

# G H O S T W R I T I N G

Luke Bradford

© 2026, Luke Bradford

FIRST EDITION

All rights reserved. This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photographic, or otherwise, without written permission of the poet, except in the case of certain noncommercial uses permitted by United States copyright law.

Designed in Brooklyn, New York.

Download a free PDF version of this text at [lukebradford.xyz/ghostwriting](http://lukebradford.xyz/ghostwriting).

For my grandfather.

LIFE 1

|              |    |                |    |
|--------------|----|----------------|----|
| ARCHAEA      | 2  | INCHWORM       | 14 |
| BACTERIA     | 3  | EARTHWORM      | 14 |
| AMOEBEA      | 4  | SNAIL          | 15 |
| PROTOZOA     | 5  | DAMSELFLY      | 15 |
| NARWHAL      | 6  | BULLFROG       | 16 |
| BELUGA WHALE | 6  | TURTLE         | 16 |
| WALRUS       | 7  | COTTONMOUTH    | 17 |
| POLAR BEAR   | 7  | CRAYFISH       | 17 |
| LEMMING      | 8  | BLACK WIDOW    | 18 |
| MUSK OX      | 8  | SCORPION       | 18 |
| CANADA LYNX  | 9  | IGUANA         | 19 |
| MOOSE        | 10 | TREE FROG      | 19 |
| BLACK BEAR   | 10 | HOATZIN        | 20 |
| CHIPMUNK     | 11 | SPOONBILL      | 20 |
| MOLE         | 11 | JAGUAR         | 21 |
| WOODPECKER   | 12 | TWO-TOED SLOTH | 21 |
| BARN OWL     | 12 | AXOLOTL        | 22 |
| HUMMINGBIRD  | 13 | VAMPIRE BAT    | 22 |
| BUMBLEBEE    | 14 | ANACONDA       | 23 |

|                   |    |               |    |
|-------------------|----|---------------|----|
| ELECTRIC EEL      | 23 | PLATYPUS      | 32 |
| X-RAY FISH        | 23 | DUGONG        | 33 |
| OKAPI             | 24 | LIONFISH      | 33 |
| ZEBRA             | 24 | CORAL         | 34 |
| WILDEBEEST        | 24 | SEA ANEMONE   | 35 |
| LION              | 25 | FEATHER STAR  | 35 |
| CHEETAH           | 25 | OCTOPUS       | 36 |
| OSTRICH           | 25 | MANTIS SHRIMP | 36 |
| LEMUR             | 26 | SEADRAGON     | 36 |
| CHAMELEON         | 26 | MANTA RAY     | 37 |
| GHARIAL           | 27 | STINGRAY      | 37 |
| GIANT PANDA       | 28 | MAN O' WAR    | 38 |
| JAPANESE MACAQUE  | 28 | JELLYFISH     | 39 |
| SLOW LORIS        | 29 | OYSTER        | 40 |
| GIBBON            | 29 | OTTER         | 40 |
| BABIRUSA          | 30 | ORCA          | 41 |
| CIVET             | 30 | ELEPHANT SEAL | 42 |
| GREEN TREE PYTHON | 31 | PLANKTON      | 42 |
| COCKATOO          | 31 | PENGUIN       | 43 |
|                   |    |               |    |
|                   |    | ABOUT         | 45 |



L I F E

a ghost's artwork;

a haphazard,  
sunstruck orchard,  
ours to burn

A R C H A E A

kingdom of unknowns:  
of billions upon billions of ubiquitous living souls,  
undying, unknown, unsung;

blips of biology in uninviting spots;  
dominion of odd goblins in tiny blindfolds,  
swimming in pools of boiling mud,  
in oil, in bubbling slumgullion,  
in stinking bogs, in moist, puddling dung;

folk toiling in oblivion,  
subsisting on poison;  
pinpoints dividing in invisibility,  
not just in billions but in quintillions,  
on logs in softly twilit woods;

monks of biolysis,  
busy in unlit subsoil,  
unmindful of us, numb to us,  
but still symbionts to us,  
still kin to us;

voluminous, bountiful, multitudinous zoo,  
blossoming oozingly in slow longing,  
longing, longing to multiply...

