

# An Unfolding Elegy

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By Teow Lim Goh

It is difficult to talk about the poet Jake Adam York without talking about his unexpected death in December 2012, at the age of forty. Those who knew him mourned a husband, son, brother, teacher, and friend; those who knew his work lamented the loss of a poet who engaged with a dark episode in American history: the martyrs of the Civil Rights movement.

York wanted to write an elegy for each of the people whose names appear on the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama. This project spanned four volumes of poetry: *Murder Ballads* (2005), *A Murmuration of Starlings* (2008), *Persons Unknown* (2010), and the posthumous *Abide* (2014). Even if he had lived longer, he knew that the work was destined to be incomplete; the list expands as more names are discovered, more stories remembered. He called this life's work *Inscriptions for Air*, writing in the afterword to *Abide*:



*It requires the work of volumes to come. *Inscriptions for Air* is then a book without a single spine, without a single binding. My hope is that its presence in a larger body of work that asks not only questions of memory but also questions of life will suggest the necessary continuity and perpetuity of the work of memory.*

Born in West Palm Beach, Florida, in 1972, York grew up in Gadsden, Alabama. A tall, bald white man who could have been mistaken for a skinhead, he knew he looked the part of the murderous power he decried in his poems. To that end, he questioned what it meant for him to write the forgotten and often suppressed histories of murders committed by men he resembled. He recognized that if he did not examine his position as an elegist, he could instead usurp these histories for his own gain.

The elegies are the centerpiece of York's poetry. He also wrote about music, in particular the murder ballads of the Louvin Brothers and the jazz of John Coltrane and Sun Ra. He wrote about his grandmother's southern cooking and his love of whiskey and barbecue. For York, we relate to one another in music and food. We create memories and a sense of belonging. In this light, the elegies are not just for the Civil Rights martyrs but also for our best selves: the selves we subsume to the demands of power and privilege.

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York's first collection, *Murder Ballads*, takes its title from a type of country song that tells of a murder, most often a crime of passion. He invoked the murder ballad most directly in the poem "Knoxville Girl," based on the Louvin Brothers' 1956 song of the same title:

*The song is one their mother sang,  
a campfire waltz on autumn nights  
or alone, a lullaby,  
the oldest song they know.*

*Now the tape is rolling,  
Charlie on guitar, Ira mandolin,  
the way they've done since they were kids,  
in heirloom melody –*

In the song, a young man goes on a walk with his girlfriend. He beats her to death and throws her body into the river. Back home, his mother asks about the blood on his clothes; he says he had a nosebleed. That night, he is haunted. In the end, he is in jail for life, pining for the girl he once loved.

Of the murder ballad, York said in an interview with Gregory Donovan at *Blackbird*, “The stories they told were tragic. But the songs couldn’t be sweeter. And I’ve been struggling with this aesthetic problem of how to write about history that’s terrible without offending this history, offending the victims of this history.” He wanted to write poems that “are interested in things that are terrible, but at the same time in their textures, the sounds, the music of the poems, offering something more dulcet.”

The song “Knoxville Girl” predates the Louvin Brothers. Its lineage can be traced across the Atlantic to “The Bloody Miller” from seventeenth century England, a time when ballads were a popular way to record history and tell stories. In engaging with the murder ballad, York aligned himself with the ancient role of the poet as scribe and witness.

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The murders York wrote about are of a different kind, though no less sensational: those of black men and their white allies in the South. The perpetrators were often individuals acting on their own, but they were often backed by systems of power and privilege that reinforce white supremacy. Most were not brought to justice. In this light, York knew that, as a white man from the South, if he did not acknowledge his position, he could dishonor these histories instead. As he said in an interview with Jenny Sadre-Orafai at *New South*:

*I didn't think that poetry's authority or the elegist's authority or tradition's authority was enough to allow entrances into these lives. I thought that it shouldn't be enough. Maybe, the trouble with elegy is not that suffering is inconsolable, even partially, but that poetry's demonstrations of its own authority, as justified per se, are what threaten to turn elegies into pornographies of power. And the murders I was writing about were murders by power – physical and hegemonic power – I didn't want to place the murdered at the hands of another kind of power without asking questions of that power, and that meant asking questions of myself and my ability to enter their lives and memories. So, in many of these poems the elegist becomes the victim of another sort of violence, most of it self-willed if not entirely self-controlled.*

York contended with this asymmetrical power of the elegist in the poems “Negatives” and “Vigil”.

