet,
Voluptuously round and more, ignores
The noise, and saunters to the Stewart house,
Leaving the din and care to Grandmamma.

Is it the wind or heat that shimmers through
The tops of the marsh grass--a dancing line
Of gray between the greens of marsh and trees,
Between the blues of sky and Tuckahoe?

VII

The Ladder

"To me, this ladder was really a high invention, and possessed a sort of charm."

A woodsplitter takes pride in what he does,
If he's worth anything.
Isaac was free, and had to earn his keep,
So I'd like to have seen
The ladder from the floor to loft
In Betsey Bailey's hut.
More than a ladder, yet not quite a stair,
With split treads and a decent run,
Built for the two extremes of life.

Beside the fire, Grandmamma bends to turn
The sweet potatoes baking on the hearth,
While up and down the ladder Isaac built,
A Jacob's dream of children climb,
Bethel in Tuckahoe.

VIII

Stray

"I am glad the time has come when the 'lions write history.'"

--Wendell Phillips

Did Betsey Bailey keep a cat? Some stray
That wandered from Holme Hill and found your hut
Warmer than Master's barn, if not so safe
From Betsey Bailey's mob?

When winter broke at last to cherry-time,
You woke to feel her nibbling at your toes
Or curled around your shoulders. Such a cat!
Remember when she brought her first chewink
To the threshold, and dumped it plop beside
The quart measure for breakfast? Betsey scowled,
But still you shared your bowl of cornmeal mush
When Betsey turned away.

Brave Cat, you purred:
Stalker of Tuckahoe, what tales have you
To tell when cats tell tales?

IX

Dust

"My fondness for horses--not peculiar to me more than to other boys--attracted me, much of the time, to the stables."

When a horse rolls, he first selects a spot
Devoid of grass, and reconnoitres it
Well round; once satisfied, he slowly leans
Against the air, and then contracts his legs
As if arthritic: formally he bows
Till foreknees touch the ground, now tucks himself
Under behind, then with a healthy groan
He falls on hip and shoulder and begins
The serious part of roll.

A yellow dog
Till now a spectator darts through the fence
And leaping side to side plays with the hoofs
Now dancing overhead in clouds of dust.
Over and over, back and forth they go,
The rolling ritual of Tuckahoe.

Lessons

"The slave boy escapes many troubles which befall and vex his white brother."

No verses in the nursery,
No lectures on propriety,
No knife to use improperly,
Or fork to handle awkwardly.

Never soils the table cloth:
On Betsey's floor eats bread and broth;
Seldom tears or spoils his clothes:
Wears but a shirt from head to toe.

Never the little gentleman:
None asks it of the colored hands.
If he escapes the older boys,
He trots along in heathen joy.

And, when the master's shadow passes,
The white boy's freedom he surpasses.

XI

Tell-Tale

"From that moment we proceeded through the woods together."

--Audubon, "The Runaway," 1834

If John James ever reached the Eastern Shore
He'd have had Lehman painting Hillsborough
Behind a yellowlegs and pickerel weed.
(Would Mason or Maria draw the plant?)

Too curious to fly, the shorebird stands
A short boat-length away and not quite sure
If you present a threat.
The Frenchman would have shot the bird by now
And stuck it up on wires before it spoiled.

Did they trust Isaac with a fowling-piece?
He trudges in the middle distance, stalks
And fires:
Stone-snipe tonight in Betsey Bailey's stew
And--who knows? Audubon to supper too.

XII

Lunar

"All Art is reminiscence now."

--Carlyle

The moon, the color of a carrot, rose
Full-lipped over the trees of Caroline,
One finger high, benignly smiling on
The fields that stretch away to the northwest.

When did the vision of a taut-calved girl
Give way to this rotundity and its
Benevolence? Is this a Druid's moon?
Did Africa have her equivalent?

When Betsey Bailey called you out at night
And said *Look at the Moon!* did she intend
To introduce you to a god whose face
And manner anciently belonged to Jove?
Or was it just the beauty of the night
Crossed by another shadow?

XIII

Lightning

"Bigotry has no head and cannot think,
no heart and cannot feel."

--Daniel O'Connell

"The lightning, when speaking for itself, is among the most
direct, reliable, and truthful of things."

