



Lamp Lit

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LampLit

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A letter from the editors

Dear readers,

Lamp Lit was born from our need to tend to ourselves and to our community. Like probably everyone reading, we have always been led back to what's truest in ourselves by creative work, whether it came from us, or ferried us within it.

We are at a loss to describe how moving this process was and is for us. We received such an unexpected volume of beautiful work that we accepted much more than we planned, and we are not the least bit sorry about it.

To everyone who submitted, our friends, and everyone reading, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for making it possible for us to do this.

Thank you for trusting us.

We hope you enjoy this first issue of Lamp Lit, filled with work we love, that reminds us good things do happen.

With hope,
Jaime & Michael

"Above all else, it is about leaving a mark that I existed: I was here. I was hungry. I was defeated. I was happy. I was sad. I was in love. I was afraid. I was hopeful. I had an idea and I had a good purpose and that's why I made works of art."

-Félix González-Torres

"We have to create. It's the only thing louder than destruction."
-Andrea Gibson, whose memory is already a blessing.

Ecological Study: New Moon

The moon is wet. A moon's moon
is called a moon moon. The moon

is rolling down the street, chased
by its handlers. Every year the moon

spirals away from the moonstruck
by a span of two fingers. The moon

is wobbling, spilling cups, throwing
oceans. The prophets share lunar facts

as sacred, as if gathering enough
might illuminate how to hold on,

sustain us through those dark phases
where the light cannot be seen.

Literate Toes

I don't know how to describe
from life, the contents of a beginner's
mind, from an era when letters
were pictures and sound's later
profligacy, lofted by alders,
had only this morning spilled
past the kitchen screen door.
My toes gripped the linoleum
then, squatting little Agnes Martin
laying down spirals and bands
in calm crayon, less precise yet
sturdier than my many tuitions,
my later concentrations that bent
minds—I've got two—toward
studios and compact shelving
toward cubes of light
toward boxes of daybooks and every
Euclidean proof, then finally
at forty-two to a better, freer willingness
to play longer, to be even less precise
than I was at the beginning —than I
would have been all the shaken-out
hours of my life
were I a better man.



Mile Forty-Two

Snow day, & as I walk
the ground melts in the air.

No agency, if calculation
keeps the abyss below you, maybe

some small change in the light,
keeps the advantage

absolutely. In this world
we say, they were part

of this world, & they are
missed. A real thing

also misses
you, & lives.

Waiting For the Mouse

For the last two or three weeks one of our cats
has been stalking a mouse in the walls upstairs

This has been our first mouse since we started
living together and a house can only do so much

to resist the natural world Maybe a house
is the best kind of insurance we have

against going feral ourselves and either killing
eachother or getting along or just watching eachother

It's hard to say but we've already started all that
anyway and now the cat is here

walking along the walls waiting for the mouse
to find some kind of opening make an escape

and there's no telling if he'll kill it or not
or if he'll get along with it or just watch it

He's probably never even seen a mouse before
except when we've shown him pictures of mice

movies of mice or any of the dozens of toy mice
we've given him in his five years of life

but never a mouse in the flesh unless it was
when we were sleeping and i guess

it's worth noting here that flora and fauna

cats and mice all still occur while we're sleeping
as if in a dream as if in a joke And has any object
in a joke ever laughed from the inside?

People say god has a sense of humor Every punchline
needs its animal We've been waiting Watch it Here it comes

escaping through joke after joke Through fields
of jokes Getting away Disappearing off the tongue alive

into the nebula of laughter that we weren't meant to survive
That we've all feared.

The Evolution of Tetrapods

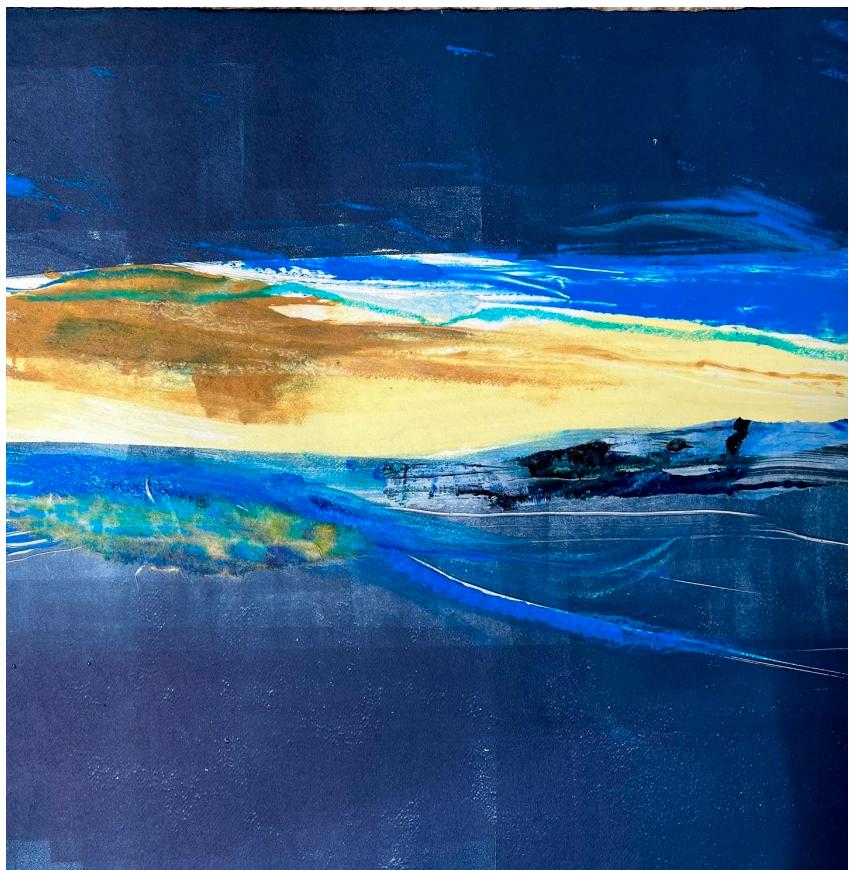
That blue Miller-Urey muse couldn't hold us forever. At first lonely, single-celled, algae and bacteria. Like all youth, we ached to be all things, to live in all directions: anemone, jellyfish, childish refusal to commit to just one axis. Over time, we chose reflection, finned a path through the current. Inevitable, the consequences of that decision. Personally, adaptation has been the best misfortune of my life. But there's only so much a body can change. A species can suffocate on progress. Maybe I will always love the ocean too much. The home we can't return to. I've tried to move on, to leave behind the churn-salt and crushed-shell dividing line of abandonment. To accept these new knee-bent limbs as worthy. Even now, eons past, my eyes still see better underwater.

