WHY I WRITE

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Much of what I have to tell you is anecdotal, rooted in a personal meditation, but throughout I have tried to tease out the implications of my own experience. I am reminded of T.S. Eliot’s ideas about poets writing about poetry: “The poet, at the back of his mind, if not as his ostensible purpose, is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing or to formulate the kinds he wants to write. He is not so much a judge as an advocate.”

It seems to me that all writers, at some point, must respond to a question—posed either by themselves or someone else—in order to answer, as Orwell did in his 1946 essay, “Why I Write.” The first time I had to do this I was trying to get into a graduate creative writing program and I needed a statement of purpose. Back then, my father, a poet and professor of English, suggested that I read—of all things—Orwell’s essay. I could barely contain my excitement when I sat down with it. His words were thrilling; they seemed to speak directly to me, emboldening me as they provided a scaffolding of ideas that seemed to justify one of my evolving attractions to words. These sentences stood out to me: “I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest, but I know which of them deserve to be followed”; and, “Looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives, and humbug generally.” Armed with Orwell’s words (I know I must have quoted him), I composed my essay, and—as I would find out a few years later—barely got into that graduate program. A famous poet on the admissions committee rejected the sheaf of poems and the statement included in my application by writing on a little slip of paper that I was “too concerned with my message to write real poetry.” I was lucky that a second poet on the committee, on yet another slip of paper, had concluded—instead—that I was “young and could be woken up.”

Later, when I learned of their remarks, I had to look up the word message and ponder the definition: a significant point or central theme, especially one that has political, social, or moral importance. And then, I asked myself: What was wrong with that? Hadn’t those things always
been a part of poetry? Didn’t the poems I loved stir in me a moral vision, a sense of empathy, of social, ethical engagement? Hadn’t I turned to them to learn something about myself, my relationship to the world? The poems of Yeats and Whitman, Auden and Bishop, Williams and Hayden, Brooks, Ahkmatova and Hughes: and did I not attend as much to their music, their sound, as to their meaning, the messages I took away from them? What mistake had I made by revealing that political, social, and ethical concerns undergirded my poems and gave me a sense of purpose? Discouraged, I began to ask myself what had made me think, beyond Orwell’s words, that I should be a writer and that the subject matter that would be my calling was worth answering in the language of poetry. Looking back at Orwell’s essay now, twenty years later, I see points to disagree with—and yet, there are still parts that ring true to me, that help me make sense of my early impulses and the commitments I have even today.

It should be noted that long before Orwell would arrive fully at his sense of political purpose, he discovered—as he puts it—the “joy of mere words,” the sounds and associations of them, how they could send shivers down one’s spine, pure pleasure. In this acknowledgment, I found an echo of my own experience—that moment of reading something that was thrilling in its use of language and that feeling of delight in words just for their sound; and later, that feeling of excitement at creating a pleasing pattern of sound stretched along a line, a stanza, and finally in the lyricism of an entire poem. As a small child, I had felt the joy of words in their juxtapositions—in the rhymes and near-nonsense phrases my mother sang to amuse me—long before I was conscious of their social or political power. That knowledge would come a few years later, when I read—in the 5th grade—*The Diary of Anne Frank*, and the words transported me to another time and place, and planted deep in me an empathy for the suffering of people living in very different circumstances than my own.

In his essay, Orwell begins by describing the conditions of his early childhood that inculcated in him this notion that he would be a writer. He mentions seeing his father very little, and this causing him to be lonely, to develop the lonely child habits of making up stories and holding conversations with imagined characters. “I think,” he writes, “from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with a feeling of being isolated and undervalued. I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life.” In Orwell’s words I hear the suggestion that the creation of that private world was a way to triumph over the circumstances of one’s daily life, and I
recognize in his experience some hint of my own. My parents divorced when I was a child and I, too, rarely saw my father—only in the summers: that circumstance creating for me a dual existence. Orwell gives a good deal of personal background information in the essay because, as he puts it, “I do not think one can assess a writer’s motives without knowing something of his early development. His subject matter will be determined by the age he lives in—at least this is true in tumultuous, revolutionary ages like our own,” and that “before he begins to write he will have acquired an emotional attitude from which he will never completely escape.” Orwell does not make these claims without a sense of caution, warning that a writer must discipline the temperament, effacing the self, though not altogether abandoning those early influences lest he kill the impulse to write. I am reminded of poet Philip Levine’s words: “I write what is given me to write.”