This ancient oak, held up less by its roots
Than the regard of reverent passersby,
Stood by the banks of Tuckahoe until
The lightning struck it down (the last decree),
Its trunk an empty hole four feet across,
The ruin of a tree even before
It fell.

Now, leaves drooping, and branches bent
And broken, limbs as big around as men
Shattered and split, without a heart or head,
Its falseness gapes.

*The waters of the Flood
Carried the acorn that became that oak
To Tuckahoe, Grandmamma Betsey warns,
To be a lesson that the oldest lie
By its own weight and sudden truth will die.*

XIV

Red-Wings

"Male unmistakable; black with red epaulets."

--Forbush, 1927

Sentinels of the marshes, the Red-Wings
Parade the boggy ooze of Caroline
Along the Tuckahoe, their *conk-a-ree*
A warning to the overbold to halt:
Who goes there? Friend? Advance and give the sign.
Just then the treacherous soggy turf gives way,
And your incautious footstep plunges you
Into the dark and watery depths below.

Black soldiers with their scarlet epaulets,
Their bronze guns booming through the southern swamps--
What a dream for a boy of four or five!
But when that dream came true, the Union lost
More blackbirds in the parishes
Than swans at Gettysburg.

The Net

"I have known her to be in the water waist deep for hours,
seine-hauling."

The laurel's faded now;
The tide as low as you have seen
In Tuckahoe.
Long margins of mud lead away North
A row of turtles, one by one, dissolves
From bank and branch into the creek below;
The dark surface shivers with silversides.

*Fisherman Peter out at sea--
Betsey draws the seine away from shore--
He fish all night and he fish all day.
Walking upstream now she starts to turn,
Follows the net's pull:
He catch no fish but he catch some soul,
In Tuckahoe.*

Tetuckough

"I have been known as a Negro, but I wish to be known here and now as Indian."

When Petalesharoo came east did he
Pass for a Negro? Did he look like you?
My little Indian, Old Master said
(Before he *got ahold* of you, that is).
And on a Hudson River steamer once
A missionary-looking man in black
Addressed you as a red-man of the west,
Until you set him straight.

Well, Betsey might
Have been part Nanticoke. Did she tell you
The Talbot fable of the theft that gave
Your creek its name? *Somebody took a hoe*.
I'd rather think old Isaac made that up
To tease you, and that Grandmamma would know
Tetuckough is the root of Tuckahoe.

XVII

Midnight

"Scandalous and shocking as is the fact, he boasted that he bought her simply '*as a breeder.*'"

Betsey wakes and rises,
Walks to the cabin door:
Behind, the quiet breathing
Of the children;
Before, the midnight gray of wheat
Silent and motionless
Along the banks of Tuckahoe.

Across the fields I see her dimly still,
This hour of all the hours of her life
Unfettered.

Unmoved, she gazes at the wheat, and then
Returns to Isaac's side, without a sigh,
Without a word,
Alone, at midnight.

XVIII

Caulking

"Here I rapidly became expert in the use of my calking tools; and, in the course of a single year, I was able to command the highest wages paid to journeymen calkers in Baltimore."

The mud-daubed logs of Betsey Bailey's hut
Were not too tight. When January came
With its cold, steady, Queen Anne County wind
You huddled in the loft or tucked your feet
Into the ashes of the fire, and dreamed
What it would take to stop the north-west wind.

It isn't likely that you figured then
That several strands of cotton laid in first,
Followed by oakum, and all sealed with pitch,
Might make the hut as tight as Noah's Ark.

A house like that would float on Tuckahoe.
But only if the journeyman returned:
The trade you'd someday learn in Baltimore
Would never stop a hole in Betsey's door.

XIX

The Path

"He literally runs wild."

The grass grows thinly here, green at the top,
But rusty as a new hoe near the ground,
Like a green haze inches above the path
Between the fields and Tuckahoe.

Abruptly underfoot a killdeer cries;
Panicked, it drags its outstretched wings,
And quivering fans its tail,
Flashes of rufus, white, and black: alive,
Imploring.

So adept at masquerade
It draws you off the path, conspicuous
By design, but failing to understand
Though hunger drives
The fox to follow the killdeer,
You follow for the beauty of its fear.

Blacksnake

"He held me, and I held him."

When you pick up a turtle it withdraws
Into its shell, or paddles at the air
Futilely, out of its element.

