

PRETTY OWL POETRY



I H
I I have taken my madness out
into the fields and smoked with it.



PRETTY OWL
POETRY

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Sweat Lodge Blues

Meggie Royer

Against the sink she pulls on the bottle,
the amber crawling her throat like beads.
Through the window one moon slice
buried in the darkness like an eye,
her body warm with sweat.
Algonquin legend tells of a canoe of giants
who guided a lost family home
through the bay,
though everyone else
believed them to be cannibals.
I kiss her like that,
something unbuttoning between us,
taste the salt of her neck,
hungry.
We carve into each other like animals,
pine trees stretching through the night,
tall as monsters.

Blood Sport

Marika von Zellen

Mathematics attracts hunters. A clock-face
ticking off the seconds, minus the round encasement,
multiplied by claws. Reaching for the difference

between mastery and moss. Which came first—
the illusion or the illusionist? We mathematicians
kidnap numbers. Gag them, strike them, fold them

into crevices shaped like the human brain—
and still they hold their values. One: a farmer
driving his load of sheep to the sheerer for

the last time. Two: the crisp metallic *ding*
of a tin can traveling from dead hand to street curb.
Three: a young girl sitting in detention, scraping

a pencil along the plane of her arm. We sing to angles.
We translate corners and dub *them right*. And curves,
oh curves—the spiral of the soul *ad infinitum*,

the growths on old speckled skin, the ratio of moon
haze to moon walks. Arithmetic : strategy :: deep sea :
electrogenic fish. To feed on event horizons is to

involve the last thing we said to our lovers before we
slammed the door. We are predators. We compute
the slope of the light prowling on your apathetic
cheeks. You are all being guided by linear guns.

Doppler Shift

Marika von Zellen

There's a fracture in the mantelpiece
below the painted mask from Africa

Mom bought before, before
she was this—*wed thing*, whispering

little resignations to the clock
on the oven door at midnight.

There's a fly on its back, legs stacked
up to holy heaven though I

think its soul left through the padded
apartment door; the same way

Dad goes on nights he needs
refuge from being *wed*—*wed things*

don't paint the food dishes clean
or have sleepovers with pony

breeders who're restaurant owners
who're the leaders of folk music bands.

There's half-eaten carrot cake, moist
still with some kind of personal therapy

the curl of Mom's fingers when
she mixed up new fears with good

memories—like a homeless shadow
edging in circles around a three-story

mansion, waiting for a key to emerge
from the dry solid ground.

There's a man and a woman
sitting quiet on the sofa & holding hands

watching TV couples look for houses
as blank expressions turn to scars on their faces.

A Range of Hills

Susanna Fry

The Sierra Nevada Mountains were formed by a thinning of the North American Plate which then cracked as a result of upward pressure. Huge blocks of rock containing massive chunks of anxiety welled up at this crack and tilted up along it. The upward tilting edges became the Sierra Nevada ridge.

The friction caused by these conflicting forces made what you might call the airway more difficult to climb. Molten mantle got sticky. No one wanted to go home. On several occasions a voice-like sound went silent.

Scientists recently have come to believe that this upward movement could have been corrected with the awareness that we now call consciousness.

Shedding of layers and layers of rock allowed the crust to soften. ***You let yourself swelter into the warmth of the quilted landscape.***

In a matter of thousands of years a reality mass form shifted. Not unlike the way that who you were imploded in your last lifetime. In the circular way everything caves in on itself.

The echo of the sheep's bleat replays itself.

The shoe lace slowly unties. Mist catches on the doorjamb.

Remember when you realized that everyone was staring at you because they thought you were a mountain?

Things moved more quickly then they did. Thousands of years spun on the phonograph intertwining with facial hair and shedding cat's nails.

It was at that time that you were what you now imagine you might have been.

You'd have a better idea of who you were and how you shaped your environment if you had been swallowed up by the coast.

A 2004 study concluded that a massive amount of basaltic memory broke off the bottom of the continental crust and dropped into the entryway mantle. This may account for the thinning and weakening of the North American ego responsible for the rise of fluttering. Although many geologists lay blame on undefined "tectonic forces" that were responsible for the ragged topology it was the reactive formulas that ultimately did you in.

