

VANTABLACK STUDY GUIDE

“In writing your poem, tell the truth as you know it. Tell *your* truth. Don’t try to sugar it up. Don’t force your poem to be nice or proper or normal or happy if it does not want to be. Remember that poetry is life distilled and that life is not always nice or proper or normal or happy or smooth or even-edged.” -Gwendolyn Brooks

WHAT IS VANTABLACK?

I played with several different titles for this chapbook before *Vantablack* emerged as the best. In fact, Chet Weise was the one who called it out as a title, and I knew it was right. In the title poem “Blackbodies [Vantablack]” I got curious about how we are in awe of black bodies in the universe—so much in awe of these scientific beauties that scientists have spent forever trying to create the blackest manmade black to mimic a black body. Once Surrey NanoSystems created Vantablack, which consists of microscopic vertically-aligned nanotube arrays of carbon that absorb 99.965% of light passed over it, the substance has been lauded, celebrated, fought over. It’s of enormous value. People desire this blackest matter. So, of course, I had to think about how we commodify black human bodies, the value we have historically placed on black bodies and the value we place on them today. I explored the irony of celebrating this Vantablack matter while also hearing the chant of black bodies simply asking to matter in the world.

But the title for the chapbook works beyond just this title poem. I address race throughout the chapbook. But I also dive into many seemingly darker moments in the poems. I address topics we might only keep in the dark like my first experiences with masturbation. I write of deep tragedy, like the time a 5-year-old talked to me about drive-by shootings in her Baltimore neighborhood, the time I met with a former child soldier in Uganda and listened to her talk about forgiving her rapist, the time my sister lost her baby who lived for only two hours. I tackle love in the form of arguments—playful and real arguments. I take seemingly happy things like the color yellow and moments at the Waffle and see what edges might cut us there. *Vantablack* is a compilation of poems curious about going to some of the darker places, willing to absorb the light there.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

How does the poem make you feel—not what it makes you think or what you believe it means, but what feelings emerge for you when reading? Where do you feel it in your body? Often readers assume that something is wrong with them or the poem if they don’t “get it” the first round. But I believe poetry is less about intellectually getting something and more about experiencing an emotion. Tap into that emotion first.

What imagery/thought do you assign to colors? Why? How might this chapbook help you rethink the ways you see color?

What do you think young people are learning from humanity these days? Consider writing a poem or short story or just a little paragraph about how some children are playing and learning from the ways we conduct ourselves as adults.

Be in conversation with the poem. Here are some general questions to ask yourself when reading any poem (revised from <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/how-read-poem-0>):

- Who is the speaker?
- What circumstances might have given rise to the poem?
- What situation is presented?
- Who or what is the audience?
- What is the tone?
- What shape is the poem? Stanzas, line breaks?
- Is sound an important, active element of the poem?
- Does the poem spring from an identifiable historical moment?
- Does the poem speak from a specific culture?
- Does the poem use imagery to achieve a particular effect?
- What kind of figurative language, if any, does the poem use?
- If the poem is a question, what is the answer?
- If the poem is an answer, what is the question?
- What does the title suggest?
- Does the poem use unusual words or use words in an unusual way?

A FEW LITERARY INFLUENCES

THE REAL CAUSE OF YOUR ABSENCE, Curtis Bauer (C&R Press, 2013)

THE ORIGINAL FOLK AND FAIRY TALES OF THE BROTHERS GRIMM: THE COMPLETE FIRST EDITION, Jacob Grimm (Princeton University Press, 2014)

THE FEEL TRIO, Fred Moten (Letter Man Editions, 2014)

WHITE ON BLACK: IMAGES OF AFRICA AND BLACKS IN WESTERN POPULAR CULTURE, Jan Nederveen Pieterse (Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, 1990)

RICE, Nikky Finney (TriQuarterly Books edition, 2013)

HOW TO BE DRAWN, Terrance Hayes (Penguin Books, 2015)