

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 63 N°1 FALL 2012

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## COVER

**Mary Greene**, design

**Lewis Koch**, "Northern Illinois" (front) and "Copenhagen" (back), photographs, 2008.

## Poet's Forum ([blog.bpj.org](http://blog.bpj.org))

The participating poets for this issue are Jaydn DeWald (September), Philip Metres (October), and Martha Collins, Kevin Coval, and Jake Adam York (November).

**K. A. HAYS**

**And the Lord Hath Taken Away**

The bee claws into touch-me-nots,  
the mouth a flame against the orange of it.  
And the mind stops its minding.  
The legs hold up the butt-end  
to the flower. *Why not stay?*  
the bee asks as the dusk comes.  
*Why not stay inside the orange mouth  
above the fleabane, balling up  
inside a horn of plenty.* Mornings I find  
such bees. Half in, half out.  
The body in the mouth from which it drank.  
Morning night-damp still. I shake the bush  
of touch-me-nots, I make a blaze of them  
against the cold. The bee holds fast, is drunk.

**LIZ KAY**  
**A Warning**

My friend says, *I feel better knowing there's a bridge just a mile away,*  
and I understand what she means about last resorts,  
about the call of the water, why it's not the direction  
she drives on nights when only the car's engine and its wheels  
over gravel will soothe the baby, finally, to sleep.

Sometimes, I stand outside myself watching. The boy says,  
*I want a peanut butter bar,* which we don't have, and I tell him this  
in the voice I usually reserve for company or home  
movies, but this time I'm offering it generously, lovingly,  
to make up for my lack of forethought at the store.

I use it five times, and when he says, for the sixth time, *I want  
a peanut butter bar,* I lean into his face, close enough to kiss,  
and feel the words *We don't have any fucking peanut butter bars*  
press from between my teeth. And when he starts to cry,  
I feel happy. I feel relief. When I say I understand why that woman

took a hatchet to the children and then herself,  
I mean to scare you. I mean to scare myself. There is so much  
we don't have enough of. There is so much they want.

**HANNAH K. GALVIN**

**Open letter to my teenage patient with congenital HIV and a CD4 count of 0 after she told me going back on antiretrovirals was “pointless”**

You've had plenty of time to perfect your slouch over the molded moss-back of plastic chairs, folding yourself rendshadowed into the arms of your hoodie like a necklace of weathertorn bones dropped by some careless angel.

Time is not what concerns you.

It hovers like your dry swallowed pulse in the yawn of pharmacy counters lined by last year's frosted tinsel, the vacant hope only adults cling to with their high-pitched snapdragon lips and the sour aftertaste of regret.

Pity is only one part nausea. The rest is mirror, or rather the chalk outline of its missing shards. I know how it follows you, with its ripper stealth and whole tone footsteps, the way daybreak chases a sundial gnomon toward eyelash.

It oak rings your face with its echo, slips only stale apologies onto your finger.

So when you tell me it's pointless,  
how can I argue with someone who learned to write their epitaph before their name?

And when you wide-angle this world, comb cloudburst to find Jacob's Ladder descending into a lover's quarrel of sewer grates, when you capture the emulsion of its stagnant puddle water and speak the mothertongue of ashtrays, as if no other language could spin silk strong enough to hold you,

This is how life revolving doors into unblinking cell phone lights, the stiff rash of hospital sheets and so many crumpled Dixie cups of time you did not ask for.

**MATTHEW NIENOW**

**O Anchor**

Dark charms the anchor in its house  
  
of water, and what type of bottom  
does it drag, for what type of work, for you,  
  
with your need to stay in roughly the same place  
  
for a night, with your questions of how  
much to let out  
  
and how well your windlass works  
  
and how you feel sometimes hauling  
200 foot of chain by hand in the dark,  
  
wondering what in your life sent you  
  
here, where the world exists as much  
below you as above, where you are  
  
as much the chain as the chain.



**MATTHEW NIENOW**

***And***

Flies wake themselves from the end we believe we've witnessed  
and buzz winter out of their bone. They live again  
and for what? To blink against the window over  
and over, the tirade of their want a reminder of what lives in me  
and, therefore, my son, in you. This glissando ligature that  
    belongs to the mouth  
and the ear. But more so to water, for it is all  
*and.* We bathe in it, carried on the backs of ghosts  
and gods. How gently it lifts  
and drowns, while something in us wakes  
and, to the glass we do not know is there, takes us full force  
    onward, glistening with hum  
and furthermore.

