

*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.