

Pretty Owl Poetry

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Remembering How to Breathe

Cathy Ulrich

The contortionist at the end of the world finds a building with vents like the ones in the movies, vents big enough to live in. Unscrews a grate from the wall, pulls herself inside, makes herself a mouse. The contortionist crawls through the vents, screwdriver in her mouth. The sound of her knees and palms scraping metal is the only sound in the world. The contortionist thinks *oh, I have forgotten how to breathe.*

In the old days, the contortionist used to do a trick where she would strike a match with her toes, light a cigarette in her mouth. She would do this curled over backward, face to the camera, shake the match out when she was done.

She would end with a joke: *Smoking is bad for your health*, let the screen fade to black.

The contortionist thinks of those days as *old*, thinks of everything from before as *old*, as *lost*, as *dinosaur bones*.

She crawls through the building vents, tries to remember how to breathe.

There used to be comments left on the contortionist's videos after she uploaded them. She would scroll through them on her laptop, unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth, legs lotus-crossed. They said the usual things, *wow; that's amazing; it's all photoshopped; what's your favorite position *wink**; and she ignored them all, except once, someone left a comment that said *I don't even think you are real.*

The contortionist bit down on her prop cigarette, typed back quickly: *I'm real. Of course I'm real.*

She said: *Are you real?*

And there was never any answer.

The vents in the office building are winding and gray and filled with dust. The contortionist coughs and coughs, leaves marks of her hands and knees behind her. She dropped her screwdriver when she realized she wouldn't be able to open any grates from the inside. It rattled away from her, down and down and down the sloping vents. It was louder than anything the contortionist could remember. For a while, she curled herself into a ball, covered her ears, thought *quiet, quiet, quiet*.

Sometimes, the contortionist used to go to clubs, order whiskey sours, tap a pretty girl on the shoulder, *dance with me?*

The contortionist remembers holding a drink as she danced, remembers the rattle of ice cubes, remembers ordering another and another and another, remembers deep kisses in alleys behind clubs, remembers applying lipstick alone after, *Scarlet Empress*, she always liked the name, puckering her lips, *how do I look* to the empty bathroom mirror.

She'd fall asleep, those nights, on her apartment floor in front of her laptop, her own videos looping and looping.

When the world ended, the lights went first. The contortionist in her apartment in the dark. She tucked herself small, pulled herself into a cupboard with a crackling bag of popcorn, sat in the dark, sat in the dark and waited.

She thought of the last girl, the last club. She thought: *I should have brought her home.*

She thought: *I should have brought any of them home.*

After a while, the contortionist pushed the cupboard door open, let her eyes get used, again, to light.

She went up and down the apartment building hallways, knocking on doors, neighbors she had barely known, *are you there, are you there, is anyone there.*

She knocked until her hands were sore, she knocked for days.

She thought: *I can go anywhere now.*

In the vents in the office building, the contortionist breathes air that is old and stale, thinks how dust is mostly made of skin particles, thinks *I am breathing in the dead*, pulls herself through the vents, thinks *I remember how to breathe*, thinks *I am real*, thinks *I am breathing*, and crawls, forward and forward and forward.

My Parents' Marriage as a Kitchen That Keeps Being Entered

Sierra Rose Lindsay

On the stovetop: an empty burner. The oven
a thick crack *pop* of cooking oil, cabinet slammed
with my mother's body.

I am not in this poem. In this poem,
the gynecologist between my legs. *Might*
be dead in there. My parents' marriage
has been dead for some time now, just as the rib
rack cooks in its own fat. In the kitchen
my mother serves and slides a knife
between the skin left clinging. I don't like chewing
on bone and knowing that in some other life
I could be chewing my own meat.
I welcome others to the table
of my open legs. I ask them to eat. I make
every poem about a man
who has made me consumption and I am hungry
but my mother grows two scaly wings
and breaks through the kitchen ceiling.
Plaster scatters across the kitchen
and my father enters, brushes dust
from the table, eats. I am not in this poem
but in this poem my parents' marriage
turned over for its own fat, probed with a finger
for anything left kicking. I take
my feet from the stirrups, starving.



I spend a lot of time thinking about:

Chelsea Margaret Bodnar

How none of us are supposed to be here:
the whole bad show
turned off
by everyone
and rebooted by
clueless billionaires.

This morning I sleep in
and in and in,
tunneling the dirt

behind
my eyes. I wake

covered
in blood,

wring it out of my clothes,
and disastrous/unhopeful,
take my new medication.

