

**VOICED : words from asphalt** – a film by gail langstroth

Again, & again—

I think I can close the book, finish it, write the last poem.

But reality stabs, strikes an already raw, vulnerable-ized skein  
of my own heart-skin.

I am forced to ask *How can I, an advantaged white woman even begin to feel, understand, the pain of what my Black brothers & sisters have gone through, the pain of what they are going through? How can I feel with them? Is it even possible?*

As the pandemic demanded that I stay home, I realized—the only way *out* is *in*. I took long walks, noticed the abundance of robins; innocently I began to count robins. One Sunday I had to stop, within an hour I had already counted 99. The pastime of robin counting changed. My attention was drawn to the rising number of deaths due to Covid-19. Robins, Covid-19 victims, then a louder-than-all-that SCREAM: the names/the words—George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, *Black Lives Matter*, Rashard Brooks, Marcus-David Peters, Daniel Prude, &, &, &, & Casey Goodson, Daunte Wright, Adam Toledo . . . Andrew Brown. Innocent Black men & women, victims, dead on our streets, on their porches, in their beds. I had to take note of this!

I entered through word into my heart & into each victim's life. I said their name out loud, researched their story, how they had lived, & how they died. I got as close as I could to each of them through a poem; I wrote, & I wrote.

In this process of listening, I noticed something unfold. A mysterious relationship began to reveal itself between the poem, its words, my own life, & the lives of those who had died. I stood & stand in awe. To notice how the word gifts its creative force as a tool, how it has a power to guide, to help. How in attending to these stories through the poem I could feel a pain I had never felt before.

*El Dolor Común, Common Pain*, as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Spanish philosopher & essayist Miguel de Unamuno wrote. A universal, shared pain.

& I continued to write.

Remembering several wooden crosses that I had rescued from an abandoned cave above the Saint John of the Cross monastery in Segovia, Spain, I placed a cross in my garden for each victim. After running out of crosses I began to create my own markers. Today, as I open my bedroom curtains each morning, the earthen slope under tall pines in my backyard reminds me—names, the human beings, now dead.

Reaching into my studies at a theological seminary in Hamburg, Germany, I recalled King Solomon's words, spoken, sung 3,000 years ago. These words began to speak to me now, speak as if they were the voice of my Black brothers & sisters saying *Set me as a seal upon your heart*. These words became the title of my manuscript. Four of the poems in my growing manuscript

were chosen by a Dutch eurythmy colleague, Lisa Dunker, & myself as a focal point for a shared project. Our work was to have been shown in several European festivals 2021. Because of Covid-19, everything changed. With a stipend from the QuoVadis Eurythmie Impresariat I had three weeks to create a film in order that my work could be virtually present at a March festival in Bonn, Germany.

A deadline & a list: find a videographer, director, rehearsal assistant, & a place to film. It was impossible to think of renting an indoor space, all theatres were still in lockdown.

One Sunday, with snow still on the ground, I ventured forth in my car to case out a few graffitied walls that I thought might serve as a backdrop. The walls I had in mind had been painted by professionals. They are well designed & vibrant. But destiny would have it that on that particular Sunday, a detour had been set up. Over curbs & through alleyways I was lead to an area of Pittsburgh's Wilkinsburg that was new to me.

I stood in amazement. Garage doors, brick walls bursting with bold, black letters: BLM. Antwon Rose in white, rimmed in red. & George Floyd, & more red against an unapologetic pink splash spelling out: *Say Their Names*.

Trash, litter, McDonald's & KFC wrappers, remnants of Christmas decorations, glitter, ornaments. I pick up a copper-colored globe chipped at the top. Broken brooms, cracked plastic buckets, tubs, old suitcases, a soggy cardboard box filled with wet encyclopedias, & leaves, leaves, leaves, broken tree limbs, branches. A horizontal wooden beam that once held window glass caught on the vertical beam of a metal garage door track, swaying like a pendulum. A perfect cross directly above the letters: Antwon Rose.

I enter the garage from a broken side door. Stench, piles of debris, cans, used toilet paper, human excrement—I hope that the limb of a dead body does not materialize.

This is where I will film.

Further along on Hamilton Avenue, I revisit a site behind the African American Music Institute. Through years of weekly visits to the Institute for my classes with the Lemington Gospel Chorale, I am already familiar with the banner-like statement painted in large black script along the wide length of a white brick wall: *The People Are The Light*., A series of wooden stalls in the asphalt lot facing the wall, as I study them now, suggest shoots for cattle or sheep before a sale or slaughter. This will be my second site.

Rehearsals resume in my home studio. A dear friend, seated on her bed in Michigan, recites the words of my poems through her iPhone. I research & practice word-sound combinations that I had never practiced before in my over 50-year career as a professional eurythmist. Words like *bullets, cops, hate, segregation, race/racism, scourging, discrimination, injustice*. The B of bullets has its home in the constellation of Virgo. In its archetypal form, the sound B can be seen as a protective sheath, a warm blanket surrounding our pillar of light. It protects us from streaming out, from losing our light. But here, the B in the word *bullet* protects what? I ask. And the unique U as it sounds in the word *bullets*, leaps, pops, throws back. The L draws, like the

roots of a tree, from the earth up into, through the heart, releasing its life flow only to descend, begin again. The E closes sharply at the center. The T meets the mark. The S cuts, slices. I think, listen to the sounds & recall, in German we have *Kugeln*, in Spanish, *balas*. Different sounds in different combinations are brought together to mean the same thing. An example of how each language brings to bare another aspect of the idea: *bullet*.