But a blacksnake, without a shell or feet,
Held just behind the head, begins to coil
Himself, turn upon turn, around your arm
Until you feel him tighten like a rope,
Pushing his way out of your grip as if
You meant no more to him than a tight fork
In a shadbush. Guilt mingles with your sweat:
You wish you'd let him go when first you heard
His *buzzing* tail. You wonder, is it fear
Or freedom drives him so, and it occurs
To you to ask the blacksnake *who holds who?*

Flowers Mill Road

"Genealogical trees did not flourish among slaves."

More weeds here than I know what to do with,
Or how to call them even:
Adam himself would shrink from naming them.

A Gray's Botany of paleo-lawn,
A tribute to the owner's laziness.

And after all these years of red-house clay
Are these the weeds that grew at Anthony's?
In a burst of silver down
Did your lips scatter dandelion tufts
Or your small fingers pry apart
The milkweed pods from Betsey Bailey's lot?

Do weeds keep genealogy to know
Which seed's from Africa and which
From Tuckahoe?

Passengers

"The naked woods are suddenly blue as with fluttering ribbons
and scarfs, and vocal as with the voice of children"

--John Burroughs, 1877

The caterpillar of the gypsy moth
Sunning itself on an electric fence:
A sight you never lived to see, but when
This fellow molts the woods will fill with moths
Trembling in scattered clouds between the trunks
Of oaks and poplars.

No, but you have seen
The pigeons, thicker than the leaves, break down
The trees they roosted in, and scour the ground
Below. When you were young, with poles and hoes
You knocked them from the air like quail that fell
Into the camp of Israel.
Their wings roared through the darkened sky for miles
As far as you could see above the fields
And woods of Tuckahoe.

XXIII

Bluebottle

"It was a long time before I knew myself to be a *slave*."

Consider the cornflower, eye to eye.
Is this the blue that oceans are? The stalk
Strident and bare, with here and there a leaf
More like a blade of grass than what we call
A leaf. And at every stalk's tip a bud,
Green at the base, and scaling into--what?
The color of the plums that Master gives--
And into petals more blue in your hand
Than in the field,
Like the bandana Betsey Bailey wears.

When you pulled up this stalk the root broke clean
Below the snake-spit: Wilted in your hand
You wonder if the cornflower wonders too,
Whether its purpose was itself or you?

Sweet Potatoes

"If good potato crops came after her planting, she was not forgotten by those for whom she planted; and as she was remembered by others, so she remembered the hungry little ones around her."

Gathered before the hard frosts in the fall,
Baskets of Betsey's sweet potatoes lie
Beside the hearth. Grandmamma Betsey lifts
Two wide oak boards, and on the cellar floor
She spreads a bed of sand. In circles, then,
She lays the sweet potatoes down, roots in,
Heads out, and with the dry sand covers them.
Course upon course she builds till all are thus
Preserved for winter.

After the spring rains,
In all directions Grandmamma is called
To place seedling potatoes in the hills
Round about Tuckahoe. If Grandmamma
But touches them at planting, it was said,
No one in Tuckahoe would beg for bread.

Lee's Mill

"It was a water-mill, and I never shall be able to tell the many things thought and felt, while I sat on the bank and watched that mill."

The ruined mill-gates rise out of the swamp
Like Segovia's Roman aqueduct.
A shot-up mailbox, rusty cans, and jars
(Empty but whole) commemorate the dump
Of some departed legion. A thrush pipes
Deep in the woods that used to be the pond.
The *gulp* of distant frogs, a bumble-bee
Drawn to the back-yard scent of the milkweed,
Abruptly punctuate the afternoon.
A hop merchant--a tattered butterfly--
Brushes my hand and lights a foot away;
Her tail the color of a blueberry,
A damselfly lights on the bridge itself:
Lee's Mill unravels like a sycamore.

Queen Anne Tractor

"Our implements of husbandry were of the most improved pattern, and much superior to those used at Covey's."

If you ask me, the worst job towards the fall
Is raking hay: alone, with bugs and chaff
In ears and throat and eyes, a wooden rake,
A water jar, and miles of windrows left.
And never once have I seen anyone
Outside my family do it. Was I
The last boy to be tortured raking hay?

Across the road a hundred new machines
Make farming bearable (not easier--
Farmers still work as hard). And yet they sell
Those hay-rakes in some stores, even today.
Varnished, with all their teeth, they don't look much
Like seasoned tools--not like what we remember:
Relics of waltzing with September.

