

# Cappelen Damm

## Agency *Spring 2023*



*White, Norwegian Man* is a moving and important book about a subject many experience every day – namely racism. In this poetry collection the author Brynjulf Jung Tjønn depicts his own experiences of racism.

Jung Tjønn was adopted from South Korea to Norway as a child and has always known that he looks “different”, as he puts it himself. Still, the pandemic, which raised awareness around racism and hatred towards Asians in particular, gave him newfound and painful perspectives on his own background and upbringing. What is it like to live as a racialized person, to feel estranged and othered, by a society whose culture is the only one you have ever known?

*White, Norwegian Man* is about being a minority in the majority, and the covert and overt forms of discrimination. A quiet candor and an eye for bleak comedy saturates the poet’s direct and unsentimental style. At its core, this is a raw and honest appeal from an othered human who hopes for understanding and longs for a sense of belonging to the place he’s always known as home.

**WINNER OF THE CRITIC’S AWARD 2022**

**NOMINATED TO THE YOUTH CRITIC’S AWARD 2022**

**NORLA SELECTED TITLE SPRING 2023**

White, Norwegian Man

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**White, Norwegian Man**  
Brynjulf Jung Tjønn

CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

# Reviews

‘What a clenched fist of a book this is! .... Among the most powerful things I’ve read. Everyone should read it.’  
**VG, six/six stars**

‘A gripping poetry collection about racism. ... a tragic seriousness, often wrapped in witty turns of phrase. ... I would recommend it to any young adult and up, but also for use in anti-racist work and in classrooms.’  
**FRAMTIDA, six/six stars**

‘Poetic protest against racism. ... one poem in particular is so compelling and gripping I think it will remain forever in Norwegian literature ... a wistful, vital and necessary contribution to contemporary literature.’  
**AFTENPOSTEN**

‘Brynjulf Jung Tjønn's poems about the experience of adoption breathes of life.’  
**KLASSEKAMPEN**

‘It's been a while since I've read something as brutally vulnerable and poetically probing as this. [...] really, when I think about it, these poems should be read by absolutely everyone.’  
**NRK.NO**

# Critic's Award 2022 - Jury's statement

In a number of books, Brynjulf Jung Tjønn has encircled otherness and social maladjustment. In the poetry collection *White, Norwegian Man*, he directly addresses his own experience as an adopted child from Korea, relocated to a small village by the Sognefjord. With short, poetic sentences devoid of sentimentality, he shows how life as a person of Asian descent in an all-Norwegian environment is an almost bizarre experience. The little boy is allergic to most things that surround him – wool, hay and milk – and he has no other culture than the white Norwegian culture, with a burning desire to be just what the title says: white and Norwegian.

In quick flashes we experience events from the poet's life, and the form assigns the task of reacting emotionally to the reader. It's as if the author is just saying, "Here you go, here it all is." In this way, this short book becomes an excellent gateway into something that very few people in Norway get to experience - the absolute experience of being a stranger in situations characterised by awkward goodwill and a lack of insight, but also living with a vague threat of potential brutality.

**Brynjulf Jung Tjønn**  
*b. 1980*

**Brynjulf Jung Tjønn (b. 1980) made his literary debut with the novel *I came to love* in 2002. He has since published a number of books for both children and adults. His novel for Young Adults *You are so Beautiful*, won the Brage Prize in 2013.**



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# Sample of poems from *white norwegian man*

by Brynjulf Jung Tjønn

translation © Rachel Rankin

This translation has received a support grant from NORLA.

*N.B. This collection consists of seven sections. The poems in this sample make up sections one, six and seven of the collection.*

# ONE

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**White, Norwegian Man**  
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what do you want to be  
when you grow up?

i want to be  
a white norwegian man

if only i had had blonde hair  
if only i had had blue or green eyes  
if only i had been a  
white norwegian man  
what kind of problems would i have had then?  
i have thought about this every single day  
ever since i was little and stood in the mirror  
and wondered why i had such yellow skin  
why my hair was so black  
why my eyes were so narrow  
why i didn't look like anyone  
i went to school with  
didn't look like my cousins  
didn't look like my parents  
why should i  
among five million norwegians  
look like i am chinese?