Headless Chicken Monster (It's a Real Thing, Look It Up)*

A bright red beating heart,
not bleeding, but propelling itself through
the cerulean depths,
hovers over the sandy floor,
semi-transparent veil undulating,
like a dancer's gauzy skirt in mid-air.
Watching it tickle the seabed with tiny tentacled feet,
you will never know what it is
to wear that gossamer skin.

** seriously, do look it up! -Eds.*

Brigit Lilley



This Bird

The day is filled with Piazzola
staccato and flow,
accordion breaths and piercing impressions.

Huge, curled women stare with big eyes,
lay naked across each other on the wall.
languish in burnt sienna.

Fish jump from their quiet ponds
engorging leaves and flowers
into the air,

sound is sliding between
arpeggios to spun silk and
embroidered lands.

This bird sits puffed upon a dangling page.
its careful black eyes seek any movement
that's too quick.

Its brilliant body of electric blues and greens,
smooth and hollow as a violin,
is always ready to fly.

Still and moving
the point of its beak
a kiss.

laugh track

While the sky blinks to itself, the groundskeeper plays an accordion.

The dispirited ground devours time ahead of the angel's processional.

Words are exchanged that combustion may happen—

so that a single pious sparrow might latch its wingspan to our voice work.

The sidewalks remain steep with singing, that we may never stumble from our throats.

Holy Basil

And every time I die,
I awake in another world
of colorful feasts and dark forests,
with no maps or invitations,
no leaf of holy basil on my forehead,
and I don't speak the language,
and I have no currency.
I stumble across a lavish banquet,
everyone draped in silks and glinting jewels.
I am naked with a bit of spinach in my teeth.
I approach Osiris,
who is holding court at a party of all the gods,
to ask him if I should stay,
And if so, what exactly should I be doing?
Making small talk at the party
or bussing the tables?
And I've interrupted him in the middle of a story,
so he is displeased.
He casts me down to the Earth below,
with its heartbreaks and pain and disappointments,
and I wake up screaming with a new name.
The lights are just so bright.

Where Are We Going (after Barot)

You don't have to understand it, the way a long winter can kill a new mother. I had three under five, snow piled to the fence points, small boots making salt rings on the wood.

New town, no village, the pipeline to padded rooms seemed decorated with handprints. But the museums were hushed. The pleasant white noise of corduroy swishing, no goldfish

no crunch, no washing, no flush or crushing of a brother under a monster, no songs. At the Peabody Essex one son licks a fake dumpling in the Chinese House,

at the MFA he pulls a whole pear from a coat pocket and devours it in front of the Gauguin. I speed them through the Science Museum where he finds a room of thunder and lightning

drinks the fear of his own clear tears, his hot fingers searching my pocket for a ring pop. When we get to the Gardner, the other two under the spell of the heist, blank space

like a movie on the wall, this son escapes to the Rapunzel of nasturtiums, can we go he asks, because he has taken one and eaten it, his breath a masterpiece in pepper.

That son lives in a monastery in Québec now. He tends the small trees. He makes apples into cider, which my husband considers going nowhere. Sure, no money is exchanged

the concern being nothing is earned. But I don't have to buy the cider to know the quiet, gentle art of every apple, every hand, I only care he made it.

Prague Grafitti, Vltavská



somebody who isn't me

it's already almost summer again. the cats are on the bed. milhous is as old as mommy was when we got him. i think she still thinks of him as a baby. all of us do. she'll still clean him like she used to and sometimes now he'll clean her like she used to clean him too. they nap together in the sun. who knows how many days we'll have like this how many afternoons. who knows anything about time. the cats act as if they know. they might. but probably they don't. i don't. i don't even think god knows, but somebody, someone else besides god, they must know. that's right. that's better. as long as somebody knows who isn't me. i'm trying to explain all of this to my mother on the phone. but explain isn't the right word. anyway she can't explain it either. and she laughs and laughs at something i can't see.

Mile Forty-One

Strange, that your home
is brokenness. How else

would it happen. Of course
the world is as it is. All told,

you are not surprised. Not
torn, you can walk away.

A cigarette bears black
ink to the lungs, wheeze,

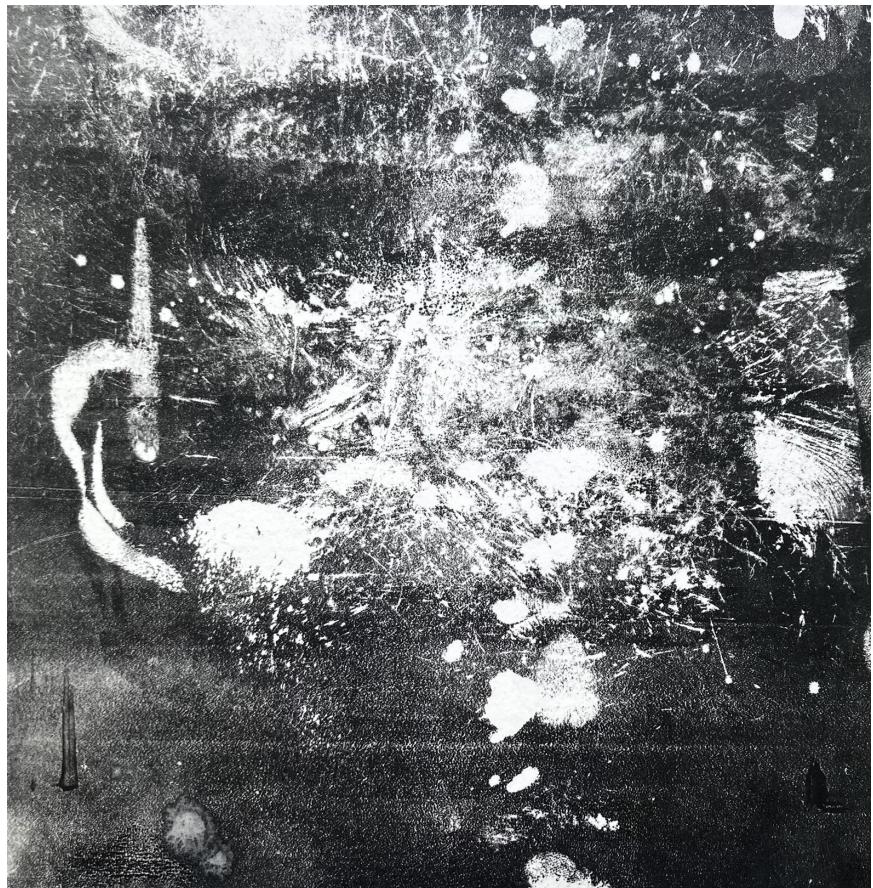
song, & whistle. Pause to
think. Bare open the wound.