Every time I return to my chosen sites, they have changed, as if each is a *Lebewesen* (a *living being*) in and of itself. The wind, rain, sun, snow all bring a strange kind of life to the dead trash, leaves & debris. Shifting, tossing, even the light itself seems to be in a combative mode, & the walls themselves speak of pain, death, loss, history, the burning reality of injustice, discrimination. I am challenged. *How can I perform before these backgrounds? What does "perform" even mean in this context?* Before the task I have set for myself, I feel weak.

[Saturday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, I turn on the television. Prince Philip Duke of Edinburgh is being honored, laid to rest. Laid to rest. On a raised altar behind the pulpits belonging to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Dean of Windsor who officiate over the ceremony, an array of velvet pillows adorned with gold chains, crosses, & satin bands of green & turquoise are displayed. The most high Queen Elizabeth II stands for *The Blessing*, her signature black pocketbook on the empty seat to her left, where her Prince might have been seated.

Bagpipers of The Royal Regiment of Scotland play a *Lament*. Decorum, ritual, procession, procedure, now Buglers of the Royal Marines sound *The Last Post*. Every braid, drape, chord, collar, gold nub on top their white domed helmets. Circumstance, ceremony, pomp &.

In America when we bury our Black sons & daughters, there are no State Trumpeters sounding *Reveille*.]

On the first day of filming, I arrive early, get out of my car, stand before the brick wall with the vertical wooden beam dangling above Antwon Rose's name. I concentrate on the wall & suddenly, quietly, a Black man, age 25, perhaps, approaches from the alleyway. He makes no gesture to acknowledge me. I watch him disappear behind the garage, assume he wants to relieve himself. Then I see him climb the back porch of an adjacent, boarded up house. Gone, but not gone. He reappears, skirts to the left of the garage wall, the debris & leaf-covered area which will be my stage. Finally, in silence he walks back into the alley from which he came. He says nothing. His eyes dart as if worried. Later I think: Was he a messenger, a guardian, marking with his presence the measured perimeters of my performance space?

After the first day of filming, I had just changed my shoes, packed my belongings in the trunk. A man approaches. I notice his shiny, satin bomber jacket. Around his neck, a large silver cross hangs on what seems to be a heavy silver chain. *Hello*, I say. *Magnificent graffiti, do you happen to know who painted these walls? Yeah, they are beautiful*, he says. *There*, he points. *The artist signed his name*. The man points to the white letters, rimmed in red—Antwon Rose.

I know Antwon died in 2018. I wrote a poem about him. These walls were painted in May of 2020. As I drive away, I think maybe that is how this happens. At night the deceased return with

their buckets, brushes, & spray cans. They paint their names so we can remember, so we will never forget.

In order that we never forget.

In order that we never . . . let us never forget.

[I recall Lincoln's Gettysburg address: "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. . . . it is for us the living . . . the great task remaining before us.]

The task given to us, to me, what remains to be done.

Due to all, & I mean *all* the circumstances surrounding this film, I recognize that **VOICED : words from asphalt** is one of the most significant projects of my 50-year career as a professional eurythmist. Another such project dates back to 2005. I had just completed 2½ years of study in the Christian Community Priest Seminary, Hamburg. Upon leaving the seminary, I wanted to work with a sacred text. I chose the seven I AM statements found in the Gospel of John. Strange as it may seem both of these projects the I AM words of Christ & the act of filming movements to my own poems in front of these graffiti walls, are related.

The I AM words of Christ are an expression of Christ's Being in The Moment: *Geistes Gegenwart*.

The words & names painted on garage doors & abandoned buildings in Pittsburgh's Wilksburg neighborhood are born out of a fierce urgency of now. When the day came to begin filming, I recognized there was no way I could use movements or ideas that had previously seemed appropriate, in other words, what I had practiced yesterday, or in the days prior to the filming. On site, I was forced to be in The Moment. This was Edge Work: no makeup, no censoring, no pre-meditated will!

At one point in the rehearsals I expressed my struggles to Tina Kronis, the director. I told her *I feel inadequate, vulnerable, on the verge of tears. Everything about the place, the graffiti, the garbage, seem to erase me. How can I live up to this challenge?* Tina's response, *Imagine you are performing for someone.* I did that, but still, the pressure: *Gail what are you doing?* There was nothing to be controlled or practiced here. There was nothing that I could draw on. Nothing.

Added to those challenges were the last minute problems with two of the recorded tapes from vocalist & percussionist Fred Johnson. & the fact that I was scheduled to have my second vaccine on the Friday before my last Zoom rehearsal with Tina in Los Angeles. There was no time to recover before Monday's first day of filming. I was dizzy, & I felt sick.

Don't think, rather *BE*—the only way through.

Spirit Presence in the Moment / Edge / An outdoor space alive & shifting / I felt ill /  
/ What am I doing? /

& then there was the beautiful young woman sweeping her porch. She watched as we were filming my poem “Molten.” She stops sweeping. Leans into her broom, & applauds as she notices we have finished. Before driving off I approach her open backdoor. We sit on her steps & talk. She tells me she is a member of a slam poetry group & has never seen anything like this *dance*. After telling me her name, I stand up & demonstrate the eurythmy movements for SUNSHINE.

We take a selfie. Later that day Sunshine texts me asking that I not post our photo on social media. I text back, *no worries*.