**JAYDN DEWALD**

**Nocturne (or, Landscape with Father)**

We can no longer stand in the clearing, in the naked woods,  
Letting the Oregon mist seep through our clothes—  
Our father, under his green afghan, is summoning Hubbard,  
*Blue Spirits*, as though to make us face ourselves  
(Swollen-eyed, ill-shaven) in the plastic slips of his records.  
Ashbery said, “We live in the sigh of our present”—  
But we can no longer even believe in time: we are kneeling  
In our bedroom, thumbing through album covers;  
At the same moment, we are slogging through delphiniums  
To see our father, silhouetted, practicing Hsing I,  
On a wooden bridge. Ah, here it is, *Blue Spirits*. Our father  
Lifting one liver-spotted hand as the needle falls  
Into the groove, as the wide leaves flush too soon, too soon.  
Can we turn back later, after he has died, to live  
With silence and black coffee, to amble over the stone path  
In our sockfeet, our threadbare robe, considering  
Our next unpredictable gesture, like hacking up firewood  
On a floor of mirrors? The question is ridiculous—  
We can no longer leave this house, this music; we will live  
Beside him, on this folding chair, reading Auden.  
Even in Poros, years later, grating lemon over grilled squid,  
We will prop him up to watch reruns of *Bonanza*.  
Meanwhile, we are listening to Hubbard, whose music fills  
This house and this house alone, though we hear,  
Under a sun-reddened parasol, for example, faint overtones  
That make us close our eyes. Our father is dying—  
Nothing stopping it. Yet here he is, for the moment, patting  
The green afghan, his once-heroic legs, standing  
Moreover in an abandoned farmhouse: the sound of a horn  
Lost among the rooms, the nothingness of rooms,  
And we can no longer find it for him, our father: he is gone.

**RICHARD FOERSTER**

**Solstice**

how quick the plummet : moon-sharp  
the flint-sparked air : our river crackling  
on the full extreme of the tide : how pristine  
this burden : snow coiled like a widow's shawl  
about the shoulders of the world : how

numbly we face this whiteness : its weather-worn  
scars : our fading trajectories : like scavenging  
deer : and into it all this rodent-thought  
creeps its way out of troubled sleep :  
a crosshatch of tunnels : vascular runs

where hunger follows blindly on hunger :  
gnaws every tender tendrilling : brutal  
and indifferent : like beauty : like this night's  
shimmered desolations : like a body : blanketed  
yet beneath : so nakedly vulnerable :

how inexorable these silent turnings : as one  
from a window : back toward the darkened room :  
and returning : the thought : of you : downed in sleep :  
as the tide of a sudden snaps the solid mask of things ::  
how quick the widdershins flesh tinders into flame.

**EPHRAIM SCOTT SOMMERS**

**This Being a Man**

Atascadero Lake's face is a graveyard of names.  
An aluminum boat loafs dumbly upon her cheek: a blemish.

Weeds grow out of the trunk of a junked Cadillac. By a clot of bodies—  
Water, car, human—this is my body worn down.

I urge

Like a farm boy over-rubbing cob corn in butter  
For rough sex with China or Germany

In the bucket of a tractor, but I don't want to.

And I am a man.

I am a man with breasts who loves a woman

With her head shaved. The sun skids away on a boat trailer.  
Bats draw circles of black on the mouth.

I stand for the length of a cigarette outside  
The country of my sex.

**MICHAEL BAZZETT**

**Other People**

The day was too bright at the abandoned café  
scoured clean by April wind as you held my hand

almost lovingly and said, Maybe we should see other  
people, and suddenly there they were, absentminded

in their mismatched clothes, all around us, the people  
we had been unable to see until that point

because we had been so involved in seeing one another.  
But then your words conjured them from the very air,

these other people we so clearly needed to begin seeing  
if we didn't want to keep fooling ourselves, which was

another phrase you used, and I suddenly understood  
why I sometimes felt oddly wooden, like a poorly hinged

door when I leaned in to kiss you—it had to be that  
elderly woman with the permanently puckered mouth

and cardigan laced with cat hair who stood like a shadow  
behind your right shoulder, fiercely glaring and happy

to finally be making eye contact with me after so many  
futile attempts to serve as your matronly avenger.

Why she was holding an enormous scythe I cannot say,  
any more than I could pronounce the surname of the

Estonian mechanic who stood so patiently beside her,  
hefting a lightly oiled wrench in one grimy hand.

I rose in what I hoped was a dignified manner and strode  
out through the gathering crowd, shaking hands with

the blacksmith sporting muttonchops and a svelte man  
in suede boots and a remarkably slimming goatskin vest,

when it occurred to me that the fluttery pain near my heart  
was not sadness but relief at no longer being so utterly alone.

**RANDI WARD**

**Ólavsøkufriggj / St. Olaf's Fling**

**Ólavsøkufriggj**

Tú bleiv við  
at siga at eg var stygg

men tá tú vart  
endiliga avdottin

læt eg meg úr  
troyggjuni og gjørði  
ein kodda til tín

**St. Olaf's Fling**

You kept saying  
I was frigid

but when you  
finally passed out

I took off my sweater  
and made a pillow  
for you

**Faroese poems and English translations by the poet**

**RANDI WARD**

**Grannsiggin / Busybodies**

**Grannsiggin**

(stokkar glinta)

*. . . og hon dregur  
ongantið gardinurnar fyri  
um kvöldarnar!*

(stokkar glinta)

*Harraguð, eg tími ekki  
at hyggja inn . . .*

(stokkar glinta)

*Heldur ekki eg!*

(stokkar glinta)

*. . . men har er alltið ljós.*

**Busybodies**

(knitting needles chatter)

*. . . and she never draws  
her curtains shut  
of an evening!*

(knitting needles chatter)

*Christ almighty, I can't be bothered  
to look over there . . .*

(knitting needles chatter)

*Me neither!*

(knitting needles chatter)