I can see now how much of my own early development as a writer was linked to my circumstances—the condition, place, and historical moment into which I was born and raised. For the nine months of the school year, I lived in Georgia with my mother. In my home I was a kind of outsider, isolated by my stepfather who was envious of my mother’s previous relationship with her former husband and contemptuous of me, the product of that relationship. Because my stepfather was reading my diary regularly, I began to write knowing that he would see it. He was, in a sense, my first audience—and I carried on a difficult conversation with him that could not be spoken aloud. For him to challenge me on what I wrote would be for him to admit what he was doing—invading that private world of words I was setting down on paper. I began to think, then, that nothing I wrote could be private, and that my words—like Anne Frank’s—might speak not just for me, but also to and for other people.

During the summer months, I went back to Mississippi and stayed with my maternal grandmother. In her neighborhood there were no children my age, and I spent my days turning inward, like Orwell—as the lonely child does—reading, making up stories and writing them down in the form of poetry or prose, musings upon my own self and my position in the world mostly in the form of a racialized inquiry, a speculation supported by a kind of rudimentary research. For example, I spent countless hours reading the encyclopedia and one day came upon the section, in the 1967 edition, on Races of Man. There I learned what were supposed to be distinguishing racial characteristics—that if you were white, the ratio of femur to tibia was different than if you were black: in one race (the editors asserted), the femur is longer, in the other the tibia. I sneaked into my grandmother’s workroom to steal away with her tape measure
thinking it would finally reveal to me who and what I was. I was, after all, growing up black and biracial in Mississippi and Georgia, having been born on the heels of the Civil Rights movement, and I had begun to come face to face with notions of difference and how various aspects of my existence were often subjects of curiosity or contempt to many white people I encountered. Indeed, because of this, my father had begun telling me at an early age that I had to be a writer because of the very nature of my experience: that I had something important to say. I had no idea what it was, but I wanted to believe that what my father said was true. It would have been impossible then, as it is now, to say I am going to sit down and write a poem about social justice—though I see now how the hope for and commitment to it pervades every word I write, and it is the lens through which I see the world. As Edward Hirsch has written, “The poet wants justice. The poet wants art. In poetry there can’t be one without the other.”

When I was first starting out, my father could have easily directed me to countless other writers and their words: Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”; Keats’s principle aims of poetry “to sharpen one’s vision into the heart and nature of man”; James Baldwin’s “This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate from the disorder of life that order which is art”; or these words from Faulkner’s Nobel acceptance speech: “The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.” These are all ideas I believe in—and any of those writers might have led me to make assertions about my purpose similar to the ones I made after reading Orwell.

When I asked my father about it recently, he seemed amused that he had suggested Orwell and could not remember having done so. Perhaps he had wanted me to encounter Orwell’s notion of the four primary motivations for writing and to make a decision about where I stood: sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose. Orwell asserts that these motivations exist in different degrees in every writer, and that in any writer the proportions will vary from time to time according to the circumstances in which she lives. He describes the political purpose broadly: Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Furthermore he asserts that “no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.” Since encountering Orwell’s notion of those primary motivations years ago, I have come to understand that though I am in some ways compelled by each one, somewhere between two of
them—between historical impulse and political purpose—is an intersection, a place of overlap wherein I find my dominant motivation—or at least the one that deserves to be followed.

