

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
TORTURE MEMOS:
TRACING VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY U.S. POETRY

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Tracer

Richard Greenfield
Omindawn, 2009
96 pages; paperback, \$15.95

Victory

Ben Kopel
H_NGM_N BKS, 2012
112 pages; paperback, \$14.95

Black Peculiar

Khadijah Queen
Noemi Press, 2011
75 pages; paperback, \$15.00

1. The twenty-first is shaping up to be a century of pervasive violence—invasive, distributed, so volatile in nature as to be characterized, simultaneously, by opposites; our violence is deliberate and casual, purposeful and random, corporate and military, remote and immediate, clandestine and widely broadcast, partaking of newly invented and Stone Age technologies. Anything can be militarized or weaponized or both, from dolphins to baby bottles. From the perspective of most U.S. residents, violence in distant, unimaginable, indistinct parts of the world—or even distant, unimaginable, and indistinct parts of one’s own nation, region, state, or city—has been both acute and obscure, at once easily put out of the mind and brought home via media images, in the persons of traumatized vets, in a cratered economy which nevertheless continually circulates both environmental toxins and instruments of theft, dispossession, coercion, incarceration, and

chicanery. Violence, and its sensible trace, damage, can thus not be confined to the theaters of war, distant climes, the inner cities, the so called “developing world” (developing towards what?), or any other elsewhere. Violence is everywhere, in everything; massive, sticky, molecular, ambient, overt, insidious, inescapable, irreversible.

A poet, like anyone else, is implicit in the economy of violence. There is no removing oneself from violence’s grid. Poetry written in such conditions must be violent, too, and bear its trace. It is not a question of whether poetry is violent, but how. (A question for another essay might be by what deliberate amnesiac or ideological methods one might attempt to wash one’s poetry of violence, and if such washing is itself a political act, connected to other political acts, and thus to violence.) For violence is not only a thing in itself—it is also, simultaneously, a web, a medium, a distribution system, a series of flash points, contacts, and connections. Violence happens *between* bodies, sites, instruments, and materials, as well as *through* and *throughout* such entities. In the Bush Administration’s so called “torture memos,” Administration lawyers stipulated:

Each component of the definition [of torture] emphasizes that torture is not the mere infliction of pain or suffering on another, but is instead a step well removed. The victim must experience intense pain or suffering of the kind that is equivalent to the pain that would be associated with serious physical injury so severe that death, organ failure, or permanent damage resulting in the loss of significant body function will likely result. [...] In short, reading the definition of torture as a whole, it is plain that the term encompasses only extreme acts.¹

This passage, throttled by its syntax, claims to stipulate what is “plain”; it instead reveals, both “in short” and “as a whole,” that violence, and particularly the subcategory of violence termed “torture,” is in fact not “plain” or encompassed by this or any other term. Instead, violence is in motion, relative, distributed, erratic, intense. Violence both occupies an extremity and exists on an obscure system of intermediate adjacencies, subjunctives, and steps. Thus, in defining torture as “a step well removed” from “mere infliction of pain and suffering on

1. “Re: Standards of U.S. Interrogation Under 18 U.S.C 2340-2340-A.” Memo of Jay Bybee, Assistant Attorney General, to Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez August 1, 2002; 13. <news.findlaw.com/wp/docs/doj/bybee80102mem.pdf>

another," the authors assume a "mere" base-level violence so pervasively familiar that it does not require further stipulation. After this first sentence, the authors' definition of the "act" of torture quickly shifts away from a concern with "infliction," implying an inflictor, i.e. a torturer, to the site of the "victim," as if the "victim" is now in fact the medium of torture, the site at which torture enters the world and becomes sensible. It is here, rather than in the body or agency of a putative torturer, that we will look for torture. By this logic, violence is almost occult, like the medieval plague, floating out of nowhere to settle on its "victim."

Yet reading the victim-medium to learn where violence has been is also not so easy, as the victim may display a quantity of relative, removed, and adjacent signs, as well as intense and extreme ones. As a test for torture, the victim's "experience" is adjudged to be or not to be "of the kind that is equivalent to the pain that would be associated with" a "likely result." The exact quality or quantity of the victim's pain or suffering is not admissible; only whether it's of a "kind," "equivalent," "associated with," "likely." The authors of the memo intend to create a definition of torture so narrow as to elude any "act" meeting it, and, in a further act of prestidigitation, to make the putative torturer *disappear* by shifting the definition away from the act or infliction of torture to the nebulous "experience" of its victim. However, such sleights cannot erase torture, still less disappear the torturer. Instead, this prose renders "experience" as synonymous with a murky fabric of violence, a system of adjacencies and associations, subjunctives and comparisons. The memo shifts attention to victims as the media of violence, as violence's registers and metrics, the bearers of its traces. What's "plain" from this fifty-page "memo" is that violence is various in its intensities yet unyielding in its presence.

Such serpentine passages, linguistically torqued and fitful, operate on comparison and make legal room for poetry as another putative "body" of violence, a staging of violence, a sensible trace, a victim body implying, masking, mimicking a shadowy inflictor. On the open site of the poem, the poet stages violence, and the poem is at once the medium, the victim, the damage, the trace that makes violence visible. Yet even if poetry is made of likenesses, what crosses over this conduit of association and likenesses is, itself, violence, mere violence, since we learn from the Bush Administration that violence,

like poetry, is also made up of what is “of the kind,” “like,” “associated with,” “equivalent.” Poetry and violence pass through the same membranes of “likeness.”

Moreover, if Poetry cannot meet the definition of physical torture, it must logically rank somewhere with the unprosecutable, unparaphrasable acts which, if they do not meet the Bush Administration’s definition of torture, exist in a swarm of specific yet unnamed actions which simultaneously reveal and conceal themselves—the “mere.” Such acts might be termed “virtual.” The “virtual” violences of these poetries are, like all virtualities, connected, and more real than the real.

2. TRACER

*“one is so small in the age of terror as to be vast...
many devices are tuned to our choices...” (17)*

“I made a copy of a rose” (75)

The title of Richard Greenfield’s *Tracer* signals the focus of this volume, which seeks to trace the “trace” of violence, its distance, location, and tendencies, where it is going and where it has been. At the same time, its reference to the bright green tracer flares which are in fact *not* rockets but a military range-finding device which precedes or follows rocket fire (depending on the speed of CNN’s satellite link) and which also delivers violence as spectacle to one’s living room, makes the tracer the perfect vehicle for violence’s generous mutability—its ability to shift forms and potency, to be “like,” “of the kind,” “equivalent to.” Spectation, like damage, is a trace of violence, violence’s brilliant double.

The speaker of *Tracer* at times resembles the flattened speaker of Lowell’s elegiac “For the Union Dead,” speaking in the midst of and adjacent to media, art and history, and the violence of upheaval, war and transformation. But Greenfield’s speaker is not speaking out of ancestral obligation or because he is the inheritor of a lapsing lineage, but because he is the inheritor of the present tense—its medium; a contact point for guilt, complicity, agency which he can barely trace