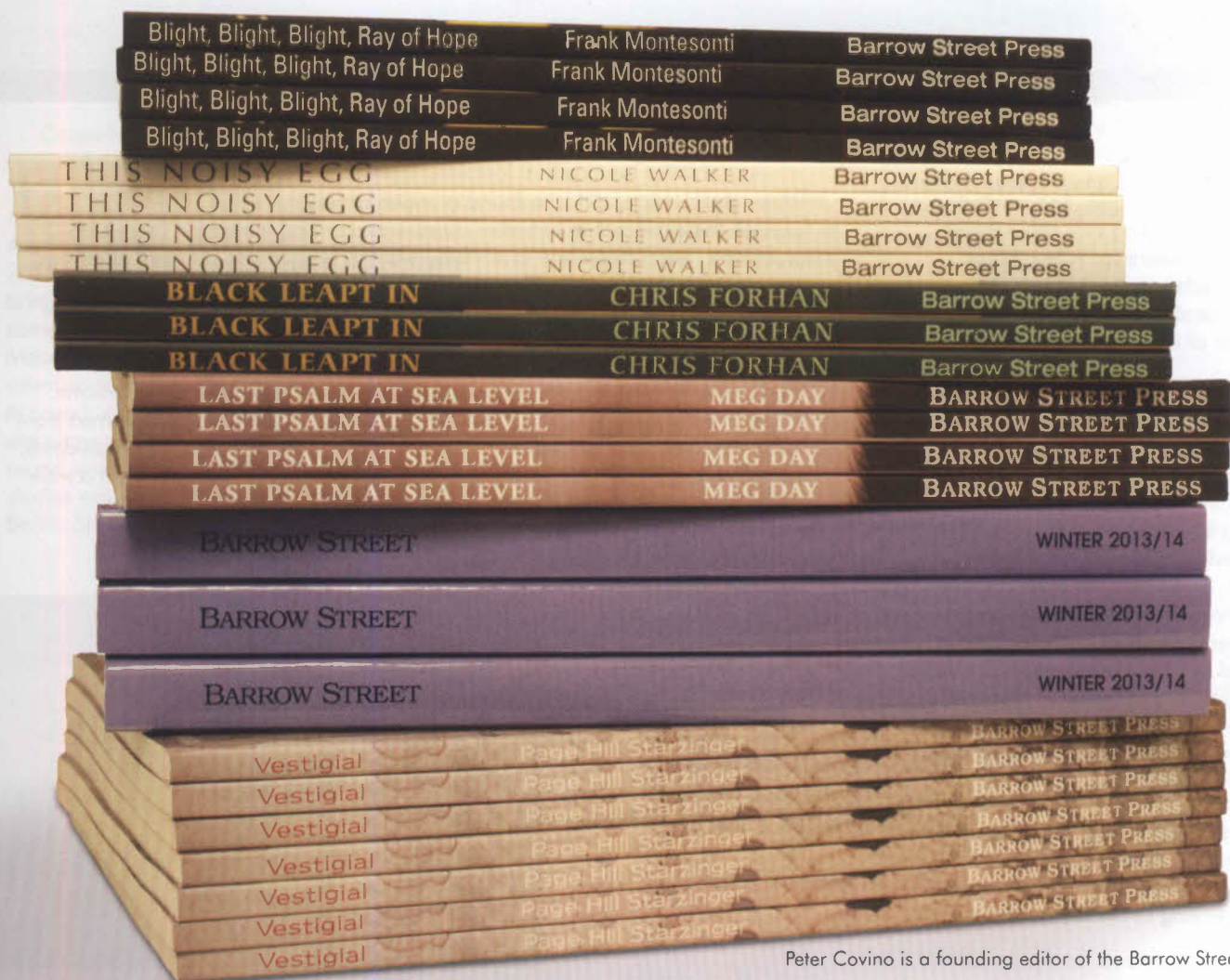


# POEMS

## Deconstruct Issues of Cultural Identity, Trauma and Loss

by Nancy Kirsch

An acclaimed poet, essayist and translator, with a gentle, thoughtful and welcoming demeanor contrasts with his poems that “name the unspeakable” — violence, loss, suicide, sexual abuse, family dysfunction and environmental disasters are among the complex themes his works explore.



Peter Covino is a founding editor of the Barrow Street Press



Peter Covino

Associate Professor, English

Peter Covino, an associate professor of English at the University of Rhode Island (URI) says, "Words have a radical power to create new ways of reflection and understanding. Language's ability to name the unspeakable can be terrifically therapeutic."

## Infusing Cultures

Covino was three years old when arrived in the United States from Italy with his parents; he became a U.S. citizen two decades later.

His family spoke a polyglot Italian dialect with a strong Spanish influence, not the more commonly spoken Italian. Covino, who only heard that dialect at home, later studied Latin in high school and Italian in college. Covino's Italian heritage undeniably infuses and influences his poetry, thinking and sensibilities.

