AMY ASH

Amy Ash is the author of the poetry collection *The Open Mouth of the Vase.* She is an assistant professor at Indiana State University. Her collaborative poetry with Callista Buchen has appeared in *Heron Tree, Spiral Orb, Stone Highway Review,* and *BOOAT.*

CALLISTA BUCHEN

Callista Buchen is the author of the chapbooks *The Bloody Planet* from Black Lawrence Press and *Double-Mouthed* forthcoming from dancing girl press. With Amy Ash, she has led collaborative writing workshops and presented on collaboration at various conferences, including the Steel Pen Writers’ Conference and Winter Wheat. She is an assistant professor at Franklin College.
**Graft and Answer**

*Collaboration as Conversation*

We finish each other’s sentences, but not to say what the other meant. To collaborate, I choose to welcome another voice, inviting it to interrupt, to finish, to reframe, to change, and I talk back. We are a chorus. We are collage. The sound, the movement, the suggestion shapes meaning. This creates space for possibility. I choose to let go of my language, let it breathe in someone else’s lungs, to return to me altered, transmuted, transformed. Respond, resound, reverberate. The individual recedes, and the poem becomes. Composition becomes an act of listening: on the page, we are saying. We have said. The poem is turn-taking, the poem is lip-reading, and we are the same plane, we balance and tilt. We are equal. We call and call, we response and response. We are without leader. We huddle close to quiet. We hear. We choose to leave the sentence unfinished, to let it wait, flapping, without body. We trust the voice that returns, that changes and challenges, and the breath that builds.

*Collaboration as Play*

Without control, we are released into lightness, into shared responsibility, greater risks. Why not, we say. Let’s try, we say. Without agenda, we can succumb, we can wander. Without atlas, we celebrate being lost, being found, lifted off the lines of the road, the words we create.

To partner is to discover new space. To throw off individual gravity, wade through the air between poles. To hide, to find, to change course, to turn in circles if only because we like to feel the breeze we make ourselves. We travel, we weave.

We refuse to consult the rulebook, but do not question the move. The die cupped in our palms, we bring it up to our mouths, whisper to it. We let go. Game cards crushed in our palms like petals, we create new combinations, new arrangements, new patterns. This one, the sharp edge of ankle bone. This one waxy pink like the underside of a tongue. What might they reveal?

I am laughing, you are laughing, and the tears are all mixed up.

*Collaboration as Community*

Fingers and bodies entwine, like the lilac bushes and oak saplings in our backyards
growing inside each other. A puzzle: which branch goes with which body? We are how many hands, how many blooms. We don’t ask what makes the part, what makes the whole. An orchard is a regna. The exquisite corpse becomes corpse, yields new growth, seedlings and shoots. Across farm and forest, across mountain, across water, across prairie and plain. Across time, across distance, across language. We village into being. We forest ourselves. We graft. We bramble and cluster. We grow.

Collaboration as Cure

For falter, the way stumbling looks like dancing. What we stumble upon. Another nudges another along, the way we walk better holding hands. There is a dark room in a dark house and single chair, but a door, but a window. Open comes from together. We can crawl forward. We can outwit the light. Even in falling, there is forward progression. This staircase welcomes us. Jump, it says. And we believe we will fly.

We subvert fear, loneliness, the promise of isolation. This room. Someone feels along the walls for where the corners meet. Someone breaks the glass. Someone finds another window. Someone stops to mend curtains, as if suturing a wound. Someone reads the scar that speaks. A language that is not mine, not yours, but ours. And we answer it.

Collaboration as Discovery

A mound of clay takes shape, under hands that mold and move, press and pause. Something unexpected and extant merges from this form. Wrist deep in damp dirt, we are pulling, pulling. What we remove and discard, what we bury. What we will find there, later, after the rain.

We return to the house, the front door curled like a tongue. Even in the stillness, we feel its warm breath. When I ask you what this means, you answer: what this means, what this means. You are pointing. We have no map, no plans crayoned to track what was before, to look for old clues hidden by steam and growth. We could be unraveling string, building a grid. Someone finds a bucket of tools. You hand me a shovel. I toss you a rake. Here, you call. Here, I call back. Here, here, here. We could be buried. We could be burying.

What is here, what we make, we will find.