

From Commerce to the Capitol: Montgomery, Alabama · *Andrew Hudgins*

Despite the heat that stammers in the street
each day at noon I leave my desk and walk
the route the marchers took. I windowshop,
waste time, and use my whole lunch hour to stroll
this *via dolorosa* in the heat-drugged noon—
the kind of heat that might make you recall
Nat Turner skinned and rendered into grease
if you shared my cheap liberal guilt for sins
before your time. I hold it dear. I know
if I had lived in 1861

I would have fought in butternut, not blue,
and never known I'd sinned: Nat Turner skinned
for doing what I like to think I'd do
if I were him. The fierce blast furnace heat
of summer loosens my tight neck, grown stiff
from air conditioning.

Outside the door
an old black man, weight forward on his cane,
taps down the steaming asphalt. Before the war
half-naked coffles were paraded to
Court Square, where Mary Chestnut gasped—“seasick”—
to see a bright mulatto woman sold.
Draped in red silk, she flirted with the crowd.
I'm sure the poor thing knew who'd purchase her,
said Mrs. Chestnut, who plopped on a stool
to discipline her thoughts. Today I saw,
in that same square, three black girls toe loose tar,
then throw it at each other's bright new dress
to see if it would stick. I'll bet those girls
caught hell when they got home, their dresses smudged
with tar. I can't recall: Was it three girls,
or four, blown up in church in Birmingham?

The legendary buses rumble down the street
and past the Dexter Baptist Church,
where Reverend King preached when he lived in town—
a town somehow more his than mine, despite
my memory of standing outside Belk's
and watching, fascinated, a black man cook
six eggs on his Dodge Dart. Because I'd watched,
he gave me one with flecks of dark blue paint
stuck on the yolk. My mother slapped my hand.
I dropped the egg. Then, when I tried to say
I'm sorry, Mother grabbed my wrist and marched
me to the car.

The uphill walk past banks
and courts, past shops, and past the Feed and Seed
gets sweat to running down my back. My white
shirt clings like mustard plaster to my back.
Before I reach Goat Hill, I'm drenched. My neck
loosens. Atop its pole, the stars-and-bars,
too heavy for the breeze, hangs listlessly.

Once, standing where Jeff Davis took his oath,
I saw the crippled governor wheeled into
the Capitol. He shrank into his chair,
so wizened with paralysis he looked
incurable, face white as schoolroom paste,
hair black as just-paved road. He's fatter now.
He courts black votes, and life is calmer than
when Muslims shot whites on this street, and calmer
than when the Klan blew up Judge Johnson's house,
or Martin Luther King's. It could be worse.
It could be Birmingham. It could be Selma.
It could be Philadelphia, Mississippi.

Two months before she died my grandmother
remembered when I'd sassed her as a child,
and at the dinner table in mid-bite,
leaned over, struck the grown man on the mouth,

and if I hadn't said *I'm sorry*—fast!—
she would have gone for me again. My aunt,
from laughing, choked on a piece of cherry pie.
But I'm not sure. I'm just Christian enough
to think each sin taints every one of us,
a harsh philosophy that doesn't seem
to get me very far—just to the Capitol
each day at lunch, walking the heat-stunned street.
On my way back, I buy a large cheeseburger
and eat it at my desk on company time.
Slowly unsticking from my skin, the shirt
peels loose and dries. Outside, on Commerce Street,
heat builds till four or five, then breaks, some days,
in thunderclouds that pound across the river—
bruise-colored clouds unburdening themselves
of rain that's almost body temperature.
I work late. Till it stops. When I drive home,
the tempered heat feels cool. The streets are hushed.
The sky's as blue as Billie Holiday.