

EDITORS' NOTE

Lee Sharkey—Editor, Poet, Mentor, Friend

Lee Sharkey, who died in October 2020, created and sustained a home in poetry for the makers of the *Beloit Poetry Journal*—generations of poets, editors, and staff. For decades she nurtured and helped lead the *BPJ*, and it is nearly impossible to describe what her generosity, precision, steadfast empathy, and crackling wit have meant to the history of this magazine. Her strength of purpose and faith in poetry—and especially in poets themselves—are lodestones for all of us who remain to do this work.

Leonore Hildebrandt, one of the journal's longest serving editors reflected, "Lee seemed indefatigable, even in hard times. Her commitment to a diligent and hands-on process for choosing poems fostered our best work. She was not afraid to tackle a 'difficult' poem, one that I might have been tempted to dismiss as impenetrable. She motivated me to stay with the poem—repeatedly reading it aloud, listening to its music, parsing its syntax, trying to connect the pieces into an artistic whole."

The way Lee listened—to the poem and to the poet—left a lasting impression not only on all of us at the journal but on hundreds of writers like Janice Harrington and Jacques Rancourt, whose tributes to Lee follow. Her approach was both sharply discerning and deeply generous. It helped define a journal that reflects diverse and lively editorial tastes and that values conversations between editor and poet, encouraging every poem toward the full realization of its power. This listening continues to be at the heart of the *BPJ*'s editorial practice.

In her own work, Lee was brave, clear-eyed, and generous. Her lines are spare, luminous, and wise. They reach for connection, even in grief, as revealed in the small collection of poems we include in this issue from Lee's posthumously published book *I Will Not Name It Except to Say* (Tupelo Press, 2021):

I was becoming sculpture. I had no will but to go further into the dark I was, that held me, to weep in my mother's skirts

It breathed me

Before I was, was onyx gliding through onyx. Every night I sought it out to surrender

Every morning I woke in my mother's arms

Now I was whole and mortal. Grief-seasoned. Mitral fingers shivered and almost touched

—"The Walking Rooms"

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Perhaps the very best tribute to Lee that we can offer is this volume you hold in your hands—the latest issue of a journal that has published without interruption since 1950 and which Lee shaped for so many years. It contains poems that vary widely in tone, style, perspective, and subject matter, but that share, as Lee would say, “one criteria: excellence.” We’re sure that Lee would have delighted in the sizzle of Jen Stewart Fueston’s “Bury me with piñon,” the innovation of K. Henderson’s “A Mixed Girl’s Virginia,” and the insight of Polchate (Jam) Kraprayoon’s “Selipar,” along with the varied texture, flavor, and representation of the entire issue.

Lee Sharkey’s devotion to, and insistence upon, the core values of the *BPJ* live on in all we continue to do: establishing long, deep relationships with poets, showcasing under-represented voices and perspectives, championing social justice through art, and nurturing a vibrant editorial family and process. Lee left the *BPJ* a rich tradition as well as the resilience and spirit to move confidently into the future. We are grateful to and inspired by her, always.