From its blue-black cover to its slender spine, in disquieting lines and enigmatic letters, *The Book of the Black Star*, Albert Wendt’s new volume of poems, explodes upon its pages like a black hole in space, sucking us into the universe of mystery that the philosopher Gabriel Marcel says only death invites us to enter. Wendt’s signature, underscored by timelines to spring and summer 2001, and the recurring Samoan ligature “le fetu uliuli” (the black star) are the only constants in this shape-shifting threnody lamenting the loss of fellow poets, of love, of language, and, eventually for us all, of life itself. We have come to learn from this unflinching Samoan writer the intimate details of Pacific colonialism—the dead waters of Viape, villages strewn with garbage, young men tattooed with needles full of heroin rather than ritual ink, the ‘ietöga and titi of the täupou (fine mat and feather waistband worn by the ceremonial virgin) transfigured into the jeans of Britney Spears, the ‘ava (kava) ceremony drowned in Vailima beer. Those images are here—“the autopsy / found his blood / had turned black” (“Sam’s Quest”); “Tonight he’ll dream of flying along / the bone-dry bed of a river / dead from a century of drought” (“Red”)—but what strikes this reader as a new drift in Wendt’s ongoing fiction is the celebration on every page of the violent trembling of paradox.

Or, in the words of William Blake:

> “Without contraries is no progression.” The basic contraries of these poems are words and line drawings which sometimes shape spirals of phrases into a chambered nautilus, or drip on the page like blood or tears, or carve the horn of a new moon out of the last syllable of “darkness.” Like ideographs or petroglyphs, these fusions (identified on the jacket blurb as “imagetexts”) tweak a mind steeped in the symbol/syllable representation of the alphabet the missionaries brought with psalms and pens to Polynesia. Thus, the conventional western invocation to the muse that opens the book, “Black Star / were / you born / during the first / dawn / before tagaloa-a-lagi / invented the alphabet / of / omens?” curves its opening spondee over lines that morph from the whiskers of a Durer rabbit to the hair-raised scalp of a cartoon character with an “o” and an “n” for eyes. The capitals of “dawn” are shrouded as if in the wings of a gigantic bat, and the period under the question mark blows up into five white pentacles with a black center, creature of sea and sky. Wendt’s many readers who share his love of poetry will feel in this lyric the pulse of Keats’ “Bright star were I as steadfast as thou art” and hear as well the Samoan syllables that name the Supreme God of Creation, with its untranslatable “ng” song, washing up against the ominous English alphabet. No matter how often it is inscribed “like a small / black bubble at the bottom lefthand corner” (“Easter Sunday”) of these poems, the palpable music of le fetu uliuli resists the monosyllabic hammer of its translation, “black star”: Life, death; light, dark;
eros, thanatos; white, black; joy, grief;
sacred, profane—like “blood or
energy/that springs from the uni-
verse’s heart” squats “fullweight” on
the head of the young poet, Sam, who
is both awakened and devoured by its
force (“On Our Way”). “Vanimono-
imo”—translated in the glossary,
happily placed at the beginning of the
book, as “the Space-that-appears-and-
disappears”—is the mouth of “that
other/holy poet walking out/ of the
tomb” in “Easter Sunday” and “the
long sad silence before/Tagaloa-
lagi uttered/the first word/+ gave
tongue to our pain” (“Creat-
tures”). Language, vocabulary, dictio-
nary, alphabet—these are the mod-
ernist and postmodernist tropes that
surface in these poems as elusive and
beautiful as light on shoals. But the
stanzaic balance and formal elegance
achieved after so much anguish in
“Dictionary”—where we await the
birth of the lizard god to a woman
who, like us, is admonished to “savali
i le ala o le fetu uliuli” (walk in the
path of the black star)—finally shat-
ters. The drawn images, too—a cross
circled by peace; batwings arching
into a rainbow over a parcele; an
oasis of music and hope in the midst
of mayhem—finally collapse into vio-
ence and incoherence. The blood of
the sacrificial lamb implied in “Easter
Sunday” careers into human eating
human heart (“Cannibals”), a bleak-
ness and devastation consistent with
the tragic vision of Albert Wendt.

The Book of the Black Star resists
the traditional apotheosis of the west-
ern elegy in which the dead poet—
Lycadis, Adonais—ascends to the
realm of the gods. The speaker and
the reader of these poems could cry
with Shelley near the end of his elegy
for John Keats: “I am borne darkling,
fearfully, afar,” but the last three lines
of that poem—“Whilst, burning
through the inmost veil of Heaven/
the soul of Adonais, like a star/
beacons from the abode where the
Eternals are”—are the opposite of
Wendt’s lamenting prophecy for Sam:
“One day you will see/the BLACK
star/racing by + know IT won’t
return.” Here, the image of the black
star rockets toward the words of the
poem, and in the last three pages the
“mere anarchy” of language is blown
like body parts across the page. Pieces
of sentences are lopped off, love-hate
poems worthy of Catullus slash out,
and the book ends with a fragment:
“out of the/BLACK” in which the last
word, veiled in ink, is reflected in frail
letters as if on white, dead water
above which the black star recedes.
Whether or not this phrase connects
to the ellipsis of the penultimate
poem, “ta’u mai loa . . .” (tell me
now) and whether or not these con-
traries are progression in the Blakean
sense are proper mysteries to conclude
the lines of these roiling, turbulent
pictographs.

NELL ALTIZER
Gig Harbor, Washington

* * *
Start your review of The Book of the Black Star. In 1999 Wendt was visiting Professor of Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Hawaii. In 2001 he was made Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for his services to literature. In the 2013 Queen's Birthday Honours he was appointed a member of the Order of New Zealand. ...more. Books by Albert Wendt. More… Related Articles. Albert Tuaopepe Wendt ONZ CNZM (born 27 August 1939) is a Samoan poet and writer who lives in New Zealand. Among his works is Leaves of the Banyan Tree, published in 1979. Albert Wendt was born in Apia, Samoa. He is of German heritage through his great-grandfather from his patrilineal ancestry. In 1988, Albert Wendt took up a professorship of English at the University of Auckland, the first person of Pacific ancestry to hold a professorial chair in New Zealand. In a 2002 interview, Wendt would Albert Wendt is a Samoan poet, novelist, playwright, artist, scholar, and educator. He has published more than a dozen novels and short story collections. His poetry collections include Inside Us the Dead: Poems 1961 to 1974 (1976), Photographs (1995), The Book of the Black Star (2002), Adventure of Vela (2009), and From MĀnoa to a Ponsonby Garden (2012). Wendt has taught at Samoa College, the University of the South Pacific, the University of Hawaiʻi, and the University of Auckland. He has been the recipient of many awards throughout his illustrious career; in 2013, he became a member of the Order of New Zealand, the highest possible honor in New Zealand. Poems by Albert Wendt. Stepping Stones. Related Content.