No photograph stands alone, and a painful one is more clearly seen in a constellation of other images.

Danny Lyon's photograph "The Cotton Pickers" makes me tense. I love and hate it at the same time. The photograph is from the late 1960s, but its form is so iconic and its atmosphere so fabular that it could have been made a hundred years earlier. On a wide field, men are stooped over in agricultural labor. The field stretches a great distance back, ending in a line of trees that marks out the horizon. The men working the field are dressed all in white. They have long white sacks on their backs and white hats on their heads. It's hard to tell exactly how many of them there are, perhaps just under three dozen, but the four or five in front are distinct. These men in front, in addition to being dressed similarly, are stooped in unison. Their faces are very dark, devoid of detail. It cannot be said with certainty that they are black men (they could simply be caught in deep daytime shadow), but they very likely are.

This photograph ("The Cotton Pickers, Ferguson Unit, Texas," to give it its full title) has an extraordinary sense of rhythm, a rhythm that makes it as visually arresting as René Burri's photograph of four men on a rooftop in São Paulo. "The Cotton Pickers" was taken on a prison farm. The long curve of each man's back is continuous with the line of the sack slung from his shoulder and set down behind him on the ground. This gives each man a strange profile, as though he were some long-bodied, giant-tailed marsupial. The photograph has such high contrast that it looks more like an engraving or a painting. Set against the field's darkness, the cotton crop is floral in effect, or astral. Or, as the escaped slave Solomon Northup wrote in a surprising passage in his 1853 memoir, "Twelve Years a Slave": "There are few sights more pleasant to the eye, than a wide cotton field when it is in the bloom. It presents an appearance of purity, like an immaculate expanse of light, new-fallen snow."

Images make us think of other images. Photographs remind us of other photographs, and perhaps only the earliest photographs had a chance to evade this fate. But soon after the invention of photography, the world was full of photographs, and newly made photographs could not avoid semantic contamination. Each photograph came to seem like a quotation from the great archive of photographs. Even the earliest photographs are themselves now

Photograph by Danny Lyon

Magnum Photos

Next Week: On Money, by John Herrman

burdened by this reality, because when we look at them, we do so in the knowledge of everything that came after. All images, regardless of the date of their creation, exist simultaneously and are pressed into service to help us make sense of other images. This suggests a possible approach to photography criticism: a river of interconnected images wordlessly but fluently commenting on one another.

But words have their place, too, and what goes without saying often needs to be primed with speech. The images that associatively come to my mind when I look at "The Cotton Pickers" are highly personal, but they remain opaque until I name them. The pattern of the cotton field in Lyon's photograph reminds me of something the great art critic John Berger once wrote: that when we look at a star-filled night sky, we are able to tell stories about it only by organizing the stars into constellations. A strong photograph like "The Cotton Pickers" is like a star on a clear night. We can track it better when we locate it in relation to other stars.

These men in Lyon's photograph with their outsize burdens immediately remind me of figures in one of Sebastião Salgado's photographs of the Serra Pelada gold mine in Brazil, the entire picture plane of which is an array of small sacks set on glistening backs. There is no individuality: The men are interchangeable parts in a terrifying theater of mass labor. And in the drawing of "Prudence" (1559) from Pieter Bruegel the Elder's series on the Seven Virtues, there is a detail of two figures side by side, almost identical to each other, their heads obscured by the two enormous sacks they prudently haul away for a future time of need. When I began to think about Lyon's image, the Salgado and Bruegel pictures, quietly at rest in my memory, glowed in response, as though summoned.

"The Cotton Pickers, Ferguson Unit, Texas" is one of a series of photographs that Lyon made in Texan prisons over a 14-month period from 1967 to 1968. Lyon already had behind him a fine body of work, done at the forefront of the civil rights movement, as the official photographer of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He gained unfettered access to six prisons in Texas, including the Jim Ferguson unit in Midway, and emerged with a portfolio of images of the guards, the prisoners, their interactions and the prisons' conditions.

"Gold Miners, Serra Pelada, Pará, Brazil, 1986." Previous page: "The Cotton Pickers, Ferguson Unit, Texas."

