Climbing Lightly Through Forests

A Poetry Anthology
Honoring Ursula K. Le Guin

Edited by
R.B. Lemberg and Lisa M. Bradley

Aqueduct Press
Land Acknowledgments

I worked on this book from my home in Iowa, the Land between Two Rivers. Iowa has been the homeland for many independent nations: Ioway, Otoe, Omaha, Ponca, Sioux, Sauk, and Meskwaki (Sac and Fox Tribe of the Mississippi). By force and by colonialist treaties, the US acquired the entirety of land in Iowa. Only the Meskwaki Nation, the Red Earth People, managed to purchase land and still maintain sovereignty in the state. Place names like Wapello, Tama, Sioux City, Black Hawk County, and many others remind me daily that colonialism is a destructive, ongoing process. May telling these truths be a small step toward reconciliation.

—Lisa M. Bradley, Iowa City, IA, March 2020

I did most of my editorial and writing work on this book in Lawrence, Kansas. This town is the ancestral homeland of several nations—the Kaw, Osage, and Shawnee peoples, who were relocated by force in the nineteenth century. Today, Kansas is home to many Indigenous people, including the four federally recognized nations: The Prairie Band Potawatomi, the Kickapoo Tribe of Kansas, the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, and the Sac and Fox Nation of Missouri. Lawrence, Kansas, is the home of Haskell Indian Nations University, a federally operated tribal university that was founded in 1884 as a residential boarding school for Indigenous children, many of them forcibly removed from their homes. This is on my mind as a migrant now living in a place with rich, painful, and vibrant Indigenous presence and history.

—R.B. Lemberg, Lawrence, KS, April 2020
Editorial Acknowledgments

R.B.: I am grateful to Bogi Takács, my spouse, for eir help, encouragement, and good advice at various stages of this project. And I’m grateful to Lisa for sharing this work with me—it’s been a sheer delight to edit with you. Thank you to the wonderful LGBTQIA+ writers at the virtual pub. Special thanks to my Patreon supporters, who followed along as the process unfolded. Last but not least, I’m grateful to my child Mati for fuzzy hugs and letting me work from time to time.

Lisa: Yes, big thanks to Bogi for crucial input and to our friends at the pub for inspiration and support. We are immensely grateful to Timmi and Aqueduct Press for championing inclusive, feminist SFF. Special thanks to Eileen Gunn for helping us include JT Stewart’s work. R.B., thanks for sharing this journey with me (also, stop making me blush). Most of all, gracias a mi familia: José Jimenez, who counters my neurotic rambling with patient reason, and our child, Ash, who understands me even when I can no longer “word.”
Contents

NOT AN INTRODUCTION 1

1. WIND AND WATER 5

Dear Ursula,
   Edmond Y. Chang 7

Where Are You?
   Jo Walton 9

Wind Writes the Water
   Roger Dutcher 10

Distance, Interval
   M.J. Cunniff 11

In Latin, foris
   Christopher Phelps 12

The Forester’s Stratagem
   Neile Graham 13

Redwood Houses
   Amelia Gorman 15

Galloping Hooves
   Tricia Knoll 16

Kudzu
   Stephanie Burt 17

Pacifica/Evergreen
   Hal Y. Zhang 18

The Other Lives
   Sonya Taaffe 19

Of Winter and Other Seasons
   Kiya Nicoll 20
“Might as well say I’m the words she read”
   Betsy Aoki 21

Poet Stumbles upon the Ten Thousand Things
   Brandon O’Brien 22

2. REBELLIONS 23

Speculative Fiction
   Linden K. McMahon 25

sound science
   Hal Y. Zhang 26

Upwards Toward the Light (a found poem)
   Rachel Swirsky 27

Physics 6
   Ursula Whitcher 28

Dream Logic
   Ada Hoffmann 29

The Trees Are Waiting
   Gita Ralleigh 33

We Dream the Future in Our Songs
   Eva Papasoulioti 34

Atmospheric Inversion
   Kim Goldberg 35

The Keystone Out of Your Arch
   Sonya Taaffe 36

Tolk
   So Mayer 37

On the Long Road Back
   Aimee Ogden 39

The Day before the Revolution
   Izzy Wasserstein 41
3. **BODIES AND BOUNDARIES**

