



a collection of poems by Kelley J. White

# Simmering

a collection of poems  
by Kelley J. White

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## Biography & Acknowledgements

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A New Hampshire native, Kelley J. White studied at Dartmouth College and Harvard Medical School and has been a pediatrician in inner-city Philadelphia for more than twenty-five years. Mother of three, she is an active Quaker. Her poems have been widely published over the past decade, in journals including *Exquisite Corpse*, *Nimrod*, *Poet Lore*, *Rattle* and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and in several chap-book and full-length collections. She is the recipient of a 2008 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant in poetry.

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*Volunteer Army* appeared online at *Covert Poetics*

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## After the Shooting

---

The night was a brick  
thrown through a window.  
Yet the jackals whispered  
truce. That howl of burning  
night, tires, oil, skin; blue  
flame singing destruction,  
ashes on my face.

Even the Mayor ran  
for the cover of city hall.  
Broad daylight and the bricks  
were flying. Yo. The mayor  
won in a recall, the city  
recalled him back. Backstabbers.  
Lie in your face.

Call the hot wolves of power,  
the calm cats of revenge.  
Let them lick your palms  
with their sharp tongues.  
Honey, no one asked you  
to take them in. It's your  
unholy funeral.

Unlock the doors  
of twilight. Se la vie.  
Que sera sera. The clocks  
have danced down from  
the wall. Listen to them  
clapping their little hands.

## Cherchez le Femme

---

The cop cars flash reveille  
on the corner. Their eyes devour  
plump whores, bitter addicts,  
stop signs jump and snicker.  
I was so sick it could wash  
a button. Cocoa bubbles  
in the culverts, tea runs beneath  
the curb as if George Bush  
and all his Texas could paint  
this city clean. The lights  
burn out with mornings. Names  
chalked: Dude, Angel, Tippy  
Toe, the artists call the sinners  
to their knees. Sweet Jesus.  
Her tail's a weasel! Satin  
smooth her underbelly.  
Sirens forget the night. She  
salutes the midday sun.  
Miss Peach, say farewell,  
you'll walk home. Tail  
lights call pickups & tractors  
to the lot. Signal, right  
now your blooming ankles  
need new shoes.

## Daedalus

---

His thoughts were ants seeking breadcrumbs.  
They carried nineteen times their weight: charcoal  
ashes, hot raindrops, crystalline sugar, and salt.

Did they taste sunlight? In Buenos Aires Tupac  
strikes a match against his footsole. Girl,  
you will tie that knot tomorrow, its greasy ribbons,

todos anos, bind the scepters of the forgotten—  
his memory's a net. Signifying monkey, when  
will the spider forget? If he says it, it must be true—

bees need sea breeze, the jaguar's pajamas,  
singe the hot iron of animosity, boil the wax face  
of truth. This nail recalls the whispers

of childbirth. El condor pasa. They have threaded  
the chambered nautilus with wheat spun to gold.

## Darn it

---

You tied my hands in a knot  
with your mother's hand-  
embroidered hand-  
kerchief.

It smells of leather  
and breath mints; you can hear  
my fingers scritch scritch scritch  
to escape.

I hear that icy click lock  
of her handbag. I know she's set  
it on a shelf.

She buys Coach and Gucci handbags  
whenever she's down South.

She never carries her own  
hanky. She's got a lucky and  
a maid.

They say good morning Ma'am  
good evening. Behind their hands they  
say "douche bag."

She hardly pays them any money.  
She says they'll work too hard.

She's the Patron Saint of Penny-pinching.  
She keeps her quarters  
in her bra.

You can hear them clank out Reveille  
when she's backing down  
the hall.

She likes to walk her little doggies  
after midnight in the park.

She gives a buck  
to all the beggars. Ties

---

a brick to her own heart.

Your little Honeypie remembers  
what you whispered to your fist.

She'll kick her way out soon  
with a check book  
and good credit.

She'll buy up half the county.  
Put you in the County jail.  
With a Gucci leather halter  
and a Tiffany iron chain.

