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[Imagined Lives in Poetry](#)

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*Mary Gilliland is the author of [The Ruined Walled Castle Garden](#) (2020), winner of the Bright Hill Press Chapbook Competition, and *Gathering Fire* (Ithaca House, 1982). Her poetry has been anthologized in *Nuclear Impact: Broken Atoms In Our Hands, Strange Histories*, *The &Now Awards: The Best Innovative Writing*, and *Wild Gods*. Poems have also appeared in *AGNI*, *Poetry*, *Chautauqua*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Seneca Review*, *Passages North*, and many other journals. Gilliland was the featured poet at the *Al Jazeera International Documentary Film Festival* in 2009 and was named “Poet of the Year” (2002) by the *BBC Wildlife Magazine*. Other honors include the *Ann Stanford Prize* and the *Pablo Neruda Prize*, and a *Stanley Kunitz Fellowship* from the *Fine Arts Work Center* in Provincetown. Alice Fulton has called Gilliland “by turns mystical and realist” with a vision “profound and enduring,” and describes the work in her newest book as “sinewy” and “nuanced”—“poems that understand earth—and consciousness—as gardens that no walls or enchantments can protect.”*

Interview with Mary Gilliland

By Sara London, WTP Poetry Editor

London: We’ve just come through a year of woes—pandemic and political. Can you talk a bit about what it’s been like for you as a writer? Have the challenges changed the way you approach or think about poetry?

Gilliland: Much of my poetry portrays the human track record of short-term thinking, creating more problems with every solution. We avoid the fundamentals of militarism and systemic inequality. I fear the recalcitrance of humans to commit to preventing future pandemics by changing our behavior in regard to wildlife, livestock, and the environment. I do my best to do what I do best while living in the United States of War—a nation-state established by war;

expanded by genocidal war; grown rich via the war known as slavery; the only nation-state with forts everywhere (called US military bases), waging endless war in one place or another around the globe. I have become so conscious of militarism as the root of all hostile -isms. That lens on our perception, that metaphor in our thinking, creates a hierarchical enemy-dependent society and prevents genuine structural change.

It feels to me like the woes go back further than one year. That November 2016 election night I slumbered early, confident. It was the first time I accepted an “I voted today” sticker at the polling place. Shortly before 3 a.m. I woke in visceral terror. What was happening? BBC4 confirmed the inexplicable. The misogyny of it all! But immediately I thought this will be the karma of the founding fathers coming home to roost. They ignored Abigail Adams’s pleas for women’s rights while framing the U. S. Constitution, and they wrote slavery into it. My gut reaction in the middle of the night was that this election upset would bring us an otherwise unavailable opportunity to deal with the damages of enshrined hierarchy.

Realizations like those I’m speaking of have been shapers of the content and organization of my poetry collections, both the new one in print and others that I’ve completed.

London: Your new book’s central poem, “Pat Euphoria,” begins: “How does a soul find its way from / the twenty-first century... /...more people in pieces / than ever...” But, as a “hardheaded gal,” the speaker aims to “step back in,” reflecting on lost love and memories of a mother’s admonishments about “torpor.” And there’s a winking at death, which “life vaults / with the urge and sea of a first kiss.” Could you talk about your inspiration for this poem, and the title? And perhaps you could address the connection to the photographer Lee Miller?

Gilliland: Many of my poems speak in or of lives I’ve not literally lived, lives that come to life in my imagination. I remember Adrienne Rich giggling when I told her that I had a poem in process about a character named Pat Euphoria who doggedly persists, around and through obstacles. In the finished poem, though, she’s stopped. The material that came together in this long poem percolated for many years. The epigraph references Lee Miller because the poem’s images and possibilities developed a lot when, on a residency in Scotland, I saw the work and I learned the life of this forgotten twentieth-century photographer. Lee Miller was one of the greatest photojournalists of WWII, and at the age of forty she traded in her talent for alcohol. But it’s not a biographical poem about her.

“Pat Euphoria” is kind of an Everywoman poem, about a woman who persists in thinking the world is *her* way despite daily atrocities of misogyny. The poem begins with a separation of soul and body, and there’s windshield glass—the narrator’s had an accident; life flashes before her eyes—sensations, dreams, relationships. Each of the nine sections starts with a hanging-left margin, outside the frame (only toward the end does Pat realize life is over) and each section treats a different aspect of life. You can read/hear “Pat Euphoria” as a sequence of related poems, or as separate poems, or think of it as a novel with most of the words removed.

London: *The Ruined Walled Castle Garden* opens with a poem about a “stubbled saint” father figure, a man in the wrong century, and a poem about Emma Mille, who miraculously survived the 1856 Isle Dernière hurricane in New Orleans. Displacement, violence and disillusionment are repeating motifs in your poems. Yet amidst stories of human vulnerability and damage, we’re

also reminded of the breeding and hatching of the natural world. How consciously do you juxtapose those more corrosive human forces with nature's healing powers in your poems?