"My work straddles several different cultures; it's not just Italian, it's Neapolitan southern Italian culture, too," he says. "As someone who comes from this multicultural background — where Italian is the closest dialect to Latin — everything I hear in English that's not pronounced the way it should be in Latin seems to be an appropriation. You don't want to misappropriate people's experiences, why should you misappropriate their languages?"

In 1990, while working as a social worker at a hospice in New Jersey, Covino communicated in an Italian dialect with a dying woman who only spoke a Neapolitan dialect. "Just helping her to communicate, to understand—it was one of the most rewarding therapeutic experiences I've ever had," he says.

## Bearing Witness as a Poet

His evolution from social worker — his profession for 10 years — to poet is not as unexpected as one might imagine.

"When you do group therapy, you witness collectively," says Covino, whose poems are almost exclusively autobiographical, and rendered with unflinching candor and a deft lyricism.

In hearing clients share their pain-ridden stories — often filled with self-loathing — Covino came to realize the value of poetic expression of such confessionals. For many people it would be difficult to be vulnerable in writing about such intensely personal experiences as his sexuality, sexual abuse and dysfunctional family life.

"It was very risky; it's become less so over time," says Covino. "My book, *Cut Off the Ears of Winter*, addresses much of my experience as a victim of sexual abuse and around my queer identity."

"I'm feeling so grateful that people see it as the best work I've written."

- Peter Covino

**DARIO BELLEZZA**  
(translated from the Italian by Peter Covino)  
*from Invettive e licenze (Invective and license), 1971*

**A Elsa Morante**

I ragazzi drogati, guardie del corpo  
dell'Assoluto, vanno per il mondo  
martutino fino alla sera della loro  
sopravvivenza: come passerotti  
mangiano distrattamente  
tutti presi dai loro sogni d'avventura.  
La sciagura che li coglie per strada  
è pienamente stecchiti  
delle iene umane  
micrologi sui giornali.

**To Elsa Morante**

The drug addicts, bodyguards  
of the Absolute, roam the world  
from morning until night  
their final survival  
they eat distractedly  
seized by their dreams.

And the disaster  
and devastation  
leaves them  
who are

That poetry collection, which includes one poem by the same name, was published in 2005 by Western Michigan/New Issues Press and earned a prestigious Poets, Essayists and Novelists (PEN) American Joyce Osterwell Award for emerging poets in 2007.

"Twenty years later, in the book I am working on now, I deal with those issues much more directly," Covino says.

To some extent, Covino's experiences as a social worker in the fields of foster care and AIDS services informed *Cut Off the Ears of Winter*. Other poems of the collection shine light on a myth perpetuated by families such as his.

Covino says, "Saving face or not sharing secrets is a major cultural concept in families like mine. You

couldn't expose these sorts of things; you couldn't even go to therapy to talk about this stuff."

Despite the poems' painful subjects, Covino adds, "It became crucial to illustrate that the life of the poet is essentially a good one. Even in the middle of devastating abuse, a writer needs to reflect and meditate, to consider some of the merciful realities of the larger world."

## Playing with Puns

The multilingual Covino whimsically plays with words, while paying exquisite attention to how a poem looks and sounds on the printed page. Of *The Right Place to Jump*, his second collection of poems published by Western Michigan University/New Issues Press, he says, "There are a lot of sonic or sound-related puns throughout, such as substituting 'kingdom' for 'condom,' or playing with the links between 'Celan' and 'Ceylon.'"

Paul Celan, a Holocaust survivor and Covino's favorite poet, committed suicide in 1970 by jumping into the Seine River in France. In his poem, "Sri Lanka," Covino pays tribute to Celan, which phonetically is the same word as Ceylon.

"The book title also reminds readers that jumping into different poetic styles and accepting the range, has value," he says.

Peppering his comments with Italian and Latin phrases, Covino adds, "When I think of what's happening poetically, I literally look at every letter of the alphabet. I think about phonics, I think about the duration of vowel sounds, it's sort of a neurotic way of controlling the things in your life you can control. In poetry, every sound, every syllable, every image really matters."

Passionate about translating Italian poetry and essays, Covino is especially enthusiastic about translating the poems of the late Dario Bellezza, who wrote frequently about death and rebelling against societal conventions.

"Others are translating him; I'm in a competition," he says. "I'm happy that others are paying attention."

Covino has managed successfully to negotiate his time and energy, and strike a balance between his own poetry, translation work and teaching. He says he is pleased with his latest work, *Armies in the Blood*, a yet unpublished collection of poetry. Although Covino once believed he was done thinking about cultural identity and different kinds of family dysfunction, these new poems seek to understand the aggression that exists in us all.

"I'm feeling so grateful that people see it as the best work I've written," says Covino.

Covino, a founding editor of the literary press, Barrow Street Inc. and the Barrow Street Books, is also the poetry editor for VIA: Voices in Italian Americana. Covino's poems are published widely in the United States and Italy.

Eager to bring highly experienced and novice writers and readers together, Covino founded the Ocean State Summer Writing Conference — now in its ninth year — one of the University's most desirable creative offerings.

"Writing is not a small enterprise—people need to read you," he says.



*"In poetry, every sound, every syllable, every image really matters."*

- Peter Covino