

READERS' NOTES

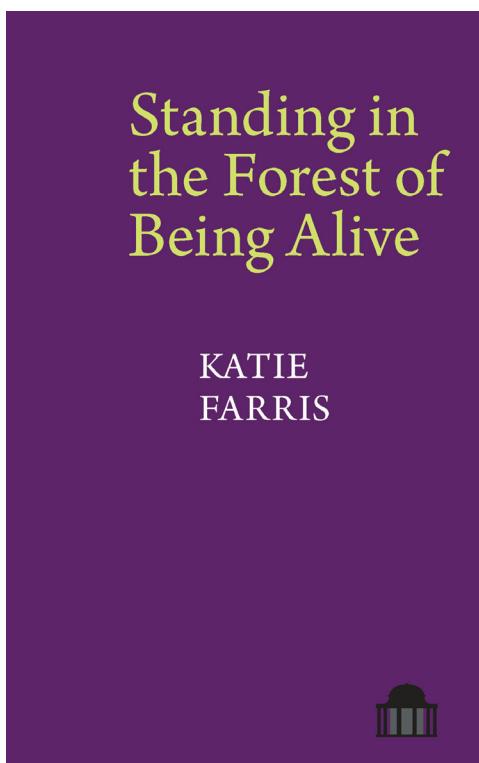
Welcome to the **T. S. Eliot Prize 2023 Readers' Notes**, in which we present the ten exciting collections shortlisted for this year's prize. The Readers' Notes offer introductions to some key poems, with reviews and biographies of the poets, and suggest creative writing prompts. Take the notes to your book group or poetry workshop, or respond individually to them in your own time. English teachers – if you're preparing your students for any Unseen Poem papers, hone their skills on this year's list.

2023

T. S. Eliot

T. S. ELIOT
PRIZE
SHORTLIST

Standing in the Forest of Being Alive by Katie Farris What reviewers say



Standing in the Forest of Being Alive (Pavilion Poetry / Liverpool University Press, 2023) by Katie Farris.
liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk (search Pavilion Poetry)

‘Why even write poetry when you have an intense diagnosis like cancer? What’s the point? Farris gives two answers. At the beginning of [‘Why Write Love Poetry in a Burning World’], she says: “To train myself to find in the midst of hell / what isn’t hell”. She is coping with her life continuing even with this diagnosis and pushes to make sure her body is still engaged with this world [...] She finishes this first poem with another answer to the question: “To train myself in the midst of a burning world / to offer poems of love to a burning world”. She has eloquently written love poems in order to stay alive, understand her path, and to bring a relentless undying hope to anyone who reads them.’ – **Liza Wolff-Francis, compulsivereader.com**

“Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones”, I used to sing in my childhood, rattling my body like a skeleton to mimic Ezekiel’s words. Reading Katie Farris’s *Standing in the Forest of Being Alive* is like reading the autobiography of those bones before their skin has been sloughed off [...] There’s a ghost in those bones, a full life lived, that must wander the land of the living contemplating “[t]his elastic earth: / with little ceremony / how it expands”, and how “a grave / is a door / we open” [...] The speaker of these poems is going through the motions of eradicating the cancer in her breasts, waiting to know if she too will become *dem dry bones*, having lost all breath and dignity, let down through a keyhole guarded by the earth’s sod door.’
– **Kimberly Ann Priest, [Harvard Review Online](http://harvardreviewonline.org)**

‘Seductress of the unspeakable, Farris approaches cancer and eros in the same breath. Stripped bare, exiled from her own flesh, confrontational in her resistance to shame, the poet is shameless [...] Farris’s defiance embraces the imperfection of bodies that offer indescribable pleasure and unfathomable pain.’ – **Alina Stefanescu, [World Literature Today](http://worldliteraturetoday.com)**

About the poet

Katie Farris’s recent work appears in *Granta*, *Poetry*, and *The New York Times*. She is the author of the chapbook, *A Net to Catch My Body in its Weaving*, which won the 2020 Chad Walsh Poetry Award, and *boysgirls*, a hybrid-form book. She is also the co-translator of many works from Ukraine, including *The Country Where Everyone’s Name is Fear* (Lost Horse Press, 2023), one of *World Literature Today*’s Notable Books of 2022. *Standing in the Forest of Being Alive* (Pavilion Poetry / Liverpool University Press, 2023) is her debut collection.