*. . . but the light's always burning.*

**CAITLIN DWYER**  
**Chamber Music**

what is the impulse  
    tell me something  
lies, more often than not  
I started out wanting truth, got  
caught up in bedsheets, tangles of  
fireworks are exploding  
they sound like bombs  
    make a shelter  
out of words (that is not the impulse)  
or maybe it is     to construct  
a thing more protective  
than beautiful     they are crackling  
across the sidewalk, popping  
their small red bodies against the concrete  
    at first, I thought North Korea  
I started out attacking  
a problem of intent, but got back  
somehow to form, structure  
being a choice I wanted to nail down  
a man who used the word *casual*  
as definition, though it meant  
he was tearing out the heads  
with the back of a hammer  
I wanted to wrench up any loose verbs  
    just wanted to talk  
it was true, back then, or it seemed true  
but listen: firecrackers pattering  
in the distance     we are being  
orchestrated     first violin in a symphony  
of self-pity     wires strung across the sky  
at appropriate tautness, plucked, sing  
little telephone songs, digital signals  
he pulled out all the connections  
this is not a violin  
    it is explosions  
little red papers, charred at the edges  
noise for a new beginning  
    (I don't want to be *casual*)  
noise for a blueprint  
pour it into small containers, let it harden  
I am harder when I do not allow

→



for beauty            she is such a casual bitch  
she tears up hammers with her teeth  
spits them out, desiccated red nails  
they clatter against the sidewalk  
in the distance hands are exploding  
uncertain applause

**LUCY ANDERTON**

**I'm sorry I have to put it this way, but**

Dear Herman I am good here.  
Camels walk about my sandy  
bones. Also trees of licorice,  
Kate Moss, and a wet corner  
of the world that I cannot name  
called my cunt. Herman, why  
are you so called? Such a name  
belongs only to old gray tires.  
When they spoke to me  
I could not hear over the roar  
of *Herman, Herman, Herman*—  
their leather leaves now roasting  
in the fire, their voices now  
bleating at the blackness  
that sheathes the slept-away day.  
I trialed and traded carefully  
cut curtains and long  
delight-filled pisses on the side  
of the country road for  
a plumb fuck from you:  
we shaking car window,  
we traveling in the grille  
of open smiles. Herman.  
My spitting crater. I smoke  
out the grasshoppers here  
in the hammock—flat  
on my broken back—my neck  
enthrottled in the tender fist  
clamp of the sun. I saw  
one shadowy person here  
in this snow Herman and  
she spoke of you  
with a red word or two  
and I saw my tangle of whiteness—  
that was slipped onto me  
by these streets and cemetery  
eyes. Here the birds two-step  
rather than fly. Here Angela  
Davis laughs in my float-  
about face, my fist  
held high. Here the wetness

→

LUCY ANDERTON

will not come forth  
in the cavern—the fleas  
are drowning the pears  
are waiting for their  
silver green dive.

**LUCY ANDERTON**

**Toward the single point of slipping**

In the slash of rain is a lamb  
strung apart through a mess  
of barbed wire.

And I saw it.

No.

I see her.

Red, wet guts,  
and white.

The dogs not startled, hanging  
barely at bay.

There is,  
as you know, already nothing  
to be done.

I am hiding.  
From my father.  
Up the mountain.  
I am hidden  
and the cries  
overcome me.

No way to cut open  
and run. We all

stumble: out  
holding our dear  
guts in our hands. And always

the teeth  
that near and near.

And always the watchers  
who do nothing.

Nothing now  
to be done.

**BRENDAN CONSTANTINE**

**The Long While**

We'd been sitting I don't know  
how long, candles having that  
effect on time, when you leant

across & said, What the country  
needs is a servant class.

Words  
that pushed me back in my seat.  
No, you said, I mean an actual

class like a school, where we'd  
all learn to serve. There'd be  
whole semesters devoted to

waiting your turn or bowing or  
scrubbing a patch of red carpet.  
People would be graded on

not asking about their grades.  
What do you think?

I thought  
we'd been here quite a while  
without seeing a menu. Then

I remembered how late it was,  
we were in a barn, the table  
between us a bed of straw.

**BRENDAN CONSTANTINE**

**In the Ear of Our Lord**

I thought you said you love  
the coal train's horn  
                  the loneliest monk  
playing piano   Such distinct  
sounds    I had to wonder how  
you knew to love them

In the beginning was the whir  
I thought you said & the whir  
was good

Didn't you say   each verse  
should end on a pyramid  
  Now  
the crowds are coming home  
Cross our eyes & dot our lines  
I could swear you said the time  
was wow  
                  the time handsome

Hark that horn   the monk's  
lonely fingers   Doesn't it just  
break your harp  
                  None of us  
will be re-embered

