



September 2023
ISSUE SEVEN

Ed. Pascale Petit

DALE BOOTON • MARCELLE NEWBOLD
YAZ NIN • EIRA ELISABETH MURPHY
GABRIELLE TSE • ALANA CHASE
ERICA HESKETH • CHLOE ELLIOTT
MILLIE GUILLE • THEMBE MVULA
GEMMA BARNETT • KRISTIAN EVANS
NASIM LUCZAJ • KATHERINE VENN
VIV KEMP • CATHERINE REDFORD
STUART CHARLESWORTH • JOHN MEE
ALISON DUNHILL • JACK COOPER

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INTRODUCTION

Propel is a carefully curated and exciting magazine, so when Anthony asked me to edit the seventh issue I immediately said yes, eager to read what the new poets are writing. I like that each issue is edited by a different editor, because it allows poets to try another's tastes if they haven't been successful before. I also like the idea that the magazine might be useful to talent scouts, which gave my task an extra edge. I'd like to thank everyone who sent work, and commiserate with those who weren't accepted – I could only choose twenty poems, from just twenty poets. I opened each document with anticipation, and liked much more than I could accept.

The trawl through the thousands of poems from almost four hundred entries took weeks. I read slowly, hoping not to miss a stunner, alert to new ways of making a poem. If there was any doubt in my mind I stopped and read it again as open-mindedly and attentively as I could. Once I'd narrowed my longlist down to about eighty my reading got even slower. I kept asking myself: what is a poem? What can it do? I don't know the answer to those questions, except that poetry can be an ineffable art, rather like trying to understand an animal. And, like being with an animal, I had to go by instinct – when I reread, if a poem gave me a pleasurable feeling of recognition, I sensed that here was something special. I'd switch into learning mode. What new world is this writer creating? Why does the imagery and tone feel like a good friend? Even if that friend is having a hard time, I wanted their company.

My twenty selections are an eclectic bunch and I admire them all. There are three long poems interspersed by one-pagers and shorts. Very short poems are hard to write well – I admit I was on the lookout for these, and was amply rewarded. Millie Guille's 'Auburn' is deceptively simple but grew each time I read it. The standard one-page-long poem is arguably the easiest size to do well, but each word has to earn its place. Every word sears in Erica Hesketh's 'Postpartum'. Sometimes it's the ending which sells a poem to me, as in Eira

Elisabeth Murphy's 'Simulation', or Yaz Nin's 'Fathers who were soldiers can't play hide and seek, it's in the manifesto sis', and titles such as the latter entice too. Longer poems also have their challenges, needing to sustain tension, and Stuart Charlesworth's 'Not About Urban Explorers' meets them – I was gripped from the first to the last line.

I'm impressed by lyrics that hold surprises like detonations along the way, or take unexpected turns, making nimble leaps, creating a rapidity in the line, a sleight of hand. I prefer poems which feel as if the writer was compelled to write them; that they weren't just trying to write for the sake of it, but made something about a theme that mattered to them, in words forged from flesh and blood and not just intellect. I wasn't so impressed by submissions that were clever but lacked emotion or body – I want poems to have bodies, intellects and heart. Poems are strange things, they can seem human at times, and we are strange, aren't we? But we're on this even stranger living planet, and I'm fascinated by work that engages with that. I hope you'll enjoy reading this issue as much as I did as I was compiling it.

— Pascale Petit
September 2023

METEMPSYCHOSIS

Alana Chase

I peel back the envelope flap like a Hershey's Bar.
The letter's from the scientist, informing me
he's been told to put down the white-tailed doe,
scotch the panther, their spots just beginning
to fade. He says no one's certain how it can be,
but the two specimens are really the same animal.
He's being kind. We both know he means me.
There are only so many ways you can beautify
the truth. Inside me are a pair of zoic hearts
pulling blood from a single pool. This maiden year,
I was meant to have made them morph, but I couldn't
bring them to a shared field of grass without one
making a meal of the other. So I let my homebody
beasts know no bounds. And when they fought,
I watched the bloodshed like a slasher film,
or a documentary on tax fraud. I think of
what I might become when the scientist is done
and I'm brought back better. Maybe it's the gulls
swirling the air above me, this letter held tight
against the faunal theater roaring in my chest,
but I feel I'd quite like to turn into something
small and volant and sure, with a mouth
that only opens to scream or to sing.