B A C T E R I A

slow, unholy fungus nymphs  
who skulk on dump plywood;

old  
souls;

mud  
ghouls;

monks of dusk

fog;

floods  
of ungodly soup, of  
odd

pond oolong:

god only knows  
how long  
you slog,

unknown,

oozy,

shy,

on hollow, mossy logs

A M O E B A

tiny, living liquid circuit

in its dish

unthinking  
druid

hunting

in dull fluid

futuristic  
tiddlywink

indistinct kin

churning, cryptic glyph

P R O T O Z O A

sci-fi devices like jewel-bedecked engines;

illegible, wiggling, single-celled squiggles,  
veiled in chemiluminescence,  
dwelling in lush invisible jungles;

exceedingly minuscule vessels like slick, slimy  
dinghies,  
swimming in seemingly lifeless effluvium,  
dividing like bubbles;

humble, fluid, elusive life

N A R W H A L

tide-tossed goddess,  
its outsized tusk exquisite,  
it jousts by misty coves;

its quiet deep is empty,  
devoid of buoys, skiffs, cities;

moist medium,  
spiked zombie,  
deity of icy fog:

jet-eyed, exotic,  
possessed by some cosmic tempest,  
it mystifies us—

it *must* be fictitious,  
yet it exists

B E L U G A W H A L E

cryptic, pisciform ivory mirror;

spindrift spirit,  
moonfrost monk

W A L R U S

tiny-eyed, thick-finned, beefy-necked pinniped,  
comedic yet dignified,  
odd demigod to the foggy fiefdom on the point

P O L A R B E A R

cunning, whitish king  
swimming in icy dusk

L E M M I N G

a hardy, wayward dwarf  
who charts a path across a hazardous coast,  
past vast, hazy bays,  
toward faraway harbors  
by harsh outcrops of rock

M U S K O X

ice giant;

a titanic Arctic patriarch wandering barren tableland,  
grazing wild earth veiled in white;

a weird, eldritch enchanter,  
drably clad in beige and gray,  
beneath a raw, fragile alien fire;

a deceptively gentle winter traveler,  
heavy, indifferent, reticent, ancient,  
eating lichen at a glacial pace in a granite-laden valley

C A N A D A L Y N X

severe, sober spirit  
whose empire of timber is bright white,  
somewhere eight hours from Whitehorse;

smooth berserker  
who terrorizes grouse,  
her power swift, gruesome but gorgeous;

the superstitious visitor  
who moves through remote forests  
where the rivers freeze over,  
where the firs murmur memories,  
surreptitious, whisper-quiet  
through the subzero hush,  
her fur beige smoke,  
her irises brushfire embers;

eerie, somber prophet  
who ghostwrites her memoirs  
with mute footsteps over soft frost

M O O S E

a rural giant,  
watchful, withdrawn,  
grazing in gray light in chill Canadian rainfall

B L A C K B E A R

dusty ghost;  
doggish night god  
dozing in snowy woods;

shy, onyx divinity,  
ominous, imposing,  
hunting in fishponds;

god of moths,  
its smooth snout digging in moss

## C H I P M U N K

a beloved, alert traveler,  
avatar of yellow woods,  
of leafy glades,  
of blades of dewy grass;

fleet elf, as soft as felt;  
beady-eyed reveler,  
too eager to rest;  
lover of seeds;

a flawless, effortless dodger,  
always ready for a fast getaway over forest floors  
to a fortress below a deadfall of dry wood

## M O L E

star spirit;

an unsung artisan in a hardhat,  
taciturn, guiding its fascinating paws by instinct:  
dirt is its habitat, its industry, its birthright

W O O D P E C K E R

a gallant, jaunty militiaman  
habitually banging his bill against limbs in slanting autumn sunlight,  
flaunting his stylish hat

B A R N O W L

fey psychic,  
its huge, empty eyes its medium:

quick, seductive, shifty, shy,  
it deceives us,  
its effective mutism its disguise;

it skims these exquisite dusk skies,  
tightfisted, fetishistic;

it seeks its victims,  
hexes them,  
dives, seizes,  
executes them—

(this, despite its deep disquiet)

H U M M I N G B I R D

a jolt of joy,  
jewel-sweet,  
as spotless as a lollypop,  
atop a leaf-petal skyway;

a footloose, lawless elf,  
lovely, sleek, pastel, afloat,  
slave to a sleepless ecstasy—

cool, coy,  
as fleet as a jetpack,  
as ceaselessly at ease as a fast jazz solo

B U M B L E B E E

a wayward airship winding across an orchard of grass;

a haphazard aviator  
zigging and zagging  
on chatoyant wings;

a drowsy dryad  
drawn onward  
on a viridian pathway  
past a grazing cow,  
toward snapdragons, hyacinths, forsythias, dogwoods...