I'm gonna walk proud down your alley.  
I'm the Infanta of Spain.  
My keys caress my fingers.  
They spell the letters of  
your name.

When you reach for them I'll snare you  
in spider webs and knot  
you in. My spider will be glad  
to see you. She already  
knows your name.

## Did you ever water your plants?

---

The snow was a bunny. I sent a mole with three teeth into the garbage disposal to retrieve my dentures. Squeezing bread, trash slam the fragrance of wild orange trees. The taste of wild orange, the taste of yellow on my tongue: a hawk sails above the creek, above Abraham Lincoln, above the AM-PM Mini-mart. I fooled the mole: my teeth were never in the garbage disposal. I bit into the orange. Everything was copasetic. I wasn't there, so when I fell nobody heard me. I took the insurance money and spent *it* on the horses, the ceiling fan of ambiguity beneath a cold sun. I leaped up the cliff.

Sparky yearned for the old days on his sprightly walking stick. White trash musings: I wonder if you can cook on a garbage can lid? Well, the sun will come out tomorrow. There's no future in eggs. Je ne sai qua; skin curved in yearning. I'm thinking like the frozen sun.

## **Egg on my face**

---

These tears might as well be flame. They'd set your car on fire. I'd love to taste the crackle and pop of the roasting red leather bucket seats. Your sweat's frying, honey. It's "Jim's Steaks" with the Surf Combo. Hot Stuff. But, no, these tears are ice, dry ice, that burns, Baby, burns. You'll burn just like a witch's rooster, Cock-of-the-Walk, Red Commander of Skipped Duty, White-Striped Cat of Victory. I'll strike a match with my toes. Miss Piggy One. Miss Piggy Two. When the cock crows I'll be singing Sayonara, little red hen. Remember the egg falls close to the nest. Maybe the chicken will come first. Crack.

## Encumbrance

---

You carry that heavy valise, me—  
remember my singing bones, my rings  
on your teeth? Remember the crack  
when you bit the bitter tautness of my musk  
olive skin, that sizzle of hot gold?

You packed as much as Marco Polo,  
headed for Nepal. That bag,  
me, swings light in your hand. You gave  
me that lagniappe of dismay. It broke  
my neck, stone, brick. Remember

the babbling brook of discord:  
“a woman’s pocketbook’s a black hole,”  
“the Bermuda triangle,” cheap  
coin of the realm. You pause  
on the threshold and wave

to the night. You call “Queen Potato!” wait  
for the second floor shutter to open. I’ll be  
plaiting my hair, you know how long  
it is, you bought the steel  
wires in Tibet. The eighth

of May was a golden year, latex  
sans poudre, jetable, your empty glove  
picks my lock, the latch clicks:  
compartments lined with velveteen,  
silk ribbons, and brass.

## Honeybee.

---

I heard you making honey  
all night long. Pop corn was popping  
off your sheets. And, damn the butter,  
seeping through my window, sizzling golden  
as the sign on the Mission's neon  
roof. Honeybun, my mouth  
is open. My teeth are clean. Ask Bucky  
Beaver. Ask Colgate. Ask  
the Jersey Queen. You're awful  
quiet, sweetheart. I hope you aren't alone.  
I'd hook up with you baby Phat  
and nasty as you be. Kiddo, you  
the honey in my coffee, you flip  
right in my cup of tea.  
Yeah, my kettle was boiling. That whistle  
means you must be home,  
with your Victory High-Hat,  
your celebratory case of beer. But  
this ain't no celebration. There's an army  
camped out back. They're gonna blow  
out all your candles. They're gonna  
stomp your paper hat. Go choke  
on your beard, luv, this hornet's going  
in your ear. I'll sing a pretty song there.  
Melt your ear wax, get things clear.  
I'll have your memory on a clam  
shell. Coquille San Jacques.  
Your soup bowls ringing. I've got  
a spoon. I'll drink you honey,  
like a kiss.

