In the Rush Hour

Space opens in the traffic, one car coming only
and at sufficient distance—
although he seems to speed to close the gap, we go—
the car beside and I.

A block ahead the light dams back two lines, nowhere
to go but to their end.
The driver behind me, though, leans on the horn and holds
the blare right to my bumper.

Carefully I lean forward to mouth into the mirror,
but stop at what I see.
Behind, already raging, chopping toward the glass
rhythmic with obscenities,

hissing and striking the words, the thin face so distorted
I hardly recognize
a woman whom I know: a friend of my wife's and mine,
someone for whom I'd written

a letter of recommendation. That we had "broken bread
together" in just those words
recurred to me absurdly. I began to laugh,
and tried to project my laughter

back to her through the mirror. I pointed at myself,
waved, gestured the ways
I thought distinct from anger, all the time speaking to her
saying who I was.

But the furious words went on, and she would not meet my eyes.
I felt some kind of chill
and wrote her name in pencil on a yellow legal pad,
big block letters scored

as black as I could make them and turned them toward her.
Her car still rocked with fury.
As we crept closer to the light, she'd leave a moment's gap
then drive straight at my back,

to stop short over and over. Once through the intersection,
tailgating dangerously,
she followed until she had to turn away, a quick veer
onto another road.

I feel I have to tell her about the way I saw her,
what she was, or could be—
I know that when I do, it will be jocular,
teasing just a little,

so I can tell her without also saying how afraid
I was that she *did* know me,
that for reasons of my own I am ready to believe
in rage that can make strangers

out of anyone, that even those who might know
each other uncontorted
will fail to find resemblance to the familiar face
along a road somewhere,

that however this becomes an anecdote out of the city,
beneath our smiling then,
my laughter, her taking all of it in good part,
will lie the other face.

What's Not There in "In the Rush Hour"

There isn't much excuse for talking about one's own poem (except that you asked, except that I'm flattered). It ought, after all, to stand on its own, to have the author stand well behind it and let it have its say. To talk about origins does perhaps leave the poem to speak for itself because, for me anyhow, it often involves talking about what isn't there: the climate of thinking around the poem, or some scaffolding since removed.

What's invisible in the version of "In the Rush Hour" reproduced in this anthology is its connection to other work. Poems written slightly earlier and preceding it in *Other People's Troubles* were almost all works of non-fiction concerning the Holocaust, recounting the stories of my father, uncle, and aunt, often from interview-testimony I took myself and supported with other research. "In the Rush Hour," too, is non-fiction, and I thought of it as pointedly post-Holocaust. In the road rage described in the narrative, I saw a breakdown of social order—and personal connection (since protagonist and antagonist turn out to be well-acquainted)—linked to that larger, earlier dissolution—or reordering, I suppose—of social and personal relationships that allowed for mass murder. In any case, those poems, rooted in Holocaust narrative as accurate as I could make it, led to this one, from a true story set in a Holocaust afterworld.

Of course it's very possible to read the poem outside of its setting in *Other People's Troubles* without thinking of the Holocaust, and yet it is some part of how the poem came into being. Still, no matter how pressing the impetus of true stories that demand to be told, poems are discovered through words. The words that began "In the Rush Hour," generative as they were, are now absent. The first stirring in language was a concrete image, present in several notebook versions, all of which depicted cars descending a hill as suddenly

released into motion from a distance: they swarm down, banded by light, or carrying bits of light across or over their brows, in a sort of insect phalanx. This was a view southward from the intersection of Wydown and Skinker in St. Louis—in which the verse-narrative begins, and from which my autobiographical self did try to enter the flow of traffic one evening in spring in the mid-1990s. I worked over the image, at pains to include not just the exoskeletal shine, a gleam of dusky sunlight reflected on the carapace of roofs and hoods, but also the distinct twin bars or circles of the closer headlights and the asterisks of light of those further off; these discrete parcels of light seemed especially like cargo. The figure of cars bearing down and bearing light as ants carry food seemed to stand aptly for the slightly menacing approach of some truth, and to suit the poem that eventually evolved out of the image, albeit in the end without that originating image.

Beyond what's not there now from the poem's beginnings, there's also more to see beyond the poem's present ending—though seeable only in my notebook and worksheets. The poem in draft went on for many lines with variations on the motif of faces: my father's in anger (which I came to understand as an aftermath of the Holocaust for both of us), my mother's as she made faces at me in a teasing game she sometimes played when I was a child, which I found delightful but also frightening. All of these lines elaborated specifically and autobiographically on how the "familiar face" can be made unrecognizable. What remains of the family drama is what I intend as an allusion in the penultimate stanza to Oedipus in his killing rage at the crossroads—father and son failing "to find resemblance" in the midst of their rage, though not just because of it. At the time, in the midst of the work I was doing in *Other People's Troubles*, the extra section of "In the Rush Hour" seemed to belong too much to the realm of autobiography, unbalanced by historical context and stories apart from my own. Sometimes what disappears one

place reappears another, so a poem called "My Mother Making Faces" shows up in my latest book, *The Man Who Sleeps in My Office.*

One last note on what isn't quite there in the final version of the piece concerns form. As I sketched out the poem, I was working primarily in trimeter line fragments, expecting they would move into a traditionally conversational pentameter, which in turn I planned to settle into verse-paragraphs. Something happened along the way, and the final result is what you see, alternating line lengths—hexameter and trimeter, in four-line stanzas. I believe I sensed that the alternations between lines longer than iambic pentameter with the lines shorter than pentameter helped suggest the quality of the central alternation between the two characters: the woman's crazed-with-anger expansiveness and the speaker's contracted-with-fear, placatory sanity. As I say, I started the poem in one way and something dropped into place for me when it went another. This was true of the forming of the stanzas as well as the lineation, stanzas that sometimes coincided with distinct units of sense—episodes in the narrative—and at other times did not, but ran over. These symmetrical quatrains do not contain the narrative in a symmetrical manner, which perhaps suggests the way societal structures, civility itself, cannot contain the loosed rage. I'd better stop here, though, since I feel in danger of assuming the voice of interpretation, better used to speak of the structure that remains, rather than of the scaffolding that's gone.