XXVII

Premonitory

"How strongly strange and striking images are imprinted on the impressionable mind of youth, to remain ineffaceable through the passing years."

--Forbush, 1927

"I rejoice that there are owls."

--Thoreau, 1854

As a young man
I walked in winter from the college towns
North to Monadnock,
And in the early winter darkness camped
Under a pine, the very tree in which
A barred owl, an eight-hooter, chose to roost.

Early in that night's morning, to my fear,
The owl affirmed its presence and announced
My insecurity;
Now, twenty years beyond,
From off toward Bettie's Lot I hear that call,
Over and over in the damp June dusk,
And wonder if you listened to it, too:
Who, who are you? it asks; who, who are you?

XXVIII

Fences

"The old fences around it and the stumps in the edge of the woods near it, and the squirrels that ran, skipped, and played upon them, were objects of interest and affection."

How many miles of rail did Isaac split
And turn to fence? Did Isaac's maul and wedge
Define the boundaries of Tuckahoe?
So many splinters in Isaac's rough hands
In a lifetime of handling cedar poles:
Maybe his rails were chestnut--and his posts?
It's hard to think of posts in Tuckahoe.
I hope he laid his fence rails back and forth
And spared the need to dig--this clay's as hard
As locust posts.

Of course, a zig-zag fence
Might seem dishonest from incertitude:
I wonder if you ever stopped to think
What boundary was marked by Betsey's fence
Or what the gate meant?

XXIX

Isaac, Four A.M.

"I am a woodland fellow, sir, that always loved a great fire."

--All's Well

Old Isaac rises to relieve himself,
Leaving the warmth of Betsey Bailey's side,
Walks to the wooded edge of the ravine,
And by his fullness tells the hour of night.

There is no parish clock in Tuckahoe,
No chimes at midnight, only the chuck-wills-
Widow, perched on the well-sweep, to alarm
The lightest sleepers and the faintest hearts.

But only on a moonlit night, and now
There is no moon. From off towards Hillsborough
Over the dark marshes of Caroline
July's plum-colored clouds of morning rise.

Another hour before it's time to stir
The embers banked on Betsey Bailey's hearth.

XXX

Hillsborough

"That was a sad day for me, when I left for the Eastern Shore, to be valued and divided."

The bridge that spans the creek at Hillsborough,
Legacy of the *WPA*
(When what got built looked good and lasted till
Its builders died), replaced a bridge you might
Have known. Where Tuckahoe's three counties join,
Now overgrown with trumpet-vine and flanked
By day-lilies, a phoebe guards the bridge.

And yours? Did Betsey let you linger there
While she went up to town?

It must have been
The main accomplishment of Hillsborough
To keep its bridge in good repair. Today,
I feel your hand upon my shoulder here,
And watch the concrete crumble.

XXXI

North

"These negroes I raised myself; and intended to give them their freedom."

--Aaron Anthony

Come up from the fields, Jenny;
Rest beside me, Jenny--don't shiver so--
Does my touch startle you, Jenny?
Close your eyes, Jenny, and know
You'll wake to find your Noah with you still,
Jenny.

The morning meets you, Jenny, in the creek:
Haste upstream, lilies tugging at your feet,
Jenny,
Without an ark, wading to Ararat,
Jenny.

Behind the bank above you sings a wren:
Jenny Bailey, Jenny Bailey, Jenny Bailey, come;
Up the river, up the river, up the river, run!

Thimbletown

"I fell upon the ground, and wept a boy's bitter tears"

From Tuckahoe to Thimbletown
Is just across the corn;
So come with me for a merry walk,
All on a summer's morn.

*Will Betsey Bailey sweep you up
And carry you off to Wye?
Hurry and follow the dusty ruts
From Thimbletown to Wye.*

When Thimbletown is far behind,
Into the woods we'll roam:
Remember that the longest road
Is the one that leads from home,

*When Betsey Bailey carries you off
From Thimbletown to Wye.*

XXXIII

Hester

"Did heaven look on,
And would not take their part?"

--*Macbeth*

For my sixth birthday: my first pair of jeans.
How proud I felt, striding along the path
That twisted through our irises and brush.