Extremely Rare but Serious Side Effects

including death have been reported—
not that death is rare, death is commonplace,
an everyday occurrence. Everyone and everything
dies. Even the sun will die and the stars—
many of them—are dead already.

"If I knew that dying was going to be this easy,
I would have done it long ago," he said. He was being
serious and also funny. Maybe he was taking medication
that put him in a jokey mood on his deathbed,
his loved ones gathered round, wringing their hands
and crying because it was all so
serious. Until he said that to no one
in particular. No one laughed at first. Then
someone did. Then suddenly they were all laughing
and feeling almost good about dying, which was
neither as serious nor as rare as had been reported.

The Body as a Printing Matrix





epilogue (I wrote your eulogy on the plane).

I am driving
The photo on my license empty and tired from
Round the clock care I felt unqualified for
(but always knew I would have to give, eternally nine years old)
Playing John Denver
My hands on the same steering wheel
That broke your shoulder on a left turn.

(We never went back to your mother's house.)

I brush my teeth at night
Spit blood from sores, grief and stress
My hand making the same motion
Back and forth
That broke the bird bones of your wrist.

(You always had perfect teeth, and I, I'm sure I believed you would live long enough for it to matter. I did, didn't I?)

Inhale through my mouth
Nostrils clogged with some infection or other
Close my eyes and see the cannula I
Unable to put the mask on your skeletal face
(you were always so claustrophobic)
Placed delicately on the back of your tongue.

I wonder if I should be enjoying my life.

I shower, let the cold water hit my skin unflinching
Think of the shower in the hospital where I first bathed you
So cold, and you screamed and sobbed

All the nurses came running.

Are you fucking kidding me?

Oh we must've been

The last time I bathed you, an echo of the last time you bathed me, a
baby, your last baby

(You have to take care of the baby. The baby is crying.)

A brief flash of lucidity

As I sponged you (warm) with Tearless Shampoo and wept

(Examine a lump on your temple, realize it's your skull, and almost
scream)

And the Monkees cried in the background too.

I just need to get over this, you said

Two days before.

Got to get over this cough, you said

As the rose buds bloomed outside

And somewhere in your throat, death began to rattle.

(I gave you Mucinex that night. Atropine was premature, wasn't it? We
had more time, didn't we?)

Are you ashamed of your mother?

Dream of your healthy brown arms around me

Tight enough to break either of us, all our bones in one but it doesn't
You hold me healthy and whole.

(I haven't seen you strong since I was nine, eternally nine)

Awake now, you crying, aching, sick

Oh god, oh god, you must've been so tired.

I love you, baby. Thank you.

Turn on John Denver one last time.

Drip blue morphine into your mouth.

Count your last breaths.

(Inhale. Exhale. In—)

Seven.

This is the worst thing that I ever survived

And you didn't.

Father Magician

My father was vibrations from a rock—
a disturbance playing on loop:
ball-thrower, book reader, sail-wind-stealer,
magician ruining the secrets of other magicians

(revealing a turtle in a fold of newspaper;
making it disappear again, telling me animals
have no souls).

My mother sang while she was able. We imagined a song,
knowing there were no more songs.
She was a bird
hitting the silence of a windowpane.

I don't need to know if ghosts exist: I need to know
if they are real.

What sort of ghost are you?

Eli & Malu, Malá Strana



Girlhood, With Apples

(after Tanya Marcuse's Book of Miracles exhibit)

What a way to love
I type when I mean live
But is it?

Apple to apple
False espalier
Earthbound and golden delicious

A frozen perch in the ice house
on that apple picking ladder
The silver lace vine goes

Round like a trail
The beat is her breath boxed below
A snakeskin, a snail, a mushroom, red and ready

The ghost enters with feathers
(Me) pulls the string
Girlhood's wings bound

To end here too
There is no season where the apple, the berry and vine bloom at
the same time
The quest lies

Always ahead,
Now behind
You're eating this while hiding from your kids, aren't you

What a way

To the motherland
The ghost exits as another

Slow through the understory
Love, I mean live
I am hiding from my kids

I miss the apple
Miss the ladder
Not so much, the ice.

Hyper-grave

Here, beside the gravel path set down long ago to rest
under the rhetoric of crows in the high, leafless chestnuts,
rank markers of mettle and years spent homesteading,
preaching signs
enameled white with a black arrow.
"OLD" directs us in tourist fashion to cordoned plots where
maps alone name
each stone scrubbed to grit and new years—whole handfuls tossed
down onto our upturned faces.
Heaped from the ice storm, shattered limbs must be negotiated with
to reach your hummock, Angelica, brightened by trinkets,
by all that is negotiated, especially memories
—so few between November and January—
purchased through barter in the last stall of the night market:
rectangle of plastic grass,
pinwheels flashing in the cold beside a fluted cypress,
string of LED lights, as if life were electricity alone and conjurable,
plastic roses—live ones too, gone brown in their plastic stole,
unicorn printed on a flat of aluminum cut into the shape of a unicorn
and staked,
leaping over stars,
a photo of you, printed on stone, that captures your gobbed mouth in
a moment
of disarmingly adult surprise.





a painting in vermillion and rust

dreaming is like wading
the aftermath of a flood;
my head is a map of streets
filled with muddy puddles
and high water and
the bodies of suicides.

this is natural.
what are we waiting for?
are you breathing? is your heart beating?
are you well?

what would I say
(again)?
would it be true?
say the world isn't worth living in
this is not a lie
but

say my life is better with you; by inference
my life is worse without you
please come back.
(alive.)

Evergreen

i'm not too proud to tell you this
i stopped at that subway on merrimack street
on my way home from the library this morning
when i was passing it i saw a guy inside
he was getting a sandwich of course and
i thought that's funny i forgot subway serves breakfast
but they don't actually they've just got these
egg patties that they warm up
and they'll stick them in a regular sandwich
even calling them "eggs" feels like i'm punching it up a bit
but the only other word i can think of to describe them is
"circle"
and that's if i'm being very fair
fair to subway;
unfair to circles
(who provide us with so much)
have you ever seen where they get these eggs in the first place?
god almighty
and then you have to remember
us people we're the only things on the planet earth
with some sort of vision for world peace
and the only ones who would tell you that
"that's impossible"
but this is all beside the point, what i'm trying to say is
they will make you a regular sandwich at breakfast time
and it doesn't even have to have the egg in it
so i went in and i got a regular old sandwich
just like i said
i got every kind of vegetable on it even the cucumbers
normally i skip those but today
why not, you know?
living in the united states we are at war currently
and we will continue to have more and more wars

