

Protest Poem Built on the Bones of Memory¹

What hurt most was how the city returned to its ordinary routine.
Stuck in traffic, we curse at school buses and sing out of tune. But
to learn from crises of anguish, advancing, grappling with direst fate and recoiling not
-- forget it. We don't, can't, we refuse to.
We're powerless, or think we are. But power
is to love to endure to suffer the music
and it's easy to sit back in silence, to post lines
written when it didn't matter, failing
to remember that it always has. Mattered.
A new cognition was required — then
Something for your poetry?
What was it Auden said, or was it
Williams or Yeats or Bobby Darin?
We do what we can, you say, as much as we can,
but not enough, we opposed them but not
with our bodies. I wrote a check. A poem.
This is not a criticism. This is
not an apology. This is not a note of thanks.
Who will go out there & speak laws
speak fire, shout resistance to the wind?
He died. You know his name.
He died. She died. They died.
Remember, I say, when we counted to six million,
remember, I say, we always start at one.

¹ The italicized lines come from the following poems (in order): Kwame Dawes, “Lunchtime”; Walt Whitman, “Long, Too Long America”; Juan Felipe Herrera, “Mind Core”; Muriel Rukeyser, “Kathe Kollwitz”; Carolyn Forché, “The Colonel”; Ilya Kaminsky, “We Lived Happily During the War”; Yusef Komunyakaa, “Ghazal, After Ferguson”; Richard Michelson, “Counting to Six Million”

Rosetta Stone

Rosetta Stone, he calls it, "the original hate. A readily available language for all manner of bigotry." These fuckers march carrying torches. I watch on TV. Nazi flags. A provocation. What else to call it, but a direct rhetorical assault. A negation. An effort to erase, to eradicate. The Jew. Singular. Every. Single. One of us. Every black man. Woman. Child. "Immigrants go home." "White Pride." They call it a defense. They call it preservation. White culture under attack. Fuck them. The president says there are good people on both sides. Blames the anti-fascists as much as Nazis and Klansmen. Fuck him. "To see the marching, to hear it, the hate walking by." Rifles drape shoulders. Men wear camo. Saturday. Shabbat. Synagogue filled. Sh'ma. Amidah. A reading from Isaiah. "No weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed." Tiki torches dance above the marchers. "A good week, a week of peace." Torah whisked away to hiding. Jews file out the rear door. Another placard: "The Jews are gassing us." I can't believe this. They beat a black protester with clubs. Kicked him. He tried to run, fought back. "They took something away from him that he is never going to get back," his mother says. Blacks, Jews, Mexicans, Muslims. This is 2017, not Germany between the wars. Not 1920s Jim Crow Georgia. "You will not replace us. Jews will not replace us." Tiki torches. Rebel flags. Heil Trump. White Lives Matter. "This city is run by Jewish communists and criminal niggers." Militia men glare from across the road. They haven't come for me. Yet. But they've come. They threaten to burn this synagogue down. Beat more black kids in parking garages. No cops anywhere. Take America Back, they chant

Who Sings for the Dead at Jackson State?

In memory of Phillip Lafayette Gibbs and James Earl Green, killed by local police during a protest at Jackson State College, May 15, 1970.²

They say the bullet holes
are still visible on the brick
façade of the woman's dorm.

But no one sings their names, no guitar
drives our anger. We have no pictures.
How can we run if we don't know.

Tin soldiers and a governor's
force, troopers and the Guard
armed and on the perimeter.

Phillip Lafayette Gibbs.
James Earl Green. Left to die,
shot by state troopers.

*Barrage of gunfire. Maybe
ten seconds. No more. Students
dropped to the ground to take cover.*

Gibbs: A father, a student. Green:
a kid in high school, could *run
so fast*, his sister said,

looked like he took wing and flew.³
But looks are deceiving. Earth-
bound. No bird or Superman.

He couldn't outrun a speeding
bullet. He was on his own. No
drumming, just two dead
and no songs. Just a granite

² http://www.nytimes.com/1971/03/21/archives/article-23-no-title-jackson-state-a-year-after-we-resent-everyone.html?_r=0

³ https://www.democracynow.org/2010/5/14/40_years_ago_police_kill_two

Prelude: A Conversation in Verse with an Essay on Race, a Painting and Social Media

From the outside, can I?
From my kitchen watching
as the snow falls in March,
can I, with my white skin, know,
even as a Jew whose ancestors
were slaughtered for
being Jews.

But something else happens when you are right *there*, in the mix. You want to be somewhere else. Your mind tries to free itself, a process of detachment brought on by denial. *I can't believe this is happening.*⁴

It is. And I know I should
speak, I want to speak but
I hold my tongue. I shy
from confrontation. Want
to shout, but nothing. Curl up,
hide. Can we both flee
to that somewhere else
free of all of this?

You are stunned, a shocked observer, watching yourself watch the racist fool other. And, make no mistake, there are many racist fool others out there in the world, including well-intentioned liberals. Racism is just a metaphor for these people, an idea to apply to abstract situations, an idea that has no application to their daily lives.⁵

Am I the racist fool other? Can I
be? The question
must be asked; the answer
is too important.
What did King say about the white liberal, about
the fierce urgency of now?

