



HUMANITIES
KANSAS

Written IN THE Stars

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Written in the Stars

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Elise Paschen

Acrobat

The night you were conceived
we balanced underneath a tent,

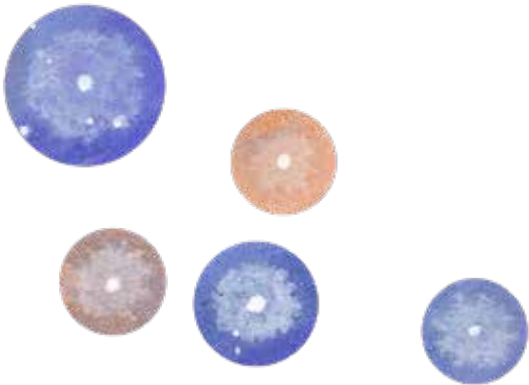
amazed at the air-marveler,
who, hand-over-hand, seized the stars,

then braved the line to carry home
a big-top souvenir umbrella.

Earth-bound a year, you dare
gravity, sliding from the couch

to table. Mornings, on tiptoe,
stretching fingers, you grab

Saturn, Venus and the moons
raining down from the sky of ceiling.





Kevin Young

Dog Star

Take today. I want there
to be less
of everything—wind

& worry, of leaves
littering the ground
& love letters, addressee

unknown. Return
to sender—
this, my quarrel

with what
must be
told. No,

I insist, No.

Yet the wind won't
go away
so easily, the stars remain

& do not grey—
the boy looking
up into them thinks

he's seeing them first
tonight—it's true,
here the sky & moon

do meet
in an overgrown field—
nothing here

tall enough to pretend
to reach—even him
amazed at the blue,

even you.

Ada Limón

In Praise of Mystery: A Poem for Europa

Arching under the night sky inky
with black expansiveness, we point
to the planets we know, we

pin quick wishes on stars. From earth,
we read the sky as if it is an unerring book
of the universe, expert and evident.

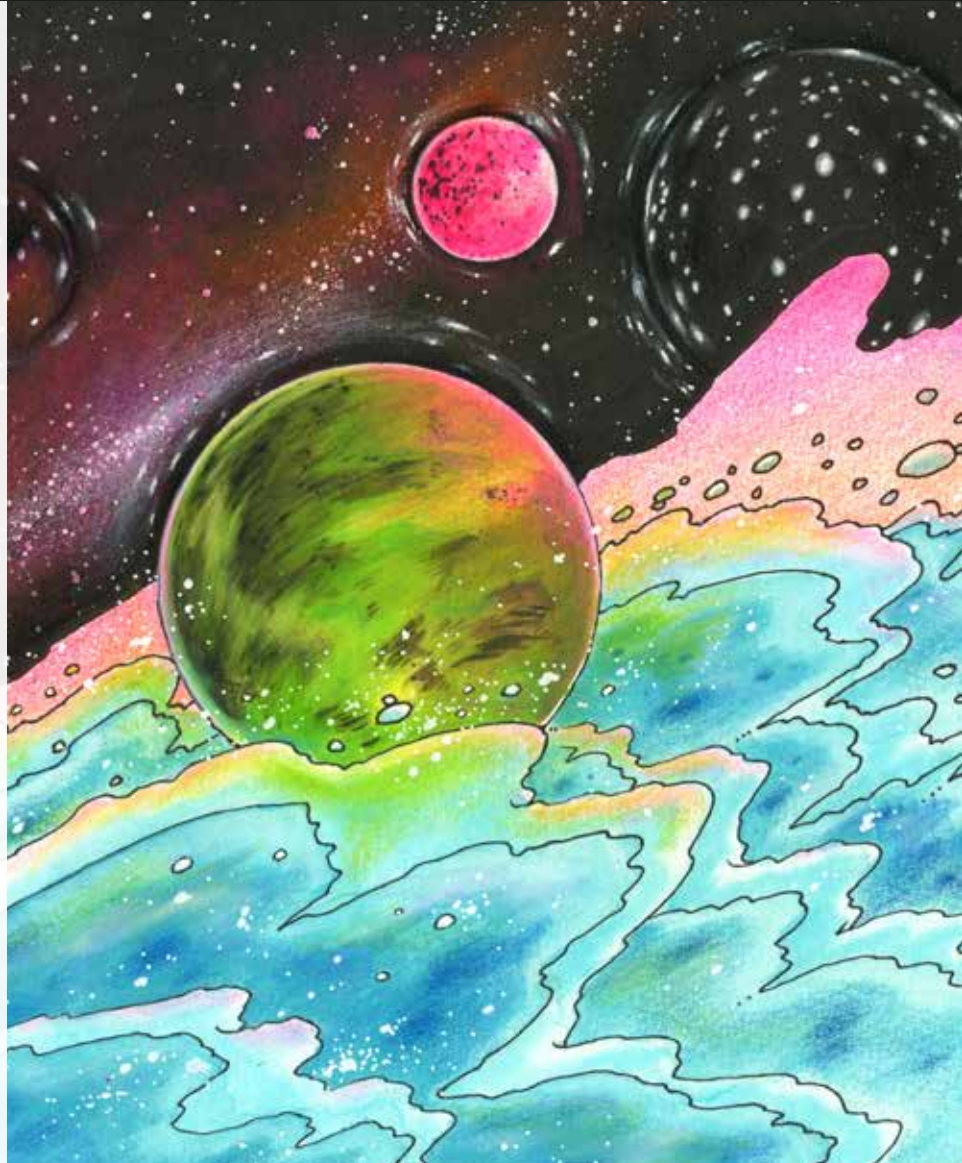
Still, there are mysteries below our sky:
the whale song, the songbird singing
its call in the bough of a wind-shaken tree.

