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Singing Counter

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SINGING COUNTER

after Hayes and Mary Turner, Valdosta, Georgia, May 1918

The rope, the tree,
the tired comparison to Jesus on the Cross. Avoid the tropes.

The metaphors.
This stands for *that*, but if no one *black* ever says *that*, how would

someone *white* learn
this? How would any of *us*? I desire the surprise of intellectual,

fractured lyrics.
Yet here I am, refusing refusal. Calling the mob out by name.

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Not even safely—
as with an anonymous *South*—but uncomfortably. As with *white*

man by *white* man.
(I'm scared just saying it.) And locating each in case

you have trouble.
(My People are exceedingly patient.) There: the expected

poor, drunk one,
neck darkened in the field. He's a nice cliché. But not the next:

a churchgoer
and father. A man who believes in Christ and the love of a virtuous

woman who fries
chicken for picnics and stirs up lemon cakes. After the lynching

he will continue
to believe and live his life in a good fashion. Beside him, his little boy,

smiling, his teeth
only beginning to loosen as he moves from baby to heir. He will grow,

remember his father's
beauty, the godly meat in that chest. In the back of this crowd,

a young scholar
home from college, brought by his friends who wanted to see

if what their science
professor said was true, that niggers did not feel pain the same

as better men.
Too old for the rowdy festival, someone's grandfather

remains at home.
An educated-in-the-North patrician who owns the newspaper

that later will run
the story. A savage raised his voice to a man. (One tenor

singing counter
to the other.) Or, he asked for his pay on Friday. Or, he

did not dance
when desired. Or, he did not step off the sidewalk for a lady.

(Should I explain
the Southern Anthropological Equation of *lady plus race*?)

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Her flowered honor
required protecting. The imperative of her womanhood:

ax and gasoline
and black blood. Pig-like screams of what is not a man to the mob,

but a side
of meat. What never was in this place. I will admit these things

in my contemporary
time, but not out loud. My white friends and colleagues

(who are not
My People) would feel indicted by my saying, *I look at you and yes,*

72

I'm frightened.

I wonder if you would have sliced off my toe as I hung there, roasting over

the slowest fire

the mob could build. And later, killed my pregnant wife, the baby

still inside her.

I'm a sinner. I fear what I crave. Or love. Part of the falling,

the romance,

is a quandary keeping the present *here*. The past *there*.

A liquid-filled jar

of sex in a general store: before that day, its name was Hayes.

He made the mistake

of calling to her. Mary answered, her hand resting on her belly.