Free alas   you said   free alas

**BRENDAN CONSTANTINE**  
**Snow Blind**

—for Elizabeth Iannaci

Tuesday  
you were falling  
wetly falling  
wetly Tuesday  
Tuesday you were falling  
you were falling wetly

and you heard those horns  
and those horns were gold like gold horns  
and those horns you gold were falling wetly

and the boy who helped with helped arms  
gold horns falling wetly and you saw the boy with gold wetly arms

who without gold without horns was without wetly falling gold  
fell with you

GREG WRENN

Ascension

Walking through the withered  
garden, I was snatched up  
to the fourth heaven? By a fireball  
with talons? Up a shaft of molten light  
breaking through the clouds?  
How to tell  
of being watched, prodded,  
watched on a cold table?  
Were those wings or  
your three-fingered hands, webbed,  
brushing against each of my vertebrae?  
“Don’t ask questions,” you said.  
Lemon scent.  
Terror—  
then *then* and *and* . . .  
Then the orgasm: for once,  
a plateau stretching  
for hours, not my usual spike  
and descent into drowsy shame. Your wet almond-eyes,  
were they goggles? Your forehead to mine,  
my eyelids were gone?  
You told me—what was me?—  
“Many have come in my name  
saying, *I’ll take you Home.*”



Your body, the mantis of it,  
  wasn't a gloryland.  
Still, I said, "Save us."

  And I found myself back in the garden,  
  
the soil cracked and burned  
  around me, the old fig tree  
  
  gone. From the water pump,  
two lizards were watching me?  
  I pinched my nose  
  
to stop the bleeding.

**HADARA BAR-NADAV**

**And with What Body Do They Come?**

A dead man talks through my mouth. His guttural bass joins the high chatter of my grandmother and aunt whose words cough chimney smoke. Here comes the child I lost before she breathed and a man who trills the names of birds: star, star, starling, he chips his way through my teeth. Mother may I cut out my tongue. *The saddest noise, the sweetest noise.* Please, please, she keens.

**HADARA BAR-NADAV**  
**Let Us Chant It Softly**

Let the man in velvet be velvet. *Let me not mar that perfect dream.* Let the words not be particulate and full of bite. Let the worms not feast. Let the oily slip of their flesh know salt. Let the salt know each of their names. Let their rigorous muscles rigorously unthread. Let each of their coils wring each of their necks. Let suffocation be slow. Let their kingdom stop churning, let their kingdom be still. And my father whole again.

**HADARA BAR-NADAV**

**To Bear on Us Unshaded**

We bow our heads and burn. Heat scalding the back of our necks,  
singeing our crowns. The sun opens over us. The sun wants to  
burn us into the ground. Scent of soil, glittering, cloying, sick with  
goodbyes. We swelter, wither, prayer stuck in our parched mouths.  
Birds descend, *declaim their Tunes*—piercing us with bright cries.  
Cardinals streak the day with blood. We follow our sad shadows,  
swallow our tongues. We are done. We are done. We are done.

**Titles and italics adapted from lines by Emily Dickinson**

**ROGER MITCHELL**

**The Dream**

It didn't care what happened, came  
and went. The past it took me back to  
dressed differently, had fresher faces.  
A hill rose steeply between two houses  
that, except for one, no one lived in.  
The street was paved with unmowed grass.  
How can a thing be so exact  
and patched together out of scrap,  
pieces of wind, and bric-a-brac?  
A few of which, it's true, had clung  
to one another once, but not  
much better than the flung water  
dream resembles, if not is.  
I found her in the house alone,  
and when I tried to talk as though  
the past might be forgotten, she  
touched something, smiled, and turned away.  
As did the dream, which came too close  
to how things had been to survive.

**JEREMY BASS**  
**Ruskin in Venice**

—*for my mother*

**1**

*City of rivers*

Witnessing its dissolution  
Years later he would say

*Among buried fragments  
Pieces of sculpture  
Lost melancholy clearness of space*

A bed. Washbasin. Desk and chair.  
His room that winter, drafts  
Piled in drifts, sounds of the stones  
Settling into their own traces.

*There is an emptiness now  
That touches all things. If you are quiet  
You can almost hear it*

The barn, alone in the ploughed fields.  
First winter snow sifting down.

**2**

*Not to illustrate  
The thing itself, but to illustrate  
The impossibility of illustration*

*Ornaments on the archivolt  
Lanterns hanging over the water at night*  
The statue of the lion  
Lifted over the square, St. Theodore  
Said to have stood there

Staring across the Lido  
When the piazza was just a scrub  
Of grassy plain  
Lapped by water, unable to support a rafter, a stone.

**JEREMY BASS**

*Now lavished upon walls  
Whose foundations are beaten by the sea*

This morning  
It is the furthest thing away.

**3**

*At night, from the smoking ruins  
Of the city, on rafts*

*No one would miss them  
If they drowned*

Tonight, each house  
Becomes an island. The snow outside  
Its sea. *The red house*

*And the yellow house, the port  
With its ships*

**4**

In Room 42 at the Grand Hotel  
He wrote the opening  
To his life's work

*The greatest thing  
Is to see something, and to tell  
What one saw*

*And to see clearly  
Is poetry*

White lines  
Stenciled against  
The black bark of trees, sun

Falling in patches, gleams  
Over the dusty snow.

So the world  
For a moment, mirrors  
My grief.

It does not make anything easier.

5

*Simple and tender  
Effort to recover*

Voice bent on saving  
Something it is unable to save

*Pathless, comfortless, infirm*

Voice unwilling to accept  
What rises beneath its own utterance

*Silence*

Can I say it now,  
That she did not always  
Lead a happy life?

