

Title Menu: 6 Lyric Voices of Witness

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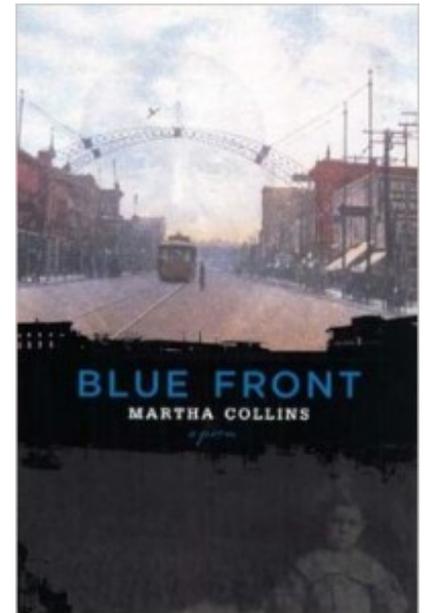
By Teow Lim Goh

Poet Lucille Clifton says, “What the poet does, ideally, is to talk about the history of the inside of people so that history is more than just the appearance of things.” A number of contemporary poets engage with forgotten histories or suppressed perspectives. In America, this includes the legacies of lynching and slavery, labor and Indian massacres in the frontier West, the influenza pandemic, and the Japanese internment during World War II. These poems insist that we remember the past, even and especially when it implicates us, and reckon with our individual and collective psyches.

***Blue Front* by Martha Collins (2006)**

The town of Cairo, Illinois sits the confluence of the brown Mississippi and blue Ohio. It is the southernmost city in the state. On November 11, 1909, a mob lynched William James, a black man accused of the rape and murder of a young white woman. They could not find the alleged accomplice; instead they broke into the town jail and hung Henry Salzner, a white man in prison for murdering his wife. Among the ten thousand spectators that day was Martha Collins’ father, then a five year-old boy selling fruit in front of his uncle’s Blue Front restaurant.

In *Blue Front*, a book-length poem, Collins collages archival research, newspaper reports, statistics, and postcard photographs with speculations of her father’s experience, building a fragmented account of the lynchings, the decline of Cairo, and her complicated racial inheritance. She also writes of the 1967 hanging of a black soldier in the Cairo jail, which authorities have deemed a suicide, as well as of her own travels to Selma and Montgomery. She breaks off many thoughts and even sentences and circles back later. In this fracture and repetition, she grapples with the trauma and anxiety of this history.



“Children were often there they were being taught,” Collins says of the lynchings. One of these children was her father, who “fourteen years later rode around town / dressed in a white sheet just / made noise he said made noise.” Her father was a kind man who liked to help others; of his youthful involvement in the Klan she writes:

*it is probably true that for him in 1924 it wasn't just blacks
but someone anyone different or maybe it was just something to do
to join he paid his ten dollars and maybe attended barbecues
dances three-day Klantaquas or Klan Konclaves or maybe*

In this environment, racial violence was unexamined and normalized.

In another phrase that echoes in the book, Collins writes of her father, “He made change.” The change is on one hand literal, the everyday transactions of a boy selling fruit. But she also writes:

*And the last day
he said You know*

this world could be

*a better place just
promise me that you
will help he waited*

*he made change may
I help you please
make change*

In this light, *Blue Front* is also Collins' answer to her father's last wish. This book may not change the world immediately, but it engenders conversations about race, power, and culpability. Change ultimately happens when we reassess our beliefs. Collins honors her father by turning his legacy into a searching work of art.

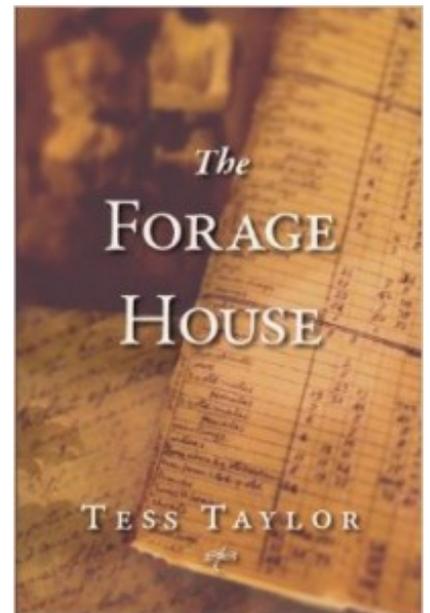
***The Forage House* by Tess Taylor (2013)**

Tess Taylor is a white descendant of Thomas Jefferson. The founding father owned slaves and likely fathered children with one of them. In her debut collection *The Forage House*, Taylor rummages through artifacts and archives to create a portrait of her family and by extension, the nation. She seeks the unwritten and unsaid: as a part of the lineage sanctified by marriage and race, she is recorded in the Jefferson genealogy. The descendants of his slave and mistress Sally Hemings are not recognized and cannot be buried in Monticello.

