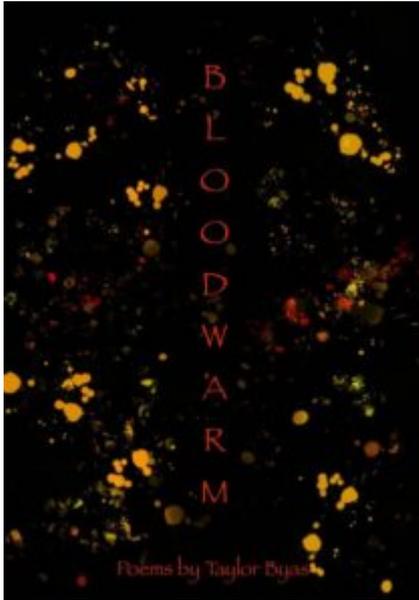


[Review: Bloodwarm by Taylor Byas](#)

written by Guest Contributor | November 9, 2021



Bloodwarm by Taylor Byas
[Variant Literature](#), July 2021
34 pages – poetry

Bloodwarm is a beautifully enticing and hauntingly sophisticated body of work. This book latches on, digs in deep, and doesn't let go. As Luther Hughes states in his blurb on the back cover, "There is no escaping. There is no hiding. There is only you and the page." *Bloodwarm* is about racial violence and the challenges of being black in a country that undervalues a person based on their skin. But that's not all it is. *Bloodwarm* is also about the erasure of black womanhood and blackness throughout history, an erasure that continues today.

It is important for me to acknowledge, before I go too far, that I am a white woman reviewing a black woman's collection about the violence black people face at the hands of whiteness. This is not about white guilt, but a simple nod that I understand the politics behind this statement and will do my best to honor *Bloodwarm* the best that I can.

But anyway, back to the poems.

Byas' poems puncture you from the very first page. Her opening poem "My Twitter Feed Becomes Too Much" is exactly what it says it is, a collage of images that compound into a story of hate and brutality at the hands of the police, complete with white complicity of bystanders and witnesses.

The poem begins by equating blackness with the bullet. "Their nose tips black / and rounded like a reporters' foam-covered / mic." The line break causes the word *black* to stand out and add to its meaning. Black is to bullet what white is to hate. But blackness isn't the only equation to bullets. In the

poem bullets are also associated with an army tank, a molotov cocktail, a shadow backdrop of smoke, tape—all things that are complicit in violence. Thus conflating blackness with violence.

Blackness becomes even more conflated with hollowing, with emptying, further into the book. On page seven Byas beautifully executes an erasure poem called “Colour” in which she blackouts a page from a text on why white people never move out the way. The blackout of the text is a play on the blacking out of black identities and lives, but also of the silencing and erasure from history. This is signaled by the solitary “Jim Crow” about halfway down the page.

Byas takes the poem a step further by bolding certain sections to grab the reader’s attention. The bold sections are actions of violence against the speaker—“but the (white) woman...is desperate to / knee me once again / a third time...strike four.” By bolding the violence in previous sections, it makes the last section, which says, “I...have to stand / between / invisible,” even more interesting, as it would normally not be a violent act. The bolding, however, turns the invisibility into an act of violence, erasing the personhood of the speaker as surely as the black erases the words. This too is another act of silencing, as the erasure silences certain parts of what is on the original page.

The poem “A Grocery Store in Alabama” is about the experience of a speaker of color trying to shop for food while white people stare. The poem ends with a white mother telling her white child “*don’t point at that.*” This line equates the speaker, and blackness, as other, as less than human. A sentiment that continues in the next poem, “How I Take My Morning Tea,” where the greyed out text tells the story of how the “police kill, burn.”

In her poem “Hypothetically Speaking,” written after Ashley M. Jones, the speaker explores how racism and violence are learned young through a hypothetical situation where the speaker is fake shot by a white toddlers fake pistol and the speaker plays along, pretending to die on the floor while the speaker’s friend is less than amused. In this poem, performance mirrors real life and this mimesis shows how children are encouraged by their parents. The parents teach the children to be perpetrators, or at the very least complicit, in racial violence, who then teach their own children and the cycle continues on and on.

The poem ends with a fake plea to call the police, a double edged sword brought about by the opening poem as the police are implicit in racial violence. Yet the boy cheers because he believes the police are heroes and he got the villain.

This idea, of black women as villains, was introduced earlier on in the poem “I Don’t Care if Mary Jane Gets Saved or Not,” in which the speaker explains why she couldn’t care less if Mary Jane, a white woman, is saved by Spiderman, a white male. In this pantoum, the speaker says they “always come for the white heroine and she will cry / wolf. Cry danger. Call the police.”

The book ends on “Geophagia,” which is the deliberate consumption of earth,

soil, or clay. In the poem the speaker examines how the clay is soiled with the blood of ancestors and that by eating the clay the man becomes a cannibal of his own species.

It is the ending, however, that I wish to talk about. The poem ends on the lines,

This is blood-warm, the heat
of night closing in like a mob. Bribe
the sun to set on you instead, let
it light you aflame.

Not only is this where the book title comes from, but it is also a call to close, and to begin again. With this we are left with the last line, “let / it light you aflame,” brings to mind fire. There is the connotation of fire used to burn down homes of black families and to burn people alive (such as furnaces), but there is also the other meaning of fire, its ability to cleanse, to offer rebirth. As such, the book allows for the speaker to be transformed, but it also alludes to the fact that everything is a cycle and the cycle continues—the cycle of black violence, the cycle of white hate, the cycle of life, but also the cycle of the book. This last line invites the reader to come back and revisit the book, starting over from the beginning.



Mel Ruth is a poetry PhD student at Georgia State University. Mel has pieces published in *Pleiades*, *New Pages*, and more. Mel was a Slice Literary Magazine “Bridging the Gap” Finalist, and their chapbook “A Name Among Bone,” was a semi-finalist in the 2020 Black River Chapbook Contest. Pronouns are they/them or she/her/hers. Follow them on Twitter

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