



What Though the Field Be Lost

Poems

CHRISTOPHER KEMPF

Based on two years living and researching in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Christopher Kempf’s *What Though the Field Be Lost* uses the battlefield there as setting and subject for poetry that engages ongoing conversations about race, regional identity, and the ethics of memory in the United States.

With empathy and humility, Kempf reveals the overlapping planes of historical past and public present, integrating archival materials—language from monuments, soldiers’ letters, and eyewitness accounts of the fighting—with reflections on present-day social and political unrest. Monument protests, police shootings, and heated battle reenactments expose the ambivalences and evasions involved in the consolidation of national (and nationalist) identity. As the book’s title, an allusion to Milton’s Satan, suggests, *What Though the Field Be Lost* shows that, though the Civil War may be over, the field at Gettysburg and all it stands for remain sharply contested.

Shuttling between past and present, the personal and the public, *What Though the Field Be Lost* examines the many pasts that inhere, now and forever, in the places we occupy.

CHRISTOPHER KEMPF is the author of the poetry collection *Late in the Empire of Men*. His work has appeared in the *Believer*, *Best American Poetry*, the *Kenyon Review*, the *New Republic*, *PEN America*, and elsewhere. He is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize, a fellowship in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University. Kempf teaches in the MFA program at the University of Illinois.

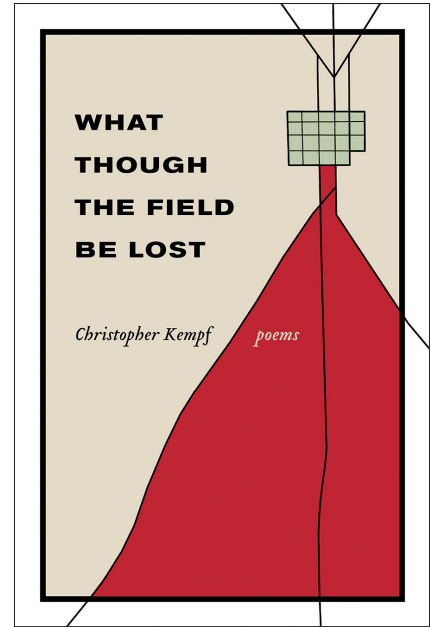
After,
in America, *no masters*
but ourselves the spangled banners

of schoolkids declared. In Carolina,
after—the exact fairgrounds
the South had flaunted its stallions

through, or had, of a Sunday, come to
in its veils & worsted—freedmen, wreaths
of lilies in their arms, interred

the Union dead in excelsis. Sweetly,
the mulberries ripened. Worms gathered. After,
we began—

—from “After”



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Poetry



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PRAISE FOR *WHAT THROUGH THE FIELD BE LOST*:

"*What Though the Field Be Lost* is a book about redemption. These poems want to know if the America citizens are compelled to love can ever be the nation it claims to be but never was: 'What is it, / though, that lets a man imagine a country/worth weeping for?' These and other well-wrought lines take up a long tradition started by Whitman, carried by Robert Lowell and Robert Penn Warren, and recently refurbished by poets like the late Jake Adam York. Christopher Kempf, though, wants to make a poem that moves us emotionally and literally: 'All art / . . . aspires likewise to wrench us/from complacency. To make us/turn, suddenly, toward some spectacular mess/made pleasing . . .' This is a brilliant and beautifully ambivalent volume in which the poet uses his entire self — 'Montgomery & I, & Jesus & Shakespeare / & a bottle of Boone's Farm my father/had bought for us just this once' — to make whole and healing poems."

—Jericho Brown,
author of *The Tradition*

"*What Though the Field Be Lost* offers us a guided tour through the tragic cyclorama of American history. Beyond repair or restoration, contemporary racial politics resembles nothing so much as an endless Civil War reenactment in this intimate historiography of eternal return: 'I want / to tell you that these summers the cities / of America are filled with the bodies / of young black men,' writes the poet, 'though for that, I have read, / the country collapsed once & split.' Revisiting, revising, and reforming constructions of whiteness from Milton to Whitman to the Southern Agrarians and beyond, Christopher Kempf refuses to 'plant plastic flags for Gettysburg's fallen' when more reparative futures await our construction."

—Srikanth Reddy,
author of *Underworld Lit*

"'All art, / the point is, aspires likewise to wrench us / from complacency.' Kempf more than fulfills this aspiration in his new collection, *What Though the Field Be Lost*, a layered, lyrical, and learned meditation on American history past and present. Kempf's work revisits and reconstructs the many meanings of Gettysburg, offering a provocative re-consideration of the past while speaking with a clear, humane voice to the turmoil in our contemporary conversation. Deeply thoughtful, statement-rich, *What Though the Field Be Lost* steeps us in an expansive interrogation of Civil War statues, racial violence, war, slavery, masculinity, and the breaking news that threatens to inundate and overwhelm. Throughout, Kempf shows that old familiar history has a fierce appetite. It waits to consume us all."

—Janice N. Harrington,
author of *Primitive: The Art and Life of Horace H. Pippin*