Of her Appalachian grandmother, Taylor writes, "They took apart her house to save the boards." In these poems, Taylor dismantles comfortable narratives of family and history in favor of the difficult truth. She visits her ancestral homes in Virginia and North Carolina to research her family's slaveholding past, but she finds more absences than answers. Her Southern white relatives are uneasy with her questions, as she writes in the poem "Virginia Pars":

*Impossible to ask. Don't speak of race.
The record's scratched. I don't recall. I never knew.*

Anyone who'd tell you'd dead. And: No one would tell you.



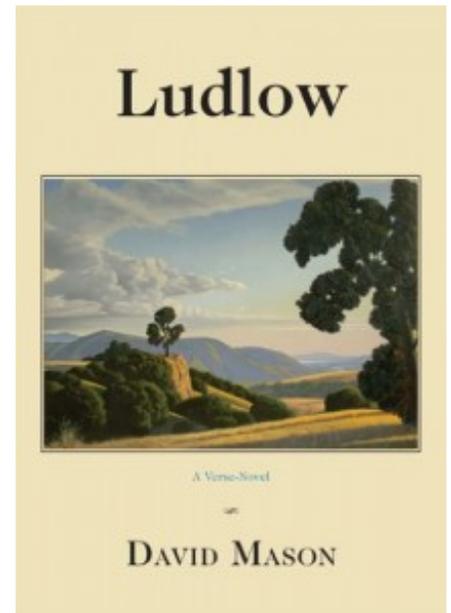
Undeterred, she delves into the archives. She finds the will of Etheldred Taylor, who deeded "Books Negros Land" to his sons. Of Jefferson, Taylor writes, "I was taught: *He could not afford to free his slaves.*" This poem "Southampton County Will 1745" continues with the auction of Jefferson's estate after his death to pay off debts. The furniture fetched high prices while the slaves sold for below the asking price. Among the bidders were Jefferson's white children and grandchildren. The slaves likely included his black descendants. This history begets the question: how do we define family?

The archives are also incomplete. Taylor patches the fragments she finds with stories of her Appalachian grandmother, her parents' courtship and missionary work in India, and the California landscapes in which she grew up. In the end, *The Forage House* is also a quest for self and identity: Taylor contends with her dubitable inheritances and the "ambitious foundering father I revere & hate & see myself in."

***Ludlow* by David Mason (2007)**

David Mason's verse-novel *Ludlow* dramatizes one of the bloodiest labor conflicts in American history: the 1914 Ludlow Massacre in the coalfields of southern Colorado. On April 20 of that year, the Colorado National Guard attacked a tent colony of 1,200 striking miners and their families. The miners had been turned out of their company homes in September when they went on strike for higher wages and safer work conditions. Among the 19 to 25 people killed on that Easter Monday were women and children who suffocated in a pit when the tent above them caught fire.

*These are the facts, but facts are not the story...
There was a weight, a person with a name.
That weight is gone, in ashes or in earth.
The name accrues some glory.*



Ludlow blends fiction and fact in octets of blank verse. While the story is rooted in history, Mason creates characters to tell his tale. Some, like the Greek immigrant and labor leader Louis Tikas, are based on real people; his body is left by the tracks for three days after the massacre. He invents others, such as Luisa Mole, a girl orphaned when her father dies in a mine accident. A merchant family takes her in, and even though they give her food and shelter, she never quite becomes one of them. Whether they are real or fictional, Mason imagines each character's motivations, which is to say, he writes the history of the inside of people whose actions culminated in the Ludlow Massacre.