I N C H W O R M

a vegetal bus-bug,  
playful, sleek, supple,  
a subtle pale jade,  
by a dappled, leafy glade by a lazy August lake

E A R T H W O R M

blind, busy, unsung sibyl  
lying in slick piping

dull, unblinking

digging, fixing, filling in  
living (dying) in dusk

S N A I L

muddy ogre;  
dour, grouchy, bombproof worm;

oozy verderer,  
keeper of the wooded grotto,  
the dew-bedecked overgrowth,  
the weedy hedgerow;

producer of umber-hued pottery  
the texture of copper

D A M S E L F L Y

chic bionic knight  
buzzing on brightwork;

rococo conjuror,  
cocooning

BULLFROG

a pint-sized jade statesman knee-deep in a Tennessee swamp;

an insistent sensei,  
as adamant as a ship's captain,  
wet, wise,  
awake in the dawn mist;

a vain, heavysset, thick-necked jazzman,  
his incessant sax set a deadpan, dyspeptic cadenza

TURTLE

a boxy naiad basking on a sandbank in a Canadian pond

## C O T T O N M O U T H

a flexile, glassy-eyed gravedigger, agape;  
a dappled viper, a dark lizard-gray,  
by pale leaves by a reedy river;

sly killer, via a deadly elixir;  
everglade devil,  
slippery, reflexive pallbearer,  
sleek as a dagger,  
as silky as a lake's lazy ripples

## C R A Y F I S H

blue-blooded, bowlegged mudbug

B L A C K W I D O W

the hungry type;

empress, expert temptress,  
her prey trusts her,  
her pretty eyes mute, severe, empty,  
her mystery her revenge:

she murmurs her pretexts,  
suppresses her regrets—

S C O R P I O N

a muted Death Valley *femme fatale*,  
flatly a gleam,  
all daedal beauty

## I G U A N A

severe, restless emperor,  
red-crested kobold,  
mottled elder:

he prowls below the trees,  
by cool yellow flowers  
by hot, rosy rocks

## T R E E F R O G

a slim, chic amphibian,  
small, unusual, simian, slick,  
which can jump, invisibly,  
and vanish, quick as a wink,  
in a lush island sauna

H O A T Z I N

queer-perfumed elder,  
bedecked by plumes dyed blue, purple, ruby red;  
speckled empress

S P O O N B I L L

dark-eyed daughter;

a demure, detached wader,  
creamy-hued, red-feathered,  
at a muddy, vegetated waterway

J A G U A R

sly, exotic feline,  
its teeth incisive,  
its distinctive pointillistic spots hypnotic,  
like divine inkblot tests;

vision of vivid, lovely, emotionless violence;

invisible, it moves like smoke  
in symbiosis with the moon,  
fishes in silent pools,  
kills monkeys on densely wooded hillsides with little to no noise;

stylish sentinel, possessed with hostility

T W O - T O E D S L O T H

a furry, imaginary magician  
napping in gray rain  
in a muggy, virgin vivarium

A X O L O T L

red, creeping psychic breeding in mud-drunk crevices,  
her fine-fingered cyberpunk disguise  
mesmerizing, shimmering, misdescribed;

eerie, pink-skinned princess,  
figurine-sized,  
weirdened by fiendish genes:

she misremembers her prepubescence,  
spends her rejuvenescence enshrined in unnerving secrecy,  
embedded in deep murk

V A M P I R E B A T

woolly ghoul, hung on hooks

A N A C O N D A

this eerie, elusive, flexible reptile;

her subtlety is impressive:

we fetishize her size

(yes, she is hellishly huge, her physique frightful, terrible, perverse)

yet she merely swirls

slight ripples where she swims

E L E C T R I C E E L

a zoophagous oxbow hangman

who zaps and nabs bog fauna;

shadowy boogyman of jaws, fangs, spasms;

shaman of agony,

shaman of ambush,

down among dank, anonymous sandbanks;

swamp dynamo

X - R A Y F I S H

cool, lucent jewel

O K A P I

gentle, demure chestnut deer,  
the jungle's secret messenger,  
she eludes the hunters: they never even see her—  
she frequents the lush green glens where men never venture;

unruffled by summer thunder,  
she slumbers between the trees,  
her secluded bed sheltered by dense underbrush

Z E B R A

stunning, hypnotic confusion of ink on snow;

puckish djinn,  
incognito, willful in its hostility,  
fitful, flighty,  
glowing ghoulishly in luminous moonlight

