

Autobiographical sketch:

I work as a Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in Climate and Inequality at the Climate Museum in New York City, and my first book of poetry, *To Leave for Our Own Country*, is forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press in April of 2024. Much of his poetry explores the intersections of place, history, and questions of climate justice across the American small-town diaspora. John grew up in the small town of South Haven, Michigan, the birthplace and hometown of the great horticulturist and ecospheric poet-philosopher Liberty Hyde Bailey. After growing up there never having heard of him, John began discovering Bailey’s work just as he was finishing college, and he has been haunted by this historical figure and the heritage of their shared hometown ever since. He spent several years as curator and then director of the Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum in South Haven, and he now serves as the series editor of The Liberty Hyde Bailey Library for Cornell University Press, which reintroduces and reappraises Bailey’s work for the twenty-first century. His editions of Bailey’s works include [\*The Nature-Study Idea and Related Writings\*](#) (Cornell UP, forthcoming), [\*The Liberty Hyde Bailey Gardener’s Companion\*](#) (coedited; Cornell UP, 2019), and [\*The Holy Earth\*](#) (Counterpoint, 2015), and he built and edits the digital [Liberty Hyde Bailey Project](#). John also spent time living in Valparaiso, Indiana and Ames, Iowa before moving to New York City, where he now lives with his wife and baby daughter in Queens.

John holds an MFA in Creative Writing and Environment from Iowa State University and a PhD in English and American Literature from New York University, and before coming to the Climate Museum he spent a year as an NYU/Mellon Foundation Public Humanities Fellow at the Museum of the City of New York. His poems have appeared widely in journals including *North American Review*, *Vallum*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *The Christian Century*, and *The New Criterion*. His nonfiction has appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *Newfound*, and *Prairie Gold: An Anthology of the American Heartland*.

[Is this about the length you’re looking for? A photo is attached separately, and the credit line for it should be © Kate McKenna, 2018.]

Interview:

Probably the most interesting interview with me is this episode from the podcast *High Theory*, which talks about a concept from my doctoral research in a way meant to be accessible to a lay audience: <http://hightheory.net/2020/09/05/ecosphere/> (There is a transcript below the episode but it seems to be machine-generated and has misspellings/errors, so a link to the page/audio probably makes the most sense.)

Brief commentary on the work that appears in the *Notre Dame Review*:

“Thunder and Lilies” is one of the foundational poems in my forthcoming book *To Leave for Our Own Country*, and it was one of the last ones I wrote for that volume. It is both a poem written in the moment and one written to meet a need. A friend had been helping me by reading through my book manuscript and felt that a pivotal moment—when I reveal that my wife and I are expecting our first child, in a poem that will appear in *Northwest Review* later this year—

seemed to come too easily in the arc of the book, given the climate anxieties that permeate the text. The decision to bring a child into a world that is continuing to be driven into the ground by capitalistic and political greed was one I had indeed grappled with, so I was thinking about how to work through that tension and come to an answer, and it seemed like a new poem was required. On the Thursday morning named in the first line, about a year ago and just a few months after the birth of our daughter, I was dealing with the irritating insomnia of new parenthood (despite the baby being fast asleep) when an incredible storm blew into Queens. Fully awake, I began to make some associations, the needed poem in mind.

My paternal grandfather had died during my wife’s first trimester, and when I think of the history of climate change and our shifting relationship with the land (which of course directly impacts our planet’s climate), I think of my grandfather’s lifespan, his stories of farming in Nebraska and living, during his young childhood, without any connection at all to an electrical grid. It’s all so recent, and so quickly connects to the history of our family’s presence in the U.S., all of which is part of my daughter’s history now, too. The storm, which had swept in from somewhere out west, seemed to connect us to the enormity of the continent the way our ancestors connect us to the enormity of time. And it reminded me of how, in the midst of the most frightening storm, my grandfather’s refrain would be that the plants would be glad—if tree limbs fell, lilies would rise. So, with some ideas swirling, I got up, turned on the light in the living room, got out my journal, and began. I transposed the narration of the poem to a year earlier, when my grandfather had not yet passed (though there is an anticipation of his death in the final lines) and when my daughter had not yet been born. I was able, in a way, to reassure my past self that we must continue planting in hope, that my decision with my wife to have our child would be the most important and incredible decision we could make as we work for a future of beauty, justice, and grace. I think it is a poem about resilience, change, and hope in the midst of uncertainty and challenge, gleaned from ancestral strength and story.

Link to my personal homepage: [www.johnlinstrom.com](http://www.johnlinstrom.com)

Links to webpages that already carry work by or about me:

I’ve had many poems published online. The best place to access them all in one place is through my website, which includes a list of links to pieces available online here:

<https://www.johnlinstrom.com/published-work>

Additional selections of my poetry that you can put on your webpage:

The following three poems are the ones I would most like to give further exposure in conjunction with the publication of “Thunder and Lilies” in *Notre Dame Review*. I recognize that “Blueshift” is particularly long; if this poses an equity problem, I would be willing to have that poem included alone, without the other two, but I think the three of them together build out on the themes of “Thunder and Lilies” quite well. Versions of these poems previously appeared as follows: “What Was Precious” in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, “Blueshift” in *Cold Mountain Review*, and “The Day the Machines Came” in *Adelaide Magazine*. They are all forthcoming in my debut collection, *To Leave for Our Own Country*, from Black Lawrence Press in April 2024.