By a few tens of millions of years ago, so much of the clenching had worn away that the surface of the ancient range had a low relief of just a few thousand feet.

Less than 20 million years ago, the continental crust east of the Sierra Nevada began to stretch in

understanding. The crust broke into a series of numbness that you now ferment in the back room.

In the next ten thousand years, an unfolding will occur. ***You'll let go.*** The plates will crash upward. You'll exploit acorns and burn underbrush of Ponderosa pines just to have something to store in your flat-woven baskets. You'll stop checking the sun and listen to your third chakra mouth words you had forgotten.

In 2008 ancient artifacts related to your ancestral storytelling were unearthed. Some five thousand years old. Among those found: forests of Black Oaks, salted grasshoppers and the sound of sticks snapping underfoot. Once the authorities give their consent, the artifacts will be reburied in a specialized ceremony along the Stanislaus River. You'll plan to go but will be thousands of years too early. Waiting at the water's edge, your molten crust will again shift upward bringing with it sugar pines, coyote scat, and white fungus.

The Easement

Joshua Marie Wilkinson

I fall over my feet. I swallow dead air.

I want to get close enough
for you to crawl onto me & tell me
the three stories you never before would.
What I want is to cease desire's
maddening force, what it yields, what it sells
& demands, what it gets talky with.
With what it fakes in the daylight
& dreams ripely come evening.

The Easement

Joshua Marie Wilkinson

When the sea filled me
I took to listening to what
I could find inside me.
The microphone's wet buzzing
the amplifier's cracked afire
by what took us each to
the bottom of the song's
shoal drop to crash.

The Easement

Joshua Marie Wilkinson

And the twin scent's sweetness is unwelcoming
though I died in a dream as a child, the sticky
taste it left sour in my mouth was finally what
awakened me & my mother was there mantling
the day, remanding my dreams to the pine
in the dog pen, squeaking badly in the stormy night:
dream, vanquished.

Diptych

Sam Corfman

When a place is protean, flee from it. Know as you leave that where you long to be no longer exists, that longing is useless, not longing but mourning. Your time in warm water and small rooms has battled with that of asphalt and sand and none is left. The balance resistance maintains is bound by rapid acceleration and the leaking from scars' edges. When you go to ruins, take solace in other places' similar ends. Take solace. This painful growing towards living with want, this last long phase.

For the Muscles of Another

Sam Corfman

Attend your own headstone dedication, to mark the end of mourning. For your body in the summer place. Watch yourself walk away from it, following ritual's directions. The walking leaves the watching behind, grasping although rust-fed and withered. Although line-ups are unreliable, because memory is, keep choosing someone to leave as. When you can't—when for the muscles of another the choreography of not mourning is too intricate—turn to the circus-act that's not, to the trapeze and the show where it's whether you caught it in your hands—or simply leapt—

On Language

Amorak Huey

A most audacious lie: we've agreed to pretend we understand each other.

Such arrangement is the reason no one ever served Dali
the boiled telephone he craved in place of the lobster he ordered.

We do not know what happens when the heart catches up to the tongue.

This is not an aberration, there are no aberrations,
the body knows what it wants.

The Mafia Hypothesis

Amorak Huey

We surprise ourselves with occasional small kindnesses.
We have long assumed that our every interaction
is motivated by threat.
Loss and desire, held together by spit.

The cowbird will destroy the nest of non-cooperative birds.
Birds adjust.
The strange egg
becomes familiar.
We can get used to anything –

if you make me another mimosa, I will drink
though I have bad memories of champagne.
The value of retaliation has always been the question.

When the season turns, we will gather enough twigs and scraps
to start all this again.

When I Cut My Hair I'm a Paper Doll

Kimberly Grabowski

Nothing to weigh me down.

