

MORE TRUE THAN SLANT

a review by David E. Poston

Christie Collins. *The Art of Coming Undone*. Black Spring Press Group/Maida Vale Publishing, 2023.

Ross White. *Charm Offensive*. Black Spring Press Group/Eyewear Publishing, 2023.

DAVID E. POSTON lives in Gastonia. He is the author of two poetry chapbooks and the full-length collection *Slow of Study* (Main Street Rag, 2015). His poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Broad River Review*, *English Journal*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Pedestal*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and others, including a poem in *NCLR* 2021 that received second place in *NCLR's* 2020 James Applewhite Poetry Prize contest. He has taught at UNC Charlotte, at Charlotte's Young Writers' Workshop and for thirty years in North Carolina public schools. He has led or facilitated writing workshops for Novant Health Hospice, the North Carolina Writers' Network, and the North Carolina Poetry Society, among others. He is an editor at *Kakalak*.

These two books are the first full-length poetry collections from these authors, and both consistently engaged me with their non-solipsistic honesty and keen insight into the human condition. While Ross White employs a wider formal range, from ghazal to anaphora to a variety of stanza forms, Christie Collins writes from a tighter, rawer, and more vulnerable perspective, focusing on the process of recovery and renewal after the end of a marriage.

The Art of Coming Undone by Christie Collins is a collaborative effort with Dutch artist Erna Kuik, including eleven ekphrastic pairings among its thirty-three poems. The collection's epigraphs identify the major themes of these poems and illustrations: love and loss, how to overcome loss, and how to become one's truest self. Leslie Jamison's words from her essay "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain" establish the emotional stance and tenor of the collection: "The wounded woman gets called a stereotype, and sometimes she is. But sometimes she's just true."* There is something telling about Collins's felt need to argue for the relevance of female pain, which these poems explore with unflinching honesty and an admirable willingness to be vulnerable. These poems speak for voices too long marginalized. Here is the poem "Me Too" in its

* Leslie Jamison, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," *Virginia Quarterly Review* Spring 2014: [web](#).

entirety: "At thirty I scream / ME TOO because at twenty / they said to whisper." But (apologies to bell hooks) these blues are also everyone's blues, informed by Collins's own perspective and speaking from it to expand any reader's perspective.

In Kuik's illustrations, the faces – particularly the eyes – demand attention. They may mislead us into thinking that the speakers and personae in the poems are wistful and naïve. True, there is a plaintiveness to the questions in "Law of Losing," the opening poem: if the first law of thermodynamics is true, "knowing that energy cannot / be created or destroyed? // Where does love reemerge – after?" The collection has moments of longing, such as the dreamy "Summer Blues," in which the narrator describes how she "traced the route to Albuquerque in coral lipstick." She goes on to say, "I cried when I didn't leave, threw each Kleenex, / each origami wad of despair to the blue paper sky. / I kept my sunglasses tight on the bridge of my nose / as my mother taught me to hide the tears, the circles." That poem ends with the speaker describing the berries she eats as both bitter and sweet, filling her hands with them while "my mouth could only mutter: empty, empty, empty." However, there is also wit and vivacity in these poems and in the appeal-



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ing sass of the characters that inhabit them. For example, the rag doll in "Girl Talk": "If I were you, she tells me, / I'd man up. / I'd stop pussy-footin'. / I'd seal the deal." She lights a cigarette and pours herself a doll-sized tumbler of Scotch as the narrator asks, "How can you see the world clearly / with your crooked button eyes?" At the

end of the poem, the two trade places; the narrator's "hands turn to cloth," while it is the rag doll "who jumps down, steps into my jeans, / & grabs my keys on her way out the door." She says she's going to find him " & kiss him till it hurts."

In other poems, the speaker directly addresses depression ("Dear Depression"), medication

("Dear Blue Pill"), and readers ("Dear Reader, Love Poet" and "Out of Date"). In "First Love," the speaker/poet begins,

Poem-of-mine,
here we are parked

at Make-Out Point.
In the front seats

of my daddy's
red hot Firebird,

the summer burns
on your breath[.]

and continues to describe the infatuated joy of beginning a new poem. The poem ends: "My heartbeat slows. / I nod, peck your cheek, // begin the lifelong drive / towards getting it right."

Some of this collection's poems overtly address hurt and healing, such as "How to Leave Your Husband," while others, such as "Nesting" or "Honeybees," employ various metaphors to explore those feelings. "Kintsugi," appearing midway through the collection, is a benchmark for the healing process in these poems, again utilizing the language of thermodynamics. Though the speaker asserts that "like a split fruit, I will never be whole again," she recognizes the physics of healing at work: "I stay in motion: breaking, willing / the parts back together, carrying / myself in my own arms as one / carries firewood to a furnace."