The speaker in “Negatives” looks at a postcard photograph of the 1911 lynching of John Lee in Durant, Oklahoma. A crowd gathers around a plume of smoke; in one version, the words “Coon Cooking” are etched into the negative. York positioned the speaker as part of crowd:

*you can see only smoke  
and the appetite on the faces  
  
closest to the heat,  
the desperate arching of a body*

*eager for a glimpse of the gravity,  
the magnetism of this powerless man.*

York blurred the lines between witness and spectator. Looking becomes prurient, the witness implicated. The speaker imagines the flames engulf the crowd and by extension, himself:

*but the cloud now a dark tornado  
caught on the verge of breaking through,  
  
ready to consume each watcher  
until all there is is this plume,  
  
the body enlarged,  
  
its ash, a thousand postcards  
of a world he dared not dream he dreamed,  
  
signed with the names of all who watch,  
ready to inscribe the scene  
  
Wish you were here.*

In careless hands, the lynching becomes just another spectacle.

The poem "Vigil" remembers Virgil Ware, a 13 year-old boy killed on the afternoon of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. He had been riding on the handlebars of his brother's bicycle when two white teenagers shot him. The speaker watches over the body on the ground, next to the bike, and imagines:

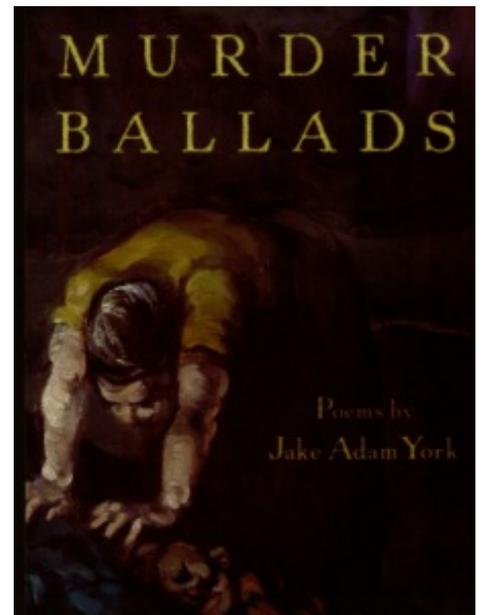
*Let it gather this heat, this fire, hold it all.  
  
Let the crucible door open like a mouth  
and speak of its bloom of light, molten and new.  
  
Let me stand in its halo. Let me stand  
as it pours out its stream of suns.  
  
Let me gather and hold it like a brother.  
And let it burn.*

In witnessing the aftermath of the murder, the elegist takes its weight upon himself. The choice to write comes with responsibilities, most notably to do right by the victims. This duty, however, can threaten to consume the writer.

Of this extreme rhetoric, York said, “It doesn’t even the scales, it can’t even the scales, and it doesn’t attempt to even the scales, but it intends to expose the postures of power so a reader (or viewer) would be asked to consider his or her position, to be implicated.” The act of witness is not neutral. Even though it often aims to right a wrong, it is a form of power that does not necessarily absolve itself.

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In *Murder Ballads*, York interspersed the Civil Rights elegies with poems about, among other things, his grandmother’s cooking, his father’s work in the steel mills, and Walt Whitman in Alabama. *A Murmuration of Starlings*, on the other hand, consists almost entirely of elegies. In the *New South* interview, York described a method he began in his first book and honed in his second:



*I started more deliberately founding the poem’s syntax and sound on the facts and, wherever possible, the actual language of the murders, as gleaned from documents, interviews, newspaper stories, or photographs. In writing these poems, I would start with a quotation and build the poem out from there, shaping the syntax to echo the quotation, or building the line on the nominal length of phrase in the quotation, or developing strands of echo or synonymy or explication from the quotation’s diction.*

He called this method the “documentary lyric,” explaining:

*I try to write a poem that, however narrative, is still clearly lyric – that is, it’s musical, its attentions to language complicate and even arrest the flow of narrative. The lyric elements – those relations of language that are not necessarily narrative, that exceed narrative – in these poems are, however, not derived out of a private language but, instead, from documents that also provide the poem’s subject.*

