

Facts

I sit in a live oak's shade,
savor of tomato in my mouth,
a salty breeze doing nothing
to cool me. In my dorm room,
I tacked up the Stars & Bars
next to the Beatles poster
& the replica Bill of Rights.
The roots of the live oak undulate
the bricks under my feet. Each branch

thick as the trunk of the red oak
where crows preen & bicker back home,
this bearded behemoth eats sun.
Each house on these Georgian blocks,
the Italianate theater, the church I glimpse
through the leaves of four more live oaks—
slaves dug the cellars, sited the sumps,
dead-lifted, mortared & made plumb

the foundation stones. Even jumbled
in the tackle box, Confederates were dashing.
I laid them superb lines of fire on the train table.
The books I've read! Ordered by nothing
but the fact I've read them. Illiterate laborers
who owned nothing, peanut-shell coffee
cooking on the fire, fiddle-head ferns
for dinner, lambs & lions slaughtered together.
John Brown was a murderer. John Brown owned
a tannery forty miles south of my home.
Starving men made rotten meat of the beaten
black troopers at Fort Pillow. I can imagine
anything—John Brown parting the waters

of the Chesapeake, Stonewall Jackson's
maggoty eye sockets. Hardly spring yet,
sweat sheaths me. A girl runs past,
then two more in matching yellow dresses,
then a laughing man in a sweetgrass boater

racing to tag them. The slave market
sits four blocks north, the docents well-versed,
manacles & bills of sale under glass.
A whiff of roasting meat wafts me back

to 1962, unremarkable 1962, the auction block
in San Antonio something to film for five
seconds of a day gluttoned by wheeling, darting,

gut-cramp play, then a rodeo, then barbecue,
coleslaw, lemonade in the deep shade

by the river. This is just the beginning.

Charleston, South Carolina, 2015