It makes sense to me now that I was headed here all along: everywhere around me in the late sixties and early seventies of my childhood I saw evidence of injustice—a cross burned on my family’s lawn, the poor segregated neighborhoods with sub-standard grocery stores and higher prices, the clothing stores where my grandmother was not allowed to try on the hats as white women did, all the everyday slights commonplace in people’s lives—not to mention the threat of real danger that loomed around us. The list goes on. An overly sensitive child, I committed to memory King’s words: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” and I thought of Anne Frank. As I grew older, it occurred to me that the world was changing, gradually, and that some of the more insidious forms of injustice were beneath the surface of what I could see around me. Along with the atrocities and overt injustices that came to us nightly on the world news report, the injustices of day-to-day life and the various forms of institutional injustice (in housing or education or the courts, for example) were the quiet, ongoing injustices—stunningly apparent—in the pages—and in the absences in the pages—of history. And the history of the place from which I’d come, intimate and personal as well as public and collective, was evidence to me of Heraclitus’ axiom: Geography is fate.

I had been born to the geography of the Deep South, the state of Mississippi whose name means great river—that river a metaphor suggesting all the hidden history in its murky depths, troubling the surface from underneath. I was born in the land of King Cotton, land of a brutal history of slavery, racism and injustice, land of violence, of lynchings and murders, one of the poorest states in the nation.

But also, I was born to a place of rich delta soil, one of the most fertile regions on earth; birthplace of the blues; home to a tradition of writers like William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Margaret Walker Alexander, and Tennessee Williams. I have inherited from this geography both great cultural richness and great suffering. I am guided by the words of Henry James: Be tethered to native pastures even if it reduces you to a backyard in New York. I am tethered to a place whose Jim Crow laws rendered my family, my people, second-class citizens, whose laws against miscegenation rendered my parents’ marriage illegal, my birth illegitimate not only in the customs but also in the constitution of the state. Thus, I write to claim my native land even as it has forsaken me, rendered me an outsider. I write so as not to be a foreigner in my homeland. I write
from a place of psychological exile. I take up the burden of history. I am
guided by King’s words: “No lie can live forever.”

Social justice depends on social awareness, not blindness, an aware-
ness rooted in both historical knowledge and a contemporary reckoning
with the past and its ongoing influence on the present. I write to tell a
fuller version of American history, to recover the stories and voices of
people whose lives have been marginalized, forgotten, erased, over-
looked. I write in order to redress the omissions and errors in history,
to confront the willed forgetting that haunts our interactions with each
other and to create a vision of a more just society based on reckoning
with our troubled past rather than forgetting it. I write because I believe,
as historian Michael Vorenburg has written in describing the ongoing
study of the Civil War, that “a better, more humane civilization can be
forged in the smithy of painful memory.” And that by restoring to our
collective memory “the savagery, heartlessness and racism” of our past,
“we can allow for the possibility of a civilization based on justice rather
than amnesia.”

How could I not, having been a product of my own tumultuous age—
the fate of my geography, its history—how could I not find a sense of
purpose in the beautiful idea of social justice for all human beings? I
can say that in my life writing poetry has been a necessity. But I am re-
minded, and so must also say, that inasmuch as the language of poetry is
about a kind of play, it has also been a privilege, a luxury that countless
people in the world do not have. I have always been more concerned
with people than with words. Were I to have sent that admission to the
graduate program, I might have found myself in the same position as
before, perceived to privilege message and meaning over whatever the
famous professor believed constituted “real” or pure poetry.

Later, that same professor would say to me, “Unburden yourself of
being black, unburden yourself of the death of your mother, and write
about the situation in Northern Ireland.” And also—at another time—
ironically, “Just pour your heart out in the poems.” Taken together or
separately, there’s an insidious implication beneath the famous poet’s
words—and it is not simply that he could not see or was not interested in
what was deepest in my heart. Early on in my journey toward becoming
a writer, I was nearly derailed by an unfortunate polemic in contempo-
rary American poetry—a bias that seeks to diminish meaning as part of
a poem’s twinned concerns of content and form, to foster the idea that
poetry is merely autotelic, to dismiss poems with social implications or
ethical vision, especially when written by someone from a group deemed
“other,” as merely “political”—in the way that word is used to suggest
suspicion of a poem’s value as pure poetry—and to render personal experience as passé.