## Independence Day

---

My head is a rocket aimed for the ground,  
fuselage wrapped in leather fringe and sequins.  
Oh, the shine of my mirror skin! its sweet cold  
and bitter ardor, its blue bitter chocolate.

I am stuck to the ground. Me, Molly Pitcher  
at the Battle of Germantown. My wheels roll  
toward Boston. Night has called them. Clicketty  
Clack, Step on a Crack; Mother of destiny,  
blown by sea-breeze—shake the doors on convention

Madre, you will climb the braided tower, wear  
the hawk's talons. Eagles tuck you in bed.  
Con fiebre. I am a firecracker pinwheeling in flight.

## Night on the Town

---

In the days when our children were guppies  
I whispered against my fishbowl womb. Ah,  
the sweet melting gurgle of watermelon, the seeds  
swallowed and planted, the dear little sprouts  
climbing towards my mouth. They spoke ambrosia  
until I dripped with immortal wisdom. Remember

Cary Grant? The way he looked in a top hat and tails,  
how he bent to a table with a tiny lamp at the edge  
of a Manhattan dance floor? Don't mistake me, I wanted  
the children. But I wanted to dance too. Wanted my picture  
taken in a smoky nightclub with a cocktail in one hand  
and a cigarette in the other, lipstick black in the black and

white glare. Mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzy divey.  
A kiddley divey too, wouldn't you? The words do sound  
queer. Cary Grant was queer but you deny it. You say  
Randolph Scott is the Stetson Hat of Masculinity. You say  
they were roommates. I say, Right. And Tarzan  
went into business on the Stock Exchange. Kiss a man,

Kiddo. Next year we're all gonna change our sex.  
I'll be the spitting wig of your mother. That's the ticket.  
Tonto. You oughta see the fish swimming in  
my new black hair.

## Peach Thugs

---

1.

Peaches are life.

Why isn't there any grass?

Because you're ugly.

I saw a fuzzy smelly peach fall with a thump on the tasty ground.

2.

Princess Peach lives in Mario Land. Don't you remember?

Peaches. Mecca & Peaches? Russell is not Peaches

the African dancer.

3.

Russell is a dancer. There are no peaches  
in that line.

Leavened bread.

Love is a word.

Lave is a word.

Laved is a word.

Catboy.

No, that's in many poems.

4.

I'm a peach. Mom always calls me a peach.

No you're not. You ugly.

5.

The jewfish.

Use the jewfish Mom.

6.

I hate him. He came to our Gettysburg trip and he spit on me.

The jewfish is an ugly fish.

It is not beautiful like a peach.

7.

Trailer parks cause tornadoes.

8.

I believe you even called yourself ugly today.

The happy peach of thugs.

Peach death.

---

Torture by peaches.  
Death by peaches.  
A poison peach. A poison mango. A lovely mango.  
Fly, peach, fly.

9.  
Peach wears a green shirt, or is that yellow?  
I wear my sunglasses at night.  
I thought Curious George was doing something obscene.

10.  
Torte.  
I like to oaat oat oat opals and bononos.  
There will be peaches. Peach thugs will overcome  
the day of peach.

11.  
Motor Inn.  
Gangsta Peach. Bling bling.  
No.  
That is implied by Gangsta Peach.  
There are dozens and dozens of them.  
I drove my peach to a Motor Inn.  
Me gusta el durazno.

12.  
Omo.  
A peach shot my father.

13.  
You are the peach that shot my father.  
Prepare to die.

## Pick

---

He drove an icebox. His brother drove  
the ice cream truck. They rang that little bell  
and the kiddies ran for the syrupy banana  
split drip. Ooh, taste the cold! G. Humor  
rode his bike down the Avenue. He didn't own  
a truck. After school they used to pitch cards  
in the gutter. "Snipes," her mother called 'em,  
nothing more than guttersnipes, all running  
all day from morning to night. And smoking  
that weed. (She makes a little puffing  
with her lips. She's eighty-one. She knows.)  
Help save the hurricane lamp of Brother  
Hood. That lightning switched off all our  
power. Tell that boy to give his Grandma  
a hand. Quite sneaking. By next year he better  
have a college degree, 'stead of that School  
of the America's Street certificate. Damn.  
What a waste of waste paper. We gotta keep  
these boys from swallowing the tube. Capice?  
Honey, the iceman know where to take his  
pick.