*These lives are part of my life's inventory;
my role grows smaller when I glimpse the whole.
Today I pocketed a lump of coal.
These are the facts, but facts are not the story.*

For Mason, this story is also personal. His family goes back a few generations in southern Colorado. His grandparents were shopkeepers in Trinidad and are buried in the same cemetery as Tikas. He grew up listening to his family's tales when he visited in the summers. *Ludlow*, however, is more than just an account of a brutal episode in American history. It is a story of people trying to find their places in a difficult world, trying to lay claim to dreams just beyond their reach.

Marked Men by Joseph Hutchison (2013)

On November 29, 1864, Colonel John Chivington of the Colorado territorial militia ordered 700 men to attack an Arapaho and Cheyenne village on the banks of Sand Creek in the southeastern plains of the state. The Indians had been assured of peace and were flying the American flag to demonstrate their friendliness. Chivington's troops ignored a white flag and killed between 70 to 160 Indians, many of whom were women, elderly men, and children. They sliced fetuses from mothers' bellies, dismembered bodies for scalps, and made bags from genitals.

In *Marked Men*, Joseph Hutchison tells the story of the Sand Creek Massacre through a verse cycle on the last days of Silas Soule, a captain who had disobeyed Chivington and ordered his men to hold fire. Soule later testified against Chivington before a military commission. He was the Assistant Provost Marshal of Denver when he was murdered outside his home on April 23, 1865. It is unclear whether Chivington had directly ordered the assassination, but he was acting within a climate in which a person with principles like Soule became a marked man.

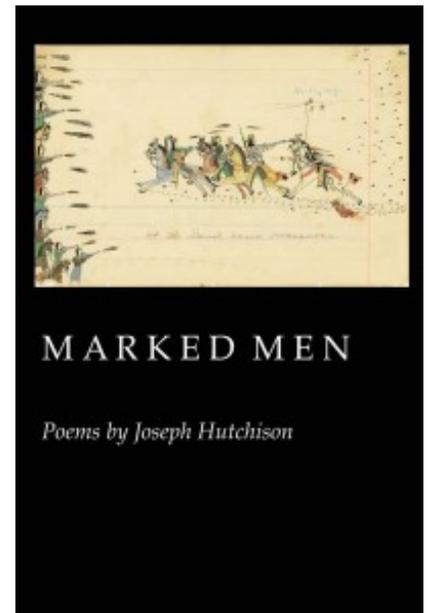
Of Soule's confrontation with his killer Charles Squires, Hutchison writes:

*Squires laughed. "I saw," the marshal
hissed. "You liked the knife.
You liked the unarmed girls. Well,
I know your ilk." "And I
yours," Squires snapped. "All this" –
he flung his burly arms out wide –
"you'd let it go to hell!"*

Our work. Our wealth. Our dreams."

Hutchison recounts the massacre in, among other things, a letter from Ned Wynkoop to Kit Carson and the report of a spy in the guise of a journalist Chivington sent to interview Soule. But in telling the story from the perspective of Soule's murderer, he also asks what it means to prize loyalty over conscience.

The two preludes in *Marked Men* tell of a mestizo artist tortured by the Spanish Inquisition and the 1788 destruction of an Iroquois town by the Continental Army, that is, Hutchison sets the Sand Creek Massacre in the larger context of the European conquest of the Americas. In the afterword, Hutchison writes, "It was the mentality that the Protestant Chivington had inherited from the pre-Reformation Christian Columbus that killed Silas Soule, whose spirit of humane tolerance could not survive the forces of dehumanizing fanaticism."



Kyrie by Ellen Bryant Voigt (1996)

Ellen Bryant Voigt's *Kyrie* is a book-length sequence of sonnets on the influenza pandemic of 1918 – 1919. Influenza is an indiscriminate killer that spreads through social and intimate contact. Men and women, rich and poor, young and old alike died from the virus. People became suspicious of others and isolated themselves in their homes. Voigt's poems are less a force of moral reckoning than witnesses to the quiet sufferings of those who lived and lost.

Voigt imagines a series of voices, including the soldier Price sent to the trenches of World War I, his schoolteacher fiancée Mattie, the town doctor, and an omniscient narrator. Individually, the poems are untitled and undated. Except for Price's "Dear Mattie" poems, Voigt does not explicitly identify the voices, though the repetition of images and echoes of stories provide clues. There is an arc to the sequence, but the pieces are not arranged into a linear narrative. This lack of specificity allows Voigt to focus instead on the emotional range of her characters.