W I L D E B E E S T

gnu;

a rank, rangy ragman,  
honcho of a rough convoy;

a horn, a horn,  
a hump,  
a hoof, a hoof, a hoof, a hoof

## L I O N

a huge, heavysset amber cat that eats raw meat;  
a haughty, severe, savage-tempered empress;

a master murderess,  
pure speed, pure strategy;

a shaggy-furred, sharp-eyed gamekeeper,  
she tracks the herds that graze at dusk  
by her rugged, grassy graveyard

## C H E E T A H

blond lynx;

god of luxury,  
sinuous, willowy, slim;

unforgiving lord of running,  
smiling slyly,  
killing springboks for slowing down

## O S T R I C H

a bald, baleful, beady-eyed landlady,  
mauve-legged,  
plumage all pell-mell,  
by a bleak, blank bluff;

a gangly, gawky maven,  
all flap and gabble,  
unanalyzable, and awfully puzzled

L E M U R

a hypnotizing, psychic ghost vanishing in a distant canopy;  
a botanistic bacchant, aficionado of incantations,  
odd in its fashions and in its fixations,  
gazing, vacant,  
into a fantasia of fog;

a hazy hypnogogic visitation;  
a cagy, canny castaway,  
soft as a shadow,  
coy as a cat

C H A M E L E O N

dizzy guru

bugs its  
grub

spry  
it grips dry twigs

G H A R I A L

onyx-eyed demon;

sunken enemy,  
doyenne of contempt;

bony-snouted, wet-footed omen,  
unseen, ensconced between muddy stones

G I A N T P A N D A

colorless colossus  
who chews hollow yellow symbols,  
who slumbers below showers of summer blossoms;

who slowly lowers her muzzle,  
mellow, somber, sober, shy:

whose eyes, forever elsewhere,  
bury her memory of sorrow

J A P A N E S E M A C A Q U E

ivory lord of hot fog

groggy  
by frigid twilight

S L O W L O R I S

a fuzzy-headed baby ape,  
haunted by vacant amazement,  
made meek by an unmapped detachment,  
at a muggy, vegetated encampment beneath a damp haze

G I B B O N

lesser ape;

a surreal, spectral creature,  
as stealthy as a cat;

the tall, alert, ethereal athlete,  
creamy-hued, dark-featured, all fluff,  
at a secret summer masquerade;

master puppeteer,  
restless dreamer,  
well-dressed traveler;

she eludes us as she scampers skyward,  
past a tree's pale jade rafters

B A B I R U S A

demon hog;  
homely golem, mottled goon;  
cloven-hoofed, yellow-toothed hegemon of wooded gloom

C I V E T

a sly, mournful burglar as gray as ash  
who prowls along lowland byways;

a paranormal mammal, wary as a spy,  
full of sorrow, and full of an odd glandular musk

GREEN TREE PYTHON

a slack, livid Biblical basilisk as fluid as liquid wax;

a lackadaisical Dada umbilical, mad as a jackal,  
as slick as silk,  
as vivid as acid,  
amid a dim dusk

COCKATOO

breezy designer,  
vivid in her summer dress;

leisurely, unruffled jungle queen,  
grey-billed, sunny-hued,  
lively, friendly, expressive;

freewheeling flier,  
surfing in sunshine in green wilderness

P L A T Y P U S

weird-bodied riverbend denizen,  
convincing evidence of forbidden breeding,  
or of bionic engineering gone wrong,  
her genome recombined, borrowed, foreign,  
emerging from dim, foreboding fog;

iconic indigene,  
coffee-brown, hook-finned,  
hiding her egg in her cove,  
or dozing in her rich green bower;

oneiric ocher nixie,  
conceived in venom

## DUGONG

a harmless, aimless saltwater mystic  
that trawls the marshy secret waterways  
by a warm Pacific beach rich with seashells;

a listless thalassic mammal  
at a silver bay that sparkles,  
awash with rhythmic swells

## LIONFISH

a mad, barbed beauty,  
amber, aureate, magma-red,  
at a pretty azure bay;

a gaudy, mutated, dead-eyed daydreamer

C O R A L

extensive, stunning, sensitive beds  
synthesized by diminutive denizens,  
besieged, extinguished, mummified  
in pink, in beige  
dyed white by the shifting tide;

designs in Neptune's museum:  
exquisite studies in density  
embedded in wet sediment  
in knee-deep immensity;  
fish swim between them;  
we skindive beside them