I'm six,
I said, the denim stiff and creaky blue.
I'm six,
As if I'd reached the pinnacle of life,
Feeling my childhood past, and now engaged
In being fairly grown (if not quite up),
Could I have been more happy or more free?

At Wye, old Anthony trussed Hester up
To a steel hook, and flogged her till the blood
Dripped to the floor and ran to where you hid,
When you were six.

Harriet 1826

"Her grave is, as the grave of the dead at sea, unmarked, and without stone or stake."

*There is beneath the sky no enemy
Like slavery to crush the filial love
Of families: father a mystery,
Brothers and sisters strangers to me still,
Mother that bore me buried in a myth.*

In Hillsborough the cemetery lies
Along the tracks, as if the souls one day
Would ride to heaven, but in Bettie's Lot
No sign remains of gravesite, white or black.
Somewhere among these fields and this ravine
Are buried most of Betsey Bailey's kin.
They lie like Quakers, marked by sod alone,
In cloudy catacombs of memory,
Clinging to wisps of immortality.

Sheep

"Flocks of little children from five to ten years old, might be seen on Col. Lloyd's plantation, as destitute of clothing as any little heathen on the west coast of Africa."

"There is more wool and flax in the fields."

--Emerson's *Nature*

In your day the Merino was for wool
And Cotswold was for mutton. Anthony
Seems not to have indulged in such a sport
As raising sheep: your shirt was made of flax.
If mutton made its way to Master's house,
It must have come almost by accident.
You'd think a man with thirty *head* of slaves
Could manage sheep.

On Bettie's Lot today
Sheep safely graze, two hundred years too late
To alter the economy, or green
The sterile landscape. What might you have been
If sheep had once replaced corn, beans, and wheat?
If children dressed in wool, and hand in hand,
Had played in Talbot's green and pleasant land?

XXXVI

Vernacular

"I got Master Tommy's copy books and a pen and ink, and, in the ample spaces between the lines, I wrote."

These three- and five-bay houses, perched on piers,
Skinny and tall to let the wind go through,
Have lasted for the century and more
Since you came back. The houses made of brick,
The older houses, some have lasted too,
Trusted and plaqued on their recognizance.

At Wye, the great house largely looks the same,
The tree-lined drive leads still to the great arc,
And fields of grain still grow on either side,
But quiet now, the remnant, not the hub,
Of empire. In repose, the captain's house
Stands idle, neither Anthony nor Auld.

But the quarters, and Katy's noisy den?
You razed them with your voice and with your pen.

XXXVII

Escape

"On sped the train, and I was well on the way to Havre de Grace before the conductor came into the Negro car to collect tickets and examine the papers of his black passengers."

The President Street Station, derelict,
Stands in a parking lot in Baltimore
Like Stonehenge waiting for an equinox.
Hard-hatted workers buttress the old brick
With mortar, cinder-block, and two-by-fours.
A second story window vomits trash
Into a Schafer's Roll-Off bin beside
A Spot-a-Pot.

One can imagine here
A train shed, and the rush of waiting steam.
A young black sailor swings himself aboard
The open platform of the coach as if
He lay aloft to loose a royal sail.

*O, God! that I were on your gallant deck,
And under your protecting wing!*

XXXVIII

New Bedford 1841

"Are the green fields gone?"

--"Loomings"

"Judah is gone into captivity because of affliction, and because of great servitude."

--"Lamentations"

The low, wide building stands with open door
Invitingly; a smoky light within
Barely illuminates an ash-box on
The porch: ashes that lay Gomorrah low?

It seems the great Black Parliament has met
In Tophet, and a hundred faces turn
To peer--a black Angel of Doom holds forth:
Blackness of darkness is the preacher's text.

*Woe unto you, slaveholding hypocrites,
Who swallow camels though you strain at gnats.
Woe unto you, you scribes and Pharisees,
For you are like the whited sepulchres,
Unclean with dead men's bones.*

*Saith the Lord,
Shall I not visit Zion for these things?*

XXXIX

England

"I have traveled almost from the Hill of Howth to the Giant's Causeway, and from the Giant's Causeway to Cape Clear."

When you described the County you did not
Forget that it was flat. It's possible
You never saw a mountain till you raised
The coast of Ireland from the *Cambria*.
I guess you made up for it then. Two years
In England should have brought you to the Lakes'
Emancipating hills. At Rydal Mount
Perhaps you walked with Wordsworth, whose "Toussaint"
Could well have been for you. From Loughrigg Fell
Stretches the landscape of the Poet's mind,
Higher and higher to Helvellyn's brow.

