

Our Common Souls

Outside, on this spring day under the blue sky's
 ordinary brilliance,
 and invited by an exploring wind nudging lost papers
 forward pell-mell on a street called St. Aubin,
 which was named after the saint
 that ransomed slaves, and fed the sick and the indigent,
 I come across a cook-out,
 a barbecue at the True Vine Temple of Christ Church—
 here in the battleground we call Detroit City,
 just a few miles north of downtown, and it's nothing
 larger than a brick storefront,
 this church of saved souls, Gospel music
 ecstatically blaring out of stereo speakers,
 and friendly, contented people, eyes bright, urging me in.

~

I stop, and I'm fed and welcomed and tended to
 by black folks as sunny as this May light
 spreading a celebration over the street
 and over a house, blackened by arson, and gutted
 down to floor planks and sooty half-walls.
 Across the street boys push and shove
 on a basketball court rainshowered in glass.
 They're in a war, their quick bodies like forcefields
 of mighty male energy
 colliding against each other, trying to steal the ball
 and score.

~

The reverend, the pastor Bishop Arthur Ward,
 who's 74 years old with eyes hidden under
 a cloak of eyelids thick and heavy as the long,
 imponderable years,
 wipes his forehead with a towel and he whispers a prayer
 of deliverance for the Pistons who are in the semi-finals.
 And his assistant, a squat man, belly unfolded
 over a belt and munching a hamburger
 as if it were a prayer with mustard and ketchup
 spilled on it, and spilling too, over his thick fingers,
 nods and chews a yes forward.

~

And then the pastor, crossing his long slender leg
 like a large bird leg over the other one, tells me in a slow drawl
 thick as southern molasses and love

that the 'hand that seizes us all' will have us all
 slowly,
 like the incessant creep of a blind man
 feeling his way forward through a poorly lit room,

~

and that 'peace starts first in the mind—'

and the assistant, sitting on a wooden stool
 beside us
 nods slowly, his neck all gears and agreement,

~

'but you can't have it—'

the pastor adds backhandedly,
 his old eyes scolding back a flurry of other,
 possible thoughts and memories
 once I ask him about things like the race riots
 and the wars of this city smoldering
 in ruins, and of factory jobs lost,
 and of the one America eating the other America
 up by the hind tail, so that the older one
 is unrecognizable any more—

'you can't have it once it's on the battlefield—'
 and I nod *yes*, here—

~

'because you're *caught*,' he says, accentuating
 the word caught like it's a pick axe
 '*and it divides you*,' he adds
 'from both this side and that; and you're cut in two halves,
 like that burned house across from us;
 and you never get right with each other
 or the street you and your people were born
 on—'

And he waves his hand, a dark, sweeping gesture
 across the ruined home that must resemble
 the world he knows and lives in across the street from us,
 like he's giving it a blessing, or some
 final admonishment.

~

Now there's a woman who brings us our plates.
 And the boys clash on with their basketball game,
 oblivious to the charcoal smells of hot dogs

and hamburgers, cooking in rows on the grill.
Then we sit in quiet, he and I
and his assistant,
letting these words sink like food, into our
common souls.