What was Precious

I remember ladybugs and sow bugs precious  
as father’s green coffee canteen, as mother’s

running shoes. I remember warty toads  
and worms with skin like ours, rainy days

when they’d take to the walks, their bodies splayed  
so earnest and unheeding over concrete

I could gather them by the tens, scolding them,  
water running in my eyes and filling up their homes.

Summer nights were cicada whir, froggy peeps,  
traffic and the smell of grass. Once, we’re told, night held

wolves, howls of shaggy ghosts, and pigeons,  
orange breasts mottling a mile-long, feathered cloud.

I imagine the pigeons descend, tornadic, a roar  
of grease-beaked benediction, apocalyptic vision

that I only once saw approximated by bats  
funneling down the autumnal evening air

to christen, unwelcomed, mother’s white legs,  
her skirt swung, our hands raised in joy.

## Blueshift

*In memoriam, Kathleen Brumbaugh*

## I.

The color blue cannot be found, they say,  
in most organic pigments. Birds encrust

with sponge-like keratin their feathers, a trick  
to scatter light and cancel all but blue.

Blue morphos' wings are similarly false:  
their crushed-up scales will make a dusty brown.

When you first lifted up the frames that hid  
my eyes, you said you never knew they were

so blue, and yet this wasn't ever true:  
my iris pigment epithelium

is likely brown as yours, but lies behind  
a stroma drained of nearly every kind

of pigment under heaven, clear as water,  
filled with little shards that scatter back

some tricky light, another peacock fib  
derived from emptiness and waves.

## II.

Ben was the one to go down, slipped  
like a proboscis under the blue skin of the  
big lake, and all unseen his wheaty head  
was lost among so many shards of light  
dancing over Michigan: wave-crash then but  
no Ben behind—swirling universe of sand  
and pebbles churning, head somewhere some  
other part should be, eyes blink see these stars,  
swish of arm, two-leg kick, fast paddle to angled  
sand become treadmill, he milling under, mouth  
opens then because it must, ears full of grumbly  
full-pool noises—lost among a mother's

Supplemental materials to accompany “Thunder and Lilies” for *nd[re]view*

scream and the lifeguard’s whistle and legs  
 until the sputterspatter cough gaaaaasp—  
*back* up without help but the lifeguard walked  
 him back anyway, and suntanned Momma  
 holding him, him crying, him not to swim  
 in Lake Michigan again for two years,  
 never to touch water when yellow flew—and we,  
 we forgot slowly how to play in that horizonworld,  
 to splash back that tension line, the two taut blues.

## III.

The lake I take you to won’t be the lake  
 I knew before the baselines shifted, before  
 the waters filled with shards. Mrs. Brumbaugh

leaned one day behind the sinks and gas taps,  
 asking sixth-grade students, Do you like  
 that blue horizon that you’ve seen from blufftop

waiting for the fireworks each Fourth? Do you  
 remember, boys and girls, when viridescent  
 stripes ran out along the pier and wrapped

around your legs when wading too far out,  
 the gentle curling of that life, when fish  
 washed up in summers gape-eyed by

the scores and all the world smelled like lakeside?  
 The sand would carry fewer gashers then,  
 but some year soon those shells will vanish too,

their zebra stripes won’t decorate the castles  
 every child today erects, studded  
 with tokens of insatiability,

mussels made to swallow what they’ve found  
 in tangles thick throughout our sweetwater sea.

Do you enjoy that photogenic blue?  
 The waves that whisper every break their death?

## IV.

The extra scatter of added miles  
 of airy matter will daily thicken

Supplemental materials to accompany “Thunder and Lilies” for *nd[re]view*

the sunset sky to red, a wide

slice of blaze between the dark  
bands of lake effect still hours out  
and the sympathetic burn

of waves below. Look up: blueness  
faded, the inferno of the west  
appears to beat a swift retreat

and slowly, straight above, the atmosphere  
goes clear. Your hands will tuck  
to sweatshirt, your eyes will rise

to stars. Somewhere there, bodies  
immeasurable merge immeasurably  
smooth, in catastrophic consequence

contract, fuse, blow out, and spin,  
and from the pinpoint pricks  
of the new star’s poles, where magnetic

fields are weakest, shoot the beams  
that meet the telescopic earthling eye  
with the pulsar’s every swift rotation.

But like the lighthouse at the end  
of the corrugated pier, a pulsar’s  
flashes, rushing brightness ever toward us,

like every star of the galaxy we see,  
come red, only red, arriving only  
as the bodies fade away, as space itself

(which we now see in brilliant blackness)  
expands as if in infinite inhale shocked,  
and all things flee from gravity. Still

supernovae merge as galactic neighborhoods  
grow distant. Waves lap and fizz at sand,  
ground earth, as if they always had.

