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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “they long to fit in, too.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

## DEADPAN DISASTERS

William Logan reviews Arda Collins’s debut poetry collection *It Is Daylight*, winner of the 2008 Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize.

By William Logan

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**It Is Daylight**, by Arda Collins. Yale University Press, \$16.00.

Arda Collins comes to her first book fully formed, and it’s a little scary. The title may be *It Is Daylight*, but the cover is black, and the title page is black—the Goths have at last taken over Yale University Press. Louise Glück, who chose the book for the Yale Series of Younger Poets, provides an intimate, bemused introduction that finds a blood-tie from Collins to Berryman and Dickinson, those poets of airless self-dramatization. It might be more accurate to say that she’s a grown-up version of Wednesday Addams, the sort of girl happiest raising spiders or trying to electrocute her younger brother.

These poems take place in the happy, happy suburbs, so of course the unnamed speaker is miserable—if the Welcome Wagon were a hearse, she’d be overjoyed.

At last, terror has arrived.

Next door, the house has gone up in flames.

A woman runs from the burning wreck, her face smeared

with blood and ashes. She screams that her children are kidnapped.

It’s truly exciting, and what more would anyone ask?

The blood and ashes, those manifest signs of mourning and penitence, suggest an attention almost religious. In these affectless monologues, even the disasters are deadpan. (Collins has perhaps learned something from Anne Carson, our master of Keatonesque delivery.) The paranoia and numbness that infuse the poems create a world where the speaker doesn't know how to respond to the terrible things that happen. Normality looks odd to her—"Nearby, a gathering of // wives are seated at a bamboo // table. They wear suits and dainty shoes// and little anguish veils across their faces. // They have expensive, sharp silverware." Such portrayals of the lifelessness of the living (the dead, to her, are not dead—they're just tanning) are delicious. When Collins goes too far, it's a devastatingly funny too far—the ladies above "have handmade White House// and Pentagon salt-and-pepper shakers."

Collins is a Nietzschean fatalist, yet the world is a mystery to her, a cipher that can never quite be decoded. It's peculiar when a book's tone and manner are riveting, but its content banal, though even banalities can have irresistible fascination.

I thought how god loves this place;  
the grass was coming in, and the crocuses.  
What if someone died, or got fired,  
or vomited alone in the middle of the night?  
The apartments were wood on the outside.  
stained red like the color of a picnic table.  
I was so ugly, I wasn't sure I'd even be able to drive.

At first I thought she'd written, "It was so ugly," but her wording is more telling. This flat deposition (for a lawsuit never to be concluded) shows Marianne Moore's love for the minutiae of being. If Collins has none of Moore's élan or her enchanted gift for description, the younger poet sees the world through strange eyes, and in them the old world is made new again. Our younger poets were born a hundred years after the moderns; no wonder the lessons of Pound and Eliot and Moore and Stevens seem antediluvian, they've been so often absorbed and re-absorbed. (When you teach "In a Station of the Metro" now, you have to explain a lot about the Métro of 1914.) Collins, whatever her debts, has learned how to make the ordinary bear the sorrows of hell.

This poet is only dimly aware of her virtues. The book is far too long (though most first books would be stronger at half the length), and the poems become too comfortable with their stark monotone, their theatrical double-spacing, their fiercely prosaic line (Collins has a wicked sense of the demotic—"You go to your piano lesson. You // stink"). More is the enemy of better here. The occasional touch of run-of-the-mill surrealism makes some poems seem to lie on a spur line from the Ashbery factory. Sometimes the poems leave

me baffled. (I don't get the point of a long poem about a serial killer or a dreary prose poem about God and microwave ovens.) After ninety pages, even lack of affect becomes affectation.

Still, this creepy, irresistible book is a masterful debut. It's impossible to know what Collins will do next, but more of the same would be tedious rather than unbearable. Louise Glück, comparing her to other poets, has apparently forgotten that the abrupt manner, the goggle-eyed guilelessness, and the bloodless tone (like that of a high-functioning victim of Asperger's syndrome) were long ago patented by Glück herself. If the vampires of *Twilight* wrote poetry, it would be this sort of poetry—they long to fit in, too.

William Logan's most recent book of criticism is *Our Savage Art: Poetry and the Civil Tongue*. His new poetry collection, *Strange Flesh*, appeared last fall. This review first appeared in *The New Criterion*. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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