

# Woodworking with Ashes

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First Place—Poetry Competition

*For Jackson, Mississippi*

*We will neglect our cities to our peril, for in neglecting them we neglect the nation.*

*~John F. Kennedy*

My city walks with a limp—  
stiffens its neck against the pole of a crossed flag  
prodding clouds above a Mississippi elementary school.

My city chuckles and makes hate sound civil,  
throws a penny to champion the skeleton army  
of our people  
shooting our people  
to shackle our people.

Children don't understand the words *black* and *white*.  
Girls at church call me light-skinned  
and scold each other if one calls me white  
like this half-empty glass of history's milk  
that drips justification  
as if heritage were an excuse to build an empire on a  
graveyard.

Toss the remnants like confetti; say hope's cremation is  
ancestral celebration.  
It's like we're interrupting a funeral with complacency's  
birthday party,  
feeding egos like fattened pigs,  
bred and farmed and cherry-picked for plump and  
slaughter,  
rolling in slop of brutality's leftovers and sucking juice  
from bigotry's full-course meal.

The ghosts here trample progress graveside,  
stomp cut flowers, drink crumbled concrete like shaved  
ice  
by trashcan firelight, play cards with men who sleep  
on air vents under skyscrapers,  
give them a dollar to buy a bottle  
and a coat to brave the night.

Culture is subject to murals and graffiti-boarded  
buildings,  
the fabled demise of Capitol Empire, destruction's petty  
ashes.  
Preacher says it is hard to hope in ruins,  
worship in the armpit of this city,  
this adolescent giant anxious for manhood,  
if masculinity means belonging  
and belonging requires bullets and bail funds and blood.

Nobody pays the light bill in this ash-ridden house,  
but at least there's flame in the hearth.

The children play gunfight in the church gymnasium.  
I can't explain poison in the water fountain or bulging  
floorboards.

A seven-year-old girl gives me the finger in exchange  
for a piggyback ride.

I tell her I am disappointed,  
I tell her I love her  
and she doesn't know what she did wrong.

I wonder  
if any of us are even trying to build anymore.  
If Jesus really was a carpenter,  
the Devil must be stuffing my city into an urn.