We are creatures of constant awe,
curious at beauty, at leaf and blossom,
at grief and pleasure, sun and shadow.

And it is not darkness that unites us,
not the cold distance of space, but
the offering of water, each drop of rain,

each rivulet, each pulse, each vein.
O second moon, we, too, are made
of water, of vast and beckoning seas.

We, too, are made of wonders, of great
and ordinary loves, of small invisible worlds,
of a need to call out through the dark.



Hyejung Kook
The Perseids

in the
* Flint Hills

mid-August
* after midnight

*with
me

Won't
you *come
* lie down

fix your eyes *
on the radiant
x here * by the head see the meteors flung outward
of Perseus
* * as we pass
* through a
comet's path
* every year
* I've missed it
*this despite my best
summer * intentions
let's * set
even if aside *
the sky time
a streak of our thoughts anger
of are clouded fatigue
light * let's lie
in in the
the * *grass
dark * together





Naomi Shihab Nye

My Grandmother in the Stars

It is possible we will not meet again
on earth. To think this fills my throat
with dust. Then there is only the sky
tying the universe together.

Just now the neighbor's horse must be standing
patiently, hoof on stone, waiting for his day
to open. What you think of him,
and the village's one heroic cow
is the knowledge I wish to gather.
I bow to your rugged feet,
the moth-eaten scarves that knot your hair.

Where we live in the world
is never one place. Our hearts,
those dogged mirrors, keep flashing us
moons before we are ready for them.
You and I on a roof at sunset,
our two languages adrift,
heart saying, Take this home with you,
never again,
and only memory making us rich.

William Stafford
Space Country

As usual the highest birds first caught it, a slow roll even the air hardly felt; then the thick gold haze that many filters of eyes found fell deep in the desert country. Wells filled and rocks—pooled in their own shadows—lay at ease. People did not know why they stood up and walked, and waited by the windows or doors, or leaned by fences to look at far scenes. The surface of all weathered wood relaxed; even gravel and cactus appeared soft.

The world had passed something in space and was alone again. Sunset came on. People lay down, and the birds forgot as they sleepily clucked and slept, close on boughs, as well hidden as could be in the air again clear, sharp, and cold.





Megan Kaminski

They say

buffalo buffalo buffalo, but these are bison named false by settlers who dusted the prairie dry, dealt death to furred kings. Returned un-ghosted with the red-haze of sunset, guided by stars that even in absence never stopped singing them; they call us into place. What's lost cannot be restored, but what of repair? Suturing seeds into prairie, tall grasses call with bison and us into night, into dreaming together beneath this Kansas sky.