all the way down the line until i die
and i want to know how they all end
so i have to take very good care of myself
that's why i got the cucumbers on my sandwich
and you know something?
it's the first of may
my favorite month
that's really nice
and the girl who made my sandwich
they call them sandwich artists at subway
she was really nice too
we exchanged pleases and thank yous cheerfully
we were like old friends playing sandwich shop
but this time it was for real
she is i think my favorite thing about subway
i wish i was more like her
and then i leave and i am walking even faster than before
i'm hungry and i want to get home and eat this thing
and i pass this house
it has two signs on the front lawn both saying
BOUNCE HOUSE TENT RENTAL PARTY RENTAL
man, i think, that's pretty good
the person who wrote this knew what they were doing
the meter the assonance the repetition:
bOUncE hOUSe tENT rEN-Tal par-ty rEN-Tal
a poet wrote that i know they did
even if they don't think of themselves as a poet -- oh of course!
of course they don't think of themselves that way
but you can tell from the craftsmanship
and this is the kind of poem that will never age
not until long after our civilization has gone
taking with it its bounce houses and tents
our books all lost or burned
the words gone, soon forgotten
and soon too no lips left behind to speak them
if only i were that good but i'm just not that good
i can dream sure but i will never be that good

but it is gorgeous out, the first of may
i said that already but it bears repeating
and i'll repeat it all my life
and anyway tomorrow's the anniversary you died.
the year doesn't matter because the feeling is evergreen
like a poem i read once: bounce house tent rental party rental
the sandwich was just an afterthought
until i got home and i ate it
and it was great it was all i could think about
until i wrote all this
and you know something else?
i'll think about that forever
i'll think about all of this forever

The Most Beautiful Clown in the Circus

The most beautiful clown in the circus is also the saddest, because he realizes, no matter what good comes of it, he is still a clown.

The most beautiful clown in the circus is the brunt of the jealous acrobat's jokes – she who sees only absurdity and cannot grasp the clown's charisma.

The most beautiful clown in the circus does not understand why the lions put up with it.

The most beautiful clown in the circus is shot nightly from a cannon, unless there is no gunpowder available that day, in which case, the most beautiful clown in the circus is given the night off.

The most beautiful clown in the circus is the beloved of the bearded lady and runs his fingers over her chin for luck before he goes into the ring.

The most beautiful clown in the circus is above cramming himself into tiny cars and leaves it to the clowns who need clichés to make people laugh.

The most beautiful clown in the circus eats gunpowder for breakfast.

The most beautiful clown in the circus prefers the humor of the non-sequitur over slapstick and refuses the big shoes no matter how well they go with his costume.

The most beautiful clown in the circus is your harshest critic and publishes his reviews of you – the crowd – in Clown Quarterly where the contributing clowns mock your inability to understand the subtext implicit in their gestures.

The most beautiful clown in the circus spends three hours applying his makeup without a mirror, so sure he is of his hand and vision.

The most beautiful clown in the circus is a near-impossibility, beggars belief, leaves the ring walking on his hands and waving goodbye with his festooned feet.

She Carries the Watermelon: On Dirty Dancing in the Year 2025

poor johnny
baby has it all laid out in front of her
that wide net
that endless field
but in every ending
he stays behind
he knows the steps
where the dance ends
and the lift begins

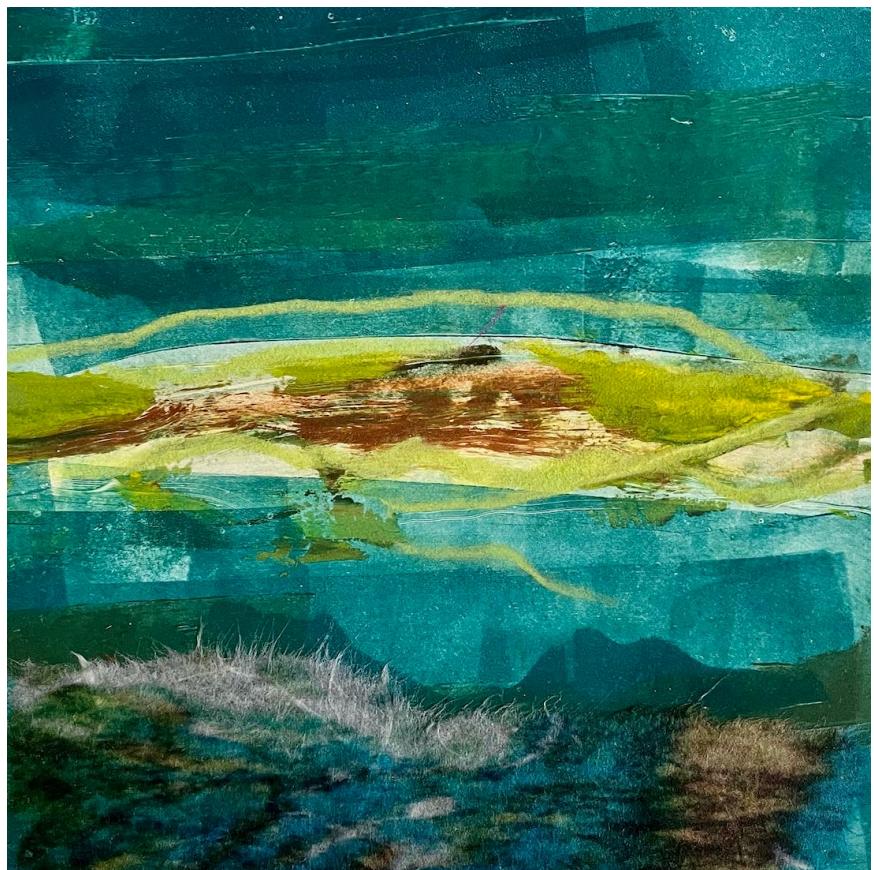
Cloud Physics in Hot Proximity

Oils on sky paper, chiaroscuro shapes.
Bodies of refracted light. Canvas we read
for meaning, heavenly messages which,
if observant, we might spot and receive.

I can't tell what I'm looking at until I see it.
This one looks like a lion. This one,
like the bar we had our second date. Two weeks ago,
2am, drunk on gin, you told me you loved me.
You'd said so before. But this time,
I was watching. I'm surprised at what I can see

in a face, how one thing can morph to another.
The physics that coaxes water into marshmallow.
In a sauna, pouring water over rocks summons
a cloud, close, earth-enough to touch.

Brigit Lilley



Untitled

i learn a boy's lap isn't that soft under your head.

—mt vallarta

i learn a boy isn't soft
sitting on your chest
arms pinned under
his legs

i learn a mouth
is as closed
as your jaw
lets it

that if cheeks
are squeezed hard enough
your teeth become a trap door
which rips open

i learn things can be buried
in your throat
that it doesn't matter
if you can't breathe

things will still fit

L.A. at Peace

There are voices
between the apartment rows,
the insistent dog whine
and the vacant echoes.

