

VII. At the Boundary (age 13, 1955)

In Mississippi, Emmett Till was lynched (August). In Montgomery, Alabama, a white bus-driver deliberately moved the “Colored” sign in his bus so that he could tell Mrs. Rosa Parks to give up her seat (December).

Not steam but wind-rush of bulk, engine's glare-light
from rails underground speed to the viaduct,
slice over cars to tracks that vault above: a blur

echoing rattles of wheels gone: mute cutout
where that train just was. Turn north: squint, catch
that speck. Pigeons flock back to bob and peck.

Here is where it happens: here all the trains explode
to day. Spiked palings ring the mouth of this tunnel.
Press over; hoot *recall the porters, conductors*
What inhabits that channel

whose unmeasured tracks are the spine of life buried
beneath Park Avenue?²—forget-met-nots above,
in season the lilies, clipped-grass islands shadowed

by blocks of apartments, shields of limestone stacked,
kept plush. Gilt and tacit brags of class: sidewalks
swept; traffic lanes free of buses, noises

of commerce. But north?—those people unknown, squat brownstones painted with ads; billboards, laundry flapping in the wind. (“Do not,” *warned*

my father) “do not stray past 96th ; recall those Negro boys, the drumsticks they stole.” At just this one block more, at 97th, my post: to resist

Manhattan's color line, where whiteland shades
to off-limits Harlem (where they have not trod . . .
those tongues so strange, their garb): here, on this edge,

this same season that Marian Anderson
breaks the color line at the Metropolitan,---
in the cross-hairs to stand here now, thirteen, pubescent

at this point of south and north, above below:
to peer through scrims, diaphanous shrouds hung,
thrall to rumbles deferred, the next explosions
from down there, and the dreams.