Icarus
Thoraiya Dyer 45

From the Ansible, a Voice
Charles Payseur 46

The Topography of Ambition
Wendy Howe 48

Frost Ascending
Kendra Preston Leonard 49

Ossify
Jennifer Mace 50

Keepsake
A.J. Odasso 52

Gebbeth
A.Z. Louise 53

A Headful of Hair
Leah Bobet 54

Evening (terza rima)
Susannah Mandel 55

And So if You Go Down, You Go Down Whole
Jeannelle D’Isa 56

ode to illness
Gwynne Garfinkle 57

The Place Where We Don’t Touch
(To Therem Harth rem ir Estravan, from Theirs to Thine)
Xian Mao 58

An idea of boundary
Shweta Narayan 59

Concern (a found poem)
Brandon O’Brien 61
4. KIN AND KIND

Subjunctivitis (or: a Stratagem of Mortality)
Margarita Tenser 69

The Scent of Green
Sandra J. Lindow 70

Dancing at the Edge
Margaret Wack 71

Until the Ships Came
Nicole Field 72

Song of the Guardians of the Rainbow
Ana Tapia
Translation by Lawrence Schimel 76

The Humanist Chaplain Watches Her Daughter
Walking through the Herb Garden
T.D. Walker 77

Couch Burning
Tania Pryputniewicz 79

My 1980
Stephanie Burt 80

On Reading Le Guin
Mary Soon Lee 81

Earthsea
Bernard Horn 82

Time Is Being and Being Time
Eva Papasoulioti 83

Lessons from Mother
Lynne Sargent 84
A Metaphor of Sparrows  
Erin K. Wagner  85

5. THE FARDEST SHORE  87
Journey  
Lyta Gold  89

Dragon Haiku  
Mary Vlooswyk  91

The Ineffable  
Valeria Rodríguez  92

Cat’s Canticle  
David Sklar  93

Reincarnate  
Kate Boyes  94

Spring  
Nisi Shawl  95

Note To Ursula K. Le Guin  
From JT Stewart in Seattle  96

Oregon: Local News  
Tricia Knoll  98

There Must Be Darkness  
Catherine Rockwood  99

THE POETRY OF URSULA K. LE GUIN:  
A RETROSPECTIVE  
R.B. Lemberg  101

POET BIOGRAPHIES  151

EDITOR BIOGRAPHIES  164

REPRINT CREDITS  165
Not An Introduction

Lisa: I’m on record as hating introductions. I’m an impatient reader who wants to dive right into the author’s work. As an editor, however, I feel the best anthologies are conversations, and newcomers to a conversation often appreciate having some context before joining in. As a tribute anthology, *Climbing Lightly Through Forests* gathers multiple conversations: the poets are responding to Ursula K. Le Guin, her work, or their own responses to her or her work; and as editors, R.B. and I put the poets in conversation with each other and with the readers. So let’s begin as we wish to proceed, not as an introduction but as a conversation. R.B., tell me about Ursula’s influence on your life.

R.B.: Her work has meant so much to me over the years. *The Left Hand of Darkness* was a revelation and a lifeline for me as a queer, nonbinary, and then-closeted immigrant teen; I read it first in Russian translation. In 2010, I founded *Stone Telling Magazine*, a speculative poetry venue named after the main character in *Always Coming Home*. I approached Ursula to let her know about the new magazine and asked if I could reprint one of her poems. She wrote back with a new poem, “The Elders at the Falls,” which appeared in the inaugural issue of the magazine. I did not know a lot about Ursula’s poetry before that, except that I loved the poems in *Always Coming Home*, but I began to seek her poetry out after that. How about you, Lisa?

Lisa: I came to love Le Guin’s work in college, when I aspired to write speculative fiction about philosophy. *The Dispossessed* rocked my world—here was a book serious about political philosophy but with a fascinating science fiction plot and characters I cared about! It was a model for everything I wanted to write. I must’ve been aware of Le Guin’s poetry, but I don’t remember seeking it out.
Eventually, my interest in Spanish poetry brought me back to Le Guin. I can read Spanish, but I rely on English translations as backup. Imagine my delight when I found a translation by Le Guin! Her work gave me the confidence to write about the speculative poetry of an amazing Chilean poet, which you bought for *Stone Telling Magazine*. That was our first collaboration related to Le Guin.