Author photo © Ilya Kaminsky



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Discussion ideas

- Emily Dickinson's life and work are very present in 'Finishing Emily Dickinson...', but what of William Blake's? What do you know of the two poets' work? Blake died three years before Dickinson was born. What do you think of the two poets' presence in the oncologist's waiting room – or three, if you add in Farris?
- The first poem in this collection is titled 'Why Write Love Poetry in a Burning World'. If 'I Wake to Find You Wandering the Museum of My Body' is a love poem, who is its dedicatee?
- What do you think the pot of chicken stock and the heavy book of titles might signify in 'Standing in the Forest of Being Alive'? What does Farris's 'forest of being alive' look or feel like for you?
- What effect does the repetition of 'fluoresces' at the end of the poem have on you?

Writing prompt

- Is there a poet or writer whose work sustains you in hard times? Write a poem for, about or to them.

Find out more

Other books by Katie Farris

A Net to Catch my Body in its Weaving (Beloit Poetry

Journal, 2021)

boysgirls (Tupelo Press, 2019)

Listen

Watch Katie Farris reading with her husband Ilya Kaminsky at bit.ly/kaminskyfarris (Katie reads from 32:00)

See also: www.katiefarris.net

If you like this poet's work, try...

- Deryn Rees-Jones
- Ilya Kaminsky
- Kathryn Bevis

T. S. Eliot Prize 2023: join in

- Look out for **video recordings of interviews and poems** by all ten of the shortlisted poets, as well as past winning and shortlisted poets, on our YouTube channel: bit.ly/tseliotprizeyoutube
- Join the poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Shortlist Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 14 January 2024. Hosted by Ian McMillan and British Sign Language interpreted, readings are simultaneously live streamed to a worldwide audience. Book at bit.ly/TSEP23shortlistlive
- Read **John Field's authoritative reviews** of every shortlisted title in full at bit.ly/eliot23reviews
- **Sign up to our weekly e-newsletters**, packed with information and insights about all ten shortlisted poets, and specially commissioned features and giveaways. Subscribe at bit.ly/eliotprizesubscribenews
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Twitter**, **Instagram** and **Facebook**

About the T. S. Eliot Prize

The T. S. Eliot Prize celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2023. Awarded annually to the best new poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland, the Prize was founded by the Poetry Book Society in 1993 to celebrate the PBS's 40th birthday and to honour its founding poet. It has been run by The T. S. Eliot Foundation since 2016. It is the most prestigious poetry prize in the world, and the only major poetry prize judged purely by established poets. The judges for the 2023 Prize are Paul Muldoon (Chair), Sasha Dugdale and Denise Saul. For more information, visit tseliot.com/prize

2023

T.S.Eliot

T. S. ELIOT
PRIZE
SHORTLIST

Finishing Emily Dickinson, First Deacon in William Blake's Church of the Marriage of Heaven and Hell, in the Oncologist's Waiting Room

Oh, Emily, goodbye!
We met in February and parted
in July—

I meet
your sweet velocity in every
thing that flies—

in mote
and star and sphere—in bird
and phosphorus of God!

Oblique, you preached obliquity—
your body, steeple for the Church of Mystery—
your bell rings on, beyond.

Standing in
the Forest of
Being Alive

KATIE
FARRIS



Standing in the Forest of Being Alive (Pavilion Poetry / Liverpool University Press, 2023) by Katie Farris. liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk (search Pavilion Poetry)

I Wake to Find You Wandering the Museum of My Body

Twenty-four Greek urns
Painted with wrestling boys
Comprise my spine.

Unusually well-preserved, my
Feet are the elaborate slippers
Of a beloved Chinese concubine,

Heavily embroidered
With vein and shadow.
My bald head? A lofty sunlit dome
Lined with pietà after

Pietà, every mourning
Virgin great in grief and
Execution.

My organs are
The furniture galleries
Everyone skips, but for you,
Carpenter, standing

Guilt-fingered before
My heart's armoire,
Stroking always toward the grain.

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Standing in the Forest of Being Alive

I stand in the forest of being alive:
in one hand, a cheap aluminum pot
of chicken stock and in the other,
a heavy book of titles. O once, walking through
a cemetery, I became terribly lost and could not
speak (no one living knows the grammar).
No one could direct me to the grave,
so I looked at every name.

A heavy bird flapped its wings over someone's
sepulcher. Some of us are still putzes
in death, catching bird shit on our headstones.
Some of us never find what we're looking for, praying
it doesn't pour before we find our names; certain
we're headed in the right direction, a drizzle begins,
and what's nameless inside our veins
fluoresces, fluoresces in the rain.

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