CHRISTIE COLLINS was born in Asheville, NC, and raised in the South, and she has recently moved back to Starkville, MS, where she teaches writing and literature courses at Mississippi State University. Prior to her return home, she completed a PhD at Cardiff University and taught there and at Louisiana State University. Her critical and creative work has been published in *Stirring*, *Phantom Drift*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *NCLR*, *Entropy*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Poetry South*, and *Poetry Wales*, among others. Her chapbook *Along the Diminishing Stretch of Memory* was published in 2014 by Dancing Girl Press.

ABOVE Art by Erna Kuik, one of the works paired with poetry in Christie Collins's collection

Soon after that come two poems in which the speaker addresses herself. The first, "How to Build a Dock," speaks of preparing for failure, "the kind you must / dive underwater to amend." The next, "Glory," uses its risqué premise to highlight a turning point, with the speaker asserting at the end, "You want to be someone else or the someone you really are."

The sass of the rag doll in "Girl Talk" is echoed in "Eros the Wingman," a poem in which the title character is an irresistible force, shamelessly making "everyone in the room open up, reveal / the desires they bury." In the conclusion, the speaker acknowledges to herself that Eros is the one who "winks and takes your hand, spinning your body / like a top toward your next best bad idea." In "Knight of Cups" (one of several poems set in New Orleans), the mystic on Chartres Street looks into his tea leaves:

He foretells a string of new chapters
beyond the one I'm leaving,
the one I'm already homesick for.
You're gonna be alright girl, he promises
over and over until I almost believe
him, a blend of sass and Southern
on the tongue of this strange, kindred spirit.

In "The Art of Letting Go," Collins returns to the questions of her opening poem. "Nothing is truly lost," she says, and then asks, "what if we had / made the connection sooner?" Her answer comes in the poem's conclusion: "Then, we would have known / that we never truly began, / never ended. That our story / lives on as it always has." And in "Dear Reader, Love Poet," she provides her *ars poetica*, her conception of what can happen when the work of a knowing poet finds a "prepared & passionate" reader.

Collins writes that "certainly any poem could be moving, which // is why I wish I could be there with you / now as you read this line to yourself." She concludes the poem with these lines:

As I read, you would hear undercurrents,
a brave passion. In all honesty, you might

hear me slip or stammer on a word because
that happens sometimes as do other truths

when I let go of this tight grip, when I let
the robe slip off my shoulders, when it's just me

and my voice in front of the stage lights,
the audience waiting.

Ross White's *Charm Offensive*, winner of the Sexton Prize for Poetry, begins with a more self-assured tone than *The Art of Coming Undone*, one which tradition has made it easier for male poets to muster. White announces in his opening list poem, "I Like Too Many Things," that he is "unruined," that his words are "laden with an unburdened appreciation of living." That confidence is justified. White has a keen, wide-ranging eye and the mastery of craft to write with self-assurance about topics ranging from skunks to quahogs to divination. The next poem, "Junk Drawer," establishes the fuller tonal range of the collection as it moves from mundane to nostalgic to self-deprecating to risqué to a sobering ending:

eventually we'll be in the fossil record
for scientists of a much older earth –

which will, to them, seem new & renewing –
to rummage around in, regarding our strata
for its clutter, its tires & smokestacks & bones.

In "Michelangelo's David," Ross acknowledges the venerable poetic admonition "to tell the truth slant" but asserts that the slant truths we tell ourselves often lead us to folly, to assuming that "God has not yet chosen / the instruments of our inevitable humiliation." These poems explore dark, unflattering, occasionally even violent aspects of human nature; however, they also contain moments, particularly in the concluding section, of lyric beauty. A number of them explore how religion, myth, and folklore are central ways that we tell ourselves these slant truths. White, however, cautions us that these mythological and religious tropes sometimes tease out our most unpleasant tendencies. He declares in "Damned If You Do and Damned If You Do,"

The stories of salvation are boring –
it's all a lot of bread
and dirt and daguerreotypes,
a sort of heaven for great-grandparents.
We're taught early on to want what we do not want.

These poems suggest that religion and myth give us opportunities to imagine having the power we ostensibly want, and they suggest the frighten-

ing consequences of what we would become if we had it. "Bad News for Mortals in Forests," for example, begins, "If I could be a god," and proceeds to list the misbehaviors that would ensue. After a surrealistic twist on the birth of Athena, the poem ends with dissatisfaction and boredom. "Scorpion" employs fable as a commentary on the darkest aspect of human nature, the inexcusable ways that one might try to excuse hurting those who love and trust us.