Michael Kleber-Diggs

4/13/2029—

a Friday, another chance for an extinction event, another chance for possible planetary destruction by asteroid, a chance for a rock the size of the Rose Bowl to hit us—a rock called Apophis, named for the ancient Egyptian god of death, darkness, and disorder. At present, Apophis is on course to pass approximately 18,000 miles away, which, as asteroids go, comes too close for true comfort. So close that, if you stand in Northern Europe, you will be able to watch it go by as a blaze of brightness in the night sky—ten miles per second. As new data arrive, scientists revise their projections: the odds of Apophis destroying everything keep going down, but, within the possible range of options, there remains one where that rock passes thru a gravitational keyhole so its orbit gets altered and it hits us seven years later, 2036, which would still give us ample time to prepare. Anyway I am rooting for us and against darkness and large rocks. I am rooting against extinction events of all kinds. I am rooting for potential calamities only—for reminders of how fragile we are, how temporal all earthly life is, just without any catastrophic consequences. And lately, at night, when I scan our sky for stars and planets, I find I do not wonder which projection will pan out. I find myself searching for a new god though—a god of life, light, and order. What shall we call her?



Jesse Nathan

December

We thrive in a narrow range.
Venus running right about 900° Fahrenheit
but down here it's a gentle 17
afloat in a bag of winter
at the mouth of wind.
The icy breathing of it all
makes flour-fine stars, the flinty dipper
erect on its handle. Arcturus, you old buzzard,
suspended and watchful,
one-time narrator of prologues,
you used to tell the farmers when to plant
and the mariners where to go
but now what've you got to say?

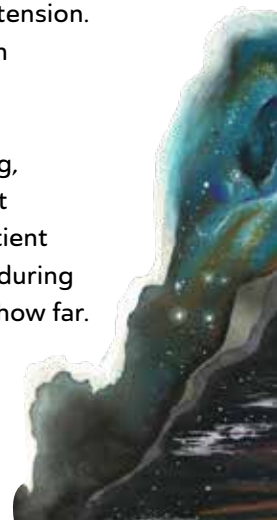
The universe I want to say *stares*
into my season. The stars clarify
like family traits in a face.



Traci Brimhall

Stellar Parallax

Even miles apart, we want to be close
so we step out onto cold concrete
and call out constellations like vows.
If not holding each other, sharing the sky,
the wind tugging both of our shirts. If not
marriage, its commitment to gravity,
the difference between good enough
and worth forgiving. Stars taught others
myth and science and how to cross the sea,
but we recite galaxies like a catechism on love
at a distance. You call the quick flare a falling star,
even though we both know it's a meteorite.
If not forever, the small lies that fill the silence
with promises. My heart hangs upside down
in my chest as you describe the telescope
you've built, the way you want to help me see
the night more clearly. But I've always seen
the calculated beauty of orbits, each celestial body
separate from one another, perfected by tension.
If not bright as choir robes like Sirius, then
Betelgeuse, red as fire's autobiography.
I clutch the dark heat to my chest, marry
the memory to bone. If not feather or wing,
a bridge of lights to carry me to you. If not
now, someday. I disciple myself to the patient
distances between the stars, taste the enduring
elegies and yes, keep burning, no matter how far.





Megan Kaminski

Written in the Stars

As long as we have looked to the night sky for guidance, we have found our fates and more written in the stars. The night sky helps us to understand the world and our place in it, from farmers timing their plantings with moon cycles, to navigators charting paths via Polaris and the Southern Cross, to theologians, physicists, philosophers, and others pondering the galaxies to understand the fabric of our universe. And we're not alone as a species in gathering knowledge from the night sky—seals, moths, frogs, and other animals use the starry sky to navigate, to feed, and even to find their mates. We are all together under this shared canopy, looking up for information and inspiration.


Every evening when we gaze at the stars, we take a journey through time and through the vastness of our universe. Light travels at a speed of 186,000 miles every second, and while the light of the moon reaches us in only 1 and 1/3 seconds, light from Sirius, the brightest star in our skies, takes nine years to travel here. Light can take tens of thousands of years to reach us from distant parts of our galaxy, which is roughly 100,000 light years wide. It's no wonder then that the celestial

prompts us to reflect upon the passing of time, of what has been, and to speculate on what could be. The universe tells its story through these lights, and we see our own lives reflected in them.