to walk around without people speaking English to me  
to walk past a nursery  
without children shouting  
*ching-chong-chinaman*  
to meet new people who aren't wondering  
where i *really* come from

do you come from a dale up in Dale?  
do you come from a hill farm  
where no one would believe that anyone could live?  
do you come from a remote village in the arm of a fjord?  
or do you come from the ocean?  
did you climb out of the ocean  
and crawl ashore by the norwegian coast?  
were there remnants of oil in that blonde hair of yours?  
were there salmon swimming in those blue eyes of yours?

where do you *really* come from  
white norwegian man?

i don't know where i *really* come from  
but i do know that i didn't  
set off a bomb in the government quarter  
didn't try to shoot old men  
in a mosque  
and i know that  
if i had had a stepbrother  
a white norwegian stepbrother  
then he could have shot me  
in my own bedroom  
because i wasn't  
a white norwegian man

Note: The line “where no one would believe that anyone could live” is the translation of the line “der ingen kunne tru at nokon kunne bu”. This is a reference to the long running Norwegian television programme *Der ingen kunne tru at nokon kunne bu*, which follows people living in remote, usually rural, places in Norway.

they ask me  
where do you come from?  
i reply  
i come from feios in western norway  
they ask me  
but where do you *really* come from?  
i reply  
i was born in south korea  
i was three years old  
when i came to norway  
i grew up on a farm  
along with my parents

they ask me  
when you say *my parents*, what you mean is  
your *adoptive parents*  
right?

# SIX

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**White, Norwegian Man**  
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i meet a white norwegian girl  
the first time we hold hands  
we walk past some youths  
who ask if we're a couple  
they say: we don't think  
you work well together

after this i have always thought  
that every single person we meet  
thinks this  
we don't work well together  
a yellow boy and a white girl

i stop holding my girlfriend's hand  
when we go out  
i stop kissing her  
when other people are around

but we get married  
we have hybridchildren  
they don't look white  
they don't look yellow  
how do they  
actually look?  
is there a country  
just for hybridpeople  
a country where all who have been watered down  
can live together?

my wife gets pregnant for the first time  
and i think  
maybe we were never meant to  
mix the white with the yellow?  
what happens if we mix two things  
that don't work well together?  
i wake in the night with a headful of hybridchildren  
children who can't speak  
children with extra toes  
children without thumbs  
children with growths right above their tailbones  
children who don't understand norwegian  
what language do hybridchildren speak?  
do they speak a hybridlanguage?  
do they speak in codes?  
will i understand my own child?  
and what if this child doesn't understand  
that i'm their father?  
what if this child looks around  
and doesn't understand  
that their father isn't  
a white norwegian man  
but someone who doesn't look like anyone else?  
what if this child grows up  
and stands in the mirror  
and wonders why  
their eyes are so narrow  
their hair is so black  
their skin is so golden?  
what if this child  
sprints through the darkness  
with someone chasing after them?  
what if some stepbrother comes into their bedroom  
and takes aim at them?  
what will the child of a recycled child be?  
will this child also be  
a second-rate child?  
or what is the sum of  
a child of a surplus child?  
will two negatives make a positive?  
a true norwegian child?  
i can add and subtract  
as much as i want  
but i never find the answer

my children will inherit separation anxiety  
my children will inherit waking in the night  
and thinking that they are alone  
my children will inherit fear of train stations  
my children will inherit a farm with no animals  
my children will inherit this golden skin  
and this wiry black hair  
my children will inherit a korean ancestry  
which they will never know  
my children will inherit the features of men and women  
who live on the other side of the world  
my children will inherit hundreds of years of  
war and conflict

but my children are unable to eat with chopsticks  
my children eat sushi with a fork  
only one of my children has inherited lactose intolerance  
one of my children has wavy hair  
she has lighter skin than the others  
i disappear into my children  
my korean history is erased more and more  
in a few generations  
i might be gone  
and perhaps one day one of my great-great-grandchildren  
will find a photo of me  
who is he? the child will ask  
that's your great-great-grandfather, my great-grandchild will say  
but he doesn't look like us, the great-great-grandchild will say  
but inside that child will flow biological traces of me  
a man who dreamed his whole life of being white  
and several generations later  
his descendants will look  
like his dream  
they will perhaps have blonde hair  
they will perhaps have freckles  
they will perhaps have blue eyes  
they will go on holiday to the west of norway  
they will swim in the ice cold water of the sognefjord  
they will drink milk  
they will jump into dry hay  
they will clap the sheep  
perhaps one of those children will have  
the same name as me?

