

Matthew 5:22

Jordan Smith

If I am liable
For insult to my brother or my sister,
Then what am I doing
In a quiet car, passing this view I love,
The river, and the college skulls, the fleet
Early sunlight on the ripples.
I have a cup of coffee on the dashboard,
And the small, infinite order
Of the baroque on the radio.
If I am liable for the insult

Of exhaust to the breath of my brother
At the gas pump, to the breath of my sister
As she flags down traffic for the road crew,
Why am I content now with my forgetfulness.

I'm driving to work
At a job I got because someone else didn't,
From a house I bought
Because of what the market did
To the seller, and anyone else who wanted to buy.
Is any of this worth more than just a shrug?

"You can't make poetry out of guilt,"
A teacher said, and I believed her.
I felt guilty then, I thought, for no good reason.
But there is good reason,
If poetry speaks of what we hold in common,
To speak of guilt,
To begin, at least, in honesty
Of what passes between us.

I stop for gas. I wait
For the oncoming traffic to clear
The one lane of road where they're fixing the shoulder.
And in my smallness of anger, of impatience,
I know what I am doing,

Making, of forgetfulness
A makeshift order,
Beautiful, consolatory
(a mortgage, a fleet of boats,

A fleetness of recorder notes),
And culpable.