There is a far deep brood of cars
on their freeways under the stars.

There is dark not dark.
There is light not light.
There is need and desire
in the encircling night.

Yet now is the moment
of still shadows on a fence,
unmoving,
without significance.

Such things as this,
such stillness is.

Before leaf and life take up wind
and silhouettes on the walk
descend.

open letter to my friends who plan to commit suicide if Trump wins (we're doing this again)

long time no see.

what I meant to tell you was—

did you know your favourite pop star spoke against fascism today?
in the time between when they found your body
and when the bodies of my brothers washed up on the shores of
tyranny
she declared herself just to the left of childless
where three hundred million people
or more
could see.

would that have been enough? you liked cats and
you died childless

i thought you would've made a good father. that's all.
i thought you would've had a longer marriage
than the years you drew breath.

inhale.

there is a small corner of the world where
under fascism, or above it, or pressed to the dirt still soft over where
you sleep,
i will live. quiet.
in another life i think i would've made a good mother
i think i'm going to have a long marriage.

i am thinking of living.
i'm thinking of growing old again.

when my hair is white, when everything marketable about me sags
when my creaking bones are worked to dust under capitalism or
cruelty or my own stubborn disease
when they lay me down beside my sisters where the soil has long
grown hardpacked
will i be able to tell you?

what i meant to tell you was—

The Baker, the Dog, and Me

What makes a person great?
And do they ever run out of clean socks?
How I wish I were a baker,
who knew that their purpose was to bake,
who enjoyed rising before the sun,
whose forearms and hands were knotted from kneading dough
and dusted white with flour,
the person we look to for lemon squares and sugar roses,
the person who bakes the very best bread.

And even 40 years later, you can remember what it was like
to walk into that shop, the tinkling of the bell on the door,
the loaves of bread on the shelves against the wall,
the cookies and cakes and donuts in the glass cases,
the air perfumed with all of these together—
you can smell it still!

To know what you want to be and to do it well,
even if all that remains of your work are
crumbs, a dusting of powdered sugar, and sticky fingers.

Or what if that were your purpose,
and nobody goes to bakeries anymore?
And the lease on your building is running out,
and the strip mall is just going to be torn down anyway.
And people don't want carbs or sugar or gluten—
your paints, your canvas.

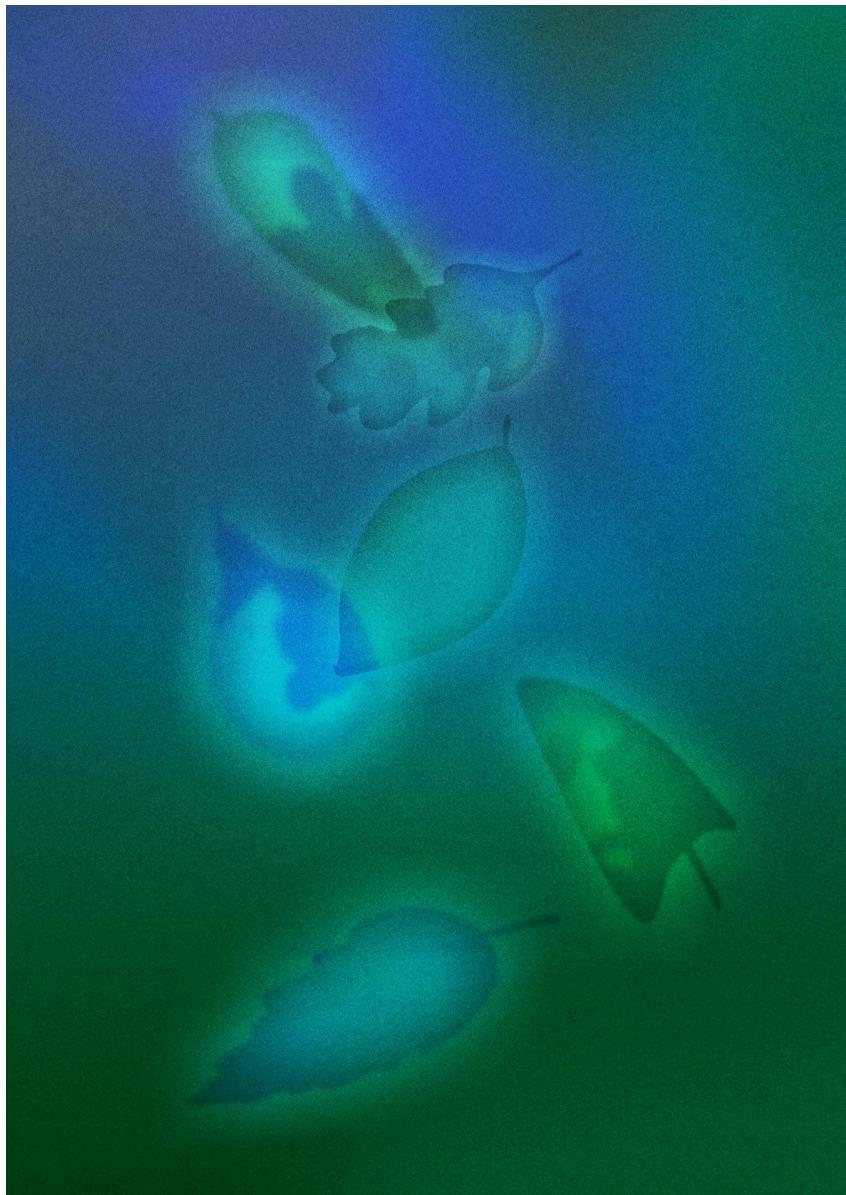
What if you had arthritis and a slipped disc
from kneading all that heavy dough?
Would you feel as lost as me?

Maybe better just to be a dog,
a yellow mutt with a lolling tongue
hanging out the side of her black-lined mouth,

a full belly and fat swinging tail.
Nobody asks her her purpose.
She just is,
and she thinks it's all pretty great.

In search of

that broken pencil, snapped midsentence
a torn receipt, folded in faded directions
the old city map, which can't find itself
one thumb-worn stone, never sold
ten & twenty magpies, trapped in the sky
each beggar, whose wish granted a horse
years of arguments, buried without ceremony
clipped want ads, circled and circling desires
one pair of tortoiseshell glasses, blind to the future
this jar of pennies acquired through cursing
six brass shell casings for emptied rooms
singular strands of hemp twine, parceled away
every set of eyes that bored through heaven
because the remainder were lost to view.



Still

My stepfather took a picture
in the forest, once,
right as a leaf fell.

And it looks caught,
suspended in the air
as though having always been there

waiting for its miracle
to be stumbled upon.