York used the documentary lyric in “Substantiation,” a sequence of nine sonnet-like stanzas on Emmett Till. Till was visiting family in Money, Mississippi in 1955 when he was murdered for purportedly flirting with a white woman. He was fourteen. The killers tied a cotton gin fan around his neck and threw his body into the Tallahatchie River. York focused not on the crime but on the aftermath:

*The sheriff says it wasn’t Till we pulled from the river,  
that man was as white as I am, white as cotton  
blowed by the cotton gin fan that weighed him down,  
looked like he’d lain there weeks, not a kid at all.  
He was a stranger just out of Money, recalled  
by a store clerk, a hobo, a crossroad guitarist.  
The reporter finds them at the once abandoned crossing.*

*They say it's like the sheriff says, came up one night,  
headed Clarksdale way, another one, hat pulled down,  
right behind. Three days later, the bluesman says,  
a plague of starlings gathered into little boys  
those who fished and found the dead man's foot.  
The reporter stares into his cataracted, cotton eyes.  
He cannot find them, no matter where he looks.*

This opening stanza lays out the facts and establishes the tone of the poem. The community, as represented by the sheriff and later the defense lawyers for the accused, claims Till is alive and his mother ordered a body dug from a fresh grave. The reporter, who is based on two real-life journalists, comes to town to cover the trial of Roy Bryant and John Milam, but he is thwarted by locals who refuse to deviate from the official story and the sheriff who gives him wrong directions. York weaves these two points of view to create a portrait of a community's denial and, ultimately, the silencing effect of power.

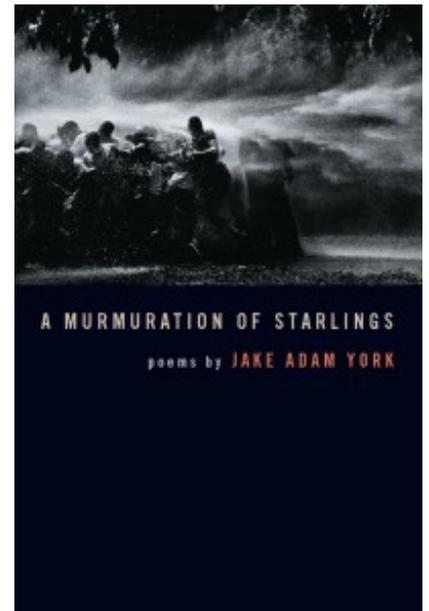
The civil rights movement worked to dismantle state support of white supremacy, but underlying that support were private and often unexamined beliefs about race, power, and privilege. Bryant and Milam may have acted as individuals, but they were threatened by what they saw as a loss of their white identity. The community supported them until, after they were acquitted, they boasted of the crime and thus exposed the community's complicity.

The poem "Substantiation" is accusatory. York made his argument by accreting the facts – or more accurately, the lies and the doublespeak – in the story. He built documentary-like scenes and let the images make the commentary. Most crucially, he composed a consolatory music that, as he said, "draws the readers' attention even more closely to the facts and events that should disturb them fundamentally." In employing the documentary lyric, York created poems that make us face the inner workings of injustice.

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In 1890, Eugene Schiefflin, in a bid to bring all of Shakespeare's birds to North America, introduced the starling to New York's Central Park. As the starlings multiplied, they became seen as an invasive species, a rhetoric that echoes fears of racial pollution. In *A Murmuration of Starlings*, these birds bear witness to racially motivated crimes, as in the opening poem "Shall Be Taught to Speak":

*A thousand miles away, in Arkansas,  
six men pose beneath a tree. In the photograph,  
  
the hanged man's sweater's buttoned tight,  
his hat, his head raked to hide the noose.  
  
One man stills the body with his cane.  
Another moves to point, but his arm is blurred.  
  