Gilliland: Although in poetry I don't usually find myself recounting my experience, I do after the fact often realize that I've transformed it. My father, a manic-depressive who self-medicated with alcohol, wasn't able to manage sobriety, although he tried. Some time after writing that opening poem, "The Old Man Brought Home," I realized its images turn his terrible suffering, experienced by his family as well, into something like fable.

Would that the natural world could be a safe and healing place for people of all colors and preferences! My solace as a child was gazing beside stream or pond, or reading in the crook of a big oak tree. My family lived in one of northeast New Jersey's first suburbs. Neighborhood streets would end at a granite curb and I would walk from there directly into the woods. I always felt innately part of nature, not separate. Our healing powers are nature's powers. That notion of nature and human as separate spheres began with the so-called European Enlightenment, which degraded the traditional image of nature as organism and elevated that of nature as machine, to be owned, managed. The Biblical notion that dominion over other creatures involved responsibility and respect vanished.

Your question brings to mind writing seminars that I created and taught at Cornell, centered around concerns that infuse my poetry: "Ecosystems & Ego Systems," "The American Way: Addiction and Consumption," "Writing as a Naturalist." Every syllabus included the *Tao Te Ching*, a book students kept instead of re-selling, a philosophy of living in harmony with the Tao, a greater Way.

The Ruined Walled Castle Garden explores the sufferings of the earth & its creatures, and of individuals damaged by conventional society, whether that's Virginia Woolf deciding to drown, or a shift worker forced to pluck and prepare chickens all night. A ruined walled castle garden is the present location of 'Western' civilization. I hope we can bring alive again respect for each other and for the rights of nature, of ecosystems. The poem titled "Is a transcendentally beautiful place not to be ours?" characterizes Emma Mille's tears as both "little bags for keeping miracles" and "lumps of fool's gold." In our present moment, which will it be?

London: I'm struck by the wide-ranging thematic layers in your work, but also the rich, linguistic leavening in the poems, and also the vivid imagery: "The sphere clears, / its path the smoked whirl of a catseye / skating parquet..." or "Above the city—ribbing, scales, sunlight cupping / pockets of the dark—a swart fish of the heavens / plies the line to the horizon." How conscious are you of "kneading" and shaping your lines and phrasings? Do you revise a lot?

Gilliland: Those lines you quote—and many others—are gifts, pure gifts, offered by the word-hoard in exchange for my bone-house's near-daily sitting or standing or walking along with language. They're what I breathe for. Sound, not sense, starts off most poems, and does most of the shaping. I do revise a lot—by hand, by ear, by eye. Much of that time, the poem is removing or rearranging its phrases. Any small change, I write the whole thing over from the top, for it's the words that are speaking to each other. I think I learned that from H.D., or from Provincetown where at the Fine Arts Work Center at last I had enough time for poetry, because that's what the time was for.

I have so little formal schooling in poetry. I've taught myself by deeply immersing in one or another artist's written or visual or aural creation. For example, when my husband and I lived at Kitkitdizze [Gary Snyder's home in northern California], Gary brought me "The Poet and the Dancer" by H.D., which Five Trees Press had just published. I loved her poetry, went on to read everything she wrote, nearly memorized her lyric-epic *Trilogy*, attended the H.D. centennial conference, gave talks for friends in their Cornell literature classes. Gary also urged me to understand our language and its history, recommending books by Jespersen and other early linguists. I studied these scholarly works with the fervor with which I'd learned Anglo-Saxon in college. This body of knowledge seems to naturally pervade my poems. More than once in a poets' group, remarks on my odd but resonant locutions have led us to discover, in the O.E.D., that I've positioned the word or phrase just how it was used and meant in a previous century—a surprise not just to others but to me as well.

London: Regarding the many interesting figures of history, mostly females, resurrected in this book: What attracted you to Lizzie Borden, the focus of "About to Burn Her Dress" (featured in WTP [Vol. VII #10](#)).

Gilliland: Was Lizzie guilty of murdering her father and stepmother? Her trial and acquittal was the tabloid story of her day, and children still recite the rhyme of forty whacks about her purported heinous acts. Phrases come to me, and the whimsy of Lizzie's "interrupting Mr Borden's nap" wouldn't leave me alone; I grinned, everything became detached, including our protagonist, among nineteenth-century furniture with its curious makings and names. Lizzie appears to have gotten away with silencing her father, making the house her own. H.D. and Lee Miller had to become expatriates in order to develop; Lizzie's art was succeeding in place in her intention. There's a long tradition of heroizing the outlaw who gets away with it—think of the most recent occupant of that big house on Pennsylvania Ave—and I was tickled to turn the role over to a female.

London: Who inspired your earliest love of poetry? What poets move or excite you today?

Gilliland: Earliest: the Greek myths, the Norse; verse in the blue Catholic school grammar books that we were assigned to memorize and recite: 'shoot if you must this old grey head,' 'I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide' and then myself on to Dickinson, Tennyson and, about age twelve, Whitman. Today: John Donne. There's a copy in nearly every room of the house. And though she's prose, the late Penelope Fitzgerald. Among contemporaries — what a whirl! Our changes nourish each other.

A recent essay by Gilliland on John Donne may be found [here](#).