Implicit in the famous poet’s statements is that Ireland might make for better subject matter—that he wasn’t interested in the particular experiences from which my poems came. It would have been different had he said, “Master the craft so that you can write beautifully about whatever it is you have been given to write.” Instead, he suggested that I write something different altogether, echoing former Academy of American Poets Chancellor John Hollander’s notion, articulated during an NPR interview, that black poets would write better poems when they stop writing from personal experience. Elizabeth Alexander, countering this notion in an interview, declared it “a particularly dangerous use of the idea that personal subjectivity is somehow passé.” She went on to say, “I think there is talk—which has currency in more than one place—that is really saying, I don’t want to hear that story; I don’t want to be confronted with what that voice is presenting to me.”

Certainly there are many poets and critics out there who believe that all personal experience is passé—my famous poet professor said as much on many occasions—though I have never heard anyone simplistically admonish white poets by saying they’ll write better poems when they stop writing from personal experience. Often, when poets who are from groups deemed “other” write about personal experience, some readers assume that the poems can’t speak to universal human experience, thus imparting the work with a “message” some readers would rather not encounter. Saying this, I am reminded of the young white woman I met while visiting a small college in South Carolina. Her professor had assigned a book of mine to the class, and when the student read the blurbs on the back informing her that the book was by a black woman and was about—among other things—black workers in the Jim Crow south, she dreaded reading it because, as she told me: “I didn’t think it would speak to me because it didn’t have anything to do with my experience.” She wasn’t referring to the fact that the book was about work she’d never done, but that it was about black people. What she initially believed underscores the notion that the experiences of black people can’t speak to universal, human experience. It’s implied on each book jacket that describes the poems inside it as “transcending black experience” in order to praise them for rising to the level of plain old human experience—as if the two are mutually exclusive. It also implies the notion that only black people and people from groups termed “other” experience race. It forgets or ignores that the experiences of white people are also experiences of race and that they too write from within a particular racialized experience.
of the world. Fortunately, that young woman came away from the book with an entirely different view.

This, I think, is why so many poets are “accused” (and it is often an accusation) of writing about political issues, of being too concerned with message, whether they intended to or not. I have been described many times as a poet who writes about race—though I can assure you that not only have I never sat down to write a poem on the theme of race, but also that I don’t consider my poems to be about race at all. That some of them have racial implications or come out of my racialized experience goes without saying. Geography is fate. But as Seamus Heaney has written, “To effect the redress of poetry, it is not necessary for the poet to be aiming deliberately at social or political change.” I assert, as my famous professor did, that a poet need only pour out her heart, and if a commitment to social justice is what is found there, it will infuse every word the way that one’s sensibilities always do. There is a poetic music that can bear the weight of these concerns. “Whether these poems are good or not,” wrote Denise Levertov, “depends on the gifts of the poet, not the subject matter.”

The implication that certain subjects (thus certain messages) belong in poems and that some do not is present each time I am asked—why poetry? This question usually comes after I have discussed my obsessions—the motivations that I believe deserve to be followed—as though I should have chosen some other vessel for my content, for that which I have been given to write. To that I ask, why not? I believe, after all, that poetry is the best repository for our most humane, ethical, and just expressions of feeling. This is because poetry ennobles the human soul, that it opens—not closes—our hearts. Poetry matters not only because of its aesthetic beauty, but also because of the possibility of humane intelligence—its ability to teach us what we have not known, to show us what we have been blind to, to ask of us the most difficult questions regarding our own humanity and that of others. Across time and space, it shows us how we are alike, not that we are different. It asks of us that we approach the world with more openness than we might employ in our daily lives. It asks that we be more observant, more compassionate, empathetic. I write because I cannot stand by and say nothing, because I strive to make sense of the world I’ve been given, because the soul sings for justice and the song is poetry.

