

Gary Jackson is the winner of the 2009 Cave Canem Poetry Prize selected by Yusef Komunyakaa. His book *Missing You, Metropolis* will be published late October by Graywolf Press. For those who have not heard of the Prize, Press or Komunyakaa, this is a huge deal!

[lit] from Topeka to beyond wildest dreams

by Dennis Etzel Jr.

I graduated from Washburn with a BA in English alongside Gary in 2004—literally walking to get our diplomas. Now I am so happy to see his work get its well-deserved recognition, to add yet another successful Topeka poet alongside Kevin, Ben, Cyrus, Eric, Amy, Ed and such. Here is a recent interview with him.

Dennis: *I found out you won the Cave Canem Poetry Prize from your Facebook status, something along the lines of “I have no other way to say this” with the web link announcing you had won. How did you find out the news?*

Gary: My partner Lisa and I had just moved to Korea for a teaching job. Our plane landed in Korea in the middle of the night, we got to our hotel and crashed. The next morning I checked my Gmail and sitting in my inbox was an email from Alison Meyers at Cave Canem. The first line read “Dear Gary: I’m pleased to write that Yusef Komunyakaa has selected your manuscript, ‘Missing you, Metropolis,’ for the 2009 Cave Canem Poetry Prize.” I couldn’t believe it. It was too surreal for me to accept. I had moved to another country less than 24 hours ago. I must have reread that email at least fifty times that

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completely blew me away. Later I got to read his introduction to “Missing You, Metropolis.” Reading what he had to say about the collection... there aren’t words for that feeling.

Being validated like that just motivates a person to write more.

Graywolf Press also sent me a list of his revision suggestions over the manuscript, which was also amazing to read, because here was Yusef Komunyakaa offering me suggestions on over 40 of my poems. However, there wasn’t any back-and-forth between us. His comments were mine to follow completely or ignore completely or anything between the two. His comments were on point, and the fact that he understands what I’m trying to do in my manuscript made it a smooth process.

From what I understand, I’ll not only get to meet him in person, but I think I might get to read with him as well, which is just going to give me the shakes. But I’ll love every second of it.

Dennis: *I remember your comic book poems when we were going to Washburn. Were those the start to the collection?*

Gary: Actually, a handful of poems that I wrote as an undergraduate made it into the manuscript, but most of the poems that made it in deal with growing up in Kansas. I can only remember one poem I wrote at Washburn that dealt with comics and it was called “Reading Comic Books in the Rain” and it also made it into the manuscript. During my dissertation at the University of New Mexico I even named the entire manuscript after that poem.

During a grad school workshop I brought a poem that’s now titled “Upon Seeing Spider-Man on my Way to Work” and I remember that at least one of the students didn’t understand how the poem worked since Spider-Man was a comic character, thus he wasn’t real, even though the speaker observing Spider-Man WAS supposed to be real. So I started thinking how interesting it would be to do a

day alone, figuring if I read the words enough times, they would become real.

Dennis: *How often do you correspond with Yusef Komunyakaa? How has the experience been?*

Gary: Most of my correspondence with Yusef Komunyakaa has been indirect. Cave Canem told me that Yusef chose my manuscript and told me what he thought of it and why he had chosen it, which

Gary Jackson



photo courtesy Graywolf Press

series of poems about superheroes, but use personas of "normal" people who had to put up with living in that sort of world. Then the idea began to grow and encompass other ideas, and started to bleed into the real world, intertwining with other poems about my own life growing up in Kansas, thus bringing in a thread of different poems I had been working on in grad school. The end result is something unlike anything I could have originally imagined.

Dennis: *What was the process of writing your poems?*

Gary: Ah, process is such a loaded word for me, partly because I'm such a terrible model for how most of us are taught to write. If I don't feel like writing, I don't. If I feel like writing, but nothing's coming to me when I try to write a new poem, I move on to something different. I'll tinker around with a story or essay or screenplay and simply wait until something comes to me. I'm very patient that way.

When I do get into a good groove, I've developed a routine where I begin my day by revising the poems I wrote the day before. My only goal for revision is to make the poem better than it was yesterday. Sometimes it means I rewrite it from scratch, other times I delete an "and." Either way, I'm happy. After I revise a couple of poems I start working on something new. I'm a draft writer, I guess, I like to vomit words on the page in these delightfully shitty drafts. Sometimes they don't even have line breaks. And then I slowly start to chip away at them. Sometimes, though, I get lucky, and a poem comes together line by line – which is always great. This routine can be pretty slow, which I'm fine with, but some of my poems wait for nearly a year before they get that final image or line and I consider it finished. Other poems never get there.

The last thing I wanted to say is something new I've discovered about myself. When writing a series of poems, I tend to write the last poem pretty early on. Similar to some prose writers, I guess I like to see what I'm working towards. The poem I mentioned earlier, "Reading Comic Books in the Rain" is a perfect example of this: I wrote that poem probably seven years ago and now it's the last poem in "Missing You, Metropolis."

Dennis: *How does elegy play a part in your book?*


Gary: You could call the entire book an elegy. The title, "Missing You, Metropolis," is a pretty strong hint that it's dealing with elegiac themes. In the literal sense, the book laments the death of two people that were very close and dear to me. Also, the simple act of growing up, demands that we're going to lose some things along the way.

Dennis: *How is the book tour plan going? Where will you be reading?*

Gary: The book tour, similar to every other aspect of publishing this book, has been wonderfully surreal. I don't have a lot of dates set in stone, but I know I'll be reading at NYU on November 5, and I'll be reading at AWP Feb. 2, 2011 with other Cave Canem winners and judges including Rita Dove, Yusef Komunyakaa and Natasha Tretheway, which is simply unbelievable. I'm setting up readings in a lot of other cities as well, including Topeka, but they're all in various states of finalization so I better not jinx them. But if you hear I'm coming to a city near you, come out and see me!

Thanks Dennis, for giving me the opportunity to talk about poetry with you. And if anyone wants to reach me, feel free to contact me at garyallenjackson@gmail.com.

Dennis: *Thank you, Gary! I'm looking forward to your book.*

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The Dilemma of Lois Lane [poetry]

When you first showed me your secret,
the red S hidden beneath your shirt
all these years, I lost my mind.
God, just looking at you, thinking
how those eyes will never fade
or dull, how your hair will never uncurl
and fall away and how even though
you haven't worked out since living
on the farm, your body will always be
as solid as diamonds.

And yet I have to pretend those things
don't exist, that you'll always be
the Clark that steps on people's
shoes in elevators, the Clark
that spills coffee on the break
room floor. But you blow forest
fires out with those same breaths
I take into me when we kiss
and when you're tired you dip
into stars for afternoon naps.
And I don't know which man
is real. Sometimes,
when we're alone at home,
fixing dinner, you'll pretend
to wince when you cut yourself,
and I find myself hoping
that the tiniest drop of blood
will bloom on your finger.



Kansas Photo

LaToya, Stuart and I are standing
behind the apartment complex, snow erasing
the un-worked brown pockmarked acre
with a smooth layer of white, five inches deep.

We have jackets on
posing side by side by side, untouched by the cold,
unsmiling, as if this is to be our debut album cover.

Stuart, in Stuart-fashion, has his pants
pulled down to his ankles, belt buckle resting
in the snow, his blue boxers complementing
his ashy legs and stoic expression.

Our bodies an ellipsis on the snow field:
leading us nowhere on a blank page.