i lost my korean parents  
then i got norwegian parents  
now i'm creating a family of my own

when i had my first child  
i was no longer alone in the world  
for the first time in my life  
i had someone who looked like me

seeing my firstborn  
was like looking back in time  
it was like seeing myself  
as a newborn  
it was like seeing myself  
lying there bundled up  
in a little blanket

i saw myself lying there  
in the crook  
of a white woman's arm



i ask my wife to go to the first parents' night at the school  
i ask my wife to collect  
our children the first time they visit a friend's house  
i ask my wife to go to the first school Christmas party  
i ask my wife to volunteer first at the nursery  
i ask my wife to go to our eldest daughter's  
first violin concert

i just want to make a good impression

the glass door of the dentist's office opens  
is minh here? asks a grey-haired dentist  
is minh here? he asks again  
this time he looks right at me  
i look around and meet the dentist's  
gaze again and shake my head  
the dentist closes the glass door and disappears  
what name did he say? i ask my son  
minh, i think, replies my son  
the dentist appears behind the glass door again  
this time he doesn't open it  
but looks through the glass  
our eyes meet again  
then he disappears  
then another dentist comes out  
she walks straight up to me  
what's your name? she asks  
i'm just here with my son, i say  
oh, okay, she says and walks through the glass door  
and i'm left sitting in the waiting room  
thinking about minh  
i picture a vietnamese man  
a second generation immigrant  
studying science at university  
wearing high street brands  
perhaps he is running through oslo city centre  
late for his dentist appointment  
perhaps it was a meeting that wouldn't end  
perhaps it was a child who didn't want to go to nursery  
perhaps it was a train that arrived too late  
minh sprints sweating and stressed through oslo city centre  
and doesn't know that the dentist thinks he's already here  
that he's sitting in the waiting room  
and that he doesn't understand much norwegian  
that's why they have to ask him again and again  
what his name is  
but minh isn't minh  
i'm the one who is there  
i'm just here with my son  
and the dentist thinks  
i look like minh  
and for a split second i'm relieved  
that the dentist believed  
that it was me who was minh  
and not my son  
that he avoided it  
this time at least

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i am visited by nrk migrapolis  
i tell them that i never liked  
living on a farm  
that i had ten thumbs and hayfever  
that i didn't like seeing dead animals  
that i didn't like the smell of barns  
that it hasn't been so easy  
being adopted  
afterwards i get a text from a relative  
she writes that i should be grateful  
that i got to come to norway  
that if i hadn't been adopted  
then i might have ended up on the streets in south korea  
making a living from begging

Note: *Migrapolis* is a television programme broadcast by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). The programme follows the everyday lives of immigrants and aims to explore and illustrate multiculturalism in Norway.

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my hybridchildren  
sprint across the grounds  
of the farm i will inherit  
but never take over  
my hybridchildren  
a warm summer's day  
with golden skin  
black hair  
there they run  
through the green grass  
they run there  
with norwegian names  
olav  
ingeborg  
marie  
sigurd  
majestic norwegian names  
there they run  
through the grass  
and the water from the sprinklers  
makes their bodies glisten  
they remind me of  
the children who ran from  
the atom bomb  
in hiroshima  
weeping children  
with golden skin  
black hair  
with narrow, weeping eyes  
but my children do not weep  
they laugh with narrow eyes  
in the cold water  
from the river  
and now they sprint through the grass  
across the yard  
and into the kitchen  
and they drink red juice  
and eat lefser with brunost  
and they laugh and might think  
that this place  
this little farm  
by the sognefjord  
is a paradise on earth  
it's not like oslo  
with cars and roads everywhere  
imagine living here  
they might think

imagine growing up here  
they might think  
imagine living like this  
every single day  
they might think

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**White, Norwegian Man**  
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# SEVEN

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**White, Norwegian Man**  
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CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

where do i *really* come from?  
i come from feios in sogn og fjordane  
where 250 people lived  
there were two of us in my class  
me and odd-helge  
i come from tjønn farm  
which my grandfather  
brynjulf tjønn  
ran until he died  
i come from tjønn farm  
where my father  
magnar tjønn  
still lives  
i come from seoul in south korea  
where millions of people lived  
i come from kyung san station  
in the town of gyeongsan  
four hours by train  
outside seoul  
i come from the children's home  
sung rak won  
where there now only live  
korean children  
with down's syndrome  
because their parents  
don't want them  
i come from all of these places  
but i don't know where  
my whole life i've longed to know  
where i *really* come from  
my whole life i've wondered  
where it is  
is it in a street in the town of gyeongsan?  
is it in a street in seoul?  
is it in a street in a little town  
that nobody in norway  
knows the name of?