*O world,  
Canals of light rivering  
Through the broken arms of trees,*

*There is a spot  
On the other side of darkness  
That will not wash away*



**STEPHEN O'CONNOR**

**Above the Lake**

In this season the world is composed  
of absence: black, which is the color  
of no-light, and white, which is the color  
of blank. By world I mean this snow,  
these woods, this bleak sky, this mute  
roar, which is the afterlife of sound.  
By absence I mean abstraction, this black  
brook as diagonal gash, these slim  
trees as lines, vertical, monotonous,  
impossibly interchangeable. By abstraction  
I mean meaning, I mean human longing,  
I mean loneliness accreting as quiet  
on quiet, as white on bluish white.

**ALLISON HUTCHCRAFT**

**Lampshade Cue Stick Acrobat Dust**

*Proximity—a Gestalt principle of organization holding that (other things being equal) objects or events that are near to one another (in space or time) are perceived as belonging together as a unit.*

—The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

Rain in the gutters, rain in the sea. A man stands at an intersection,  
his red umbrella broken by wind,  
and everything seems temporarily permanent, a color  
of moment and weather.

There's hope maybe in this,  
or in watching plump orange koi  
swimming at local Japanese gardens. I watch their slow, hibernating  
circles, as if  $x$  equals  $x$ ,

as if from a certain distance lily pads are also stones  
and a child leaning toward the water's edge,  
searching for frogs,  
is a strand of cattail bent to the tilt of its lean.

I can go a relatively short distance  
and find other versioned localities—  
grocery checkout line, jicama and sprouts,  
or the fox-glow of an afternoon, its near privacy opening,

expanding into June.  
Once while looking out a train window,  
I saw a woman standing in a grassy lot. The train had stalled,  
another stop, small towns in Illinois,

and she was combing her hair—  
there, where her back turned at an angle toward the tracks,  
where the curve of her hair met the curve  
of her arm lifting,

and the wing of the comb  
summered at the tip of dusk. What do I think when I feel it?  
When something's very near, when glass breaks in the sink  
or on the floor—

maybe that's the crux of it, resurfaced again, an old table.

Maybe that's proximity, released.

These lights I turn off at night, in the morning they're all turned on.

I've forgotten all my bravery.

**JOEL PECKHAM**

**The Well**

Once beyond the field behind my house I found  
an abandoned well covered in old planks,  
a blanket of moss and pine mulch. I could  
not see to water but inhaled the rot  
and wet and thought it might go down forever, curve  
into a belly like the long plumed throat of a loon. Stone  
after stone I dropped into the earth, and listened.  
No splash, no thud, no clack and clatter.  
Amid the pines and calls of birds, only the low  
long breathing of a boy, the swallowing of stones.

**JEREMY GLAZIER**

**The Paper Doll**

Stripped of its cutout clothes  
the paper doll stammers  
its insecurities. The indifferent child throws  
its crinkled body who-knows-  
where. From some forgotten corner it clamors  
to uncrumple itself. It hammers  
its paper fists against the walls, but the blows  
  
are futile. One would suppose  
the child would hear the paper cries,  
recognize the naked woes.  
But he doesn't. He lies  
on the bed and coughs and cuts out paper tears  
to paste in the corner of his eyes.  
The doll, who hates to hear the boy sad, rips off its own ears.

**JEREMY GLAZIER**

**In the Age of Terror, Góngora Reconsiders Life's Brevity**

—after a late sonnet by Luis de Góngora,  
“De la brevedad engañosa de la vida” (1623)

No less eagerly did the second jet that morning  
vanish into pillars of fire and smoke,  
no more silently did global warming  
strike, or avian flu, or all of Lake

Geneva, WI, get swept up by the rapture—  
oh wait, that last one hasn't happened yet,  
but mark my words: In vain we tried to capture  
our elusive lives, the Doomsday Clock reset.

Bin Ladens in the dark caves of your afghans,  
beware: Don't think I can't unstitch you here.  
(Or “uncrochet”—is that a word?) The hands

of time will find you like a drone (to mix  
my metaphors), bust your bunker, fix  
your wagon: There's no nostalgia for next year.

## PHILIP METRES

### An Index

With scissors & Samson, see. With columns, see, see also. With gunpowder, my liege.

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For disambiguation, see Mother of Satan. Cf. skin to kin.

**BOOKS IN BRIEF: Writing White**

**Lee Sharkey**

**Martha Collins, *White Papers*.** Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012, 75 pp, \$15.95 paper.

**Jake Adam York, *A Murmuration of Starlings*.** Carbondale: Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press, 2008, 96 pp, \$14.95 paper.

**Jake Adam York, *Persons Unknown*.** Carbondale: Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press, 2010, 112 pp, \$14.95 paper.

**Kevin Coval, *L-vis Lives!: Racemusic Poems*.** Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011, 120 pp, \$16 paper.

I've been moved, and also chastened, over the past few years to see white poets confronting race in their writing. By this I don't mean so much decrying the racism still intrinsic to these United States as unearthing personal, family, and regional history to discover the role race has played in privileging them at the expense of others. Not to address race in our writing, as Tess Taylor asserted at the 2012 AWP panel "Talking about Whiteness," perpetuates a silence in which power consolidates itself. A poet's politics, she reminded the ballroom full of poets, are conducted "on the level of sentences."