POSTPARTUM

Erica Hesketh

In another world, I'm sure I laced my tea with fenugreek.
Yes, I dressed my front door with garlands of straw and pine
and lay in state for five days, while a young woman
from the village rubbed salt into my swollen feet.
In another world, I know I rested for the full thirty days.
I avoided hot baths. Or I avoided cold baths. My hair lay
tangled on the pillow like a serpent's shed skin. I saw it.
In another world, I shied away from men, shielded them
from my unholy body, the uncertainty slipping
like scarlet silverfish down my thighs. My sheets were
buried quickly under the floorboards. In another world,
the colostrum dried out in my breasts. Or I nursed freely,
day and night, day and night, never offending any ghosts.
In another world, I packed my bags and returned
to my mother's house, to be fed, washed, taught what
a mother was, at last, to be grateful. In another world,
I must have been surrounded for a hundred nights by wild,
wise, luminous women who stroked my cheeks and wept
for the beautiful things I had lost. In another world,
I may have slept for forty days while those exact women
mixed elixirs from angelica root, honey, cracked seaweed,
their heavy plaits thudding like boots on their backs.
The questions drying out in my mouth. What is. Why did. Would it have.
In another world, other hands may have soothed my baby
while I watched from under a thick blanket. Maybe I ate

nothing but hot foods to counteract my feminine nature,
so spongy and unfinished. In another world, they may have
hoisted me above an open fire and left me to sweat it out.
To cure. To counteract. We have no way of knowing.

AUBURN

Millie Guille

August failed early with bathers in its mouth
which means either: I never really loved you,
or either: I never loved myself.

And the leaves will fall, or they won't
and the bathers drown, or don't
and the sun will spread her hips in the sky
for shorter and shorter periods

with no-one to hold her at night.
I said no-one to hold her at night.

And God won't return my calls
no-one catches the light as it falls
when I try, it scorches my hands

leaves blood where it lands.

SIMULATION

Eira Elisabeth Murphy

The probability that I am not real
gets greater the longer I live.
Before bed, I imagine dissolving
into numbers, translating my thoughts back into fractions.
I imagine this process of simplification
to be like unwinding wool.
A bathroom that must once have existed is supplanted by the white tiled dome
I wish up in replacement.
I make this the site of my brother's almost choking,
a hot rash of fists and hands forced down throats.
I remember that pain lives in the body,
not in the contortions of air around
what I can no longer say,
the slow morse code blink
of a computer cursor.
A flight of magpies is a glitch on the evening, puckering air and blue light.
I reach for you blindly.
This ritual feels like throwing stones.
I wait for the resolution of broken water.
I say *tonight the earth is round like any other planet*
and I feel my liver unmoor itself, float upwards
and out towards you.
I describe a view from my window
in old colours
and the initials of lost people.

In my imagined bathroom, I do not notice that
I am already in mourning for you.
I imagine the shape of your last smile,
do not stop to think about what I must later convince myself is true.
I lose control of my breathing,
safeguard memory
in cold water.
I dream that I have destroyed my voice
and all its terrible brokenness sits round me.
I dream I am a computer screen going dark
then flashing up a constellation,
white-hot peep holes, hair-line fractures,
or fish swimming flat against purple,
each scale blurring into
tiny pixellated squares of coded bone.

NOT ABOUT URBAN EXPLORERS

Stuart Charlesworth

There's a pack of students
tearing around
the gutted aquarium halls
of the old telephone exchange,
the condemned terrace row,
the manor house, the office block,
burgled bare,
shorn of cables and lead-lined roofs.

The rough-looking kids
from the local school
filming their adventures
down the sewers,
they post their tour
of the ward I worked on
before it closed down. Their commentary
on what they think happened
in the ghostly 'Asylum',
their Scooby-Doo theme park,
is unrecognisable to me.

Disturb that wet, decaying pile
of leaves in your back yard.
Lift the manhole cover
leading down
to blue-green moss

and mould, steadily
eating the sofa you never bought
with the lover you only picked up in a club
and had an awkward one night stand with.

The sofa hangs precariously
on and off a joist
in a gaping hole in the sinking floor;
and there in the corner is a cake,
a rotting time capsule
of mushrooms and spores
with a miniature you
and that lover on top.