Other poems are more sympathetic. The speaker in "Believer, Affix a Fish to Your SUV" gently tweaks those who do so for their motives as he himself asks for "an anti-lock, all-weather Christ" to keep him from harm. "Notes on the Oracle" catalogues a myriad of ways that divination is attempted, but remarks, "Bring coin to any. / Any will tell you what you want to hear. / And still the news is never good." The poem presents us with the character of a child oracle, and ends by asking us to consider the toll suffered by that child: "And if the child Oracle does return to the doll, / how long will she love it for its human qualities?"

The human quality of seeking the unknowable is what leads to these desperate and exploitative efforts. Another character who evokes our sympathy for his supernatural burdens is the ferryman in "Past Perfect," who must shield others from the reality of death, even though,

When the bereaved places a coin
in his rough palm,
the invented past dissipates,
as if it were a vapor, a fog seared away:
he sees clearly his ship's frames

as the ribs of a skeleton.

ROSS WHITE is Executive Director of Durham-based Bull City Press and the Director of Creative Writing at UNC Chapel Hill. He is the host of two podcasts, *The Chapbook* and *Trivia Escape Pod*. In addition to *Charm Offensive*, winner of the 2019 Sexton Prize, he is the author of three chapbooks published by Unicorn Press: *How We Came Upon the Colony* (2014), *The Polite Society* (2017), and *Valley of Want* (2022). He earned his MFA in Creative Writing at Warren Wilson College and has received scholarships from the Bread Loaf Writers Conferences in Vermont and Sicily. His poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry Daily*, *Tin House*, and *The Southern Review*, among others.



"Vs. World," which concludes the opening section, is a wish-fulfillment fantasy with a dagger thrust in its conclusion. The speaker describes himself parading through New York City reveling in a surrealistic swirl of confetti, followed by wolves wearing velvet collars. "If the roses and rosepetals littered the streets behind me," he says, "If all of Manhattan, made of rosepetal." Then comes the knife-twist in the last two lines: "If I had no one to share it with. / If I had no one I had to share it with."

The poems in later sections are kinder to both speaker and subject. "Statues of Women" is particularly touching, a subtly nuanced ghazal-like nar-

ABOVE Ross White giving a reading at Oden Brewing Co. for Poetry on Tap in Greensboro, NC, 19 Nov. 2023

rative of missed connections and sorrow over love that might have been. The concluding poem of the middle section, "Wonders Never Cease," ends with lines that might sound clichéd: "Each of us has only minutes left to live. // Ruin lies in rushing through." These lines, however, are *earned*, informed by the strong, unflinchingly honest way White has looked into his own foibles and self-delusions.

White chooses to present his most vulnerable poems, including a series of love poems, in his concluding section, where he explores grief and pain before finding a resolution which includes, if not joy, at least some measure of contentment and self-acceptance. Its opening poem, "Ghazal," seems bitterly masochistic, echoing the violence of "Expert Advice for Your Boxing Career" when it asks, "Please, beat me out of me." The general movement of the section is much more positive, though. "Second Love" is a retrospective on past relationships and how the speaker evolved through each of them. In a similar vein is "Last Sonnet for My Beloveds," in which the speaker says to a previous beloved, "Sweet invader, I was the wrong country." "A Shoebox," with its images of tenderly caring for an injured bird, ends with this description of the speaker's current relationship:

‡ I know that our marriage bed
is the shoebox she set up for me,
‡ she will wait nights to see if I worsen,
if I fall prey to small perils,
just enough that she can keep me
from returning to the wild.

The final poem, "The Old Gods," is composed of a series of brief sections alternating between descriptions of a foggy mountain drive and statements that

bring the arc of the collection to its conclusion: "The past calls to us *love, love* and / the future calls to us *come, come*." The speaker declares,

I don't believe we are saved by facing
our truths – though they are seldom
behind us. All that is back there
is the past, drafting its legislation, authoring
its bibles, pouring its foundations
over bone and primitive tool.

"Nostalgia is sweet in the ear," he says, "but I have never wanted sweetness." The old gods, capricious and dangerous to encounter, are not what we need to guide us.

Both these collections lead us through careful examination of our fears and misconceptions to what is ultimately both a more honest and a more hopeful perspective. Ross White leaves us in his final poem driving through fog, steady hands on the wheel, in the only moment we have. Christie Collins, after leading us through explorations of love lost, ends with a poem set in "St. Fagan's Museum of Welsh Life," where the speaker describes the beginning of a new relationship with someone who "makes me want / to pick flowers again to dry and to keep. / He makes me want to pack a blanket, savor / the new daffodils yielding to the spring wind."

Her poems and her biography document that Collins has covered a great deal of ground geographically, and she and White have covered a lot of thematic ground as well. "I'm trying not to turn around," says White. With the right person, says the well-traveled Collins, "anywhere and everywhere could be home." ■

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