This project became the basis of his 1971 book, "Conversations With the Dead." The book is full of excellent photographs, some of which work in much the same way as "The Cotton Pickers," like a photograph of the Ellis unit clearing a wood: white-capped, white-clad men distributed against a dark ground.

But when I try to understand the mysterious visual effect of "The Cotton Pickers," I don't restrict my reading to those images that are obviously related to it. I am interested in how Lyon came by the image and in the images that might have influenced him, but I am also interested in how my mind receives it, without reference to Lyon's intentions. I think not only of Salgado and Bruegel but also of the sack-carrying migrants in Jacob Lawrence's painting "From Every Southern Town Migrants Left by the Hundreds to Travel North," a panel in his Migration Series (1940–41). The poor sometimes have bags, but throughout history the very poorest have had to make do with sacks, or simply with a cloth gathered up at the edges. This bulging, precarious load is part of our collective memory of deprivation, connoting wearisome toil, hasty migration or both.

Consider, for instance, an 1860s photograph by an unknown photographer of a winding line of black people standing in a field carrying loads on their heads. It

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Photograph by Sebastião Salgado

is an image of suffering, no question. But is the suffering related to an exodus, with its uncertain future, or is it related to brutal servitude, with the grim certainty that the labor is unending? This photograph is sometimes titled "Slaves Returning From the Cotton Fields in South Carolina," which suggests the latter; but the feeling of ambiguity remains. And I think of the way "The Cotton Pickers" is bound to other rhythmically satisfying images from the history of photography: Paul Strand's silhouetted figures dwarfed by the great buildings of Wall Street, Dorothea Lange's bent-backed Mexican migrant picking tomatoes, Lee Friedlander's note-perfect scatter of musicians walking on a New Orleans street.

"The Cotton Pickers" is an activist picture. Lyon hoped that his prison series would change the way people thought about incarceration. Perhaps it did. But it certainly couldn't stem the huge increase in the number of imprisoned Americans between the late '60s and now, or the way that increase disproportionately affected black Americans. "The Cotton Pickers," considered by itself, is also a work of compressed history. Within a single frame, we witness forced labor, the plantation economy, cotton's allure, black subjection, government control and the facelessness of the impoverished. It reaches back to images from the 19th century and before, and it stretches forward to the crouched and hooded prisoners of Guantánamo Bay.

It reaches back to images from the 19th century and before, and it stretches forward to Guantánamo Bay.

I hate "The Cotton Pickers." It's unpleasant to be confronted with the abasement of these men in the form of a photograph. But I love the photograph for its compositional harmony, which is like the harmony of a chain gang's song, or like the paradoxical pleasure Northup took in the sight of a cotton field in bloom.

A photograph can't help taming what it shows. We are accustomed to speaking about photographs as though they were identical to their subject matter. But photographs are also *pictures* — organized forms on a two-dimensional surface — and they are part of the history of pictures. A picture of something terrible will always be caught between two worlds: the world of "something terrible," which might shock us or move us to a moral response, and the world of "a picture," which generates an aesthetic response. The dazzle of art and the bitterness of life are yoked to each other. There is no escape. ◆

This poem takes its title from a poem by Lord George Byron, the most notorious of the 19th-century English Romantic poets. Byron wrote his poem — at age 29 — to lament his weariness and loss of energy for youthful misbehavior. McCrae's poem adapts the poem's basic structure to explore a different sort of weariness: His seems to be a song of postelection despair, an exhausted giving up on the possibility of ever escaping the legacy of slavery.

We'll Go No More a Roving

By Shane McCrae

— George Gordon, Lord Byron, although I first encountered it in a setting by George Walker, the first black composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music

We'll go no more a roving from
Our bodies   love who once had roamed
So far as almost to have been
The owners of our bodies then

And not their property we'll   go
No more from the master's fields   and no
More love   we'll will we lay no more
The master's yoke and gaze we bear

Down in the grass that is grass green
The grass will borrow from our skin
Its color and become us   love our
Skin will be all the Earth's wild colors

We'll go   no more a roving now
Except as the mule roves with the plow
The white stars make the endless black
A night   the master calls us back

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Illustration by R. O. Blechman