Eighteen and freshly free
from home, I joined any university club
that would have me. Signed up
to the caving soc. for weekends away
in borrowed Land Rovers,
electric lamps mounted

on mud-scuffed helmets,
wetsuits under boiler suits.
Changing by the roadside

in the Mendips at dawn,
then tracing the thin river
into darkness
then darker than that.

Past delicate stalagmites,
tiny blind spiders.

Till the river cuts
through the limestone seam,
sculpting a cliff face
beneath the hillside.

Not enough for some —
there was a splinter group
who never stopped talking
about disused mines.

How they wanted to descend
from wrecked pump-houses.

How they wanted to read
the names of the miners
that were on the last shift
before closure,

carved into
the hard-packed earth.

Well I have mining blood
or so I believe
in my maternal line,
but I would not go
into those manmade underworlds,
no not for love nor money.

Even walking in daylight,
sunburnt September, around

the ancient industrial ruins
of the Ding Dong mine in Cornwall,
I looked on the stones
in the still-standing walls
with suspicion.
As if some had been lifted
from the megalithic circles
 near Boskednan
and the surrounding moorlands —

the malevolence in the gorse —
the perfectly circular pit-shaft
was a bottomless challenge
I fought to ignore —

 I think I know
what I would do
down there:

The gallons of water
I'd pour on the ground
 until out of the soup of it
would rise my biological father.
And I'd hold his head
while the earth filled his mouth,
his nostrils and lungs,
and while that subterranean
 quickpool

hardened again into concrete.

Then, perhaps while quietly singing
a throwaway tune to myself
and without ever
 looking back,
I'd climb out.

RADIATOR BLEED KEY

Marcelle Newbold

We learn, quickly, to master
self-regulation

the minute manipulation
of the tap that releases

just the right amount
of self, for a given situation.

Half a turn, one turn,
fully open gush —

the balance
between safety
and burn.

MORNING AFTER

Dale Booton

the rain understands us forgives us for not stepping out
into its vague dampness of melting heart instead
on the floor we congregate for side-eye romance
of skin-on-skin grazing then resting then holding cushioned
by large blankets in lieu of the sofatocome head-on-shoulder
eyes-on-TV we tread the ground of comfortability
weigh in the vulnerability of the early morning bags heavy
minds loose breaths stale to the act of impression we want
to give in to longing begin to curl around the neck
like scarves wear each other's hands as gloves
no longer shrink away from touch smooth over the coarseness
of our hearts with impromptu descriptors of affection
like toddlers we are learning to understand one another
the way the rain hears the call of the earth and rushes to meet it

DREAMBABY

Chloe Elliott

I am in a volcano
that is lava without red which
is mean of my mind but I am at
least awarded Sophie who I cling
to on a dragon pool-float as
our bald crowns sparkle over
the sulphuric gas before
she is rushed away to brunch
with her children and I am reminded
of my barrenness with a tethered
kind of calm where I am forced under
rock as I search for my dead children
by their feet but there are no toes
only things that resemble frozen crabsticks
or trick birthday candles where everyone
is too white to be mine
so I go back & follow the loss
all the way home to the first water bear
to exist and here I find myself suckered
into a crater that functions
the way any room does with gravity
like one of those primordial waiting rooms
that run by normal force & petrol sponges

& midwives that suck on the carpel
of lilies as they stack the blue roll
like flames in a bin today this woman
told me about her waterbirth she smiled
she stroked my cheek said the whole thing
was easy like shooting out a bullet

FATHERS WHO WERE SOLDIERS CAN'T PLAY HIDE AND SEEK, IT'S IN THE MANIFESTO SIS

Yaz Nin

There was a god here once
my father told us in his mother's empty house

My sister then six
leaning against a white wall overcrowded with family portraits
moaned with braided hair and pink flip flops

But why can't we play hide and seek?

My sister now 27
still hasn't forgiven our father
she makes a show and tell
when playing hide and seek with her children

See Baba this is how it's done!

