

Catfish Alley

Catfish Alley—
In a small city it was
The touchstone of black culture.
In the years of Jim Crow and repression
It was the market, the meeting-place,
The bustling center of the city's melanin web.
Not much remains there now.
A restaurant and a dilapidated liquor store
And a mural commemorating its history.
A mural defaced two years ago,
White paint poured into a Bud Light bottle
And launched out of a car window,
Crystal shards catching the dull orange glow
Of pale streetlights.
In the morning
Two men surveyed the damage. Not too bad,
They said. We'll have it off in two weeks.
We put a special coating on just to make paint
Easy to remove. Two weeks came
And went. It was harder to remove
Than they thought—the paint was
Thick and gunky, and two weeks turned into a month,
Then two, then six, as winter came and
The paint froze in the north wind.
They never got it off—after ten months
They ended up repainting it, a lone man
Standing in a tan shirt and jeans
Mixing burnt orange in a coffee cup.

Some stains are too hard to get out
So we paint over them, let them fester,
Pretend that because we can't see them
They are no longer there. It's easy
To believe that hate is a memory—
Harder to walk down pale orange streets
On humid Southern summer nights
And admit to yourself that hate hangs heavy in the air
Like water vapor: that it is all too easy
To liquefy it, pour it in a bottle,
And hurl it bright and blazing into the night.