## Pigs on Ice

---

Their meeting was a conflagration.  
He gave her a tombstone and the keys to a red Cadillac.  
They were both inscribed with her name.

The car glistened with Turtle Wax in the cold rain.  
It dripped down her nose and tasted like tears.  
Wax tears.  
A little bit salty.

He honked the horn.  
Twice.  
They set off for Atlantic City.  
Miss New Jersey was an old friend of his.

They grew cool to each other.  
His kisses came from the Frigidaire.  
She said “Chill now, I gotta answer my phone.  
It’s ringing ‘cause you wore your hat.  
Now I’ve gotta talk to the Bloody Prince of Chaos  
before he meets us at the door.  
He swings a pink umbrella,  
prob’ly knock out a tooth or two.”

Buckbeak, you better run then.  
His burning teeth will have to roll.  
Sayonara.  
The fire’s waving.  
Time to leave this happy home.

## Pistol

---

Catheaven, and the dogs wait outside  
the gate of fish bone and feathers. They smell  
fear, the hot blood of snakes, the teeth

of snails. The gate is brass. Its pennants silken.  
Dry pearls stud the tombs. Hasta la vista,  
baby, even John Wayne forgot the Alamo—

his bootstraps of silence rattling the twilight.  
In August the geese gathered seed. The cowboy  
spread butter on a cracker, called the spirit

of his mother in a bucket of cholesterol: Sweet  
Pea, it's a tall tree that casts no shadow. When  
the cows come home on Wednesday and you walk

the walk, Baby Gun, Blue, Tree of Knowledge,  
you flat onion, you empty hat, climb my fishbone  
trellis, my backbone of feathers will cut the names  
of the faithful in your bone.

## Purgatory Swamp Road

---

Mary's life was a toad hiding  
behind the dumpster. She waited  
each evening for the mother ship  
to take her home. Days she slept  
to the hot sun lullaby of flies  
and that sweet smell of gasoline  
slipping on her skin. She heard  
the glaring of the neon exit sign  
behind the bar. Sometimes Joe  
or Bill would come out and wipe  
their hands on their aprons  
and stare across the river to Trenton.  
Then she was rich and beautiful  
with reflected light.

On Sundays the bar opened  
late and closed early. The little  
church next door rolled and  
rocked. Signifying. Testifying.  
Sister Marjorie fanned her cleavage  
with a powdered hanky. Um um  
um um um. Her diabetes kept her  
fat. She swallowed the bitter  
ointment of forgiveness every  
morning before she spit it with  
her breakfast in the sink.

Mary wanted to be stylish. She tried  
Miss Marjie's jewels on when  
the sis slept late. The Bean girl hid  
and told the Preacher on her.  
They'd all get a licking by & by.

Buttered peaches! He was  
a handsome piece of dirt. Banana  
Creme de la Creme. But  
the dumpster mocked Mary  
with its open jaws. Tonight  
she'd close the lid  
when it was time to sleep.

## Rattle

---

These broken cup children, chipped and bonethin,  
their brothers hold shutters to shatter the wind,  
they sip apple cider, sing peach fuzz and pear,  
their skin tastes of cedar, their hair rattles tin. See Moses  
in the Sinai, dry mouthed and hungry, these children of  
holeness watch weary and dark. The orchids are empty,  
the birds call out silence, the wagon sits fallow, the whiffle-  
tree rusts. The wicked-historical eagle of peacetime carries  
an arrow of mistletoe and bile, its bow bent with love  
and a soft summer wheeze. Sparrow, forgotten, shall meet  
the gray stranger. His strong boots are steel-toed. His voice  
is brass chimes. Beyond the gray lighting, as drone bees  
spin springtime, she weaves horsetail blankets and lacewing  
black flies. The dark bowl of autumn never quite empties—  
Veni Vidi Vichi, his whiplash loops will fall.

