

STOMPING THE BLUES: KEVIN YOUNG AND THE NEW IDIOM OF AMERICAN POETRY

Jelly Roll: A Blues. Kevin Young. New York: Knopf, 2003. *Blues Poems*. Edited Kevin Young. New York: Knopf, 2003.

Ivy G. Wilson

In the foreword to a recent edited volume of poetry, Kevin Young notes that the blues are “feelings and states of mind that are hard to describe—some might say that don’t properly exist—until we have a word for them.” The genealogy of the blues as an aesthetic form from the slave song and the work song through jazz as well as both early rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues is well-documented. But it is worth recalling that the blues were born at a moment in U.S. history when the residues of slavery were still yet too noticeable and the promise of equality still too far away, subjecting many African Americans to what W.E.B. Du Bois called a “peculiar sensation,” or, as Young states it, to “feelings and states of mind that are hard to describe.” How is it then, one might ask, that an aesthetic born out of the near impossibility of being black in these United States reverberated with such a wide range of poets from W.H. Auden to Sonia Sanchez, John Berryman to Gustavo Pérez Firmat? How is it that the blues became idiomatic?

Young’s edited collection, *Blues Poems*, and his own volume, *Jelly Roll*, both published in 2003 by Knopf, are part and parcel of more recent work on the blues, as well as a continuation of the poet’s own fascination with African American cultural production, especially music. Some of these books include works by ethnomusicologists and others, such as Angela Davis’s *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1999) and Eric Sackheim’s *The Blues Line* (2003) and, more specifically on Jelly Roll Morton, a new edition of Alan Lomax’s *Mister Jelly Roll* (2001), Phil Pastras’s *Dead Man Blues* (2001), and *Jelly’s Blues* (2003) by Howard Reich and William Gaines. Young himself has been enthralled with music, as evidenced by an earlier edited collection, *Giant Steps* (2000), after John Coltrane’s famous album, published in 2000 which includes a discography and the recent revamp of an earlier volume of poems to create *To Repel Ghosts: The Remix* in 2005. Given its presence in American culture, especially African-American poetry and letters, it is not surprising, then, that Young would pick up the blues.

Blues Poems and *Jelly Roll* reveal the grandeur of the blues; their contours, their vicissitudes, and their nuances not only illustrate their appeal to poetry but reveal the blues as poetry. Many of his selections for the Every-

man's Library Pocket Poet series demand this kind of recognition, as with Ma Rainey's "See See Rider Blues" and Son House's "Death Letter Blues." The collection is sub-divided into discernible parts: "Standards," "Some Songs," "Form," "Facing Off," "Figures," "Freight," and "Finale." Young includes expected songs and poems such as Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues," Richard Wright's "FB Eye Blues," Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues," Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail," Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog," and Sherley Anne Williams's "Any Woman's Blues." The first section "Standards" is comprised of blues poems written before World War II and includes verses from Claude McKay, Nicolás Guillén, Muriel Rukeyser, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Poems on Muddy Waters, Leadbelly, Langston Hughes, and Big Mama Thornton can be found in the "Figures" section and, in the "Finale," there are poems for Bessie Smith, including the august "Homage to the Empress of the Blues" by Robert Hayden and Michael S. Harper's "Last Affair: Bessie's Blues Song." Young also selects John Berryman's "Dream Song [no. 40]" for the volume, itself a precursor to *John Berryman: Selected Poems* that Young edited for the American Poets Project of The Library of America in 2004.

Blues Poems is representative, if not comprehensive, and the extraordinary resonance of the blues is displayed in many of the poems that Young chooses for the sections "Facing Off" and "Freight." One of the most admired poems in contemporary American literature, Sonia Sanchez's "Blues Haikus," illuminates the haiku by animating it with the blues—"let me be yo wil / derness let me be yo wind / blowing you all day" (110). In the section "Freight," Young identifies poems that have transported—as much as transformed per se—the blues aesthetic into contemporary literature. Included in "Freight" is a resplendent slither from Albert Murray's *Conjugations and Reiterations* (2001)—a fitting selection from the author of *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), whose writings, along with those of his contemporary Ralph Ellison, are imbued with the music and lyricism of black life in the U.S.

old grandpa stole away
 north by freedom train
 old grandpa snagged
 that underground freedom train
 booked his passage through the grapevine
 stashed his pack
 and prayed for rain, I mean heavy rain (208)

Murray's verse here riffs on the conventional chord progression of twelve

bar blues. The image of the train is significant not only as an icon in the African American imagination but also as a symbol of African American cultural and literary production that links Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Robert Johnson (among others) to Yusef Komunyakaa, Toi Derricotte, and Bob Kaufman (among others), and, concomitantly, the blues to poetry, as boxcars of the train.

With poems by Sherman Alexie, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Marilyn Chin, and Allen Ginsberg, “Facing Off” is the section that most overtly reveals how the blues have seeped into the broader precincts of American language, changing and heightening the measure of an American idiom altogether. Alexie’s “Reservation Blues” demonstrates how the blues can be transplanted from one place to another, promising to expand the panorama of America itself.

