



## Book of Hours: Poems

*By Kevin Young*

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### Book of Hours: Poems By Kevin Young

A decade after the sudden and tragic loss of his father, we witness the unfolding of grief. “In the night I brush / my teeth with a razor,” he tells us, in one of the collection’s piercing two-line poems. Capturing the strange silence of bereavement (“Not the storm / but the calm / that slays me”), Kevin Young acknowledges, even celebrates, life’s passages, his loss transformed and tempered in a sequence about the birth of his son: in “Crowning,” he delivers what is surely one of the most powerful birth poems written by a man, describing “her face / full of fire, then groaning your face / out like a flower, blood-bloom,/ crocused into air.” Ending this book of both birth and grief, the gorgeous title sequence brings acceptance, asking “What good/are wishes if they aren’t / used up?” while understanding “How to listen / to what’s gone.” Young’s frank music speaks directly to the reader in these elemental poems, reminding us that the right words can both comfort us and enlarge our understanding of life’s mysteries.

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## Editorial Review

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\*Starred Review\* Young is adept at netting the sensations of the moment and retrieving the spirit of the past in poems of monumental grief, stoicism, rapture, and sharp humor. In his eighth collection, Young marks the tenth anniversary of his father's unexpected death, telling the story of the stunned aftermath with striking attunement to the utter transformation of what had been ordinary life. His tone is elegiac as he describes picking up his father's effects at the hospital. He marvels over the strange munificence of organ donation, and when he acknowledges the poignant kinship he feels with his father's dogs, he quips, "Brothers in paw." Young is a virtuoso of succinctness, which in this book has particularly deep resonance: "The grammar of grief / gets written each day / & lost—and learnt again / by stone, by small / sliver, hieroglyph." As he takes measure of paternal absence, he prepares to become a father, writing with awe of the astonishments of pregnancy and the revelations of ultrasound. From intimate reflections on the mysteries of the body, Young turns his penetrating attention to sky and land as though on a vision quest, tracking the sun and moon, desert and valley, wildflowers and geese in cosmic poems of life's essentials and the great wheel of existence. He concludes, "Why not sing." --Donna Seaman

### About the Author

Kevin Young is the author of seven previous books of poetry, including *Ardency: A Chronicle of the Amistad Rebels*, winner of a 2012 American Book Award, and *Jelly Roll*, a finalist for the National Book Award. He is also the editor of eight other collections, most recently *The Hungry Ear: Poems of Food & Drink*. Young's book *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, won the Graywolf Nonfiction Prize, was a *New York Times* Notable Book and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism, and won a PEN Open Book Award. He is currently the Atticus Haygood Professor of Creative Writing and English, curator of Literary Collections and curator of the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library at Emory University.

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### *Bereavement*

Behind his house, my father's dogs  
sleep in kennels, beautiful,  
he built just for them.

They do not bark.  
Do they know he is dead?  
They wag their tails

& head. They beg  
& are fed.  
Their grief is colossal

& forgetful.  
Each day they wake  
seeking his voice,

their names.  
By dusk they seem  
to unremember everything—

to them even hunger  
is a game. For that, I envy.  
For that, I cannot bear to watch them

pacing their cage. I try to remember  
they love best confined space  
to feel safe. Each day

a saint comes by to feed the pair  
& I draw closer  
the shades.

I've begun to think of them  
as my father's other sons,  
as kin. Brothers-in-paw.

My eyes each day thaw.  
One day the water cuts off.  
Then back on.

They are outside dogs—  
which is to say, healthy  
& victorious, purposeful

& one giant muscle  
like the heart. Dad taught  
them not to bark, to point

out their prey. To stay.  
Were they there that day?  
They call me

like witnesses & will not say.  
I ask for their care  
& their carelessness—

wish of them forgiveness.  
I must give them away.  
I must find for them homes,

sleep restless in his.  
All night I expect they pace  
as I do, each dog like an eye

roaming with the dead  
beneath an unlocked lid.

*Memorial Day*

Thunder knocks  
loud on all the doors.

Lightning lets you  
inside every house,  
white flooding

the spare, spotless rooms.  
Flags at half mast.

And like choirboys,  
clockwork, the dogs  
ladder their voices

to the dark, echoing off  
each half-hid star.

*Greening*

It never ends, the bruise  
of being—messy,  
untimely, the breath

of newborns uneven, half  
pant, as they find  
their rhythm, inexact

as vengeance. Son,  
while you sleep  
we watch you like a kettle

learning to whistle.  
Awake, older,  
you fumble now

in the most graceful  
way—grateful  
to have seen you, on your own

steam, simply eating, slow,  
chewing—this bloom  
of being. Almost beautiful

how you flounder, mouth full, bite  
the edges of this world  
that doesn't want

a thing but to keep turning

with, or without you—  
with. With. Child, hold fast

I say, to this greening thing  
as it erodes  
and spins.

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