## V.

Simon Pokagon, author and chief, wrote  
two turns of century ago, on leaves of bark,  
about the bluff we stand on now. Its name

was Ishpeming, the place where Kija Manito,  
 that Great Spirit, chose to set his throne,  
 from where we know he ambled north  
 at night, the stars alight in Tchibekana,  
 the Galaxy on High, scattering the land  
 with seven billion stones of every color,  
 shape, and size. “No such charming stones,  
 excepting those, could anywhere be found  
 around all the shores of the Great Lake.”  
 He later planted flowers in the forests,  
 one by one, and then returned to work  
 the great conceptions of his soul, kitchichang,  
 along the dune of Ishpeming. He built  
 a bow at least two arrow flights in length,  
 his mitigwa, and laid it gently out  
 along the bluff, where he began to paint it.  
 Far behind him, from the setting sun  
 a cyclone dropped and swept across the lake,  
 wawsaw mowin flashed across wawkwi,  
 anamika boomed with tigowog,  
 the rolling waves, reaching then the shore  
 and glorious painted bow. The earth shook,  
 dunes slumped against the bow (the bluff  
 we know), and Kija Manito smiled in the teeth  
 of the storm. When it retreated to the darkened  
 east, between its lingering shade and what  
 remained of evening’s crepuscular light, he blew  
 a tearing squall to lift the painted bow  
 and it ascended to the place between  
 the clouds and twilight, arrowless and empty,  
 no string or quiver, tips in treetop glow,  
 a bow of peace, he said, as a reminder.<sup>1</sup>

## VI.

The lake I take you to won’t be the lake  
 that swallowed Ben among a verdant throng,  
  
 that Pokagon would dream of seeing lifetimes  
 hence—Lake Michigan the source of life  
  
 and culture, waving on. This lake is blue

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<sup>1</sup> Chief Simon Pokagon, of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, tells this story in his partially bilingual pamphlet, *Algonquin Legends of South Haven*, printed on birch bark in Hartford, Michigan by C. H. Engle, twelve pages with illustrations, 1900. I follow Pokagon’s spellings of Anishinaabemowin words throughout, but I follow more modern practice in omitting syllabic hyphenation.

Supplemental materials to accompany “Thunder and Lilies” for *nd[re]view*

and clear as all unpeopled sky with light,

blue of emptiness, a stroma blue  
bereft of pigments that it knew so long—

the Potawatomi received the tale  
from the Ottawa, wrote Pokagon,

who had learned it from the Mashkode  
whom they had driven from the land one half-

millennium ago. Nikonong, the place was named,  
land of beautiful sunset. Much farther still

into the drifting past the lake had worn  
its flowing dress of algae and its fish—

Whitefish, Herring, Muskellunge—and never  
known a zebra mussel’s sharp-shelled

gash. The shells themselves are growing sparse  
of late, the castles every child today

erects in shade of Ishpeming are barer  
than they’ve been. I don’t know what I want

for you to see; the lake I take you to  
might wash into your memory, or rush

in roars of shipwrecking blue; I want for you  
to feel the riptide in your calves, the cool

below the fire, to spy the minnows’ trace  
of lacework in the shallows, scoop of beetle

back-floating away for you to save to shore  
and more of power and of passing grace,

but not to love the blue, my dear, the blue  
that hits our pupils rushing fast, that scorns

the fleeing redshift stars, that comes at noon,  
the blue that chases faster than retreat

accusing us of our own empty sails,  
self-crashing blue that churns the rocks to silt

and brightens every tourist’s photograph,



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dark blue that lifts a tourist from the pier

and drowns him every year, that rocks or swathes  
each day of death, of surf, of grief, of breath.

The Day the Machines Came

We said, finally, here is some help  
and for cheap. Somewhere someone  
had dug the graves of a bygone age

and turned up the muck to racket  
the tractor to life. We thirsted,  
had no money, that day. Oils forced

from subterranean slumber became gold.  
We could bring bananas back from town,  
send the children to school, buy more

land, send our youngest son away  
to college. Why didn't he return?  
Sunlight glinted off metal shoulders,

beat less long on our backs. The earth  
smelled warm, that day, felt still  
soft and inexhaustible, while the prophet asked

*Why do you spend your money  
for that which is not bread, your labor  
for that which does not satisfy?*

Soul thirsts, flesh faints, the soil  
grinds below the turning blade, we eat  
of new cheap calories, energy dug

from deep and irreplaceable. Were we  
worse sinners for what we began,  
that day? Later we thirsted, needed money,

left the land to others and fewer.  
We sat down to eat and drink  
and then rose up to play. Now someone

somewhere exfoliates the earth  
to charge our little bricks, the metals  
and the heavy metals someone somewhere

has ordered from the rock,  
that hands have bled against,  
so we may sit to eat and play

and bend above the little worlds  
that we've retreated to. When the screen  
goes black, what does it reflect?

Here is help, and cheap. Does this test  
provide a way out? We thirst, need money,  
dig new graves and leave the land to play.