In this collection, contemporary Kansas-connected poets take on the night sky, with all its beauty, mystery, and histories, to map connections between past and future, reality and dreams, and to inspire us to ponder our own place in the world. In their poems, Kevin Young and Hyejung Kook look to the stars as unchanging beacons upon which to pace their own life trajectories. US Poet Laureate Ada Limón contributes a poem filled with wonder about the “ordinary loves” and “small invisible worlds” that comprise our daily lives here on earth; it's a poem that will literally make its way to the stars, engraved on NASA's *Europa Clipper* for its mission to the Jupiter system 1.8 billion miles away. We might see William Stafford's “Space Country,” originally published in 1970 during the height of the space race, as similarly reflecting on the passage into outer space while remaining firmly grounded in his present moment: “Sunset came on. / People lay down, and the birds forgot...”

Naomi Shihab Nye's poem bridges the physical distance between herself and her grandmother, looking to the stars to hold memories across time and space: “Our





hearts, / those dogged mirrors, keep flashing us / moons before we are ready for them." Michael Kleber-Diggs' poem "4/13/2029—" pulls us into the future, calling on our collective wisdom and faith to navigate environmental crisis and to see the stars as inspiration to build new relational models for being in and with the world.

Perhaps the poems and Matthew Willie Garcia's drawings will inspire you tonight to look up at the sky towards discovering your own orientation in this world and into the worlds that we might dream together. ★



Christopher Auner

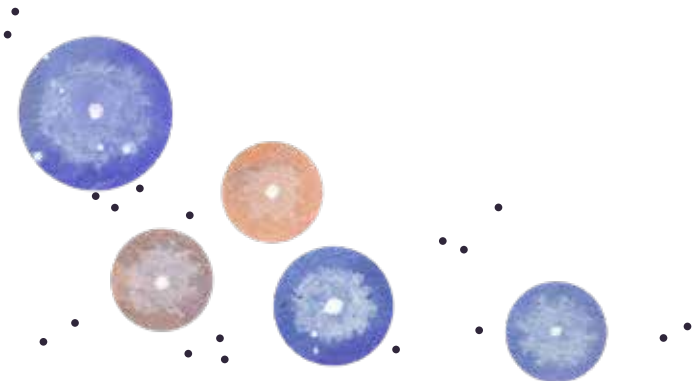
It Was Us We Were Looking For: Kansas, UFOs, and the Unknown


Humans have always looked to the stars for answers—not just about the universe, but about ourselves: Who are we? Where are we? What does the future hold? Through constellations, we tell stories about our world. Through astrology, we tell stories about who we want to be.

But sometimes, when we look to the stars, we're searching for something beyond ourselves—friends, companions, co-conspirators in this vast, cold universe.

In 1964, Elmer D. Janzen—chiropractor, ventriloquist, UFO enthusiast—opened his Geneseo, Kansas, home as a museum. This was at the height of UFO fever in the United States, when flying saucers regularly made headlines. Still open today in the self-proclaimed UFO capital of Kansas (aliens welcome!), the museum features drawings of humanoid aliens, spaceship diagrams, and newspaper clippings about a dog from Venus. (Her name was Queenie.)

The museum showcases Janzen's passion for the weird and the town's fond remembrance of the man, but it also tells





of a time of discovery, imagination, excitement for the future—and more than a little trepidation about what we might find out there beyond the clouds.

Lest we discount Janzen as an eccentric, it bears mentioning that even Clyde Tombaugh, Kansas's astronomical sweetheart, reported several UFO sightings during his scientific career. Tombaugh built his first telescope on his family's farm near Burdett, Kansas, and was a self-taught astronomer with a high school diploma when, in 1930, he discovered the long sought-after "Planet X"—soon dubbed Pluto, after the Greek and Roman god of the underworld. (Pluto was reclassified as a dwarf planet and hailed as the first known object in the Kuiper Belt in 2006.) Tombaugh earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Kansas while continuing to work summers at Lowell Observatory in Arizona, where he first caught sight of the smudge of light that was Pluto.

In addition to discovering Pluto, 15 asteroids, and hundreds of stars, Tombaugh also observed several UFOs. Although he tended toward a scientific explanation rather than an extraterrestrial one, he was nevertheless open to the idea of intelligent life on other worlds. And perhaps it was this openness

that drew him back to the sky night after night, straining to see just a little bit further into the unknown.

Sometimes we look to the sky in search of faraway worlds, but we find ourselves instead. What if those stories about aliens and UFOs are really stories about us? Stories to make the darkness a little less lonely, the strange a little more familiar. They speak of our thirst to make meaning, to seek connection, to ask questions and discover answers.