Trees burn quietly in the morning sun.  
Their jaws are set. Just one thing's in motion.*



No one sees, York repeated in the collection. The power of his work lies in part in his relentless accretion of detail; he refused to let us look away. "For Lamar Smith," on the voting rights activist gunned down on the courthouse lawn in Brookhaven, Mississippi:

*No one sees him cross the courthouse lawn,  
the lone black man in the election crowd,  
  
and no one steps from the line and pulls a gun  
then slips past the sheriff and the whole white town*

“For Reverend James Reeb,” on the white Unitarian minister from Massachusetts beaten to death during a Selma march:

*and no one can see what lands, what cracks  
the skull, the hairline fracture in tangled hair*

And in “A Murmuration of Starlings,” on Jimmie Lee Jackson, whose death at the hands of police catalyzed the Selma-to-Montgomery marches:

*No one sees them drag him down the stairs  
and into the street  
  
but that is where they found him  
  
No one sees them beat so hard  
clubs splinter  
  
skin and spit and blood  
through the haze of breath, bodies’ steam*

No one sees. No one sees the consequences of their beliefs, the complicity that makes these murders permissible. The starlings, however, are there as quiet witnesses in the background, a chorus of sorts. Their presence and anonymity indicts us. As York writes in “The Crowd He Becomes,” on the Birmingham church bombings:

*The mayor says all of us are victims, innocent victims.  
The lawyer kills his radio. When folks ask later  
who did it, the lawyer says I’ll tell you who.  
Who is everyone who talks of niggers. Who is everyone  
who slurs to his neighbors and his sons. Everyone  
who jokes about niggers and everyone  
who laughs at the jokes. Everyone who’s quiet,  
who lets it happen. Now his voice flaps in the rafters  
of the meeting hall, and everyone is quiet.  
I’ll tell you who did it, he says, we all did.*

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In the afterword to *Persons Unknown*, York invited the reader to split the book and join it with *A Murmuration of Starlings*. He also noted that as the conversation on this history expands, additional martyrs have been identified, which is to say, this project is open rather than closed, without boundaries. In an interview with *The Country Dog*

Review, he says:

*A writer, like me, who wants to explore the duality or multiplicity of our cultural and historical life – to look not only at the official (white) history history that precedes the Civil Rights Movement and that often complicates it, but to look also at the stories and lives that were suppressed or nearly erased, and to look at those things at once – has to occupy several places at once. Since writing is a temporal art – it requires time to create and time to consume – the only way to achieve simultaneity is through constant self-revision. One work revisits another.*

*Persons Unknown* continues with the Civil Rights elegies, but instead of focusing on the details of the murders, York evokes the haunted landscapes of the crimes. The title poem is “The Hands of Persons Unknown,” a documentary lyric on Mack Charles Parker, who was arrested for alleged rape, abducted from jail, and murdered in 1959. His body was recovered from the Pearl River near Poplarville, Mississippi, ten days later.

*Ice buds on the oaks and hickories.  
The rain, the ice keeps coming.  
The limbs lean down. Light may stir  
in the bulbs of ice then break, spread  
and split in the smothering dark,  
then close again, just headlamps passing,  
ice cocooning every limb.*

Here York does not accuse, not directly. He stays with the landscape: ice, rare in subtropical Mississippi, as well as the trees, river, and glass. He addresses Parker as he imagines the violence inflicted by hooded men:

*They've come for you as if counties'  
worth of water could claim its bed,  
claim its crest in you. You leave  
your mark, your water, but subside is slow,  
a melt to the bridge, the bank, the stream,  
high marks for a Bible and a brush  
in the morning to wear it back again.*

The landscape becomes an accomplice to the crime. Unlike the starlings, which make noise as they depart the scenes of the murders, the landscape keeps its secrets, including the identities of the men who shot Parker and tossed his body into the swollen river:

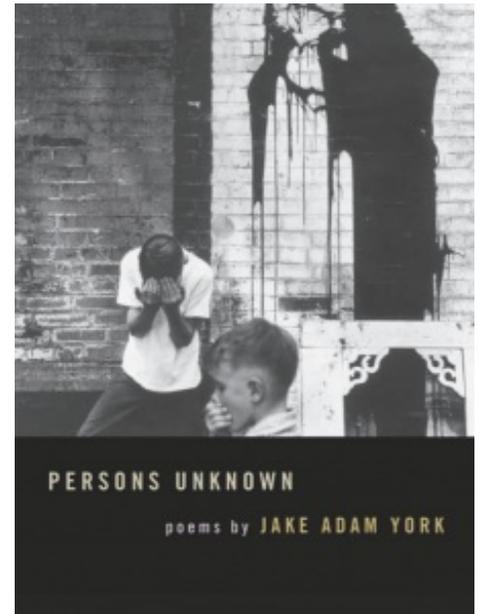
*Tell us how the river rises,  
how one prayer becomes another  
once it leaves the mouth.  
Tell us how Mississippi  
makes an undertaker of the water,  
a perfect gauze for every wound.*

The murderers remain unknown. We see only their shadows on the landscape. Like the starlings, these ghosts make us contend with our culpability. These figures have no names, no faces; they could be us.

