

### KEVIN YOUNG (1970 - )



Kevin Young, born in Nebraska, spent middle and high school in Topeka before attending Harvard University. He is a professor at Emory University in Atlanta, and he is a renowned poet and editor. He has won Guggenheim, NEA, and Stegner Fellowships. Young was once a student of mine in a summer creative writing workshop for middle school students at Washburn University. When he was still a teenager, Thomas Fox Averill of Washburn sponsored Young to edit a book of poetry by Kansas poet Edgar Wolfe. These early opportunities make a difference for youngsters, as his career shows. I hope this example encourages teachers and community arts program leaders.

Young's poetry shows influences of Langston Hughes and the blues, with lean lines and sharp images, but he definitely has his own contemporary vision. This poem appears to be set in the Kaw River valley, where ash trees grow. The meditation on childhood begins with a "welcome" from the woods. He describes chicken-of-the-woods fungi on fallen trees, which seem to be listening ears. Beyond sight can be heard woodpeckers, which references John Keats' nightingale. The pivot in the poem comes before the halfway mark with the question: "Where is nature human?" The narrator looks down from canopy heights to the ground, and the mood darkens. With nightfall, aging begins, and also a process of confusion. Young uses vivid comparisons to explain this mystery: strips of bark on the ground are a coded text. Darkness is like dangerous depths of water. In the last two lines is another shift, as mosquitoes bite: "Wish /them well. Wave." The poem tells us to embrace the dark.

#### CHILDHOOD

**Autumn & the leaves turn  
to people—yellow, brown,  
red—then die. Only ash  
trees stay white, standing—**

**the woods welcome you, trail  
like a tongue, half-hidden.  
Ears cover fallen trees:  
pale mushrooms, listening.**

**Stop & you can hear  
the peckerwoods high up.  
Where is nature  
human? On the ground**

**bark thin & pale  
as paper, coded Morse.  
You are lost, path  
unmarked. It grows**

**dark, you older, night  
around you like a lake  
you've swum out too far  
into—tread moonlight**

**while the bugs begin  
taking your blood  
for their children. Wish  
them well. Wave.**

**Education:** Kevin Young graduated from Topeka West High School. He has an A.B. in English and American Literature (Harvard University 1992) and MFA in Creative Writing (Brown University 1996).

**Career:** Kevin Young's books are *Most Way Home* (William Morrow, 1995), National Poetry Series; *To Repel Ghosts* (Zoland Books 2001), finalist for Academy of American Poets prize; *Jelly Roll: A Blues* (Alfred A. Knopf 2003), finalist for 2003 National Book Award in Poetry; *Black Maria* (Alfred A. Knopf 2005); and *Dear Darkness* (Alfred A. Knopf 2008). Young edits anthologies from Harper Perennial and Everyman. Young's poetry and essays have appeared widely in print & electronic media.