How long will it take before my veins
don't creep up on me
from under
skin

that nightmare organ
in the floor-length mirror
enveloping my Real Self in its
terrible
catsuit;

I want to be sheer
like a nightgown,
paper doll,
an angel all covered in eyes.

In hell, even regular people
have, at minimum, three faces.
Sideshow animals
split-hooved and upset,
every head
trapped in equally unbearable places,
each one thinking
None of us are supposed to
be here, none of us
are meant to do anything
specific

I want to be a nightgown
I want to be
seethrough and delicate
and yes, maybe I want to live through this

I want you to put me on
and wring the blood out from
my mesh

my lace
still somewhat pretty in its red

“Pre-Everything”

Ellis Light

It was a Friday when I noticed everyone
in town was a skeleton. I dreaded Monday.
I spent most time crouched in corners,
baking dirt, or filling flowerpots with knives.

But I wasn’t ready for the redbird
flying at my forehead, ready to change everything.
I paid for everything in nickels,
spoke in code, locked everything away.

I betrayed no pledge because I made no pledge.
Isn’t everything fake? Doesn’t *everyone* feel awful
all the time about themselves, their body,
their irreconcilably wrong plumage?
No one told me anything.

I’m armed to the teeth with rabbits’ feet.
I’d like to see you try
to get in there, past the snakes,
the cup, the bishop and the whip.



Friday Night at the Cinema

Keely O'Shaughnessy

“Consciously or unconsciously, we manipulate our memories to include or omit certain aspects. Are our memories therefore fictions?”

— 168: Reality Hunger: A Manifesto by David Shields

They were at the cinema, my mum and her first boyfriend after my dad. They went to the last screening of *Pulp Fiction*. My dad followed them there: the headlights of his car on full-beam blinking in the rear-view mirror. He turned left when they turned right. He took the second exit off the roundabout and doubled back. They were sure he'd gone. I can see the whole scene. The foyer has spotlights on and smells like sweet toast. Mum presses her hands to the glass of the popcorn warmer while her boyfriend collects the tickets. The lights are too bright. The image in my head is like a grainy television set.

This is not my own memory. It's my mum's, but it's like I inherited it. I nurtured it. She only ever told me one thing about it, in anger. I didn't appreciate what she'd been through bringing me up.

Although this is a stolen memory, I know it. I can see it as if it were mine; I'm close to it. I'm not looking in through binoculars.

She told me about the knife (a Swiss Army penknife bought as a birthday gift by my grandparents) and how it was pressed into the back of the folding seat chair. I added the sound of ripping fabric. I can inhabit the space where it happened. The *snap, snap* of synthetic threads.

On the screen, John Travolta and Uma Thurman dance on an oversized clock face in monochrome outfits. They sweep their fingers over their eyes in a V-shape. Then they do that underwater jive thing. Clubbers watch them in a semicircle. Coloured lights flash. The wall behind the dance floor is stone effect.

I tried putting this memory alongside Bret's interrogation scene—Samuel L. Jackson shooting the couch—but it doesn't seem right. I think of the fan T-shirts that copy that image. The block-print. The moustache and Afro combo. I have watched the film ten times or more and I think all of this must have happened after the dance contest. It fits best alongside the bit with the adrenaline shot. Panic and then the loud intake of breath.

The problem is the event has become the movie. All Hollywood, a shiny wrapped package, unreachable. One of those parts in an action film where the good guy rolls from the shell of a burning car moments before it spontaneously explodes. He is unharmed and you find yourself saying, “As if.”

The lights are down and the cinema is half-empty; that's how it happens, unnoticed.

My mum watches the screen. Her boyfriend's arm grazes her breast as he reaches for popcorn. She wriggles in her seat. Her boyfriend pauses, his hand halfway towards his mouth. He emits a squeal that is more like the sound of breath being stopped. His body is rigid. He tries to signal my mum with his eyes. His pupils move from side to side, the pressure from the knife in the small of his back, the tip of its blade dulled by the seat's padding.

My dad whispers: "Do you feel lucky, punk." This isn't a question.

He has been sitting behind them the whole time. In fact, he was there first. This is how I see it. He wears ripped chinos and a jumper over a hooded top. The hood is up and shadows his eyes. His beard is unkempt.

In Diaspora

Rita Mookerjee

In my town, white families burst and spread
like ripe fruit, ribbons of pulp trailing seeds behind
them while I search in the past for a scrap of skin,
any hints about all these brown people I never met.