What did you learn from your deep dive into Le Guin’s poetry?

**R.B.:** Much of her poetry felt very personal to me and not nearly as speculative as her fiction; and there was much less engagement with it, from both readers and critics, so I was interested in why that might be. Le Guin herself said her poetry was dismissed because it was written by a novelist; but I am not sure if that is quite true. It’s just that her poetry was so much less speculative, and her readers expected speculative works from her—grand feats of imagination, of *naming* what has been silent for long. The magic of her poetry is quieter. It is in the wind and water, the landscape and the trees, whole forests of them. Ursula called herself an arboreal writer, and the title of this book, a line from one of her poems, reflects that.

**Lisa:** Arboreal! Certainly, Le Guin looms as large as a sequoia for readers of her speculative fiction. But perhaps we should imagine her as a whole forest, because she wrote astutely and passionately about many things in many genres. I agree, spec readers seem nonplussed by Ursula as Poet, probably because her poetry lacks the comforting protocols of much spec fic. Many spec readers shy from contemporary literary poetry, which is how I’d classify Le Guin’s work, and so those readers are even less likely to know that Ursula translated poetry. Yet it was Le Guin’s translation that crystallized my love for her, specifically *Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral* (University of New Mexico Press, 2003). Mistral was a Chilean educator, diplomat, and poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1945, and that essay I mentioned from *Stone Telling* was about Mistral. As a Latina, I’m deeply grateful that Le Guin spotlighted Mistral’s work. Western literature, and speculative literature in particular, can feel oppressively white. Le Guin’s tribute to this amazing woman is a powerful act of inclusion. This anthology continues in that inclusive vein.
R.B.: Yes, it was wonderful for me to discover the poetic conversations she had with Mistral and other Latinx poets, and her abiding interest in translation. Inclusion has been very important to us as anthologists, and we have been blessed to receive submissions from poets from all ways of life—poets who were readers and who were friends, poets of many ages and genders, poets from different corners of the world. The poems in this book engage with Ursula’s legacy from a multitude of perspectives—from the landscape of the Pacific Northwest to family to feminist issues. I am especially proud of how many queer, trans, and nonbinary voices appear in this anthology. So many of us have felt seen and empowered—and some of us also hurt—by her works, which reached beyond cisnormativity towards a more inclusive world.

Lisa: Indeed, this anthology is enriched by the work of poets from all over the world: Greece, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, Chile, the UK, Australia, Uruguay, and Canada, in addition to the United States, where R.B. and I are located. (We speak more about that in our land acknowledgments above.) As a fan of Le Guin’s translation, I’m so pleased to share Lawrence Schimel’s translation of a poem by Spanish poet Ana Tapia, here titled “Song of the Guardians of the Rainbow.” Several of our poets wrote in English, although it is not their primary language. We are grateful for their generosity and virtuosity.

We’ve also included work from over a dozen poets of color, many of whom, like me, felt seen by Ursula. She may not have always seen us correctly or fully grasped our contexts, but she recognized non-white, non-Western lives and artists. From that recognition, Sofia Samatar, Shweta Narayan, Brandon O’Brien, and others have spun fascinating, sometimes critical discourse.

R.B.: I love how the poetry in this volume has such a range of tone. Taken as a whole, the resulting book is deeply Ursuline—in its contemplativeness, in its rebelliousness and resistance, in its thoughtfulness, in its sadness and its hope. When I pitched Climbing Lightly Through Forests to Timmi Duchamp at Aqueduct, shortly after Ursula passed away, I did not expect how emotionally difficult it would be for me to choose between so many wonderful, heartfelt poems. I am immensely grateful to Lisa, who came on board a bit later. We worked together
previously, but not as co-editors; I loved her editorial approach when she worked on poetry for *Uncanny Magazine*’s special issue “Disabled People Destroy Fantasy.” Co-editing this book with Lisa has brought tremendous joy to the process and made the book richer and so much more satisfying.

