

Shift

— after John Coltrane's "Alabama"

But note the tone, I instruct each student
before a poem, sometimes halfway through,
sometimes one stanza in. Note the way she
inserts the *this changes everything* clause,

or that one phrase, which has now imprisoned
itself deep, deep in your temporal lobe,
or a conjunction pregnant with a bomb
that will detonate in the final line.

Like Trane. How, in "Alabama," he turns,
turns like the coiled rope clenching the Black man
high on the tree, then is cut down and mourned
in Bible study murdered by gunfire.

But then the sad saxophone turns to scream
and he's the most frustrated Doctor King
who knows the bullet can't destroy his face
but gets they'll never release knee from neck.

Take note of the evil inside of you,
I beg them, and put yourself in Birdland,
September fifteenth, nineteen sixty-three,
between bombing and assassination,

where the Prophet, in front of Garrison,
Tyner, and Jones, cries out to us, begs us
to tint and shade, to wade into deep parts
where man is just man, where just is just man.