Which, in some and all ways,
is completely true.

Mile Forty

Time oceanic
& violent, Thursday

clamors for the door.
Who is washing away

the sanctity, complicit,
boundless, & abrupt.

Flooded lawns, brown
fields, & time messianic.

Uncrossed, despite its
betrayals, dampening.

hierarchy of longing

if I give the flower a name
I have killed it

brother, where have you placed yourself
in your hierarchy of longings

the way your head tilts back
when laughter erupts in your chest

everything adored is not aware
of its own breathing

Zookeeper

Our marriage was a contract, literally. We signed a marriage license and uttered vows at an altar of domesticity, like everyone. But there was a thirty-two-page, physical (and electronic) legal contract outlining expectations. He presented it to me before we began dating, if you can call what we did dating. I know, I know. Look at Facebook, look at Instagram, look at our old posts. Pictures of incandescent smiles, arms looped over and around each other, funny back-and-forths and grumpy cat memes. There's one where I'm in a white sundress, in a dark room. We're sitting on a couch together, lit by direct on-camera flash like soon-to-be roadkill in headlights, my legs tangled up in his chinos. Our mouths are so gaping open in raucous laughter they could be exit wounds. Night out, I wrote in the caption. He commented twenty heart-eye emojis. Damn, it was cute. Damn, we were good.

You know, I wasn't planning to tell you any of this. It's not the kind of thing you tell anyone. Like a fire smoldering in your chest that you don't want to breathe out, lest someone get burned. But you deserve to know. And I don't have another way or time to tell you.

The contract was similar to what some might call a prenup, and I was expected to keep it—to mend the childhood wounds in him by creating rife possibility for more in others. Licking my fingers to turn the chalky pages, I read clauses on division of property, spousal support, definition of a termination event, disclosure of assets, and even voluntary execution, where we agreed we weren't signing under duress or "undue influence." That clause was my favorite. We met in his living room, navy blue upholstery that felt rough to the skin, like burlap smoothed over with wear. We hunched over an oak coffee table—a tasteful tone against the coolness of the room. We read by lamplight and a filtered dusky glow through the window sheers. We discussed in monotone, we clicked pens into action, we sipped decaffeinated coffee out of chipped mugs. I always dreamed that when I planned my wedding, I would sit in a gown flayed out around me, encircled by

magazines open to pages of bridal wonder, sipping effervescent alcohol, playing records of Etta James— “At last, my love has come along”—checking items off lists on stationery flowered over and scented of roses. I cleared my throat. It echoed in Gilbert’s room like a failed skipping stone. Page twenty outlined children. “The spousal parties agree to produce offspring in the manner hereby outlined.” Childbirth. That was why we were here.

It was the smell of childbirth that always bothered me the most. The sour sensation of a licked envelope seal in the air, my own feces, not like flatulence but like tar. The baby itself, milky. Undigested. I had four. The first time, I had two. One boy, one girl, and internal bleeding. The next one died at first breath—an anomaly, anencephaly. We decided to name her Anna. When I had the fourth, I named him Xan because it means light, and I put him up for adoption. The pain was a lot—pulling a rope with my entire might to ring a bell that would never toll. A rope of my own intestines. I can’t remember if I felt all that after or before epidurals; they never worked the magic I was promised.

Gilbert was tall, built with a sturdy stance and lean composition. He was a baseball player in another life, he told me. I kept a collection of details about him in a drawer in my mind that I decided to only fill partway—to keep clear enough it would shut easily, never with any pages or pens sticking up in the way of clean closure, flush with the dresser wall. He found me through an online ad, not a dating profile but a job-wanted ad on a public site where people list used furniture. These days I would tell you it’s unsafe to market yourself like that; it was unsafe when I did it too, though. I included a photo because my face was personable, good for customer service, a warm handshake. Brown hair, dimples, nineteen. I looked like ripe mail-order wife-fruit ready to pick.

He didn’t know how to get on in life. He hadn’t had parents. He was raised by wolves, he joked to me. That was only true in the way that it’s true tears are blue. Blue comes to mean sadness more because of hypoxia, because blood turns blue after death, I’ve read. He was raised by foster parents, in actuality—abandoned in his toddler years with the information on his origins redacted, per his parents’ request. He jumped from home to home, living in eighteen by the time he’d turned eighteen. He described them all as dark, musty places down dusty dirt

roads. At times I wonder which one he was most describing when he spoke of them “all.” Then I close the drawer. He was thirty-one when he answered my classified.

When he was twenty-nine, a lawyer had reached out to him and gave him the first information he’d ever received about his birth parents. There was an inheritance. I have a guess what you might be thinking—that this inheritance required him to have children to come into the money, that that was why he sought out something so contractual. There are two things you might be forgetting already, though: one, his desire to heal his childhood wounds, to give other children the stability he didn’t have; and two, that he met the lawyer two years before I placed my advertisement and he replied to it. No, the will did not state that he needed offspring in order to inherit the sum. In fact, the sum wasn’t especially impressive. It was significant enough that he considered retiring on it but, after calculating and consulting, realized it would be better to use it supplementarily. He hadn’t had an amazing career—he was a zoo clerk; he worked the gift shop and concession stands while keepers fed wild cats and zebras that fattened and atrophied with nothing to chase them—their stripes rounding into arches around their middles. He watched the keepers nurture both the predator and the prey so they didn’t need each other at all, at least in theory. At least in cages. It was something different. He’d been there since college age, when his friends headed off to pursue dream careers, burger grease singeing their arm hairs to support them along the way. At least he avoided scalding, even if that meant there wasn’t anywhere else to go. Then the inheritance proved there could be.

Gilbert considered college. He considered a degree in biology; perhaps he could become the zookeeper, not merely a worker. He considered many things, but I’m not going to stuff your drawer on him, either. What he finally decided on, was me.

♀

I didn’t grow up in foster care, but I sometimes wished I had. My mother became single again at only thirty years old, after my father was found with my older sister’s panties under his pillow. The first time,

it was a laundry mishap. The pink, stretchy cotton clung to the satin by static. The second time, it was a question for my sister, and she didn't answer. The third time, he did. He said he didn't do everything my mom was thinking, and that was enough. He never touched me anywhere near my panties, but I remember my cheeks hot with embarrassment when he yanked my arm to pull me away from crunchy leaves on the sidewalk (my jumping on them annoyed him). I remember the burning sting on the back of my thighs when he spanked me for wearing short shorts when I was five. I remember a chain of men that followed after him and more experiences the same or worse, and I remember us leaving. leaving. leaving. Looking out the passenger window of a U-Haul in the side mirror at driveways that were no longer mine.