I'm trying to escape signification, but it's tangled

in my hair, such convoluted knots I can't bear to brush
them out. An ex-boyfriend wanted to cry every time

he heard the rake of a comb running through my wet
hair, like I was killing something in a most reprehensible

way, using this plastic-toothed paddle. If I cut it all
off, I wouldn't be the-girl-with-long-hair, but I would be

the-girl-who-cut-it-all-off. Frankly, I would still be girl.
But I would have nothing to run my hands through

in nervous sighs, no constant un-tame that needs
ordering. I just want to feel engulfed, want men to feel

suffocated sometimes. And how else would I gauge
the rate at which I'm falling apart? It's the only

acceptably dead fragment of me. I resent it and I cover
it to subvert the way it owns me. Reigns me in, revenge

for elastic bands, where it began to break from containment.
I never wanted to be manipulated this way, to gather

identity in one hand behind my head, silenced by bobby-pins
in my mouth. Never wanted to like it. The times I was naked

in front of the mirror, bright red from the blow-dryer's heat,
trying to regain homeostasis. Nothing gets done

fast enough on the "warm" setting, it's hot and high
or air dry, those are the options. When I go to sleep

with it wet, I wake up sick with residual cold,
the way my hair holds on to everything I want

to forget, the smell of man from the night before
reborn with water. The way my hair demands looking

and I demand hiding—we have an understanding.
It keeps my hands occupied. Maintained and framed.

Something About Monsters

Chas Hoppe

The girl who thought she knew something about monsters
thinks ghost hunters are trapped inside the TV.

The boy who neither drinks nor says Bloody Mary
has cornered the market on fisheyes and reenactments.

Death as commodity feels natural with spirits on the couch.
Elsewhere, a celebrity eulogy slips out from the cloud.

Something About Monsters

Chas Hoppe

The girl who thought she knew something about monsters prefers action words—active voice—to clumsy descriptors rendered lazily, uninspiringly, predictably. Her eyes move from the rudder, the anchor, and the figurehead on the prow, imploring the Monster not to choose, to leave her indefinite, indefinitely.

She ties herself to the mast. The ship will find the shore, but first to know the sea.

The boy who wrote first drafts for sea captains swallowed the message whole with the bottle. He doesn't know how to revise himself, to build an audience, to participate rather than to pander. He is a sorter, not an organization. He is a curator, not the information. He is the wanting for detail, not the lack of definition.

If he is to be lost at sea, he will do so in a dinghy with a monster of a cliché atop his shoulder.

Something About Monsters

Chas Hoppe

i.

The girl who thought she knew something about monsters
crow-strutted over the event-horizon-as-neighbor's-lawn,
the vending machine—prize boy in sight, but puzzle-bound
as if mythos, photos, and cronos compressed to a single point—
the receding screams of an attack monkey on tree-dream prowl.

The albino crocodile and the donkey reset the gravity well
convinced escape velocity is the same thing as waking up,
play high-wire on the event horizon, screaming into themselves
until one says, “We can sidestep falling branches all day,
but failing that, we can staple your head back together later.”

It wasn't for lack of wolf that the girl chose to ignore the path,
more that she had no reason to think she wouldn't find her way.
She remembers now, how she found him in the gravity well,
paused, and asked, “How do you know when a crocodile is home?”
The monster knew, but couldn't reach escape velocity in time.

ii.

The monster interrupts the boy

who caught flack on walks to school
for knowing words like *premeditated*

who can't say *caboots* without feeling
the tingled-spine promise of adventure

who begs chatterbox lips to fall in line
to prove he can make a straight face

who fixes his gaze, steadies his voice
and strips the peanut gallery of its salt.

*

The monster interrupts the boy

who has taken to curating interruptions
like they're bargain bin idols for display

who weighs them out against sandbags

to preserve a facsimile of the sacred

who courts boulders as if he's only happy
outrunning the temple's collapse, idol intact

who knows precisely the words to speak
but only transcribed half the medallion.



~ ANTIGONE IPA ~

FEELING LOYAL TO A FAULT?