What is heartening to me is the number of writers whose work continues to undertake these noble goals. There are many. For example: the way that Terrence Hayes is at once a strong advocate for social awareness and social justice in his poem “A Postcard from Okemah,” while
at the same time gracefully effacing the self, the personality behind the poem’s making.

A Postcard from Okemah

Turned from the camera’s eye, hovering, between river & bridge, the hung woman looks downstream, & snagged in the air beside her, the body of her young son.

They are tassels on a drawn curtain; they are the closed eyes of the black boy who will find them while leading his cow to the river bank; they are the bells that will clang around the animal’s neck when it lowers its head to drink. The boy dangles in midair like a hooked fish, his pants hanging from his ankles like a tail fin.

On the bridge women pose in aprons & feathered bonnets, the men wear wide-brimmed hats with bowties or dungarees; there are three small girls leaning against the railing & a boy nestled beneath the wing of his father’s arm.

I count sixty-seven citizens & children staring at what must have been a flash & huff of smoke. The photographer must have stood on a boat deck, though from this angle he could have been standing on the water with his arms outstretched. He must have asked them to smile at the camera & later, scrawled his copyright & condolences on the back of the postcards he made for the murdered man’s friends. “The Negroes got what would have been due
to them under process of the law,"
the sheriff said. His deputy
had been shot when the posse searched
the suspects’ cabin for stolen meat.

To protect her son, the mother
claimed she’d fired the gun.
The mob dragged them both
from the jail bound by saddle string.

If you look closely you can see a pattern
of tiny flowers printed on her dress;
you can see an onlooker’s hand opened
as if he’s just released a dark bouquet.

Now all of Okemah, Oklahoma, is hushed.
Now even the children in attendance are dead.
After that day in 1911, it did not rain again.
To believe in God, this is the reckoning I claim.

It is a Monday morning ninety years too late.
All the rocking chairs & shopping carts,
all the mailboxes & choir pews are empty.
I cannot hear the psalms of salvation
or forgiveness, the gospel of Mercy.
I cannot ask who is left more disfigured:
the ones who are beaten or the ones who beat;
the ones who are hung or the ones who hang.

In the precise focus of the imagery in this poem—the flowers on the
hanged woman’s dress, the hand of a bystander opened as if releasing
a dark bouquet—we can see at work Shelley’s assertion that poetry is a
mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted. The poet need not
take sides to guide us—his empathy encompasses us all.

In R.T. Smith’s poem, “Dar He,” the speaker challenges the self, asking
a difficult question, not to congratulate himself for asking it, but to
reckon with a difficult realization.

Dar He

When I am the lone listener to the antiphony of crickets
and the two wild tribes of cicadas and let my mind
wander to its bogs, its sloughs where no endorphins fire,
I will think on occasion how all memory is longing for the lost energies of innocence, and then one night—whiskey and the Pleiades, itch from a wasp sting—

I realize it is nearly half a century since that nightmare in Money, Mississippi, when Emmett Till was dragged from his uncle Mose Wright’s cabin by two strangers because he might have wolf whistled at Carolyn Bryant, a white woman from whom he had bought candy, or maybe he just whispered “Bye,” as the testimony was confused and jangled by fear. The boy was not local, and Chicago had taught him minor mischief, but what he said hardly matters, and he never got to testify,

for the trial was for murder after his remains were dredged from the Tallahatchie River, his smashed body with one eye gouged out and a bullet in the brain and lashed with barbed wire to a cotton gin fan whose vanes might have seemed petals of some metal flower, had Bobo—as friends at home called him—ever seen it. And why this might matter to me tonight is that I was not yet eight when the news hit and can remember my parents at dinner—maybe glazed ham, probably hand-whipped potatoes, iced tea sweeter than candy, as it was high summer—shaking their heads in passing and saying it was a shame, but the boy should have been smarter and known never to step out of his place, especially that far South. Did I even guess, did I ask how a word or stray note could give birth to murder? He was fourteen, and on our flickering new TV, sober anchormen from Atlanta registered their shock, while we ate our fine dinner and listened to details from the trial in Sumner, though later everyone learned the crime occurred in Sunflower County, and snoopy reporters from up north had also discovered that missing witnesses—Too Tight Collins among them—could
finger the husband Roy Bryant and his step-brother
named Milam as the men in the truck who asked, “Where
the boy done the talking?” and dragged Emmett Till