And it was only after you returned
From Eden, that you tried in words to show
The flat depravity of Tuckahoe.

XL

Rochdale

"When I went to England that country was in the midst of a tremendous agitation."

Deep in the smoky midlands you began
To lecture to the English working-man
For sweat's the same
In Tuckahoe or Nottingham

*And what a worker earns, that he should keep,
And what his labor sows, that should he reap,
In labor or in capital.*

In Manchester you filled the Free Trade Hall,
Arousing the descendants of John Ball,
While in an alley underneath a hill,
A Rochdale warehouse gathered men of will
And future fame,
Whose stern cooperation made it clear
That you were not alone a pioneer.

XLI

In the Quarry

"When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them."

--John Brown

Among the rocks at Chambersburg you read
The history he wrote, stone upon stone,
Kansas to Canada, as clear to you
As to Lyell the sands of Salisbury.

Come with me! I'll protect you with my life.

Two days you wrestled with the angel Brown
And lost. Shields Green, the Emperor, goes down
With the Old Man; the perfect trap springs shut;
Virginia turns the gallows to a cross.

But threats of hanging hounded you to sea,
A Jonah's voyage made more bitter still
By losing one of those you left behind,
A loss you hadn't felt since Tuckahoe,
And, even then, had scarcely come to know.

The War

"The raising of these two regiments was the beginning of great things for the colored people of the whole country; and not the least satisfaction I now have, is the fact that my two sons were the first two in the State of New York to enlist in them."

When the war came, you watched your people build
The forts, dig the entrenchments, grow the corn
And cotton of the South, a people in
Rebellion to themselves.

Then how you yearned
To wear the eagle button, and to bear
The musket on your shoulder. And, in time,
You sent two sons to war. Was this the price
Your faith was asked to pay?

When Shaw went down
And with him half his men in that dread night
At Wagner, did you feel like Abraham
Knowing your sacrifice was pure, yet still
Willing to search the bushes for a sheep?

Thinking it over now, could you again
Sacrifice sons to prove that they were men?

XLIV

Anne Catharine Buchanan

"I never accepted such a gift with a sweeter sentiment of gratitude than from the hand of this lovely child."

Your fear was premature. When last you saw
Lloyd's daughter she was just a girl, eighteen,
And now a widow. Still, you find her youth
Reflected in her eyes and speech; she calls
You to her side, and so you sit and talk
As equals. When you rise to go, a girl--
A grandchild--fetches you a gift of flowers.

Was that the day you finally believed
The war was won? Brief victory, but in
The latest generation you can hope
That war and slavery are dead and gone.
As for Anne Catharine, she stands between
The Admiral whose world went down in doom
And the grandchild whose life has yet to bloom.

Chapel District 1878

"Nothing beside remains."

--"Ozymandias"

"When one has advanced far in the journey of life, when he has seen and traveled over much of this great world, and has had many and strange experiences of shadow and sunshine, when long distances of time and space have come between him and his point of departure, it is natural that his thoughts should return to the place of his beginning."

Thirty years since,
The standard railroad of the world
Followed the tomato farms to seed.
A century's cinders cling to hollow ties
That nearly brought the world to Bettie's Lot.
When you returned to Tuckahoe
You came by cart.

Trotting beside an air-conditioned Ford,
A horse kicks up the dust where you husked corn,
The fence of gleaming plastic guaranteed
Never to fade,
To outlast the fields themselves:
Better than Ike's split rails
Or Betsey Bailey's hut.

XLVIII

Tappers Corner

"Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
The hooly blisful martir for to seke."

--Chaucer's General Prologue

In Concord, home of truth and Emerson,
The pilgrims come to Walden one by one,
Each with a stone, and build a cairn that marks
The site of Henry David Thoreau's house.
And every year they cart the stones away
And start again.

At Bettie's Lot there is
No cairn or shrine to mark your origin,
Only the misplaced signs on New Bridge Road,
But still the pilgrims come, and the word spreads.
After the winter wheat is harvested,
Like Cumae's Sibyl each conducts the next:
As Freeman guided you to the ravine,
Virgil leads Dante through the muddy fields
To Betsey Bailey's home in Tuckahoe.