I did not tell her
last summer
when rearranging the portraits in the godless house
I forced her children to wriggle their fingers in the bullet holes
gold framed portraits had been hiding

SEVEN OTHER THINGS GEORGE FLOYD IS DOING RIGHT NOW

Thembe Mvula

when walking his daughter to school, a colony of blood
coloured ants halts them in their tracks.

they watch tiny bodies zip through a cracked
pavement like a miniature underground railroad.

george recounts the african proverb: *an ant on its feet can
do more than an elephant on its back.* a police van

drives past them, keeps going.

after inventing a sustainable solution to aviation travel,
george lives off the grid; grows his own produce
and tells the best fireside stories.

in the life where he followed his childhood dream
of becoming a professional basketball player,

he's a workaholic, knows the indentations of
a spalding sphere on his fingertips better than
the softness of his wife's brown skin,
everyone is thrilled that he is living
to his fullest potential.

george has obama as a guest on his late night show – *floyd's weekly roundup.*
he interviews him on his latest cook book. they discuss legacies
of black billionaires and round off the show with
a live rendition of midnight train to georgia.

he's a ballet dancer
after a standing ovation for his haunting performance
at the lincoln centre, he huddles under a hoodie
on his way back home.

he's the poet laureate of the united states.
his face fixed on dime coins,
a national treasure.

he's with his mother in jamaica.
when he calls out to her, she responds,
holds his hand and smiles, he is seven years old again,
fear still unfamiliar to the vocabulary
of his breath.

KIOWA RANCH, NEW MEXICO, AUGUST 2, 1929, THE TIME WHEN IN GLASGOW
TREES ARE PINK AND DAFFODILS HOLD THEIR HEADS DOWN TO THE DEW, KICKED
THAT WAY BY PISSING DOGS

from 'I love you like this morning'

Nasim Luczaj

I didn't tell you that after reading your letters last night I walked across the alfalfa field with a candle to light the way and sent you a telegram at eleven o'clock—and carried back a bucket of hot water to take a bath—and you didn't tell me about the cocoon in your bed—a butterfly so heavy to think about—though she never does as much as she is prepared to—people change but not all butterflies can show you the ground you are best coming to—sorry not sorry—eventually the candle was running, all veins down my hand, and I bathed in the dark, like lying in an eye with the lid down. I'm still stuck on the structure of dragonflies—80% of my brain is not vision. Just imagine it were. I don't have that organ for slitting leaves apart to put my eggs in them. My hands are too busy trying to keep hold. Maybe I am better this way, carrying glints, phases. This season they are dark bath or pink the moon will show me. Dearest—Have you considered the hue to every question, the complex, not just rotten ones, like the mud of do you love me, though who am I—not the field—

to denigrate mud or insecurity? *I feel like saying Yes to everything you say to me or ask me when it is a moving towards me—You must know that—I'm bonfire-restless but each night swayed all in your direction. As for the day it's all sitting around the table eating stewed cherries—My painting moved very fast—there are forests to burn—tomorrow we will see what it moves to—It sort of knocks my own head off—the head I was born with—birds, too, spit out their cherry stones one by one. The woman rises. The Polish word for mirror is the Italian word for five years. Are you surprised languages won't fit in my head, that they spill all over the roads, making them dark and relieving, drowninable? A man approaches the fire to give me cold old charcoal so I can hold the very core of something. Pressing matter. It squeaks in my hands. I have it all over me.*

Italicised lines are quotations from *My Faraway One: Selected Letters of Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz: Volume One, 1915–1933* ed. Sarah Greenough (Yale University Press, 2011).

IN THE ROCKPOOL

Kristian Evans

Midnight syllables on the black
water of the rock pool, whisper
of salt retreating into crystal
mind of limpet and gutweed,
untranslatable speech. I recognise
nothing in this mirror. Broken
shells and bones, a cloud of ink
remembering itself, articulating
a psalm of mineral health. When
all this is over I will run away.
I will run and I won't look back.
Bladderwrack and barnacle Kabbalah,
digital sweat, micro-plastic alphabet.

VESSELS

Gabrielle Tse

I wonder about my great-grandmother, the fisherman's bride
if daily she watched the sea, imagining the arrival

of an envoy from the depth:

a small, familiar boat, emerging through the surface

untouched by time.

over there my sister sleeps, invisible,

though I was taught the contours of her face

before learning how to read, and stood for hours

before the mirror, trying to outwit

her relentless duplication: the same soft lashes,

small cheekbones, a face not just my own.