When you doctor a photo, you become addicted to the process of trying to make things better. If you warp the background to make yourself skinnier, you have fence or tree lines to straighten. If you make yourself smile, you have an inexplicable extra tooth. All of the AI photos we see (funny how AI could mean artificial intelligence or artificial insemination if you wanted)—humans with extra hands, three ears—that was my life. It was like the photos of us, before we posted them. Seventy-dollar editing software from a box at Best Buy and my aimless time to dedicate toward perfecting them. I was inadequate, but I was always trying to improve it, to improve its appearance.

I graduated high school shortly before I placed my photo ad and won't deny that I hoped my appearance might prove a little seductive. My high school was tiny, thirty-two people in my rural Iowa graduating class, and I didn't find the love of my life there. Cute football jocks or funny drama nerds or even the guys who seemed to date everyone would rather laugh about the strange girl that was so hard to talk to than ask for my number. But before I went to a concert, before my mom and sister and I would go out to dinner, or before I went anywhere, I'd pray to the universe, "Maybe he will be there tonight. You know, the one?"

I don't think I prayed about that ad in that way, but it was in the back of my mind. What I officially wanted was private employment—online tutoring, pet sitting, maybe house cleaning (even though I was terrible at that). I cast myself like a wide fishing net—local and nation-

wide, not planning to relocate but amenable to something digital. I had no money for college, and neither did my mom, but I'd heard of a concept called a gap year, and I thought I could save up.

Gilbert lived in Georgia. He funded my trip to sign our life away at his bungalow. He funded our rustic wedding and made the trip all the way up here. Chalkboard signs hung with burlap along the aisle of white folding chairs in my new backyard by a creek, my mom and sister and a few of my high school friends on their way out of my life in attendance. He reasoned that we both had so few connections no one would question us. He was right, which ruined me. I wouldn't have to see my family except on holidays, and we could manage those. Most of everyone's existence is online these days anyway. What he didn't consider was you—you, the daughter who lived. Your six pounds of creamy squish on the day you ruptured your way into the world, in that cold and dark hospital room, under a beaming light, with your pebble eyes that met and mirrored mine. How could he leave you without a father?

♀

Gilbert learned a lot about his parents the day the lawyer found him. Monkey see, monkey do, they had also felt the need to propagate but not to raise. From the way he told it, he was grieved at how much he looked like his father—the strawberry blonde hair, the frame. His mother bloomed from the page—he showed me the photos—busty, dark-haired, smiling, but looking away. What could be so fun that she looked away from the camera at it with such an equatorial grin? She was a daycare manager, and he was a prison warden. They had been meticulous savers. A tiny note left for him seemed to have been bleached of any hint of sentimentality: Dear son, We leave you everything we have. Best, Al and Amy. She died in the hospital, of sepsis due to intestinal rupture, at fifty. He had been much older than her, and he died shortly after his wife, at seventy-one from an overdose on sleeping medication that he didn't handle well in his advanced years. The lawyer didn't seem to think it was suicide but said he'd had chronic insomnia after Amy's passing. Perhaps he was overcompensating.

My own attempt at pharmaceutical overcompensation didn't begin until after you and your twin Benny were born. Some wounds don't heal like they're meant to, and my wounds and pain from your emergence after three hours of intestinal wringing with no one by my side were that type.

Speaking of, isn't it humorous how the doctors and nurses don't bat an eye when the father can't come to the birth? Humorous how if a mom is grocery shopping with two infants in the cart, no one wonders why their daddy's not there. How if a mother takes her children to the park, out to McDonald's for greasy fries and a comic book toy, to newborn appointments and daycare and school and playdates, classes in the activity rooms at the library and photo sessions for milestones or "mommy and me" and to see the newest Kung Fu Panda at the theater, and parent-teacher conferences and back-to-school shopping and tutoring appointments and bike-riding around the neighborhood and soccer practices and swim lessons and summer camp and to the pet store to get covered in puppy pee and to the gas station for snacks and gum and—to anywhere the dad isn't there—nobody bats a fucking eye? So funny, my own grin is fucking equatorial, too. Sorry for my language, Bunny.



I don't think Gilbert saw me as seductive. Ripe mail-order wife-fruit wasn't the kind of sweet to whet his appetite, but attractive genes were. I spied copies of Zipper underneath his armchair. His cheeks reddened at a quick mention of Tyler, his best friend in high school, not that I cared. He never touched me. I haven't explained that part yet, have I? Well, we did kiss on our wedding day; it was a swooping, passionate kiss, a swinging veil and a swept train and a leaning bride. Our faces smashed together in a marshmallow-y melt. My pelvis ached like a strained muscle—I hadn't experienced the full pain there, yet. He flew back home the same night. I was a child to him, not a mate. My young, fresh face in my ad looked like the first childhood he could save, a feral animal to be rescued and fed and contained. And the formula for redeeming the rest.

The first package, exploding with steam of dry ice, arrived a month later. The FedEx man, purple-ish tan skin beautiful against his indigo uniform, was required to ring the doorbell for this one. He smiled and handed me the clipboard that held a blank where my signature belonged. I officially owned the responsibility of you, already.

♀

There's still a frame on my nightstand that holds a photo of Gilbert and me. It's powdered over with dust, and it's propped up with a crinkled plastic water bottle because the kickstand broke from overextension years ago. I keep the curtains closed because I don't like to see the particles in the sky lit up with light, so I have to strain to look at it. (Remember how I told you Xan means light?) Technology is brilliant, really. So many of our photos look like reality, after I attended to every extra finger or warped shape. This one is from our wedding day, though, so we were both there, physically there. Like in the occasional family photo at a holiday, but this one is different. Touching fingertips, standing in sun. The photographer placed us so the light would be behind us, not in front. A white, wobbly reflector compensated so we could feel illumination looking ahead too. Unlike the fakes, in our wedding photos we didn't pose so perfectly; we were stiff, and our smiles were tight. This has still been my favorite photo the entire time. I wring my fingers around it, brush off the silky dusty layer, press a finger to each of our noses, and put it in the drawer, which I close.

The contract protected me, I have to admit. He gave me the right to leave. I could keep my house, keep the payments; I could keep the responsibility of the children. He left me everything he knew how to. But I was supposed to keep going, to ensure the future of more of his progeny, so I worry he found someone else. Though I refuse to check, I think I know he has.

When I take you to the park—when I took you to the park—my favorite is when I swing you. Benny's alright. He's a tough little man like his father, and he has you to look out for him. He kicks rubber mulch, his floppy straight-edged blondish locks bouncing. But when I swing you, you fly up into the air, and I catch you in my arms at the other end

of the pendulum. We bathe in sun. We smell flowers. You tell me about your favorite books—ones where dragons breathe fire and get married. You have dimples when you smile; they peek out from your low-hanging rusty-colored curls, and the one on the left is higher.