DRINK ANTIGONE BEER AND FORGET
YOU GIVE A SHIT



The Woods

Joe Meno

In walks Haley in a beige sweater that shows off her tits. I ask her where she's been and she says she's been at class. I ask, "You dress like that for class?" but she only rolls her eyes. For the last month she's been taking classes at community college. The place is depressing. It's a dump. The teachers are all divorced, the students all in wheelchairs. "So are you ready?" she asks me. I glance up at the clock and see I've still got ten minutes left. The supermarket is empty; in the back I can see Pedro mopping up by the freezer section and Mr. Lampierre, the assistant manager, at his little counter counting up receipts. I tell Haley it's going to be another couple minutes. She yawns and I ask her to tell me about her class.

"It was fine. I think I decided to become a vegetarian."

"You what?" I say.

"I was in biology class and my teacher was talking about all these chemicals and things and I decided I don't want to put any animal products into my body."

"No animal products? What about this kind of meat?" I ask, pointing to my groin, but Haley only rolls her eyes. Jokes like that used to crack her up, but now? She sits across the counter and for the next ten minutes we don't speak.

We end up in the woods, which is the place we always go. We fool around for a while until the windows of the pick-up are steamy; but when I try to get my hand down her pants, Haley stops me. It's been like this for a few weeks: start and stop. Out of pity, she gives me a handjob. But it barely even counts, because the whole time, I can practically see her rolling her eyes. When it's over, I clean up with an old flannel shirt hidden beneath the bench seat. Haley stares out the window at the unmoving trees and says, "Do you know what the largest living organism in the world is?"

"That's easy. A whale."

"No," she says. "It's a fungus. There's this fungus in Oregon that's a few miles long. It lives under the ground. It's like a couple of thousand years old."

"A fungus isn't alive. It's like a tree. Or a bush. Those things aren't alive."

"It is alive. You just can't see it. People walk around right on top of it and the only time you notice it is when there are some mushrooms growing out of it. But it's always there. It's called the mycelium. It's always there, totally invisible, underneath the ground. It's this living, breathing, organism."

"Wow," I say. "It sounds like you got your money's worth today."

"It's got one job," she says. "The mycelium. To decompose stuff. Animals, plants, anything that's

dead. It breaks down the dead stuff so new stuff can grow.”

I nod because I really don’t know what else to say.

“Isn’t that amazing?” she asks. “Your whole life could go by and you’d never even know it was there.”

“It’s amazing anyone gives a shit about it. It’s amazing someone got paid to tell you that.”

Haley looks at me and squints.

“Why do you have to be such an asshole?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Why do you have to pretend to be somebody you’re not?”

“That’s it,” she says. “My mom told me you weren’t going to be happy I was going to school.”

“Happy? That you think you know a bunch of important stuff no one actually cares about. So what? You go to a shitty community college and I don’t. Big deal.”

Haley blinks her eyes twice and says, without a pause, “I think we need to take a break.”

“A break? You mean you think we need to break-up? Are you serious?”

“Maybe. I don’t know,” she says and then she turns away from me.

“Well, that’s fine with me. You can go to class and stick your tits in anybody’s face you want.”

She’s silent after that. I start up the truck. Then I quickly turn it off again.

“This is stupid,” I say. “Why are we breaking up?”

“It’s just...we’re different. We’re different people now.”

“From when? From a month ago? You’ve only been in school for a month.”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“You don’t?”

“No. Let’s just end this as friends.”

“But we were never friends,” I say.

“You know what I mean,” she says.

I’m silent for another moment. “Can I still call you?” I ask.

“Why? We’re broken up.”

“I don’t know. Just to talk.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Well, can we still text? Can I still send you emails?”

“What for?”

“I don’t know. Just to know you’re still there.”

“What?”

“Even if I can’t see you. Just to know you’re there.”

She thinks about it for a moment and then says, “Fine. But I’m not writing you back.”

“Fine. That’s cool. That’s okay,” I say. I start up the truck. It’s quiet. Haley doesn’t look at me for the rest of the ride to her house. It’s a long drive back.