XLIX

Haiti 1818

"I am charged with sympathy for Haiti"

In March, a mad and weary Petion
Hands the republic over to Boyer,
And dies.

In April, all of Port-au-Prince stands still
To mark his funeral, while in the north,
Cristophe rages and reigns, and Boyer sets
A line of bayonets from Leogane
To Cibao's isolated peaks.

At Môle St. Nicholas a young *marchand*
Leans on an elbow in the Haitian sun;
Smiling to contemplate the coffee crop,
She cocks her head to hear her lover sing:

*La nuit quand moi dans cabane
Dans bras moi kimbé où.*

L

Haiti 1891

"She, by her bravery and her blood, was free."

Free long before you knew your freedom lay
Before you, Haiti stuck in the South's throat
Like a black bone.

Far to the north of Port-au-Prince you gaze
Down on the tumbled walls of Sans-Souci;
The Citadel Henri is quiet now;
The silent guide beside you peels a lime
That would have graced Old Master's table once
At Wye.

South without being sold,
Black without being bold,
As natural to you as Betsey's house,
A calm you haven't known
Since Tuckahoe.

Some Notes on *Tuckahoe*

By chance, in 1996 I moved to the northeast corner of Talbot County just as I was working on a production of my play about Frederick Douglass and John Brown, *Prospect for Freedom*. When I learned that Douglass was born only two miles away, I began a cycle of poems that looked at the county (and beyond) through his eyes as well as my own. Naturally, I have depended heavily on Douglass's three autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), and on Dickson Preston's *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years*.

Title Page: Wordsworth's line probably inspired Henry David Thoreau's remark "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads" ("The Pond in Winter," *Walden*).

Surroundings: The imagery in this poem is lifted literally from FD's autobiographies, as are all unascribed epigraphs. "Ague and fever" is malaria.

Grandmamma Betsy: The "you" in the poems is usually a young (or retrospective) FD, but here, and occasionally elsewhere, the poet addresses the subject of the poem.

Harriet: FD published the abolition journal *North Star* in Rochester, New York. He later dropped the title because of the ubiquity of the symbol in the abolition press.

February 1818: "Hunters in the Snow," primarily. When Jenny escaped with her husband Noah, her daughter Mary--the "Jen's first" of this poem--was sold south in retaliation.

Days: The hog-nose, a small and nominally non-poisonous snake, produces a secretion that can trigger a severe allergic reaction.

Demarcation: Shortly before FD's birth, Harriet ceased to be hired out as a field hand and stayed at Holme Hill Farm in Tuckahoe, then rented by a Mr. Stewart.

Stray: The Phillips letter introduces FD's 1845 *Narrative*.

Lessons: The ragged psalm meter is representative of the didactic doggerel FD escaped from as long as he remained in Tuckahoe. He probably encountered it in full force in the Auld household in Baltimore.

Tell-Tale: Audubon encouraged a thirteen year-old boy, Joseph Mason, to paint flowers to accompany his bird portraits. He later hired George Lehman, a German-Swiss landscape painter, to provide a dozen and a half of the most successful backgrounds to the paintings that became *The Birds of America*. Maria Martin, sister-in-law to Audubon's friend John Bachman, also provided paintings of plants for this

collaborative effort.

Lunar: I think the "Man in the Moon" is perhaps most strikingly visible about three days after the full, at moon-rise, when shadows on the moon emphasize lips, eyebrows, and eyes that seem to gaze just to your left.

Red-Wings: During the Civil War, Rhode Island was famous for its batteries of artillery (whose trim color, appropriately, is red), several of which fought with distinction at Gettysburg in the largest artillery battle on the continent. But the highest casualty rate of all Rhode Island regiments was sustained by the Fourteenth Heavy Artillery, a black regiment ravaged by disease in the bayous of Louisiana.

Tetuckough: The "root" here seems to be *tuk*, an Algonquin form meaning *river* when found in compound words. The plant called *Tuckahoe* is the Arrow Arum, characteristic of river flora. "Petalesharoo" was a Pawnee who captured the American imagination when he visited the national capital in 1821, "destined as well by mental and physical qualifications, as by his birth, to be the future leader of his people," according to James Fenimore Cooper.

Midnight: Although FD never applies the thought directly to his grandmother, it seems obvious that Betsey Bailey's role paralleled that of Covey's slave.