into the darkness. His mother Mamie, without whom
it would have all passed in the usual secrecy, requested
an open-casket funeral, so the mourners all saw the body

maimed beyond recognition—his uncle had known
the boy only by a signet ring—and Jet magazine
then showed photos, working up the general rage

and indignation, so the trial was speedy, five days
with a white jury, which acquitted, the foreman
reporting that the state had not adequately established

the identity of the victim, and I don’t know how
my father the cop or his petite wife the Den Mother
took it all, though in their eighties they have no love

for any race darker than a tanned Caucasian. I need
a revelation to lift me from the misery of remembering,
as I get the stigma of such personal history twisted

into the itch of that wasp sting. Milam later told Life
he and Bryant were “guilty as sin,” and there is some
relief in knowing their town shunned them and drove

Bryant out of business, but what keeps haunting me—
glass empty, the insect chorus fiercer, more shrill—
is the drama played out in my mind like a scene

from some reverse To Kill a Mockingbird—or worse,
a courtroom fiasco from a Faulkner novel—when
the prosecutor asked Mr. Wright if he could find

in the room the intruder who snatched his nephew
out of bed that night, and the old man—a great uncle,
really—fought back his sobs and pointed at the accused,

his finger like a pistol aimed for the heart. “Dar he,”
he said, and the syllables yet echo into this raw night
like a poem that won’t be silenced, like the choir
of seven-teen year insects, their voices riddling strange
as sleigh bells through the summer air, the horrors
of injustice still simmering, and I now wonder what

that innocence I miss might have been made of—
smoke? rhinestones? gravied potatoes followed
by yellow cake and milk? Back then we called

the insect infestation ferros, thinking of Hebrew
captivity in Egypt and believing they were chanting
to free us, instead of the come hither new science

insists on, but who can dismiss the thought
that forty-nine years back their ancestors dinned
a river of sound all night extending lament

to lamentation, and I am shaken by the thought
of how easy it is for me to sit here under sharp
stars which could mark in heaven the graves

of tortured boys and inhale the dregs of expensive
whiskey the color of a fox, how convenient
to admit where no light shows my safe face

that I have been less than innocent this entire
life and never gave a second thought to this:
even the window fan cooling my bedroom

stirs the air with blades, and how could anyone
in a civilized nation ever be condemned for
narrowing breath to melody between the teeth,

and if this is an exercise in sham shame I am
feeling, some wish for absolution, then I have to
understand the wave of nausea crossing me,

this conviction that it is not simple irony
making the whir of voices from the pine trees
now seem to be saying Dar he, Dar he, Dar he.

In his powerful reckoning, we witness the enactment of Yeats’ words: We
make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with
ourselves, poetry.
Because writing about race or—more likely—writing from within an acknowledged racialized experience of the world is too often understood to be what black and “other” writers do, poet Jake Adam York encounters people who are baffled by his subject matter—the Civil Rights Movement, our shared history of violence and injustice. “I’ve been told,” he writes, “—whether because of my youth or my race—that I don’t have to be interested in this history.” Implicit in this line of thinking is that the poet has chosen his subject matter—not that it has chosen him—and that a young white poet should find something else to write about. Writing what he has been given to write, Jake Adam York grapples with our shared history as Americans, restoring what has been lost to our collective memory in the elegant language of poetry—thus contending with decades of historical erasure and cultural amnesia. In this poem, which recounts and imagines events surrounding the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963, the combined effect of the imagination at work and the documentary evidence that makes up the poem’s scaffolding is powerful and haunting.