At the Whitney⁶, Emmett Till's
open casket on canvas, a reprise
of the violence. White artist.
Mother. *Emmett*

⁴ <http://evergreenreview.com/read/urgently-visible-jeffery-renard-allen/>

⁵ <http://evergreenreview.com/read/urgently-visible-jeffery-renard-allen/>

⁶ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/arts/design/painting-of-emmett-till-at-whitney-biennial-draws-protests.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share&_r=0

was Mamie Till's only son.

Empathy? A pain
that's universal? *Extends*
across race, curators say. Mostly
black men.

West Village museum
overlooks the Jersey City
skyline. *In a larger sense*
an American problem.
More than art, than free speech.
We welcome these responses.

Yes. American. But not
universal. Not

I feel like she doesn't have the privilege to speak
for black people as a whole or for Emmett Till's family.

As a mother, she says. I know the pain.

No. There's more.

Art can be a space for empathy, she writes,
a vehicle for connection. I don't believe
that people can ever really know
they can't
know the fear
that black parents may have

Have. More than have.
More than now. The fierce urgency,
the battered black body, recast
in paint.

The subject is dead. Not a subject.
An object. Inert. *He doesn't care.*
He can't. They robbed him, the white mob
took from him with bats
and fists and rope
The painting at least
brought his name back up
*for discussion.*⁷ What exactly
are we saying?

⁷ From a Facebook discussion

*Nobody's cornered the market on suffering.
A human issue, he says.⁸*

On that mountaintop overlooking --
some of us have been
some still no

*Most of the arguments I see
are race-based/class-based. Deal with right of someone
to paint something. **Say his name.***

*You can paint anything
or are we looking at a form of censorship?*

Till in his casket, remade in paint.

No

*color/religion/race owns
a particular grievance. American slavery. I don't know
of one group that's been sole to suffer
that grievance. Jim Crow. Women
and men are the only groups
that have suffered something
that no other group can claim.⁹*

Just men and women. No color –
here it is

the mistaken belief that because one has taken some courses in political theory, one is now
aware, free of bias and bigotry. Racism is reduced to rhetoric.¹⁰

Slaves, slave-masters. Pinched
Opportunities. Death. Morrison
calls it *lost status*. I have status,
accumulated as consequence of my

but I am still a Jew. An other.

But being white means
being American.

⁸ From a Facebook discussion

⁹ From a Facebook discussion

¹⁰ <http://evergreenreview.com/read/urgently-visible-jeffery-renard-allen/>

The education that should make certain liberals more aware has become a hard shell to hide in, a space of abstract pontification. Politically content, the white liberal can pat himself on the back.¹¹

I write this poem in earnest,
to tell a story, confess a sin. Is this appropriation?
Metaphor, mistaken belief, political
theory? Isn't this
the American story? All our story? I wish
I could be certain.

¹¹ <http://evergreenreview.com/read/urgently-visible-jeffery-renard-allen/>

Scientific Racism¹²

Fixed the status of the subordinate race forever.

As property. The true order, *the natural relations of the races*. We call it Natural Law, the slave state, yes, *the status of the negro in American society* -- human law, the law of the still-young nation -- *springs spontaneously from the necessities of human society*.

Whites superior, negroes inferior, *brought to this country and sold as slaves*, no right to freedom, *not entitled to sue as a "citizen"* – the words of the court, Chief Justice Taney, scion of Maryland tobacco, Jackson's man on the court, *Every citizen has a right to take with him into the Territory any article of property*, property, a man of fifty-eight, all but free, a man, black as the deepest sea, man, wife, two daughters. Ebons, Africans, tools of the manner born. Not a citizen. *No right to freedom*. Property. Wholly owned. As a shovel, a rake. Flesh, blood, bones, a mind imagining, unshackled, free to roam, to think -- *unnatural relations with the white man*, contrivance, against the laws of god and man, *necessarily destroys the black soul* drives him *into his inherent and original Africanism*, the spontaneous eruption of *his African habits*.

¹² Source material: J.H. Van Evrie, Negroes and Negro "Slavery": The First an Inferior Race; The Later Its Normal Condition. New York, Van Evrie, Horton & Co., 1961 (Library of Congress, <https://archive.org/stream/negroslavery00vanc#page/n7/mode/2up>); Decision in Dred Scott v. Sandford, including an introduction by J.H. Evrie, Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/DredScott.html>).

Sanctuary

She slept in the church basement,
cleaving her three young children
to her chest. Tuesday, day before
deportacion. In the church,
the priest lights the candles,
prays. She prays. Keep this place
holy. Ashes of saints. White robes.
A sanctuary. From the Old French:
a *saintuaire*, a sacred relic,
a holy thing. God consecrated
in brick, mortar, wood and tile.
In the cross. The chalice. The Sunday
service. The wine, the wafer. Confess.
You would dispatch her back to the dry
streets of a village she fled
decades ago. In the sanctuary,
she sits amid regalia , safe
for now, a mother, protected
by church, by God, by hope. Only hope.