All this to say – I understand why, mama,

you sometimes peer into me, stock still,

as if inspecting water

for tricks of the light

WHAT THE BADGER SAID

Katherine Venn

That there are at least eleven different kinds
of love, and love lives mostly underground.

That love can stink, and stink can help you to survive.
Love wears its own grizzled face with pride.

Love can be solitary. Love can find itself happy in a clan.
Love sleeps under root and bramble, where no one else can.

That love can gallop. No one expects this.
That love loves the night. It's where we find our bliss.

Love can eat anything – worms, insects, grubs, roots.
Love can get drunk on rotting fruit.

That some men will hunt love for sport.
That love knows how to fight fiercely when caught.

It is an offence to keep love as a pet or put it on the market.
That it's an offence means someone, somewhere, has done it.

THE ARROW STORK

Viv Kemp

Its arrival in Rostock refuted Aristotle
and Ovid, as in lieu of wintering as barnacles
or some other species, *Ciconia ciconia*
simply flew as far as Africa and not the moon

until halted by a hunter's bolt. Imagine the Klützer's
surprise at the spear piercing its throat, African mahogany
out at both ends, brown fletch acute to the stork's white own,
the wound healed over in a diamond mound, feathery but pressed.

No blood, but **maybe** some was loosed by curious prods or pulls,
imparting **a red hand** to peasant or zoologist
as it was studied then stuffed for display (still to this day).
It was meant to be a miracle. There've been twenty-five since.

I come from a similar place. This stork denied transformation
but not being changed. It sat with the solid and the hollow held
firm in its neck, swallowed and sang in resonance with the skewer
and lived. I listen to a stork's call: guttural, rumbling, rapt
like the smack of wooden shaft on stretched skin, and imagine it not
unlike the song of an adapted larynx that says 'we're coming'.

TWELVE HORSES

Alison Dunhill

Two horses, graceful and shining in slanted sun, heavy, gentle; they tread on cuckoo spit and celandine.

Three horses, piebald, skewbald, strawberry roan.

Four horses, childhood heroes, Palomedes, Trepalus, Michalaedes, Agamemnon.

Five horses from Roydon Common, the New Forest, the Shetlands.

Six horses, standing head to tail, upright off-camera, flicking flies.

Seven horses, de Chirico still.

Eight horses; a shimmer of nerves in tensed flanks.

Nine horses, their snorting breath clouding; a whinny.

Ten horses, alert to two humans wearing grey hoods, opening the gate.

Eleven horses at a canter, treading and spreading the ragwort and plantain, the red campion and the celandine, outside the fence.

Twelve horses at a gallop, to the open level crossing; the train.

A response to the incident in November 2014, between Cambridge and Ely, when twelve horses were deliberately let out of a field near an open level crossing.

PRIN / CESS / PARK / MAN / OR

Gemma Barnett

I – cess

i'm listening to a podcast that recognises
everything as a construct. in that case i
don't know the origin of anything. a chain
dropped into descending water proves all
is traceable if you haul yourself toward it.
maybe it's a long time ago when the jails
picked illness like a scabby knee when
asylums came to take out the poor, beat
them into submission like his front door
last week, boot driving through the letter-
box. i wasn't there but i hear wailing
was thrown in a cell. i know bars cast
stripes down wet faces, his eyes now
holes made by extinguished cigarettes,
remembering his brother's body left in
their house turned over.

i mean to say: on Wednesday when they
finally let him home, now alone, brother's
blood the carpet crust, the police stuck
planks of wood across their own damage
saying

that'll do

with the scum they let in

anyway

on Thursday when we drove up to help
clean splintered needles, he asked me
for a tenner. i clutched my pocket searching

for the origin of punitive.

II – Prin

my 13th birthday party was a dewy sleepover.
the glamourised teen movie fun turned horror when a thin girl's
mother asks if she's taking her medication – refusal

ends in multiple murders of good un-pilled girls. a shower
curtain dragged underground. my fingers radicalised
the beanie baby. Four hours away, a boy –

almost known as Harry Styles, is tucked in bed white
bread cling-filmed. he sleeps soundly. i find the surreptitious
floor of my parents' room; can't undress the movie from my flesh.

III – Park

we were driving
to Grovelands
when the car crashed –

i learnt to wear
a seatbelt
head nodding free.