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Though York's life work was to reckon with the Civil Rights murders, he was still a white man, with all the attendant assumptions and privileges. When he traveled in the South, whether to meet family, delve into archives, or visit the sites of the murders, his accent and appearance gave away his Alabama roots. For better or for worse, people treated him accordingly. In the second half of *Persons Unknown*, he looked at how he could be two people at once, his inner life shaped by geography.

"The Second Person" describes such an experience in Natchez, Mississippi, where he strikes up a conversation with an affable shopkeeper. She identifies him as Alabamian, waxes rhapsodic about the landscapes of his home state, and "leans in to say *I just love it / you know – there are no darkies there.*" She assumes that, as a fellow white Southerner, he shares the views she ordinarily would not say aloud. Of this he says:



*Then afternoon is a conspiracy of color,  
an echo the heat or the history*

*in our voices draws us into –  
someone else's version of ourselves –*

*and the inevitable, painful quiet  
in which an answer must arrive.*

He does not respond; his answer is too long and complex for a casual conversation.

In "Self-Portrait in a Plate Glass Window," he dines at the Selma café where James Reed last ate and notices the owner watching him:

*It's the right address,  
though the name has changed,*

*and he must be asking, as I am,  
am I where I'm supposed to be.*

He avoids the man's gaze and focuses on his chicken and greens instead:

*Eyes down, I'm working to the blank plate  
and the questions that have to follow –*

*Where you from? What you after? –  
even if no one says a thing.*

Under the restaurant owner's gaze, York questions his own presence: why does he need to write these difficult histories? Why does he not maintain the silence expected of him? There are two sides to privilege: it is the luxury to be blind to the suffering of others and the ability to speak truth to power without severe consequences.

York returns to West Palm Beach in "Self-Portrait in the Town Where I Was Born". At a seafood shack in the black part of town, a girl with a baby on her shoulder asks him and his companion, "What y'all doing here?" He wants to say, "I was born here," but he realizes that is not what she asked:

*This is the moment  
we become visible,  
when we emerge or develop,  
the only whites in a block or two.*

Why are you, white man, in our part of town? The question echoes his own: why are you, white man, writing our histories? The people in the shop turn to him:

*waiting as I take a breath –  
vinegar and brine  
in the rising wind –  
everyone waiting  
for the sound I'll make,  
the first word I'll say.*

In this moment, he suggests his responsibility to the black community: to use his privilege to make their stories known without speaking for them.

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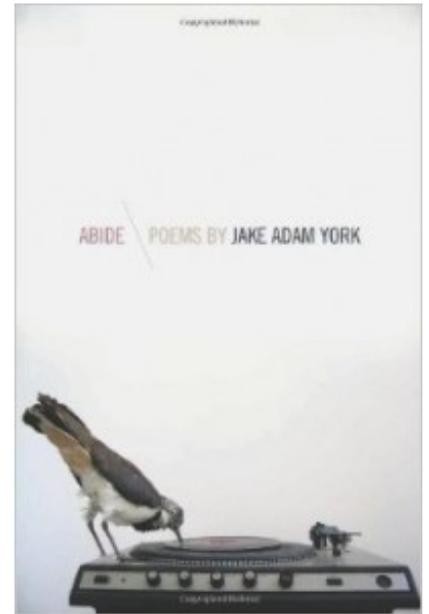
In the afterword to *Abide*, York wrote, "Memory lives in the breath we breathe, in the air we make together." That is to say, the act of remembering the past is not separate from our everyday lives. We carry our histories inside us; we make history as we share our stories. In an interview with Shira Richman at *The Volta*, he describes two modes of thinking about history:

*One of those modes is the monument, and the monument is about making some sort of large public statement that seeks to reorganize the way the recipients understand themselves or their position in the world in which that statement is possible. The other approach is the memento, which is something more personal that, if you will, evidences the artist's relationship with that subject in his or her life, in his or her own bodily experience, without necessarily directly implicating the reader in any particular way.*

The poems in *A Murmuration of Starlings* are mostly monuments. They look outward; they are founded on the facts of the stories; they seek to change our knowledge of these histories. *Persons Unknown* continues with this mode, but it also begins to invite personal reflection. *Abide* extends this work on the Civil Rights elegies, but it takes a more intimate turn in poems nominally about York's personal life and in particular, his relationship to music. He integrates elegy into the atmosphere and culture of the South.