## Sequined Suit

---

Your breath was sweet peppers.  
I thought I'd go to jail.  
Honey, I miss your salt. Your cool sheet slither.  
Take me off to jail.  
Go rustle me the moon, hon.  
Make your skin sing that little welcome song  
up against my thigh

Oh buzzing, buzzing, buzzing—  
Elvis of Macedonia—I hate your breath of almonds.  
It's the pits, but Honey I want it.  
You really oughta be in jail.  
That shimmy in your giddy up  
that just don't quit.  
Stay right here with me in jail.

See, the painted nails of victory  
are waiting here for you.  
They'll peel your corn, your red speedo.  
Hold onto your bathing suit.  
Look out your little bunny's  
gonna find her way home.  
And she knows you ain't in jail.

Her tail'll be tapping rhinestone  
dos preguntas—  
you gonna wish you was in jail.  
He sees her keyhole's yawning.  
Better put a rose where your nose is—  
she smells you sinning.  
You really oughta be in jail.

## Silver

---

That night was a cavern of dying fish. It sang mercury,  
iron on the tongue, steel needles in the point  
of the meridian, glint of steel, smell of tin, her breath  
of lightning.

Say: The child was a sunbeam.

No. The child was an ashtray.

No. An apple. A stone. A punching bag. A chair.

The child was the daughter of nothing. No.

She was the daughter of lightning and pain. No.

She was your daughter. She was mine. She was no one's.

She was a stairway climbing up and falling down.

A bowl with no bottom. A stoppered bottle. A cracked mirror. A knife.

A fallen bird.

“¿Quien es?” Koi.

A quicksilver tadpole.

A floating tooth.

She wore the cold jubilation of a martyr.

The tight cap of faith.

Her emblem: the hawk with a single wing.

And your night? It bloomed with olives. Gap  
in a rock filled with moss and clean bones. Crevice  
that hid lightning. Cleft tree stripped white. Hollow  
gourd.

## Simmer

---

Stay out of my kettle. It boils  
whenever it rains. You hear  
that hot brass whistle, darling,  
I'll give you a lemon you can't  
squeeze. Paul Revere hung  
his sign, dear, at the Boston T  
Party coffee ship. He made a big  
iron kettle. You can climb  
in and sit down at the counter.  
I suppose they serve espresso  
now. If they haven't sold out  
to Starbucks and knocked  
the whole thing down. How  
'bout a cuppa? Java Joe IV  
Caffeine. I drink coffee  
'cause I'm hyper. I'm  
the dancing Queen of Speed.  
You're just my stormy  
weather. You eat when you  
fingernails ain't clean. Kitten,  
you ain't bagged nothing.  
When you get the bill you're  
gonna scream. You'll wish  
you hadn't et. I'll be a groaning  
bank book. He'll have pinched  
your wagging tail, like Pepe LePew,  
mi amour, your stripe'll wag  
you into jail. And I'll watch  
your boiling anger whistle,  
chew my baby nails.

## Suspence

---

We live in a hammock.  
It has central air and pneumatic  
brakes. Oh, sweet tingling

scent of apple and peach  
blossom fruited union, greening  
air above cool golden sphere

of honeyed fur. The taste  
of a single finger down the spine.  
Hildegarde, sing. Sing me

the day of ice and wire. Of  
a soft mattress on a bed of nails. Hump.  
Honey, crush my head like

a bean. The falling leaves  
brought winter. We were the hot  
bumpers of humankind.

Her anger gleamed  
in the moonlight. She swung  
her legs over the edge

and kicked the dog.  
Hildie, Honey, you were a man  
in the first movie. How come

now you're a dame? That'll  
be the day the locusts come home  
to roost. Fat shovels.