I ain't got nothing, I heard no good news
 I fill my pockets with those reservation blues
 Those old, those old rez blues, those old reservation
 blues
 And if you ain't got choices
 What else do you choose? (134)

If one of the most identifiable characteristics of the blues is its use of call-and-response, Alexie’s poem approximates this interactive mode with its instructions for the reader to repeat the chorus twice more rather than simply have them (re)printed within the domain of the poem. In forcing the reader to remain momentarily in this stanza, to redouble back to it again (and again), Alexie fabricates a sensation of being immobilized, reproduces the feeling of being caught in an existential predicament, and intimates the brutal history of Native America that the phrase “rez blues” can only nominally conjure. Indeed, it is this stanza in particular where some of the qualities of the blues as a form (the extension of the classic three line structure, for example) and their philosophical themes (nihilistic, existential, humanistic) become perceptible—accentuated by Alexie’s use of dialect, a particular grammar of language (and motives) so fundamental to the blues.

While only a few of Young’s poems in *Jelly Roll* make use of dialect, all of them exude the aesthetics, philosophy, and, alas, feelings, of the blues. Young occasionally uses words like “yr” and “everythang,” but the poem that conspicuously approximates dialect is “Errata.” It does so by fabricating a feigned dialect, however, one that is the by-product of having been bruised by a love that prevents the tongue from speaking straight. One of the poems that most embodies the impulse of the blues is “Early Blues.”

Once I ordered a pair of shoes
But they never came.

Young captures the anticipation of an arrival that will never come, of loneliness as an unyielding affect, of continually waiting in vain for love, as a veritable mood indigo. Fraught and unadorned, “Early Blues” and “Field Song,” at two lines apiece, are the shortest poems in the volume. The lines are sparse not meager, a visual resonance of the yearning for more—more flesh, more desire, more freedom. As poems that underscore the two-line structure of the stanzas of many of the poems in *Jelly Roll*, “Early Blues” and “Field Song” are parallel analogues that correlate the origins of the blues with the long hangover of the peculiar institution.

Ineluctably perambulating about *Jelly Roll* is the motif of enslavement, appearing, as it does, to signal both the intoxicating splendor of the idea of freedom as well as the imprisonment of the body and soul after the love has gone. In one of the earliest poems in *Jelly Roll*, the narrator of “Cake-walk” equates a lover to the free space of the mythic North, only to fall into regretful lament for having failed to read “the moss on the tree” (8). “Cake-walk” approximates some of the themes of the lines quoted from Murray’s “Aubades” and Young, himself, has a poem entitled “Aubades” in *Jelly Roll*. If the history of chattel slavery and its aftermath in the U.S. has to remain, for the most part, a refiguration and a metaphor in *Jelly Roll*, its most visceral impression can only emerge as a trace in “Dixieland.”

to see both our bodies

knocked out—dragged
quicksand down—

they’ll put up posters—
have you seen—all over town—

Days later we’ll be drug
naked from the swamp

that is us—re—
suscitated, rescued—

the cops without one clue. (9)

The narrator is speaking of a love that must persist, even if it must take refuge in the dregs of the swamp, but the image also recalls those escaped runaways in the nineteenth-century who, in fleeing slavery, were forced to

live—and die—in the bowels of the bayou.

Love may set you free, but unrequited love yields nothing save its own jail-sentence—and Young's poems in *Jelly Roll* bear this sentiment out. Like the other dominant images of the collection—trains, trees, and the cross-roads—being condemned to a figurative jail is a recurrent theme.

I weaved the road
home. Pulled over

the police offered me
2 choices—their bright

lights making me
mole—see

the inside
of jail, or forget

all about you.
How I have grown used

to the dark! Once
I did not dare

whisper, utter your
name—but here, in flashes

of light I am unafraid. You
you you I says

& mean it! Confess
nothing. Make me

a deal, backroom, bail— (65-66)

Like the person who refuses to sign a false confession, the subject in “Jive,” when faced with such a decision, admits, in fact, there really is no decision to be made at all. The narrator would rather hold on to the memory of the beloved and be confined with it alone—even if the presence of the beloved must now reappear as an auditory hallucination, as with the compulsory repetition of “you you you” that would make even John Lee Hooker envious.

Young extends this theme of a love long forgone but impossible to relinquish throughout *Jelly Roll*. In “Anthem” the poet compares the after ef-

fects of a love gone south to a chain gang that instinctively, “even without / a guard,” unconsciously “breaks rocks out / of habit” (130). In “Fish Story,” the adored is made the equivalent of a religion, or, more precisely, something more than a religion—indeed, a love supreme.

For you I would give up
God—repeal

once & for all, unkneel—
you are beautiful (116)

The presence of “I” in the blues is strong, but the presence of “you” is even more commanding. The first person subject in the blues aesthetic is frequently searching for something that is near but nonetheless distanced, sometimes in sight but not within reach—as in Young’s “Drum Talk” (“I cannot bear to become / something far-off / from you” [89]). The first person subject is almost a false designation, a position that is incomplete without its complement, its other necessary half.

One of the astonishing maneuvers of *Jelly Roll* is that, in a volume that apparently derives its title from the famed pianist, Jelly Roll Morton himself does not make a noticeable appearance. Other figures appear, if only momentarily, such as Bessie Smith and John Henry, but, as a governing impulse, Young takes his cue from the blues to craft the poems of *Jelly Roll*. The poems here, like those of *Blues Poems*, signal the majesty of the blues, the resonances of the blues that allows us to speak through its idioms and tongues, and prompt us all to stomp to the blues.