But sometimes when we look up at the night sky, we aren't looking for answers. We look to the stars to set our imaginations alight. ★





Reflection


The state motto of Kansas is *Ad Astra Per Aspera*, “To the stars through difficulty.” Hopeful words and an aspirational vision grounded in prairie sensibility. In the big picture of the human experience, does our motto get it right? Do any of these poems address a similar theme?

In her opening essay, editor Megan Kaminski writes, “The universe tells its story through these lights, and we see our own lives reflected in them.” In what ways do you connect with past memories and stories while looking to the stars above?

The illustrations are imaginative depictions of celestial objects meant to spark mystery and curiosity. In what ways have you looked to the stars to imagine other worlds, possible futures, or connections across time and space?

Many of the poets reference loved ones as they look to the stars—a grandmother, a toddler “Earth-bound a year,” a beloved partner. Why do humans reflect on our connections and relationships at night under the stars?

In the closing essay, the quirky culture around UFOs and the search for intelligent life sparks humor and fascination. The author asks, “What if those stories about aliens and UFOs are really stories about us?” What does he mean by this?



Ad Astronauts

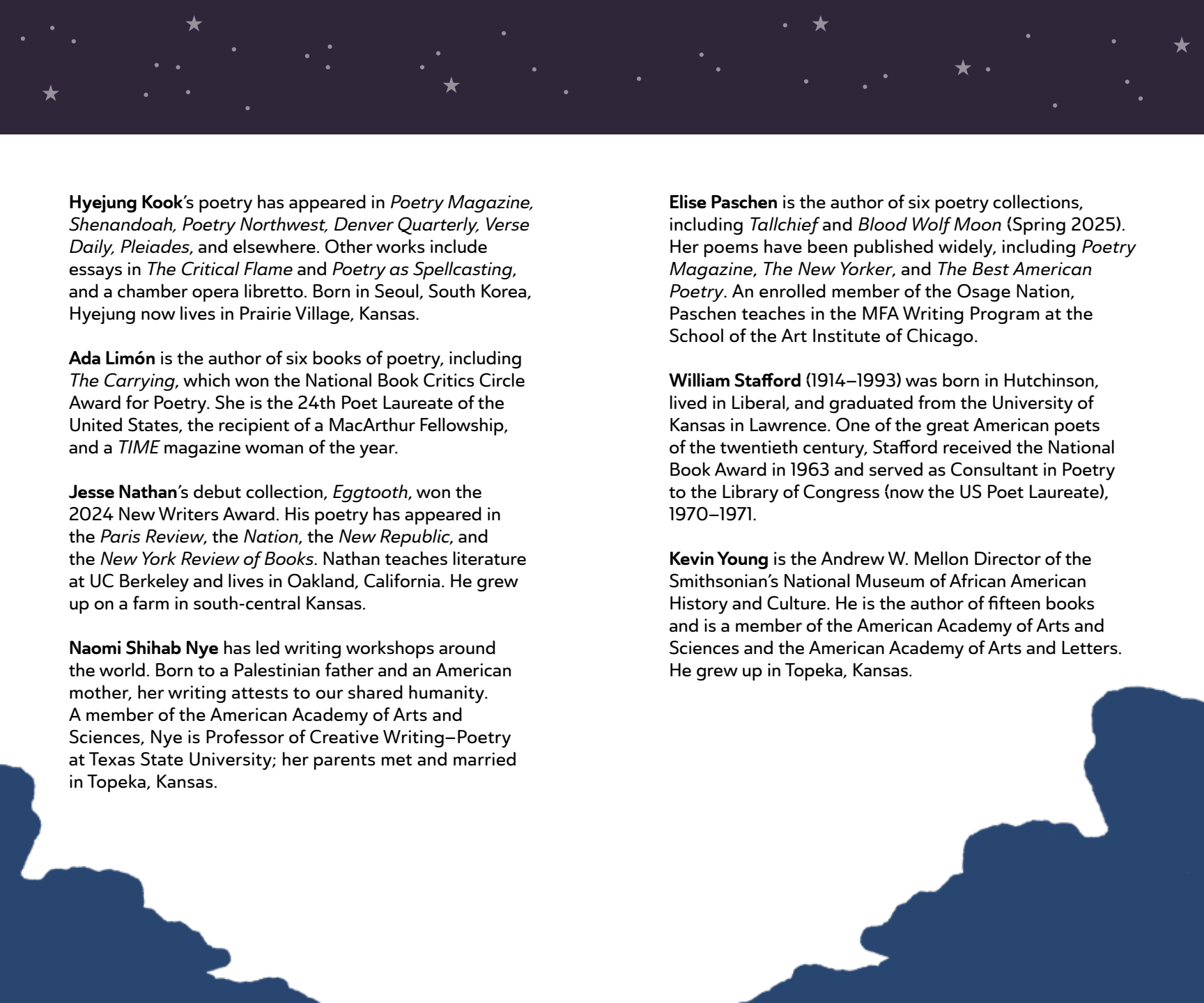
Christopher Auner is a writer from Lawrence, Kansas, who has a background in teaching, publishing, freelance writing, and higher education. He earned an MFA in fiction from the University of Kansas and an MA in literature from Missouri State University.