Your house is made of silk  
cord and spit. Arachnodactyl. The rope sings  
a song of the new rebellion.

The hammock will fall.

## Tall

---

My heart nested in your tallest tree. It had forgotten how to sing. In spring the rays of the newborn sun kissed its pretty little pericardium, summer rain brought it nectar and tried to interest the endocardium in honey, fall winds tried to whisper a melody to its stuck valves, winter storms thrummed a base-line to the sinoatrial node. Still, Oklahoma, this Annie Oakley kept her piece. After all, it was her concert. She was ready to call her own score. Ribbit. Ribbit. Don't you realize the heart is a frog you swallow? Ah, Capistrano. The swallows come back. They make a saint of adobe. The Holy Mud of History. Of Sacrifice. Of Youth. How lovely as it dries in the sun. She would bathe in clay. Then let it bake to a bottle she could sing inside. Her lovely whistle—red hen cackling corn into joy. And tomorrow. If wind skims the mouth of the bottle we will hear the conclusion of our warfare. Skipping battle. Vici. Vanquish. Victoire. Yes, that dry heart fallen into mud will sing out a rallying cry to her secret nation: the forgotten mothers who weave the roots of heavy winds.

## Texas

---

Goddamn that chain-saw movie in my brain.  
If I wake up, I'll find an African buzzing cockroach  
under the bed. They're supposed to make  
good pets. The kindergarten had some. Black  
and sleek and hard as week-old bread. They like  
bread you know. 'Specially moldy. In Cleveland  
Mike Ceraolo (Ok if I call you Mike) writes haiku  
(hope you don't mind me using you in this poem,  
Mike) about that kind of gritty stuff. Grunge. Like  
ashy skin on a skinny old lady. Looking all cock-  
eyed at you outa the side of her eye. The evil  
eye. It's already blind. Like the Darkling Crown  
of Futility. Tell that to the judge. Sure. It'll set  
you off in chains. You say I oughta look at your  
feminine side. Open up to the spirit. Hey, Quake,  
there's nothing left of your tribe. Home? Gone  
too. No cousins anymore. The feminine went  
just like that. Tomorrow I might become you.  
The bearded femme. Not by the hair of my  
chinny chinny chin. Get the scissors. Let them  
sing a warning to all who would walk this way.  
Rev' 'em up and let 'em roar.

## Turnip

---

He gave her the death stone. She embroidered  
a little silk string bag to hold it around her neck.  
She put a hundred needles through the bag  
to remind her of his skin. They scratched  
his taste into the stone, etched it with the scent  
of past wrongs and bad decisions. It's dull vibration  
burned her chest.

"Franklin," (she called him "Franklin,"  
it was the name she gave her rat)

"I will bury you  
with this at Arlington."

She'd have her way.

It was, after all, still his stone. She had a silver  
tea-set that rode beside her on the passenger seat  
of her car. Cushy. They called her, behind her back,  
Pushy Galore. Money bought her happiness. She  
owned the Forgotten Nightingale of Finance.  
And yes, it knew more than one tune. She blessed  
beggars with used chewing gum. Me, I was  
the raggedy cat scraping the bottom of her shoe.  
I'd wear those shoes soon enough. Go ice dancing.  
The stone enclosed her future and mine. Touts  
la monde. It would dance if you warmed it long  
enough in your hands. A jumping vegetable.  
A root that should be put back in the ground.

## Volunteer Army

---

The teacher shoots brass  
knuckles in the hall. Red  
drumbeats rally under  
the principal's desk—no  
sunlight, no sea, no heat—no  
song but the taste of stainless  
steel, salt tear, salt and thorn—it's  
John B. Kelly school, that long oar  
who fathered a princess. The office  
pulses with silence in the city of cold  
rain. These children will carry  
the guns of their nation, the gray  
sticky bullets, cold powder and piss-  
poor pay. They are angry, they'll fight,  
they be watching their backsides,  
dry courage of children, the cold  
hearts of brick: read history  
write psalms, Missy Anne  
go home.