IV – or

or
could it be
that inside that car
the clock was the wrong
year inside the wrong
year my family sits round
a tired table trying
to chew so silence
doesn't get angry –
holding hands
in-between
knives and
forks

V – Man

One Direction, Busted, The Wanted, JLS have all lived in Princess Park Manor, a luxury complex in Barnet once a mental hospital home to 2,500 patients. After years of complaints on January 27, 1903 one of the wards caught fire. 52 women were killed, many of them trapped in their beds.

what i mean to say by all this
is i don't know how to say
any of this but by recurring
dissociative dream as far
back as memory hauls me.
they sit at the edge of my
little bed, an impending choir
of sprechstimme saying:

*deep breathing activates the other
nervous system. we found stillness
in Tottenham Cemetery. don't pass
us your microphone Harry –*

*the PA system in the corner
is temperamental. last week it edged
so close – can't hear ourselves think.
have you lot noticed*

*your yawns don't work? even
in bed you don't get what you need.
go on, crawl up our legs, suffocate
at the waistline. things used to be*

*safe near a stomach – bless them.
we've been waiting and so what:
you bought 52 deck chairs? that won't
solve a thing now our bodies are smoke.*

Epilogue – cess (part II)

what i mean to say is
i don't know what to say
on Friday when there's
nobody left to attend
his funeral

THE CARNIAN PLUVIAL EPISODE

John Mee

She and I were chasing ammonites
through corridors of coral
when the molten basalt upwelled.

Out past the Siberian Traps,
CO₂ levels went clean off the scale.
Then it rained for a million years.

Carried along in the amber, corpses
of young crinoids, poor disaster taxons.
I could almost taste the iridium anomalies.

Days to the nearest Igneous Province,
rivers braiding, an acid pulse on the way ...
She rests a feeler on my thorax.

We've been through worse, my love. We climb
the calcium ramp, risk the shocked quartz.

ON NAMING THE STARS

Catherine Redford

Not the dead light we meet above
uneven rooftops in the back alleys,
but the new-birthing wounds beyond,
with bodies formed of glass.

These stars are named as a burr
sticks to an unravelled hem:
here's the rolling pulse at the heart of a shrew,
and the fungus nourished by a tree's dead core.

This one is the egg that failed to hatch,
blank and rigid as a corpse in the nest.
And the next, her twin, the electric pause
of a startled hare – static, on edge, as it listens again

for the cry. The sky this evening will tear and turn
while the night-river sifts her recurring dream
and the pike sing their chorus to constellations
they conspire to spear from beneath.

DEADWEIGHT

Jack Cooper

Fuel rigs stud Neptune's water-ammonia ocean like splinters in spasming skin. Each rig is the size of a city: ceramic teardrops lying on their side with a tangle of pipes trailing from them. The rigs face into relentless winds, sonic booms rippling down their hulls like silk.

A toxic atmosphere, crushing pressures, and scalding heat combine to give the planet an air of malice. Storms are not seen as acts of God, but acts of violence. The few children born on Neptune are valued as asteroid miners, comfortable working in open space. A vacuum doesn't knock down your door to kill you, just waits for you to open it.

Only once has a fuel rig failed, when the *Ferghana's* anchors caught in strange currents. It fell into the sea like a kingfisher diving through tar, leaving no survivors. Decades later, the *Ferghana* remains the subject of superstition. When a rig rocks in the current, its crew will say the *Ferghana* is pulling them down to join her. Its captain will burn a barrel of ammonia in a ritual gesture of protection, an offering to the *Ferghana* which, to their mind, has become what destroyed her: bad luck.

CONTRIBUTORS

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GEMMA BARNETT won the 2021 'Poetry for Good' prize judged by Rachel Long and was featured on BBC *Woman's Hour*. She was a winning finalist of BBC Words First in 2021 with 'i killed them when they came for my kid'. Her poem 'My Abortion was Funny' was selected and published in the Verve Poetry Festival Anthology on Protest 2023 and commended for the Out-Spoken Poetry Prize 2023. Her debut short film 'Bridge' has so far been selected for BAFTA/BIFA qualifying Norwich Film Festival. She was commended for the Poetry Kit Spring Competition and is currently on the long-list for the AUB International Poetry Prize.

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