Storied About

Kathryn Roberts

There are days when I feel storied about, days when even the dog who ended up in my living room narrates my hours without my express permission. The unwashed dishes relegating my life in primetime snippets, laundry telling more about me than I do in lengthy phonologues with my mother. If all this telling would be up front about things, I wouldn't mind so much. But I am a child waving hands and jumping up in front of parents discussing punishment, not seeing me. Gossiped about even when I shrug off to be alone. An apartment found me with a collection of indiscriminate, used furniture—a coffee-tabled library avoiding the brown and sticky circles from a previous caffeinated life; a bed whose stained sheets stayed on even after the yard sale to impart the feeling of another body to my mattress; a bureau stickered with the two- and three-black-lettered destinations encircled in white, series of initials that could be constructed to mean anywhere but meant somewhere to the dead young woman whose brother sold me the cheap plywooded drawers for an antique price, feigning sorrow at parting with a travel guide. Even the carpet regales my life to the subfloor, describing the translucent, rough, hard rubber-like patches of yellowing flesh at the peripherals of my feet, the balls, the heels, sometimes the edge of a toe, as they scrape across its softness. I shuffle even at home. Or maybe the too-heavy crunching of stiletto-points trying to support the weight of me that seems to expand vertilinearly, my body getting heavier up and down, thighs expanding up to push my stomach higher, into the ribcage. I should be taller, since I'm not wider. Sometimes at night I try to slough off some words to a journal, imprint myself so others don't get there first. But I write redundant.

Trivial

Kathryn Roberts

When we stand in front of the ocean we are both the same degree of small. We won't watch the waves together again, not like we used to, not like back when I had a disposable camera and you still pretended a smile. But when you stand at the edge of the water on a trip off the Songtan base—maybe to Mokpo, my best guess when I try to imagine where you go for excursions in your new life—and look out, even though it may technically be a sea and not the ocean, I know you will feel miniscule. This is not the same as insignificant. Insignificant like revisiting the street of our first apartment and wondering if maybe I should have made pumpkin pie instead of a chocolate torte for Thanksgiving dessert. Our first time hosting both our families, which now were a larger, jumbled family, and I tried to shake things up. Maybe I thought that a group of ten meant more in the universe than a single person. That, by marrying you, I grew closer to having a say.

Sometimes I imagine our dress rehearsal marriage with our roles reversed. I like to pretend that if I were the one to trivialize you, I would have done so gently, as a favor. I would have held your hand as I introduced you to your eventual fate. I would have done so with humility. Once, I wrote your new wife a letter. It took a long time to get the words right. In the first draft, I warned her of how small you'll make her feel, even if she is heavier than I am and has more weight to throw against yours. In the second draft, I congratulated her for rehabilitating you. In the one I mailed to *Unknown Address in South Korea*, I simply asked her to remember you like KitKats more than Snickers.

Portland Street

Katie Cortese

When the neighbor lady sits on her stoop, gardening gloves past her wrist, watching the sprinkler rainbow her manicured lawn, you say she is thinking of dinner, peeling potatoes for stew, hacking a red mass of meat to chunks, and that she will start it soon, in another minute, two, as soon as the breeze dies and sweat cools on her collarbones and the strength ebbs back to her bones, but I say she is thinking of the day she moved in with her new husband, the stooped man in the driveway slowly sweeping pine needles to the street. She sewed curtains of eyelet that welcomed in pinpricks of light. Much has changed, but her house still stands, at least. Oak trees still shade the yard. And spring is still the best time to sit outside in Tallahassee if you don't want a tan, and she doesn't. It's clear from the way her arms are bare only from glove to sleeve, from the hat we've seen her wear of tight-woven straw. Today, though, no hat. Today she watches the girls in pink masks skim by on pink scooters, shading her eyes to watch them pass.