my grandfather  
brynjulf tjønn  
knew where he came from  
he married  
his second cousin  
brynhild tjønn  
and had seven children  
what did he ponder  
while he grew up?



did he wonder  
if he would take over the farm?  
if he would make a good enough farmer?  
if he would live long enough  
for one of his grandchildren  
to be named after him?  
did he wonder  
if he would  
ever meet  
the love of his life?  
then he met brynhild  
then they had children  
then he died in the same house  
he was born

grandfather and i  
have almost the same name  
brynjulf tjønn  
brynjulf jung tjønn  
but the small difference  
is my middle name  
four small letters  
that create an entire world  
between us

if only i could be a farmer  
if only i could  
take over the farm i'll inherit  
if only i could  
kneel down in a field  
and pull up vegetables in the autumn  
if only i could  
roll out of bed  
at the crack of dawn  
to feed the sheep  
if only i could  
spend the whole summer  
harvesting grass  
if only i could  
nudge that little wooden boat  
onto the fjord to cast a net  
or sling a rifle onto my back  
and take part in the deer hunt  
if only i could  
be a bit more like my father  
or like all the other boys  
i grew up with  
like odd-helge, who bought the neighbouring farm  
if only i could  
move home and be  
brynjulf tjønn

i could have been a man who moved home  
a man who built a house beside  
my parents' house  
a man who took with him his wife and children  
and helped increase the population of my village  
a man who took with him valuable skills  
and tax money  
a man who was active in the sports club  
and local politics  
a man who each morning put on overalls  
and went out to the barn to work  
a man who in the afternoon sat on his tractor  
and drove into the forest to chop wood  
a man who came home for dinner  
and had children who played in the yard  
children who climbed trees  
children who built playhouses in the garden  
children who went to the river to fish  
children who chased after kittens  
children who cycled to the neighbouring farm to play with the neighbouring children  
and came home again in the evening  
i could have been a man who was all of this  
and who still felt just at home  
in a street in seoul

i want to be so white, so white  
so light, so light  
so normal, so normal  
so boring, so boring  
i want to have an empty screen  
i can fill  
write my story of myself anew  
every day i write my story anew  
every day i want to delete all that i've written  
every day i want to make up and lie about my life  
every day i want to write about a whole other life  
i want to write about the happy white man  
the one who wakes up refreshed every morning  
sends his children to school with freshly made lunches  
kisses his wife before heading to work on his bike  
the one who always gets new, important work tasks  
because he looks so trustworthy  
i want to write about the happy man  
who has never experienced anything bad  
to whom life does nothing but give and give  
who does nothing but take and take  
this man with a terraced house in ullevål hageby  
and a seven-seater electric car  
this man with robotic lawnmower that can endure  
a 45 degree incline  
this man who despite his four children and busy job  
manages to work out four times a week  
this man who goes to bed with a smile on his lips  
and sleeps through the night  
this man who is so happy  
so happy and light  
let me be like him  
die like him

i came to norway  
because two parents  
needed a child  
i came to norway  
because a farm  
needed an inheritor

when my parents die  
the farm will be sold

who will i be then?

i have no heroic tale to pass on to my children  
i have not sought refuge from soldiers and bombs  
i have not had to flee my country  
because i believed in the wrong god  
i did not come here on an overcrowded boat  
i came here like a parcel in the post  
but without right of withdrawal, guarantee or return form  
i have no heroic tale to pass on to my children  
but i have a dose  
of allergies  
and identity crises  
a flat nose  
and narrow, slanting eyes  
and i have this book  
to pass on

\*

one day my children will read this book  
one day my grandchildren will read this book  
one day my great-grandchildren will read this book  
one day my great-great grandchildren will read this book  
what might they think when they read this book?  
might they say  
he just felt sorry for himself?  
might they say  
he had low self-esteem?  
might they say  
he was just as prejudiced himself?  
what does it mean to be white?  
they might say  
what does it mean  
to have narrow eyes?

what do you want to be  
when you die?

i want to become  
dark norwegian earth

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