

poems reflected her confidence in herself. That taught me a lot. Lucille Clifton was another larger-than-life woman, absolutely luminous, big voiced, bighearted, big hipped, who had an indomitable spirit and a laugh that shook your ribs. She just refused to be beaten into submission. To be exposed to that kind of strength and power was worth the price of admission into the world of poetry. Others followed, Sharon Olds and Carolyn Forché being primary influences. I shaped my poems after theirs, followed in their thematic, imagistic, and stylistic footprints. I mimicked their voices like a baby chimp, tried to move like they moved through a poem, sing like they sang. It was their early poems that led me to the riverbed of my own voice. I still hear their echoes in me to this day.

**MP:** Your elegant, quintessential poem about Phil Levine, “Mine Own Phil Levine,” is among my favorite in *The Book of Men*. The poem captures Levine as both teacher and poet and shows his reverence for actual, “literal things” in poems. He emphasized that poetry is not some elusive, upper-class pastime or occupation of the elite, but that it can come from everywhere—a machine shop, a tree, an open field.

In the eighth quatrain of this poem, Levine offers his wisdom, from an experienced poet of an earlier generation, to you, just starting out: “The greatest thing, he said, was presence / To be yourself in your own time, to stand up / That poetry was precision, raw precision / Truth and compassion: genius.” In Levine’s words I hear echoes of Galway Kinnell’s famous comment: “To me poetry is somebody standing up, so to speak, and saying, with as little concealment as possible, what it is for him or her to be on earth at this moment.”

**DL:** Well, Levine and Kinnell were great friends and I am an avid fan of both. It’s no surprise that Kinnell’s words leaked into my poem about Phil. I imagine I was drawing on all the important truths I had learned as a young poet. The most important thing Phil gave me was confidence in myself and in my writing, and the writing life. He said it would take me where I needed to go, and it has. *The Book of Men* is dedicated to Phil, a paltry gift for one who gave me so much, but also to all the men I have known who have helped me along the way.

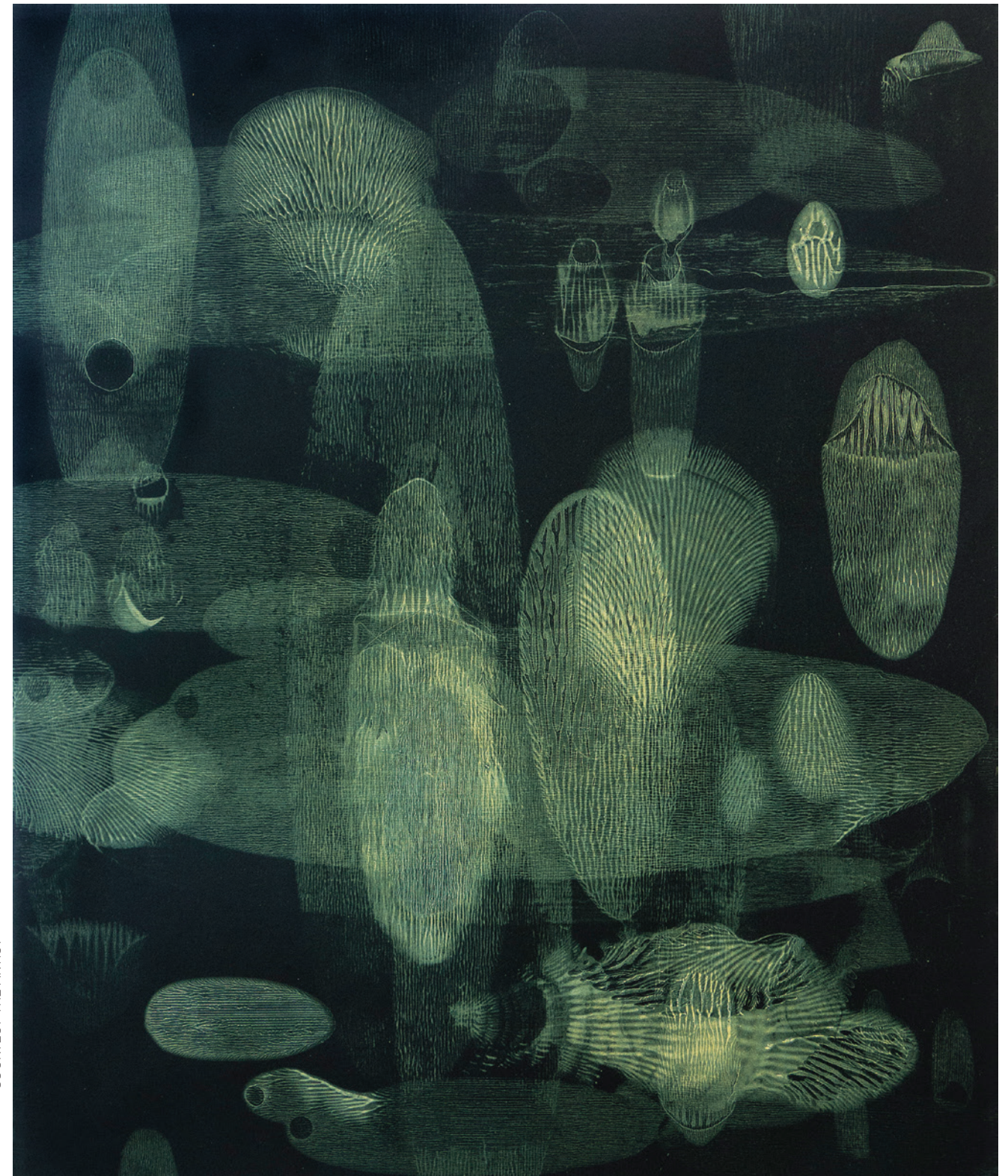
Right now, with so many men in the news who are behaving badly, I do think we need to also see the men who behave well, who support women and help them reach their goals. They are out there. I guess it’s something I’ve always been aware of, since childhood. I never knew my real father, met him only twice in my life, and my stepfather was a tyrant and an abuser. But because I read voraciously, I suspected there were men out there who were kind and loving, strong and nurturing, respectful and thoughtful. My secret goal was to seek them out in my own life. They weren’t difficult to find. My brothers, my sixth-grade teacher, the man who found me lost on my bicycle when I was three and returned me to my mother grateful and unharmed, the man at the corner store who always gave me a stick of gum when I visited, my boyfriends, my therapist, my young male students, my colleagues, my friends, my husband. And so many of my poetry teachers were men: Phil, Steve Kowitz, Galway Kinnell, Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky, Gerald Stern, Alan Soldofsky, and all of them showed me kindness and respect, took me seriously as an artist.

Li-Young Lee once spoke to me about the difficulties of growing up male, the gauntlet of violence the boy child has to endure at the hands of other boys. Listening to him speak about it quietly broke my heart, to think of him as this small child, a poet in the making, the prey of bigger boys, the constant sense of threat, having to prove himself. I had my own problems growing up as a girl, and certainly the threat of violence always lurked, but I imagined boys had it easier. They do, of course, and they also don’t. At any rate, I wanted to write a book for them, the ones I’ve known who survived the gauntlet and, against all odds, retained their humanity, and dedicated their lives to, of all unlikely things, poetry.

**Maggie Paul** is the author of *Borrowed World* (Hummingbird Press) and the chapbook *Stones from the Basket of Others* (Black Dirt Press). Her work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Hilltromper*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, *Poetry Miscellany*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Porter Gulch Review*, *phren-Z*, and *Catamaran Literary Reader*. An editor and educational consultant, she is now at work on her second collection of poems. Paul lives in Santa Cruz, California.

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