Your Mom Has Passed

Ron Burch

That's what the voice on the phone keeps saying. He repeats it at least five or six times. You're unsure because you hear him but cannot seem to hear him at the same time. And even though you might have heard him, and understood him, and responded to him, you can only say, What? And so he says it again. You know exactly what he means but you can't muster anything more than a What? For some reason, your brain is having trouble accepting this statement until

your girlfriend, who is sitting next to you, asks, What happened? And you simply reply, My mom passed away. I'm sorry, the male voice, a friend of hers you met once, on the phone says. I'm sorry, he says and

you are now filling with grief. You can feel it coming. It is not like a wave crashing down on you. It is a wave coming up from inside you, filling your entire body, crashing out of you. You do not need to hear more from the man at this time, your body decides, and it hangs up the phone and only after the phone is put down, do you realize that you ended the call.

You do not know how it happened.

You don't know where it happened.

You only know that it happened and that, for now, that is enough.

Vaugirard

Janna Layton

The two men move in downstairs in summer, and it's odd. They don't look like tourists and they don't look like expats. The older one has a long black and gray ponytail and mustache and wears a leather jacket and cowboy boots. The younger one wears torn jeans and a tight tank top and his left arm is bandaged and in a sling. They both wear dark shades. Their ages could mark them as father and son, but the older one is Asian and the younger one is white. You can hear their voices from your window when they're moving in: they're American, like you. When you see them coming home with McDonald's that first night, you feel that twinge of American embarrassment and nearly expect them to put a pink plastic flamingo in the flower bed.

There are few other Americans in the building besides businessmen, and these men don't seem to be going to any office. You wonder if they're disappointed with the neighborhood, the southern center of the 15th arrondissement. It's calm, residential. "Boring," according to some of the other young teachers at the English language school where you work. It's a pronouncement that makes you feel bad for choosing incorrectly, like you've been caught admitting you have no plans for New Year's. You tried to be more exciting when you moved here—you browsed in Shakespeare and Company for hours hoping to meet a tight-knit group of bohemians, imagined living in a crowded garret in the city center.

But you like this neighborhood—its alleys are warm with gray light from the off-white apartment buildings; the quiet parks are perfect for contemplation. The area used to be a rural town called Vaugirard until 1860, when—like Passy, like Montmartre, like Belleville—it became part of Paris.

You rarely see your neighbors, but you keep hoping to run into the men. They seemed out of place on move-in day, but intriguing, and you wonder if you were too quick to judge, if the effect will be muted when you see them again. You don't see them for nearly a week, but then one evening when you walk back from the Convention Metro Station, they are both in front of the building.

The older man is tinkering with a motorcycle by the curb—a motorcycle that wasn't there before. The younger one is leaning against a bike rack, his arm still in the sling.

"Bonsoir, mademoiselle," says the older man with a kind smile as you approach.

His accent isn't good, but he's understandable. He is still wearing the leather jacket and cowboy boots.

"Bonsoir, monsieur," you say. "Et bienvenue au quartier."

"Merci."

The younger man says nothing but nods once. He's still in jeans and a tank top. You think of those S.E. Hinton novels you read in middle school—novels of cigarettes and knife fights that were supposed to be cautionary tales but were instead safely alluring. You imagine this young man as some Dallas or Motorcycle Boy type who has been whisked away from trouble after a brawl. But to here?

You're wearing a favorite dress, light blue with buttons up the front. C'est Paris, you think.

CONTRIBUTORS

Ron Burch's short stories have been published in *Mississippi Review*, *Pear Noir!*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Pank* and others. His first novel, *Bliss Inc.*, was published by BlazeVOX Books. He lives in Los Angeles, where he is Co-Executive Producer on a TV show for DreamWorks Animation. He is also a produced and published playwright. Please visit: www.ronburch.net.

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Katie Cortese is the author of *Girl Power and other Short-Short Stories* (ELJ Publications, forthcoming 2015). Her work has appeared in *Smokelong Quarterly*, *The Citron Review*, *Word Riot*, and elsewhere. She teaches creative writing at Texas Tech University where she serves as the fiction editor for *Iron Horse Literary Review*.

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Chas Hoppe's most recent publications include *Salt Hill*, *Spork*, *TAB*, and *Oyez Review*. His collaboration with Joshua Young, *The Diegesis*, was released via Gold Wake Press in 2013. He is a former managing editor of the *Bellingham Review* and a current poetry editor for *Heavy Feather Review*.

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