Some of *Abide's* poems are entirely elegies, such as "Mayflower" and "Inscription for Air," both about John Earl Reese, a 16 year-old boy shot by Klansmen through a café window in Mayflower, Texas. In others, he references this history as he writes about something else. "*te lyra pulsa manu* or something like that" begins with a celebration of music:

*As Ovid or Onomacritus – or was it Ike Turner? – said  
music makes everything want to reach out of itself,  
rocks forgetting their gravity, birds hovering  
as if become part of the air itself*



York slides from the ancient Greeks to the blues legends Ike Zimmerman and Robert Johnson before he says:

*This is how, in these moments, when music  
coaxes everything out of itself,  
when you become so attuned  
you almost hear the light*

The light in this juke joint in Mississippi makes him think of William Moore, a white protestor killed near Gadsden:

*after walking from Chattanooga to Gadsden,  
with the sign, Jesus Was an Alien,  
taped to his caisson, his letter for Ross Barnett –  
Be gracious and give more  
than is immediately demanded of you –  
still folded in its envelope  
when the assassin found him,  
and this is how I imagine  
Medgar Evers, not two months later,  
the pulse of the kitchen light  
reaching through the bullet hole in the window  
to flicker on his skin*

This poem is a memento. His remembering of this history arose from his engagement with music and myth. In this fourth and final collection, York wrote the Civil Rights martyrs into poems about his father, his great-grandmother, his youthful experiments with jazz and rap battles. For York, history is not segregated from the present. History, no matter how difficult or damning, is a part of who we are.

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As I write this piece, I keep thinking of Trayvon Martin, Alejandro Nieto, and Michael Brown, black and Latino boys killed by, respectively, the self-styled vigilante George Zimmerman, the San Francisco Police Department, and Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. The killers perceived the boys as dangerous despite their innocuous activities: Martin was carrying Skittles, Nieto eating a burrito, and Brown jaywalking. Zimmerman was acquitted in the Florida courts on the grounds of self-defense. The other two cases are still pending, but fundraisers for Wilson's defense have *outpaced* those for Brown's family. The histories York wrote about are not safely confined to the past.

I am an Asian woman with, for most part, the outward markers of the professional class. I hardly worry that I will be marked or mistaken for a criminal just for the color of my skin. But where I grew up, Singapore, I was a part of the racial and economic majority. I learned the silences expected of me, which is why I recognize the power asymmetries York contends with in his work. This is also why, throughout this piece, I say "we" when I write of the dominant culture.

I did not know York, even though we lived in the same city – he taught at the University of Colorado, Denver, and we walked in some of the same circles. I wish I had met him. I remember where I was the day he died: I was stuck in Sunday ski traffic on the Interstate 70, idly checking my social media feeds as a friend drove, when the news spread online. Many remembered him as a generous man and a great poet; in the following days, as those who knew him wrote tributes, I kept seeing the same refrain: what else could he have accomplished had he lived? The words "poet laureate" appeared more than once.

In his later interviews, York said he was working on a cultural history book titled *Monument and Memento* as well as poems about earthworks such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. We can only speculate where his work would have gone. But maybe this is not the right question. The summer after York's death, a few of us writers gathered to talk about *Murder Ballads*. One of my friends asked, how can we honor and continue his legacy? Maybe the answer is found in his poetry: by doing the hard but necessary work of memory, of elegy.

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**Teow Lim Goh's** poetry, essays, and criticism have appeared or are forthcoming in *PANK*, *Pilgrimage*, *The Rumpus*, *Guernica*, *The Common Online*, and *The Philadelphia Review of Books*, among other publications. She has completed a book of poems on the Angel Island Immigration Station.