

aware of my world and feeling the need to express my feelings on paper. But as I remember, a very large number of those early attempts at poetry dealt with social injustice, racial and otherwise.

My generation is the last to have lived in a segregated South, and on the streets of Canton in the 1950s and early 60s I rarely saw a black person. In fact, no one I knew talked much about race. What I learned of the Movement as a teenager came mostly in snippets from the TV news.

A few names became familiar — Martin Luther King Jr., Joseph Lowery, Andrew Young — but the knowledge I was able to gather about the African-American struggle wasn't deep. These snippets, however, served not only to reinforce the questions I had about the status quo in the South, they also created an empathy that led me to books such as James Baldwin's *Blues for Mr. Charlie* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

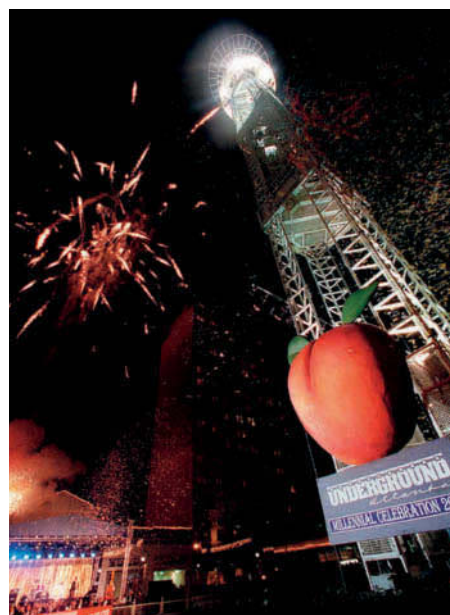
For most of my teenage years the struggle for civil rights was something that happened in Atlanta and other large cities. The people I knew had no idea what was happening in the local black churches or the Ralph Bunche School, and they were shocked when the African-American community attempted to desegregate the Canton Theater. There was some violence — a car was turned over in the street — and the threat of much more, but no one was seriously hurt. That was just about the extent of my personal experience with the struggle for civil rights. Atlanta was my connection, my bridge to a greater awareness of the human community and the growing role I would need to play in it.

And speaking of bridges. My wife and I recently saw a news story on television about a young boy asking President Obama why so many people hated him. The president hugged the boy and told him this was mostly politics and people didn't really hate him. This was a crystallizing moment, a painful reminder that some people still lag behind, but also a hopeful reminder that enduring bridges have been built. President Obama was not elected solely by African Americans, but by all Americans.

A few years ago a young writer asked me why I hadn't written more about race. I scratched my head and told her that all poems were about race because, on some level, all poems are about humanity. Basically, the message I've taken from poetry is this: There is only the one life — the one life with infinite variations. We all share that life — we're born, we aspire, we struggle, we search for meaning, we die. Poetry is the art of metaphor, which is the art of making connections, the art of discovering bridges. Poetry's great message is the message of commonality, of our fundamental humanity, the significance of being a human creature at our particular moment.



A young girl copies the epitaphs on the crypt of Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King.



As fireworks explode in the background, a giant peach travels to the bottom of a tower, signaling the beginning of the new year in Atlanta's famous Underground area.