I devote this Books in Brief to discussing recently published volumes by three white poets whose work is furthering the public discourse about race and contributing to the creation of a space where, in Susan Tichy's words, "the narratives of the marginalized and people in power inform one another." The poets' perspectives differ markedly, as do the aesthetic terms of their engagement, but all have attempted to shake off the comfort of inherited assumptions to grapple with the living paradoxes of this country's signature obsession.

■  
Martha Collins's *White Papers* follows on the heels of *Blue Front*, her book-length documentary poem based on a lynching her father witnessed as a five-year-old in his home town of Cairo, Illinois. In *White Papers*, the family story becomes her own story, a coming of age to whiteness in a country largely oblivious to the implications of being white. She describes the book as taking place at "the intersection of personal and racial history."

The book is a white paper that defrocks whiteness, lays it down naked on the page. It does so by persistently and variously interrogating the vocabulary of whiteness, interleaving a racial autobiography with



history lessons, etymological reflections/deflections, and meditations on whiteness as an ontological state. Collins offers up her color-coded childhood in 1950s small-town Iowa: the contents of her toy box (the Beloved Belindy doll, “*mammy of Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy . . . the smile painted on her broad face was as cheery as could be*”), the songs she sang (“*My heart was black with sin / Until the Savior came in. / His precious blood, I know, / Has washed it white as snow*”), the one “Flesh” crayon in the crayon box, and the invincible Lone Ranger, the name of whose “faithful Indian companion” is the Spanish word for *stupid*. Painfully, she tracks the white keys on her piano keyboard to the slaves who carried elephant tusks overland to ships bound for Connecticut, “where they were cut bleached and polished”:

one tusk + one slave to carry it bought  
 together if slave survived the long march  
 sold for spice or sugar plantations if not  
 replaced by other slaves five Africans died  
 for each tusk . . . .

a tusk

that was cut into white keys I played, starting  
 with middle C and going up and down

She shows us the racially isolated girl whose father said, “*Yes / but not in our lifetimes,*” who herself wrote a paper for school arguing “*Yes but not yet.*” Who failed to see absence. Who had no vocabulary for what in retrospect turns the stomach. Her self-indictment, inseparable from cultural indictment, is presented without the cover of bitter irony. Nor is there refuge here in language’s silky contours. One-syllable words—almost physical presences—follow each other with rhythmic insistence, as in this brief excerpt from her exploration of the word “red”: “*stop skin we said paint / the town were you ever / scare blood on my skirt / stop we said.*” Collins describes her stylistic tools as “fragmentation, questioning, stammering, repetition” (what Tichy calls “building a text that can blunder”). To which set I would add omission, elision, truncation, suspension, telegraphing, two-headed syntax, syncopation. Here’s the whole of the fifth poem:

black keys letters learn  
 to play read write dress  
 shoes purse suit grown  
 up clothes hat tie night  
 out morning coffee not  
 yet sin will find you out

→

dirt sheep eye and blue  
mark so it seemed wrong  
that *in the* meant good  
book word confused with  
Middle English *blāc* pale  
(see *bleach*) oh no never

The destabilized syntax keeps the reader alert, scrambling to figure out where to apply the missing adjective that blinks in and out. Alert both to unearned comfort with the status quo and to linguistic habits that shape our consciousness.

The historical narrative *White Papers* traces encompasses not only wars, lynchings, the slave trade that enriched New England in symbiosis with the agricultural South, Jim Crow, Black Codes, and White Money, but also the slaughter of indigenous Americans, the origins of khaki, the tulip trade, and minstrelsy, blackface itself a mask over the mask of whiteness (Had I ever known that Judy Garland acted in blackface?). Whiteness, Collins repeatedly reminds us, is a shifting historical and political construct that empties “us” out (“whatever it was we were”) by defining itself in contradistinction to an “other.” As James Baldwin put it, “The price the white American paid for his ticket was to become white.” That is, emptied of color. Given over to negation and denial:

Not mine: mine came late  
they lived in England . . . .  
Not mine: mine came late  
and poor from Ireland . . . .  
Not mine

Collins writes in the first person singular but also assumes a discomfiting first person plural that speaks in the name of the white race: “and on / we went, making roads and maps / of rivers and roads, assuming // we owned it if we could draw / it and color it in and give it / a name.” One poem early on in the sequence turns to address the white reader directly: “this is a white on white // paper if you are finding // it hard to read white // words on white consider. . . .” That it takes Caucasian readers for its primary audience is one startling aspect of the book’s confrontation with whiteness.

Collins is relentless, insistently returning to the word itself, *white*, a color in a set of colors—black, red, yellow—a subtraction of color. White lead, marble, lilies, snow, sheets, sails, petals, sepals—a catalog

of verbal and material associations. How deep the code, how thin the illusion: “the skin under / all skin is all / white seen skin / is skin deep.” Our words have married whiteness, whose nature Collins keeps worrying, its implied absences, absolutes, the attraction of its death embrace:

a white woman pure  
white body skin hair

white eyes white  
lips nipple blood

white grass for the white  
stones of this white dream

Two of the pages in *White Papers* are left blank, as if to create breathing space, silence for listening. No, that’s inaccurate. Two pages in *White Papers* are blank except for the bracketed phrase “this page blank,” as if to say they’ve been blanked—by the author, history, and the failure (and success) of language itself. As if to say, “Fill in your story here,” as indeed I silently do. Reading this book leaves me feeling as naked as Collins must have felt writing it. The empty pages call to mind the one canvas lacking a bloodstain in Isak Dinesen’s “The Blank Page,” where the bridal sheets of royal consorts are framed and displayed in a convent’s portrait gallery. In both cases the blankness is daunting, freighted with the past and with the work the present demands of us. *White Papers* is that work in progress, the “*Yes but not yet*” at its beginning rewritten on its final page as “Yes Yes.”



