What Nature

Poems

Edited by Timothy Donnelly, BK Fischer, and Stefania Heim
What

Nature
Editors’ Note
Timothy Donnelly, BK Fischer, & Stefania Heim

Silenic Landscape
Alissa Valles

The Human Race
Kathy Nilsson

The Embarrassment of Being in the World
Kathy Nilsson

From Variations on Adonis
Jesús Castillo

Fresh Kills
Claire Hero

to know a thing
Irène Mathieu

From The City Is Lush With / Obstructed Views
Greg Nissan

The Golden Hour
Rowan Ricardo Phillips

Successor
Gyðir Eliasson (tr. Meg Matich)

Reflections on the Law of Causation
Gyðir Eliasson (tr. Meg Matich)
Life After Nature
Gyrdir Eliasson (tr. Meg Matich) 31

Chicken Smog
Nicole Walker 32

Preview
Rae Armantrout 36

Signs You Are Standing at the End
Abigail Chabitnoy 37

it looks like driftwood but, really, it’s an apocalypse
Matt Massaia 39

After Nature
Roger Reeves 41

The Elements
Carolyn Guinzio 43

The Larsen C Ice Shelf on Its Last Leg
Noah Dversdall 44

I Am Chopping Ivory or Bone
Joan Naviyuk Kane 45

an empirical formula of intangibles
Ellen Welcker 50

From Shale Plays
Ted Mathys 52
The Trial
Carolyn Guinzio 59

Among Some Anapests at Civic Center
Brenda Hillman 60

Aubade
Kaveh Akbar 63

12:41 p.m.
Ellen Welcker 66

A Dedication
Christopher Nelson 68

Security Camera Disguised as Birdhouse
Diana Keren Lee 70

Godo
Adam Day 71

From Mere Life: An Algorithmic Poem with Human Additions
Kyle Booten 72

maron
Irène Mathieu 75

Object Project
Tracy Fuad 77

Mouthing Green
Emelia Reuterfors 80
From *Aase’s Death*
*Aase Berg (tr. Johannes Göransson)* 84

Diary of the Ghost of a Mestiza
*Desirée Alvarez* 86

The Age of Loneliness
*Evelyn Reilly* 88

The Rabbits
*Jericho Brown* 91

The Translation
*Carolyn Guinzio* 93

Outside the Seasons
*Sheikha Helawy (tr. Yosefa Raz)* 94

From *Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing Within the Anthropocene*
*convened by Marthe Reed & Linda Russo* 95

Third Song of the Child Soldiers
*Adrian Lurssen* 102

Notes on Third World Subtraction
*Zaina Alsous* 104

Desertification
*Amanda Hawkins* 105

Poem with No Water at All
*Kayleb Rae Candrilli* 106
Sand Fire (or The Pool, 2016)
Douglas Kearney 107

From Some Words from 40–Some Days Before the Eclipse Translating Lorca’s Danza de la Muerte by Writing It in Rice Flour Around 40 Wall Street . . .
Sarah Passino 109

The Ghost of Jack London Reports the Post-Apocalypse
Brian Tierney III

Aubade
Nam Le II13

Dear Future Child
Kyce Bello II14

Elegy beginning in the shade of Aunt Mary’s mulberry tree
Camille T. Dungy II16

Office of American Innovation
Elsbeth Pancrazi II18

Lovers in a Time of Nuclear Power
Mutsuo Takahashi (tr. Jeffrey Angles) 120

An Old Song, a Frog’s Song
Benjamín Naka-Hasebe Kingsley 122

CONTRIBUTORS
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The poems collected in What Nature were written in the predawn of the Sixth Extinction Event. They were written as sea levels rose over a tenth of an inch a year. They were written as albatross on the Midway Atoll fed their young with plastic bottle caps and cigarette lighters mistaken for brightly colored squid. They were written as insect excretions collected from Thai forests formed the shellac that gives jellybeans their sheen. They were not written on Walden Pond or in the Vale of Chamouni. They were not written because poetry can save the Earth. They were written because titanium dioxide is used to whiten ranch dressing and to protect the skin from UV radiation intensified by the depletion of ozone in the stratosphere. They were written in the wake of Katrina, Sandy, Harvey, Irma, and Maria. They were written when Monsanto’s website offered “an additional $6 more per acre in cash when [farmers] apply XtendiMax® herbicide with VaporGrip® Technology, now a restricted use pesticide, to their Roundup Ready 2 Xtend soybeans along with endorsed herbicides from Roundup Ready PLUS® Crop Management Solutions.” They were written in the months leading up to New York City’s announcement that it is seeking billions in damages from BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, and Royal Dutch Shell for having “deliberately engaged in a campaign of deception and denial about global warming and its impacts.” They were written under Trump. If they are a far cry from last century’s nature poetry, it is because what “nature” is today is a far cry from sanctuary or retreat or any supposedly tranquil, separate sphere where contemplation might unfold in ease. These poems are not at ease and there is no place left to retreat. They are themselves far cries: urgent calls for rethinking our place on an imperiled planet.