Traci Brimhall is the author of five collections of poetry, most recently *Love Prodigal*. She lives in Manhattan, Kansas, and is the 2023–2026 Poet Laureate of Kansas.

Matthew Willie Garcia’s work is inspired by science, science fiction, and his queer identity, which he explores through color abstraction and nonrepresentational forms. A graduate of the Kansas City Art Institute and the University of Kansas, he has exhibited in the United States, Japan, and Spain. Matthew is currently the Grant Wood Fellow at the University of Iowa.

Michael Kleber-Diggs was born, raised, and educated in Kansas and currently makes his home in Saint Paul, Minnesota. His debut poetry collection, *Worldly Things*, won the Max Ritvo Poetry Prize and the 2022 Hefner Heitz Kansas Book Award in Poetry, among other awards.

Megan Kaminski is a poet and Professor of Creative Writing and Environmental Studies at the University of Kansas. She is the author of three books of poetry, most recently *Gentlewomen*, and two artists books, *Prairie Divination* and *Quietly Between*. Her place-based sound, poetry, and art installations have appeared at museums, public gardens, and libraries across the country.



Hyejung Kook's poetry has appeared in *Poetry Magazine*, *Shenandoah*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Verse Daily*, *Pleiades*, and elsewhere. Other works include essays in *The Critical Flame* and *Poetry as Spellcasting*, and a chamber opera libretto. Born in Seoul, South Korea, Hyejung now lives in Prairie Village, Kansas.

Ada Limón is the author of six books of poetry, including *The Carrying*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. She is the 24th Poet Laureate of the United States, the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, and a *TIME* magazine woman of the year.

Jesse Nathan's debut collection, *Eggtooth*, won the 2024 New Writers Award. His poetry has appeared in the *Paris Review*, the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *New York Review of Books*. Nathan teaches literature at UC Berkeley and lives in Oakland, California. He grew up on a farm in south-central Kansas.

Naomi Shihab Nye has led writing workshops around the world. Born to a Palestinian father and an American mother, her writing attests to our shared humanity. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Nye is Professor of Creative Writing–Poetry at Texas State University; her parents met and married in Topeka, Kansas.

Elise Paschen is the author of six poetry collections, including *Tallchief* and *Blood Wolf Moon* (Spring 2025). Her poems have been published widely, including *Poetry Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Best American Poetry*. An enrolled member of the Osage Nation, Paschen teaches in the MFA Writing Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

William Stafford (1914–1993) was born in Hutchinson, lived in Liberal, and graduated from the University of Kansas in Lawrence. One of the great American poets of the twentieth century, Stafford received the National Book Award in 1963 and served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (now the US Poet Laureate), 1970–1971.

Kevin Young is the Andrew W. Mellon Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. He is the author of fifteen books and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He grew up in Topeka, Kansas.

The background of the left page features a teal-colored map of the Americas (North and South America) in the upper right corner. The rest of the page is white with scattered teal stars of various sizes, some of which are larger and more prominent.

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William Stafford, “Space Country” from *Stories that Could Be True*. Copyright © 1966 by William Stafford. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Kim Stafford.

The background of the right page is a solid light blue color. It features a dark blue map of the Americas in the lower right corner. The sky is filled with numerous small white stars and a few larger, more prominent white stars, creating a starry night effect.



HUMANITIES KANSAS

A Movement of Ideas

Humanities Kansas is an independent nonprofit leading a movement of ideas. Since 1972, HK's programming, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark conversations and invite new insights. Together with statewide partners and supporters, HK encourages Kansans to draw on diverse histories, literatures, and cultures to create connections with one another and strengthen Kansas communities and our democracy.

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