Jake Adam York describes *A Murmuration of Starlings* and *Persons Unknown* as part of an open-ended series “to elegize and memorialize the martyrs of the Civil Rights movement.” He invites the reader to imagine *Persons Unknown* folded into the earlier book on either side of its middle section, as subsequent volumes might in turn be folded into an ever-expanding compendium. This is a lifetime’s project, a quest undertaken by a seventh-generation white Alabamian pledged to remember a history that time and the culpable would have us forget. As an act of reparative justice, York determined to “discover the lives that have been erased” by going to the sites of erasure, where “whiteness leaves its own mark” and the writer becomes, through the poems, a disturber of complacency. “*What y’all doing*

here?" a woman asks him in one of the poems, a question he repeatedly asks himself.

York's distinction between memorial and elegy is instructive; his poems bear witness and call to account even as they enact an insistent grieving his entire surroundings participate in, most notably the opulently depicted natural world. Having researched the histories and (re)visited the scenes of the crimes, he conjures a South made of images, shades, and transformations, birds its shadows, jazz its attendant pulse (Rollins, Coltrane, Sun Ra). The mode is lyric, gorgeously so. The poems themselves become sites of confrontation, imbued with the cultures that produced the murders, the murderers, the murdered, and those who stood passively by—the recurrent "no one" who sees nothing, is not responsible, and so facilitates the everyday and extraordinary processes by which racism perpetuates itself. As the East German novelist Christa Wolf wrote in 1977 in a different context, "The unearthly secret of the people of this century . . . how it is possible for one to have been both present and not there."

York has spoken of touching the names of the civil rights martyrs through the water that runs over the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery. In his poems, he names them to honor them: James Meredith, Medgar Evers, Emmett Till, Jimmie Lee Jackson, and others less familiar: Lamar Smith, Herbert Lee, Lewis Allen, Mack Charles Parker, the Reverend James Reeb, Aaron Lee, Joseph Thomas, Charles Eddie Moore, Henry Hezekiah Dee. The poems might be read as portraits, though faces are never sketched and absence is a palpable feature. The murder sites too become subjects of portraiture ("incident turned ambient"), themselves complicit. "Each skin," he writes in "A Natural History of Mississippi," "becomes / the history of its harbor, / another word for *here*."

But the author as researcher finds no physical trace of what happened decades past, rather a gradual covering over by dust, water, the duff of sloughed skin. All he can hope for is the "wave of heat, / the echo // that will fill" a night composed of obsessively recurring images—rivers, birds, moths, wings folding. These establish an atmosphere that persists from poem to poem. All is in motion; "the moth on the window / folds to a bullet, // then unfolds / to watch again." "Homochitto," the opening poem in *Persons Unknown*, enacts this metamorphic process memorably. The woods where Charles Eddie Moore and Henry Hezekiah Dee were tied to a tree and beaten to

death have gone silent save for the flicker's "ki-ki-ki-ki-ki," eerily reminiscent of

the *Kiwu!*

which means *Klansman, I want you!*

which means you are alone  
and soon the water will take you

and keep everything but the names  
nothing here remembers.

"Somewhere," the speaker muses, defining his only purpose at this far remove, "there is a name for this. / Someone could write it down."

In "Darkly," dedicated to Dave Smith, an interlocutor challenges the speaker to explain the death of Willie Edwards, whom Klansmen forced to jump from a bridge to his death in the Alabama River. "*How* you'd ask me— // *Why?* so simple / it won't tell a thing— // . . . . To condemn is easy, you said, / to condemn is to turn away // where no one will ever understand." This provokes him to walk back fifty years, into the lives of five men sitting in a diner, rattled by the Freedom Riders' threat to their way of life, "each bus offering its insult / or imagined slight—." A familiar of Southern nights, he can walk the same streets and catch a glimpse of himself "in a window or a windshield // that wrecks my face / so for a moment // I can mistake myself / for the redneck at the end of a joke." He could walk through a door and "sit beside them // hardly out of place"—a brutal moment "when he sees himself as his language does"—the shape of his vowels, the cultural caul draped over his consciousness. It comes down, he reflects, to seeing how the map of ourselves has been drawn. If we miss that glimpse in the glass, we might well "force a choice // so [we] wouldn't have to / make one," and say looking back, "*My life hasn't meant a thing.*" These speculations reduce him to a state of not knowing, his original intentions incomplete:

And now I can't tell you  
how I got here

or what I'd hope to see,  
what face would rise

if light swept from the channel  
or the opposite shore.

The sky is empty,  
and the river's bent

like a question too close  
or too far away to read.