If you look in the drawer, beside the photo, you'll find letters Gilbert wrote to each of you. I think that's everything I have from him for you. They're short, but yours is on flowery stationery; it smells a bit like roses. I thought that would be a nice touch.

About our Contributors:

William Bortz is a poet from the Midwest. He is the author of *Many Small Hungerings* and *The Grief We're Given*. You can find his work published online in *Turning Leaf Journal*, *Button Poetry*, *Okay Donkey*, *Turnpike Magazine*, and others. William is a music enthusiast, basketball lover, and grateful father and husband.

Eliot Cardinaux is a neuroqueer poet, pianist, composer, and translator working at the edges of the lyric and improvised music. The author of *The Ocean from Here to Here* (Bodily Press, 2025), and several other books of poetry, he has also produced over a dozen albums of original music, including, most recently, *Imminence*, with USAmerican percussionist Gary Fieldman. He is the founding editor/producer of The Bodily Press, a small press for poetry and an independent label for improvised music. The growing community of poets published by the press include Cardinaux himself, Nathaniel Mackey, Sarah Menefee, Joseph Donahue, Andrew Mossin, Khashayar "Kess" Mohammadi, and several others. He and the press may be found on Instagram @eliotcardinaux and @thebodilypress

john compton is a gay poet who lives in Kentucky with his husband Josh and their dogs, cats and mice. his latest full length book is *my husband holds my hand because i may drift away & be lost forever in the vortex of a crowded store* published with Flowersong Press (December 2024); his latest chapbook is *melancholy arcadia* published with Harbor Editions (April 2024). you can find his books, some poems and other things at linktr.ee/poetjohncompton

Rachel Coyne bio needed.

Kate Cunningham-Casey Has been writing poetry for many, many years. Some successful, some not so successful, some published. Along with that she has been a child, a young person, a wife, a mother, a business executive, and now, at 76, person that has seen most aspects of life. Went to college in California at a State University and majored in

English/Philosophy and aspects and Behavioral Science. Worked for mostly large corporations - Food Machinery Corp. (they made tanks); Minicomputer Technology (they made multi-layered computer boards); Mass Municipal Wholesale Electric (they made energy); Sony (they made music and games); Disney (they made art and games); then went off the corporation route with projects too numerous to mention, including a video game maker, Player One. Art and some poetry can be seen on Flicker @alicesfurrows.

Will Davis is a nurse and poem scribbler residing in their native bluegrass. By turns an immutable fire escape, a secret handshake, a last will and peppermint.

Natalie Easton is somewhere in Connecticut reading a book of poetry, engaging in one of about a million craft hobbies, or indulging her interests in true crime and the paranormal. Her work has previously appeared in *Superstition Review*, *Rust + Moth*, and *tinywords*. She is @birdinstead on Instagram.

Bernadette Geyer Bernadette Geyer is the author of the poetry collection *The Scabbard of Her Throat* and editor of *My Cruel Invention: A Contemporary Poetry Anthology*. Her poems have appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Bennington Review*, *Electric Literature*, *Salamander*, and elsewhere. Geyer's second full-length collection is forthcoming from April Gloaming Publishing in 2025. Her website is bernadettegeyer.com.

Gregory Glenn is a writer based in Massachusetts.
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Loria Harris holds an MFA from Lindenwood University. Her work can be read in *Winged Penny Review*, *Reverie Literary Magazine*, *JAKE*, and others. A lifelong creative, she holds a BA in music performance and currently works as a portrait photographer. She lives in Cottleville, MO with her husband and two daughters, where she daily fights the Sisyphean battle to make time to complain about motherhood through

writing. Loria shares work on Instagram under the handle @looksbooksandloria and on Bluesky under @loriaharris.bsky.social.

Paul Hostovsky makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter. His poems and stories appear widely online and in print. He has won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, and has been featured on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, and The Writer's Almanac. Website: paulhostovsky.com

Hyunjin Kim is a Prague based Art director and Motion designer who likes to experiment with colors and movement by seeing things from a brighter plane of existence. Jin is currently working in B&T agency since 2019 and occasionally working on freelance and personal projects

Brigit Lilley is an artist/printmaker living in Somerset, UK. She does hand inked prints mainly collographs and monoprints. Lately she has been doing collages of her own hand printed material.

Michael Moreth is a recovering Chicagoan living in the rural, micropolitan City of Sterling, the Paris of Northwest Illinois.

Kate Pyontek is a poet and writer originally from New Jersey. Their poetry is published or forthcoming in *Poetry*, *Ecotone*, *Southeast Review*, *Consequence*, *Mississippi Review*, and elsewhere. Kate currently lives and works in Cambridge, MA. Kate can be found online at katepyontek.com.

Ania Rolińska is a visual artist based in Glasgow, Scotland. She primarily works with photography and printmaking but her practice is ever expanding and meandering and reaching out into other creative domains, including dance, performance, film, writing and voice work among others. The themes that resonate with her include the body, embodiment and the felt sense; ecology and relationships with other-than-humans; relatedness with nature and land and ancient ways of being, sensing and knowing. She is an introspective and elusive type, often strolling in the woods or along back lanes, looking for moments

of wonder. A servant to the Black Cat and coffee aficionado, exploring the metaphor of an archipelago to capture the essence of life. Devoured by a deep longing for the (Far) North, escaping to Outer Hebrides on a regular basis. She can be found on Instagram, at @anzbau

Karen Steiger is a poet and breast cancer survivor living in Schaumburg, Illinois with her husband, Matt, and two dogs, Horus and Lexi. She is the founder of her poetry blog, *The Midlife Crisis Poet* (www.themidlifecrisispoet.com), and her work has been published in *The Wells Street Journal*, *Black Bough Poetry*, *Perhappened*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Mineral Lit Mag*, *Rejection Letters*, *Versification*, and others. Her debut book of poetry, *Clean Margins*, will be published by Kelsay Books in 2025.

Jason Stieber is a Cascadian separatist and public librarian in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. He holds an MFA in Poetry from Portland State University. His criticism and poems can be found in *The Portland Review*, *Trilithon*, and *Old Red Kimono*, among others. He has ridden the struggle bus since 2016. He can be found on Bluesky @jasonstieber.bsky.social

M. K. Waters is a proficient dilettante who accumulates hobbies, vocations, religions, and words. She has to date written thirteen novels and six hundred short stories, one or two of which have been published elsewhere, and upwards of seven hundred poems, three of which have now been published. She lives with her partner and her elderly cat, and can be found being aggressively personal on Tumblr @mythopoetry, and occasionally on Bluesky at @mythopoems.

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