S E A   A N E M O N E

twitchy, cryptic, vivid blur,  
fitful, lurid,  
fuzzy with liquid light;

gulf glitch,  
wild druid,  
rich with ruby fuzz

F E A T H E R   S T A R

moon bloom,  
bionic lily;

willowy polypod,  
wobbly, windblown, billowing,  
unbundling in cool liquid;

downy godling,  
godly downlink

O C T O P U S

a dark-eyed alien admiral in a den in an emerald bay;

a many-legged animal in a menagerie in Hell,  
bewildering, remarkable, bizarrely made;

an eerie, many-handed jeweler in a bad dream;  
a damnable banker, engineering a many-layered deal;  
a legendary barman in a real dive;  
an evenhanded dealer in a marine gambling ring

M A N T I S   S H R I M P

bejeweled, cockeyed doodlebug;  
low, bowlegged zydeco jukebox;  
cudgel-gloved, bulky Beelzebub;

bold, cold-blooded bulb of loud zoology

S E A D R A G O N

ichthyic myth  
cultic lily

fuzzy  
with multiplicity

M A N T A R A Y

devilfish;

elusive, oil-blue colossus  
who dwells deep below us,  
whose low glide sweeps below clouds of bubbles,  
oblique eddies, helices;  
whose cool speed disguises his hellish size;

supple hulk,  
huge, hooded,  
hushed echo of God;

big-bodied, cold-blooded wolf,  
quick, possessed,  
veiled, devoid of soul,  
who eclipses squid  
beside lush coils of kelp

S T I N G R A Y

cold, blue-blooded kobold deep below kelp

M A N O ' W A R

psychedelic blue vessel,  
its life is sluggish, sightless sleep,  
deceptively subdued;

stylish, exquisite, fluid-filled bulb;  
sci-fi lightship, slick like ice,  
its supple keels pick up the little fish it slides sleekly by:

pitiless, elusive,  
it listlessly cuts the chill deep

J E L L Y F I S H

natant automaton  
topaz moon vagabond

odd, round mutant aquanaut

dark

dormant

no

motor

and

no

oar

O Y S T E R

a blind, unflinching dumpling in a pail;

a languid, half-mad animal,  
limp and unwinking,  
living in mud in a chill canal

O T T E R

a skillful midshipman,  
basking in sun,  
swimming languidly by an idyllic island;

a sly, cunning scallywag,  
lallygagging in mud,  
finding clams in a lazy Pacific bay;

a playful, waggish magician, winking slyly,  
all madcap hijinks,  
vanishing in a splash

O R C A

silent gunship,  
its inky bulk shining with milk-white highlights,  
it sleeps in blue twilight in the sunless depths,  
bubbles upwelling beside its muted length;

huge, elusive enemy,  
spellbinding, subtly unsettling,  
its immense heft glistening,  
its feline teeth intent, insistent, knifelike, sudden;

midnight devil,  
unblinking, unfeeling, killing with impunity,  
lunging like lightning within the seething tide:  
we glimpse its flukes in the mist between the isles while gulls fly;

fiendish deity,  
big, unblemished, willful, wild,  
single-minded, sentient,  
its unplumbed mind unintelligible, fluent in punishment;

its bite is its divine will

ELEPHANT SEAL

gruff, moody druid of frigid, foggy rock

PLANKTON

weird surfers;

fish seeds,  
seed-sized fish (?);

wiry sci-fi bugs  
which survive,  
submerged beside icebergs

P E N G U I N

frost ambassador;

a tall scholar who roosts at a faraway crystal coast,  
black as charcoal,  
smooth as a marshmallow



## A B O U T

*Ghostwriting* is a collection of lipograms: texts that avoid using certain letters. Each poem defines a term from nature, omitting any letter in the term itself.

Lipograms have been written for at least 2500 years in a variety of languages. In the 20th century, this form was famously championed by the Oulipo (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, or “workroom of potential literature”) whose writing is built around the use of constraint and combinatorics. Oulipo member Georges Perec wrote *La Disparition* (1969), a novel without the letter E, and *Les Revenentes* (1970), a novella with no vowel other than E.

As always, I owe a debt of inspiration to Christian Bök, whose most well-known poetic work, *Eunoia* (2001), is a collection of univocalic lipograms: each chapter allows the use of a single vowel. *Eunoia* also includes “Vowels,” which allows only the letters in its title, and Bök’s *Crystallography* (1994) includes a definitional lipogram using only the letters in “crystals.” Like this one, my books *Glossology* and *Zoolalia* are sets of definitional lipograms.

*Ghostwriting* is dedicated to my grandfather, Lester Bradford, a lover of the outdoors, who led a long career in tropical agroforestry around the world.