In "Mothlight," York lays out an *ars poetica* for the poet with a "dream of feeling everything," for whom race has become, to borrow from Eduard Glissant and York himself, a verb, "an ever-changing, ever-diversifying process of relations." From this perspective, the epigraph to *Persons Unknown* from Faulkner's *Light in August* is particularly resonant:

Anyway, he stayed, watching the two creatures that struggled in  
the one body like two moon-gleamed shapes struggling drowning  
in alternate throes upon the surface of a black thick pool  
beneath the last moon.

Those inextricable creatures might be black and white, victim and perpetrator—two parts of ourselves and our civic realm, destined to live or die together. The poet, immobilized by his refusal to shut out any part of the scene, has in his "forsaken hand" only the most fragile of means: "a dream of quiet"—and once again moths:

Raise them to the day  
and let them fall, through themselves,  
again. Then mark where they lie,  
each a frame of arrested flight.  
Then begin, with invisible ribbon,  
with resin, and lay them end to end,  
end to end, again—how many?—  
until this stillness moves.



There couldn't be a better demonstration that race is a verb than Kevin Coval's *L-vis Lives!*, the coming-of-age story of a "whiteboy drawn into and reared by Black music." *L-vis* is a composite figure based on Elvis (the avatar of white black musicians), Coval himself, and a roster of white hip hop artists who have hit it big, often bigger than the black artists who inspired and taught them. Coval is both sympathetic to the impulse that draws white youth to black culture and incisive in his critique of what may result from living out that impulse. This crossover book deserves an audience among those drawn to performance poetry and those who value the less time-bound relationship between the reader and the poem on the page.

In the first, apparently autobiographical, section we meet L-vis as a deracinated Jewish boy living in the Chicago suburbs in a family where “nothing was explained. no one home to contextualize.” The cultural codes he’s absorbing are contradictory and confusing. What does make sense is the music and books he discovers that cross the color line and give shape and rhythm to his anger:

there was a tape deck. a walkman. there was no apartheid in the music. no separation in the library. books endlessly check-out-able. there was holden. the hero Huey P. the wandering protagonist in the midst of all that quiet. the new music to soundtrack the walk to school. the music truthed.

The poems track Coval/L-vis posing in the full-length mirror, writing his first rap to promote a friend’s campaign for eighth grade class president, hopping “the bus he was warned against” and crossing the city until he discovers

fenced-in black  
top, hands beat bricks  
to a beat. headz bent  
& nodding, talk fast  
body part base  
line, stories over boom  
bap. words picked  
up like passes.

A picture emerges of a boy hungry for sense, drawn to music and language as instruments of self-expression. Much as Collins and Coval are miles—and generations—apart in their personal histories, one can’t help but hear the resonance between her etymological word play in “black studies” and his love poem to “black words i learned // to speak / first”:

black stax, black bodies stacked, shack(il)led  
by o’neil english. speak back, black backs  
lashed raised scars, africa attack, black oil  
black guns in the hands of blue, black foils.

The rhythms are hip-hop, but the density and the hybridized noun/ adjectives are familiar from Collins’s poem. Coval is at his best when he writes at this level of energy and compression.

It’s not clear where the desire for stardom ends for L-vis and the desire to bend the arc of history toward justice begins. What Coval does make clear in the poems where the L-vis persona merges with Eminem, Vanilla Ice, and other white rappers is that the transracial

cultural space in which they do their truth-telling exists only in performance. In “nerve,” Vanilla Ice/L-vis fesses up: “i am making Black / art, and am not. i am / something new and am not,” the “am not” ringing as an existential emptiness the reader also encounters in Collins’s and York’s depictions of unconsidered whiteness. In “L-vis sittin on some New Magellans,” Coval calls out both the white hip hop artist exploiting black culture and the crowds that consume his performance:

[i] trade  
tokens in the language of marketplace. dialect  
glass encased. studyable. i am  
a linguist presenting my findings in the field  
of Black labor.

Yet there’s something not so easily dismissed here. Coval gives it its boldest expression in “photo collage / jump cut-ups: white mobs in 1956,” a year when “teeny boppers poodle skirt, shimmy and pat / Boone their way through watered-down versions of the twist” and their “parents gather at the feet of Black boys turned effigy.” Onto this scene of arrested development and murderous racism, Elvis makes his entrance, and Coval imagines his swiveling hips as “the inverse mourning of Black bodies swinging,” the girls’ hysteria as wild grief “for the history we inherit.” A summoning of passion “for the coming revolt.” That revolt has its source in black culture and has led Coval to teaching and mentoring work with young people, most notably as co-founder and artistic director of Louder than a Bomb, a program that marshals poets and teachers to work with student writers in the Chicago public schools.



For all three poets whose work I have discussed here, there’s no way forward but to stumble through the painful revelations of their own racism and our racial history toward a collectively constructed societal transformation. Despite her dying, Adrienne Rich still whispers in my ear, “We can’t wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous. There is no purity and, in our lifetimes, no end to this process.”

**Note**

During the month of November, Martha Collins, Kevin Coval, and Jake Adam York will discuss issues raised in this review on the *BPJ* Poet’s Forum, [blog.bpj.org](http://blog.bpj.org).