

Commentary on the Poetry of Reginald Dwayne Betts:
Introduction by J. Chester Johnson at Trinity Wall Street
(February 21, 2016)

Good afternoon. We are indeed privileged to have Reginald Dwayne Betts here at Trinity Wall Street – to hear his verse, to celebrate his most recent book of poetry, Bastards of the Reagan Era published by Four Way Books, and to know his story.

In his memoir, A Question of Freedom, Dwayne Betts describes how poetry saved him, how poetry worked a magic for him in prison, how it became a necessity once he had decided he would be a poet. There is hardly a serious poet who – with normally much less severe and less physically constricted circumstances – has not come to the same recognition of necessity once poetry prevails as the source of his or her experiential sanity.

In this introduction, I'll not presume anything about the experiences that led Dwayne from a high school honors program to prison, to poetry, and to Yale Law School. What I will do is repeat, mostly in the context of his verse, material that he has made absolutely public in his writings, such as his arrest for carjacking, a crime to which he fully admitted his guilt; from high school honors student, he then served eight years of hard time in a system he describes “that was white on one side and black on the other.”

From this history, Betts writes his individual poems beyond the mere observance of a single event; instead, he ties future, past and present into the moment. He writes on subjects important – no, not just important, but essential for us – from the vantage point of the citizen in a broader relevance: what we owe and what we are owed, one to another, regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves – in prison or family home and with family member, stranger or fellow prison inmate. While, at this point, I'm largely referring to his verse, Betts' animated arcing field of vision rolls through the memoir as well. Indeed, I recommend A Question of Freedom for anyone who is engaged or seriously considering engagement in prison work or prison ministry, for anyone who spends or expects to spend time with incarcerated young men. The book is revelatory.

Since 2010, Reginald Dwayne Betts has published two books of verse, Shahid Reads His Own Palm and Bastards of the Reagan Era, and the memoir, A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival and Coming of Age in Prison. For the memoir, he received the 2010 NAACP Image Award for nonfiction. Betts has also won a Pushcart Award and a Ruth Lilly Fellowship. Dwayne Betts serves as the national spokesperson for the Campaign for Youth Justice and was appointed to the Coordinating Council of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention by President Obama. He is currently in his final year at the Yale Law School.

The New York Times calls the poems in Bastards of the Reagan Era: “Fierce, lyrical and unsparing.” Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has asserted “Betts' journey back – from prison all the way to Yale Law School – is as inspiring as it is rare, and should give us pause in condemning any man to social death. From rebirth comes justice – and power.”

Betts' poetry insists heroically and uncompromisingly on today's headlines, yesterday's headlines and the unconquered demons of violence and racism that are both American history and our heinous inheritance. From Bastards of the Reagan Era, one of the poems he entitles "For The City That Nearly Broke Me" – Dwayne Betts employs several poems with the same title – is more than a good example, and I cannot resist reciting an excerpt from it for you:

. . .No indictment follows Malik's death,
follows smoke running from a fired pistol.
An old quarrel: crimson against concrete
& the officer's gun still smoking.
Someone says the people need to stand up,
that the system's a glass house falling on only
a few heads. . .You know the truth
of the talking, of the quarrels & how
history lets the blamed go blameless for
the blood that flows black in the street;
you imagine there is a riot going on,
& someone is tossing a trash can through
Sal's window calling that revolution,
while behind us cell doors keep clanking closed,
& Malik's casket door clanks closed,
& the bodies that roll off the block
& into the prisons and into the ground,
keep rolling, & no one will admit
that this is the way America strangles itself.

This poetic thread runs from his new book of poems back to his initial book of verse, Shahid Reads His Own Palm. The poetry I just read could immediately be laced and bound with this following excerpt from the signature poem of Betts' first book of verse. According to the memoir, Shahid is a name, a name that in Arabic means "for the witness," Shahid, a name that Dwayne used while he was in prison:

I come from Friday night's humid and musty air,
 Junk Yard Band cranking in a stolen Bonneville,
a tilted bottle of Wild Irish Rose against my lips
 and King Hedley's secret written in the lines of my palm.
I come from beneath a cloud of white smoke, a lit pipe
 and the way glass heats rocks into a piece of heaven,
from the weight of nothing in my palm,
 a bullet in an unfired snub-nosed revolver.
And every day the small muscles in my finger threaten to pull
 a trigger, slight and curved like my woman's eyelashes.

There is also an unusual and eerie nexus that connects Reginald Dwayne Betts with us at Trinity Wall Street. Here we are, two very short blocks away from 9/11's Ground Zero. At the time of the attacks that morning, Dwayne, in prison, saw on television the planes crashing into the

towers. Downtown, many of us, at that moment, were scrambling to escape death, to save our lives, while immediately grieving for those already killed, with reality too glaring, too much and too close, while Dwayne stood and watched, without any noise or explanatory voice, being completely isolated from the event. He describes it this way in his memoir: “Truth is, the closest I’ve ever come to being claustrophobic was that morning, watching the planes crash into the buildings and not knowing what was going on. And then not to get any answers from the prison officials, just an announcement that the institution was on lockdown.” We’ve learned that human violation comes in many forms, even silence.

Much that appears in his memoir reappears in Bastards of the Reagan Era – places, contexts, responses, dramas interwoven into the verse. And while there is a penchant to characterize the poetry of Reginald Dwayne Betts as social realism (actually, there are very good reasons to see his splendid verse from that angle), it would be incorrect to limit it in that way; for his poetry also soars to impressive, lyrical heights. In this respect, noteworthy is an excerpt from a paean for his young son, his second son, in Betts’ latest book of poems:

“Miles Thelonious Betts”

Named after the trumpet,
after the sound that comes from all
the hurt & want that leads a man
to turn his back to the world. We named
you after Monk, too,
because sometimes you have to
stack legends in a single body
already big enough for the sound of them
& we imagined that you gave us
a different tune,
a way to bang keys into each
other until our lives
filled with unexpected music.
I hear you call me daddy
in this land where my father’s
name is sometimes another word
for grave, & I almost pause. . .

Edward Mendelson, the well-known literary critic and professor at Columbia University, once complained about certain modern and postmodern poems being “written in a subjective voice, in tones of imaginative superiority and regretful isolation.” There is one thing for sure when one reads the forceful, honest and unflinching verse of Reginald Dwayne Betts: it is as far removed from the poetry that’s subject to Mendelson’s criticism as poems can be. For that reason as well – at least from this writer’s standpoint – the reading and listening audience for Betts’ verse is the grateful beneficiary.

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