World War I provides another context to these poems. The pandemic hit in the last months of a war that, at that time, seemed inconceivable in its brutality and human toll. The soldiers went home to families and towns devastated by influenza. Some of these men who survived the battlefield, including Price, died of the flu. "The War was the one important story of his time," Voigt writes, but the pandemic ultimately killed more people – between 50 and 100 million – than did the war.

The title refers to the Kyrie eleison, the first prayer in the Roman Mass, sung by the choir and sometimes the congregation. It comes from Greek and translates into "Lord, have mercy." The verses in *Kyrie* are not directly religious, but they accumulate into a chorus of voices and a liturgy of grief and memory.

Topaz by Brian Komei Dempster (2013)

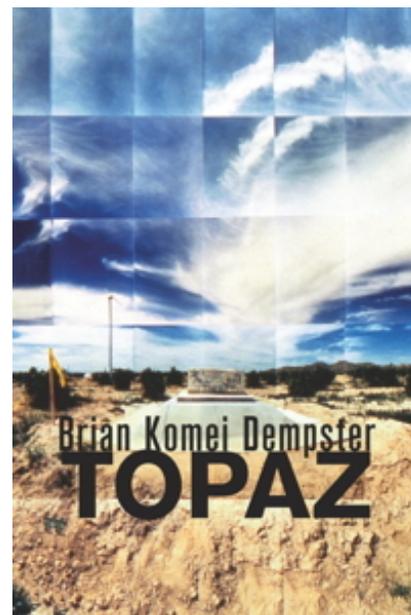
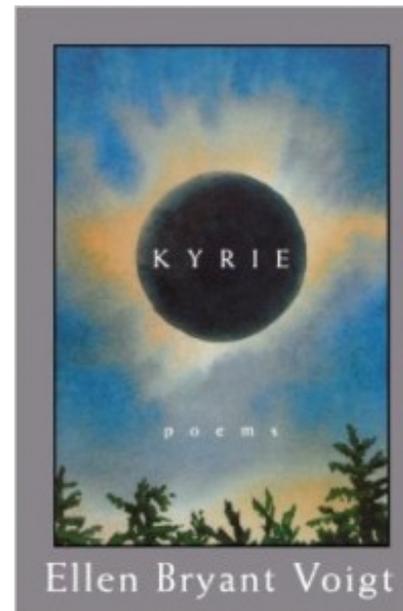
Brian Komei Dempster's debut collection *Topaz* is named for the World War II internment camp in western Utah where his mother was detained as an infant. His grandfather, the Archbishop Nitten Ishida, founded the Nichiren Buddhist Church in San Francisco. During the war, he was separated from his family, moving through various camps while his wife and children were sent to Topaz. They reunited in Crystal City, Texas and returned to San Francisco only to find their home and church in shambles.

In these poems, Dempster tries to document his family's experience in the camps. He reads the letters his grandparents wrote to each other while in detention. His mother is reluctant to speak of the ordeal. His grandmother is also evasive, as he writes in the poem "My Questions to Obachan, Her Answers":

*In barracks, Grandma, the dust chafed your lips?
Men gathered for poker, the women for bridge.*

*And guards, rifles, the sweep of black boots?
The girls cut out dolls, ripped paper into skirts.*

In this silence, he turns to artifacts from this history, in particular a steamer trunk that became his mother's makeshift crib in Topaz and which he inherited for his own son. The trunk becomes a totem of his legacy and a silent



witness to his family's sorrows.

Dempster also expands his historical lens to the 1937 Nanjing Massacre and the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The pillage of the Chinese city was a part of Japan's plans for imperial expansion; the nation would later attack Pearl Harbor as a ploy to deter America from interfering with its conquest of Southeast Asia. For Dempster, the connection is also personal: his Chinese wife has family who were killed in Nanjing. The atomic bombs obliterated the cities but also ended the war. Dempster reminds us that the Japanese were also aggressors in a war that made his family victims.

Against this history, Dempster tells stories of his family: his grandfather painting and performing rites, his grandmother writing between kitchen chores, an uncle who died in the Korean War and another who died of cancer. He watches his father brush his mother's hair. He watches himself clasp a jade necklace on his wife's neck. In recounting these devotions through the fractures of history, he finds an identity shaped by traumas he did not directly experience and asks what it means to love.

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.