The Crowd He Becomes
September 15, 1963 – Birmingham

Later he will say he did not do it,
he was home at breakfast, just ask the wife,
say they heard some radio preacher doing
love thy neighbor while birds filled up the yard.
Later, he will say he did not do it then tell
how he didn’t, lean in close to say
if he would have done it it wouldn’t have been
alone, he would have had a driver
and a man out west to phone in threats
to draw the cops away. They’d ease
through empty streets to plant their package
then glide away, their route thick with friends,
a thousand ways to disappear.

... The DA will lean, will see his would have
dashboard-lit, driving Dynamite Hill,
headlights, radio dead. Would have
in the shotgun seat, sticks sweating in his grip,
shadow steering through the city’s sleep.
Will see them driving, out before the paperboys,
ready to throw when the dark is right.
See him Christmas, few years back,
outside the preacher’s house, thin fuse of cigarette, 
newspaper spread on the bus protests.
See flash, shock push him from the dark, 
burn his shadow where anyone could see.
Something dark in the lenses of the bottle trees.

... 
The photographer spots him eyeing 
the bombed-out church, minutes after, 
a face he’s seen before, flash on the shards 
of phone-booths and broken windows
he’ll follow through the horrid and the horrified
while the cops arrive, the state patrol arrives
with bayonets instead of hoses, bayonets
instead of dogs, while congregants arrive
between firemen and plainclothes Klansmen
and the children, the children arrive
and depart, and there, the smirk he’ll follow
through uniforms and Sunday black,
into the park, then lose him as it fills.

... 
Will stand in the blur of what arrives and wonder
where he could have gone. Whether he’d cut
toward the depot, through the railyards to wind back home,
or north through the nervous blocks, or circle back
for another view, maybe shadowed in a doorway,
japing in a storefront window, listening at a sandwich stand
while everyone is talking, his work on every tongue.
Maybe he could drift through the crush of lookers
in cigarette smoke, in the breath of many lungs,
innocuous, common, a cloud about to disappear.

... 
Will stand imagining him split at each intersection,
now four of him working the city’s riot,
one with a bomb in his Sunday Herald,
one with a gun hung out the window racing
to a segregation rally, one with a bullhorn
and a speech for the news if they want it right,
and one just waiting for some midnight’s cool
when he can stand beneath the vacant windows
and search for that fire in the face of Christ
before driving out past the mills. On the ridge
he’ll see Vulcan’s torch is red, but not for them.
Shadows reel from the furnace sheds,
birds exploding, blown from molten light.
The mayor says all of us are victims, innocent victims. The lawyer kills his radio. Later folks are asking who did it and the lawyer says I’ll tell you who. Who is everyone who talks of niggers. Who is everyone who slurs to his neighbors and his sons. Everyone who jokes about niggers and everyone who laughs at the jokes. Everyone who’s quiet, who lets it happen. Now his voice flaps in the rafters of the meeting hall, and everyone is quiet. I’ll tell you who did it, he says. We all did.

The photographer keeps his beat, past the crater in the church foundation, through the park, into the mid-day rush, just where he lost him. In the darkroom, he kept arriving, his face framed between elbows, caught in the thrall, or his crewcut, his smile cropped by arms. Now his haircut, half-rolled sleeve, cigarette lip, his eye pass by a dozen times, and more, he could be anyone, could be everyone wandering the storefronts, spying behind his News. The photographer follows every one, cocked and ready to shoot, but his lens can’t catch them all so he just stands, tracing their paths, he just stands, lost in the crowd he becomes.

In this final line, circling back to the poem’s title, we are drawn to consider collective responsibility to our shared history—an ethical vision of our duty as human beings to bear witness, as the poet does.

It should go without saying how crucial the motivation of aesthetic enthusiasm is to all these poets—the heft of certain words on the tongue, the lyricism and rhythm of syntax, and the vividness of images and figurative language that can make the mind leap to a new apprehension of things.

And these poems have a message. In them, the enduring rhythms of poetry give voice to the spaces that silence has inhabited and oblivion has ruled. Social justice may not be the aim when poets sit down to write, but it can be an outcome.

I know which of my motivations deserves to be followed.