Caulking: "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,/Might stop a hole to keep the wind away." (*Hamlet*, V.i)

The Path: Yes, a *new* hoe. An old hoe is simply dark brown, but a new hoe--the first time it rusts--is bright orange.

Blacksnake: Not a rattle, of course, but when the blacksnake becomes agitated it vibrates its tail and, if the tail touches anything, produces the buzzing noise of the poem. It's very unnerving the first time you experience this.

Flowers Mill Road: The Red House Farm, Anthony's farm between Norwich Creek (which crosses Flowers Mill Road) and Lee's Mill.

Sweet Potatoes: Hills of potatoes, that is. Despite the name "Holme Hill Farm," there are no hills to speak of in Tuckahoe.

Lee's Mill: In June, the flowering milkweed smells like lilac.

Hillsborough: In his autobiographies, FD spelled Hillsboro two ways. In *Tuckahoe* the older spelling gives the third syllable more weight (at least to the eye).

North: The Carolina Wren.

Thimbletown: Present-day Cordova, Maryland.

Harriet 1826: Some time after FD departed, the site of Betsey's house became known as "Bettie's Lot."

Sheep: Regrettably, America has no pastoral tradition--no balance between wilderness and *urbs*. Although Col. Lloyd was credited with introducing Merino sheep to the Eastern Shore, their presence seems not to have entered young FD's consciousness--either aesthetically or sartorially. FD stated that Captain Anthony could sell one slave a year for seven or eight hundred dollars. So much for sheep.

Vernacular: Aunt Katy's kitchen behind the Captain's house, bleak not only from its own associations but also from the immediate contrast to Betsey Bailey's.

Escape: Or a solstice. The current ruin, associated primarily with the attack on the 6th Massachusetts Regiment by a Baltimore mob, was built after FD's flight by rail.

England: In the autobiographies, FD does not mention meeting Wordsworth, or, surprisingly, any other major literary figure of Britain. But the latter's sonnets to the Haitian patriot Toussaint L'Ouverture and to the British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson suggest the connection.

Rochdale: FD was a welcome guest of M.P. John Bright of Rochdale. This industrial town was the home of the first successful workers' cooperative, founded in 1844 by the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society. In England, antislavery sentiment was closely linked to labor reform in its most radical manifestations. "John Ball" was a leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 ("When Adam delved and Eve span/Who was then the gentleman?").

In the Quarry: FD's daughter Annie, ten years old, died in his absence--as had Harriet and Betsey earlier.

The War: "Till the blacks were armed, there was no guaranty of their freedom. It was their demeanor under arms that shamed the nation into recognizing them as men" (T. W. Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*). The question, like Abraham's temptation, is only theoretical: Lewis and Charles survived the war, as did a third brother who served, Frederick, Jr.

Admiral Buchanan: FD desired to return to Tuckahoe, but expressed some reservations about visiting the Lloyds. Jeff Davis visited the Buchanans on December 18, 1867. The Admiral's grave is marked by two mortar shells from the Mexican War, a conflict widely regarded as being fought for the extension of slave territory.

Anne Catharine Buchanan: FD visited Mrs. Buchanan in 1881. The day before his visit, Howard Lloyd had presented FD with a spray of ivy and myrtle from the family burial-ground.

Monadnock: Near the border of New Hampshire and Massachusetts, this mountain has always figured largely in the New England imagination. Ravens are perhaps not quite so uncommon here today as were, say, independent-minded Black editors in the Old Colony.

Chapel District 1878: I.e., the Pennsylvania Railroad. When FD returned, this branch was probably part of the Maryland and Delaware Railroad.

River: Although FD describes his return to Easton, St. Michaels, and Wye, *Life and Times* is silent about his return to Tuckahoe.

Tappers Corner: In Concord, "Thoreau" sounds like "thorough." When the highway department erected signs to mark FD's "birthplace," they initially misspelled his name. The signs are set along Maryland route 328, variously named Matthewstown Road or New Bridge Road.

Haiti 1818: The Bay of Leogane, not the town. "At night when I am in my cabin/I hold you in my arms."

Haiti 1891: FD's tenure as minister to Haiti was among the last public services of his life. Ironically, FD felt more at home here and in England than he ever did in New York or Washington. On February 20, 1895, FD died in Anacostia; he was buried in Rochester.