

Matthew Hamilton – Two Poems

Freedom Bell from the First Baptist Church in Williamsburg, Virginia

Our lives begin to end
the day we become silent
about the things that matter.

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The church has an oily wood smell, the smell you experience visiting an old house, the wisdom smell, the smell of hard work, a sacrificial smell. My husband and I are here to honor my grandmother, who recently left this life for the next at 97-years-old, a woman hale and strong, an icon of permanence and grit, like the resilient hands that built this church that stands before us.

Likewise, my husband and I are here to remember a generation, gone now 200 years. The original church, where African slaves began congregating in 1776, is today an isolated marker resting on a patch of grass, where birds and the ghosts of birds collect their voices around it, the cedar trees humming in the sharp air, the sun burning casually in the unruffled sky.

The atmosphere endorses Martin Luther King, Jr., who stood in this very spot 60 years ago speaking about the fire hoses, the barking dogs, the lynchings, every other violent thing that unduly happened to his neighbors, his family, his people. But King did not fight violently. His turned cheek was louder than any voice, his tears more effective than any gun, his hands the brick and mortar of love's forgiveness.

After ringing the bell, I stand in peace. Images from the nightly news sweep clean the smoky corridors in my head as I turn my cheek toward my husband's supportive hand. It was all God. I'm still shaking from it.

Hollywood Cemetery-Richmond, VA

Driving to Hollywood Cemetery, we hear on the radio that a white kid shot and killed nine black believers inside a Charleston, South Carolina church. Once passed the cemetery gates, my wife, her blood Middle Passage tough, asks the elderly grounds keeper the location of the tomb of Jefferson Davis. His white hand points the way as if such action would force this tragedy to vanish like Jim Crow laws burning behind an outbuilding of the sticky dark mess of prejudice.

At the top of the hill, the Confederate President greets us with a bronze hand. A cluster of stones stand in formation around him, representing young boys dying for the man now resting beneath our civil feet. Without rest, in the heat, in ordered chaos, they clutched the flag as they

died for a cause they believed just, though the composite movement by which the act of succession and owning another man formed an unviable knot, a knot, even a century and a half later, we find difficult to untangle.

I understand the flag's damaging supremacy. Idiots smiling underneath bed sheets for hoods, smiling below gnarled oak branches with ropes attached, with their clubs out, carrying the rebel flag as they greet black families walking to church, families that offered a kind hand to Dylann Roof before he pulled a spineless weapon, ending their humanity in tragic, gun blazing fire.

I imagine this pathetic dirt bag dangling from a sour apple tree. I imagine Jeff Davis dangling alongside him. *Should the flag keep flying?* I ask. My wife touches Davis's bronze hand, a hand that certainly cracked its share of whips. *Let it fly*, she says. *A forgotten war is bound to repeat itself.*

Matthew Hamilton holds a Master of Fine Arts from Fairfield University and a MLIS from St. John's University. He is a 6- time Pushcart Prize nominee. His chapbook, *The Land of the Four Rivers*, published by Cervena Barva Press, won the 2013 Best Poetry Book from Peace Corps