**Lisa:** I’m so grateful that R.B. invited me to this project. I’ve learned magnitudes from R.B.’s keen yet sensitive reading, their loving but clear-eyed critique of Le Guin’s work. I learned from our poets, as well. We received enough poetry that we could’ve curated an entire book of sad poems, or nature poems, or poems celebrating Le Guin’s fiction or critiquing it, but as “Journey” by Lyta Gold reminds us, “Grief keeps its own timetable.” We chose to reflect the poets’ kaleidoscopic range, because, although we all grieve for Le Guin, we may be at different stages of grief. Hopefully, no matter where the reader is in their process, they’ll be able to find solace and support in these pages. They can join in the conversations.

**R.B.:** Working on the retrospective essay and rereading Ursula’s poems about grief and age and the long, long process of writing, I felt seen and held in this one idea: it’s OK to take a long time to create something that is true. Poetry—all creativity—is often a circuitous journey.

When Ursula passed on January 22, 2018, many of us felt that she left us too soon, that she left us when we still so desperately needed her. She was 88. Yet, many of us wanted her to continue. Her work was so vital, so life-changing. We still need her voice. We will keep reading and thinking, talking to her, talking about her, talking about her stories, telling our own stories. After reading and rereading through the body of her poetry for the retrospective essay, I came to feel that she said what she wanted to say—she said all she *could* say. The rest is up to us.
1. Wind and Water
Dear Ursula,

Edmond Y. Chang

—ent
leant
sent

You rode quietly in the back seat of the car. Your friend Suzy beside you, laughing. Margaret was driving; you said you liked my mohawk. We joked about the run-in with the police On the way to pick you up from the lecture hall Where you read letters to the ghost of Tiptree. I, too, got lost in your time travels, starstruck, Now by your tottered shape and searching mind As you peered out the passenger-side window, Starboard, spying a fragment of a store sign. You chirp, trying on rhymes like hats, a meditation.

—ast
vast
past

A book of yours told me mountains when I was ten. Decades later it reminds me of promises made, Then and today, that words are more than their sums, That the map of the earth is sea and sky and change. You taught me words are magic, true names, Old names, strange spellings—wizard, ansible, Forest, lathe, kemmer, sparrowhawk, home, Journey, anarchy, foxtail, mother, Ursula— The bear, the octopus, the teacher, the guide. You taught me not to be afraid of dragons, To play among islands, to never be frugal with hope.
Climbing Lightly Through Forests

—eth
breath
death

At the hotel, caught open in the lobby, I asked
For a picture with you, and you nodded gently, tired.
At your ear, I bowed, eschewing my heavy hands,
Caught in your gravity as the day wore you down.
Your smile bore the maps and marks of every story,
Hour, and place your imagination ever visited.
My first contact with ancient generosity and keen grace.
A year later, you came again and remembered my hair.
We would never get the chance to break bread
Or take another ride or talk about how the world hurt
Before the vacuum of loss widened the orbit of your star.
Where Are You?

Jo Walton

You are in a house that creaks with the memory of footfalls. 
You are in a boat, far out in the Reaches, changing the rules. 
You are contemplating a wall, a threshold, a border. 
You are crossing a glacier. 
You are singing in the darkness the rhythms that rock a child to sleep. 
You are naming and claiming and walking and talking 
Challenging, balancing, changing and raging. 
You are bemusedly watching a cat. 
The moon is rising and you are listening to water in the mountains. 
You are extending a hand to somebody. 
You are accepting praise, awkwardly. 
You are pointing out a heron. 
You are reading with delight, greedily, like a child under the covers. 
You are watching the dragons rising, spiraling, with furrowed brow, reconsidering. 
You are eating little fried cakes. You are taking pickles to the communal barrel. 
You are making and shaping and blinking and thinking. 
You are finding your way back through a story, 
Like banging rocks in a circle, 
Like light (no, faster than that), like the necessity of narrative, 
Uphill, over broken ice, near a young volcano. 
You are at home, or at least, you always know where home is. 
That you are dead is grave. That you are gone seems impossible.