I leave the grocery store after not finding
rosewater and star anise and walk home alone.
While I search for spices and a niche that can hold
my odd body, I call up dead ancestors who haven't

the slightest idea who I am *wrong number*
they say. They hang up and go back to drinking mango
lassi. Which is just as well since we are strangers
but sometimes, it feels like they were never

really here to begin with. In truth, I don't know half
of their names. Maybe they are as real for me
as I was for them. I feel like I could disappear in a mass
of people as a smudge of broken color marks the death
of my family name. In the end, who am I to the ocean that drowns me?



passing

p. hedges adams

my wrists expose me. the other details are perfect:
soles adding height to height, hair summer-short,
chest with no need of binding. codex of arbitrary
rules. perhaps the looser trousers help, or
perhaps i only look like i am drowning.
the mirror and i spend so much time
on notation, and still the world sings
the lyrics wrong. how do i say that i want
to be everything. at once a fist and
an open hand. chin tucked down, looking
at the sky. in the store, i am called ma'am,
darling. my voice is a marker. too much
like a flute, unrestrained, trilling. or my posture,
like a musician: so careful, and with such elegant wrists.

How to Sleep Naked

Brynn Martin

First, take off your clothes.
You have to get naked to sleep naked.
Next, stand in front of a mirror,
pinch your stomach fat
between two fingers,
marvel at how much skin
you can snag.

Pat your belly,
clock the way it undulates
with the slightest touch.
Look yourself in the eyes.
Tell yourself it's okay you look
like this. Press three fingertips
into your double chin,
scrape them down your neck,
imagine you can reshape
your body with only a touch.

But this is about self-love, right—
the sleeping naked? Get intimate
with your skin.
Run the pad of your thumb
across your bottom lip.
People who touch
their mouths are sexy
and you have a sexy mouth.
Cup a breast in your palm,
weigh its soft heft, don't wish
it was rounder, perkier,
just squeeze your nipple
between two fingers.
Marvel at the stiff pinkness,
the peak that forms
though you don't feel much.
Press harder until it hurts,

until the zing of arousal
shoots through you.
Who says you can't
turn yourself on?

Climb in bed.
Feel the cool huff
of air as the sheets settle.
It's just the cotton blend
and your naked body, baby.
Just you and the effort
to feel unafraid.



Wayward

Andrena Zawinski

It was already 108 degrees when Valentina and I were dropped at the 5th and Juárez stop after an hour's ride from Cancún to Playa del Carmen. We plopped down onto our suitcases and into our silences at the curb, both wondering where to go next on this first unscripted journey together. That's when Ramon approached, offering us cheap lodging for the night, complete with mosquito nets patched with bandaids. We laughed at his joke, but realized he was serious. He guarded our tiny cabana overnight, sitting on a frayed lawn chair next to an outdoor generator from which ran an extension cord to the light bulb dangling from the thatched roof, a roof from which bugs with freakish faces dropped to the tile floor. But this story is not about the bus or the hut or the bugs or even about the erotic foot massage Ramon proposed the next morning.

Our first full day there at the playa, we wheeled our suitcases to the bus station's bag check then took to wandering along the fine sands away from the few hotels in the sprouting 90s resort area, kick splashing in the Caribbean surf, passing few others than occasional nude sunbathing Europeans. Just about when we needed a rest, we came upon a deserted ashram. From its courtyard a Mayan boy emerged with a sire, dam, and their foal, offered to rent them to us for the rest of the day. Val mounted the stallion, experienced at riding and jumping in her native South America. I climbed on the mare, who barely trotted, her foal stopping her to suckle every now and then, which was fine with me having grown up in a rustbelt in the States. Just off the stretch of beach, we meandered through a sleepy village where no one seemed to notice us bareback, two gringas in tube tops and short shorts. But this story is not about the village or the horses or the boy, not even about stripping down on what turned out not to be a nude beach.

Our adventurous spirits carried us next to Tulum by local bus. Some past rider's heated anger veined our window glass, and Val and I settled in to watch a doubled reflection of a mother with a child at her breast, purring her name as *Muñequita Linda*. At that, Val looked at me tenderly and said, "Aimee, my mother used to lovingly call me that, too, her little doll. Now you are *my* muñequita." Normally, I would never allow anyone to address me by any diminutive, but with Val it felt so innocently affectionate and intimate. With a wink and sideways smile, I slid down into the seat to sleep, but this bus had a bit of everything from lovers wiping each other down with scented wipes to a man stroking his clucking hen; and then there was the driver reading his illustrated romance novel between making change and calling towns. At every stop en route, kids boarded to hawk sweet buns, bananas, helado de coco, the smell of corn flour on coals wafting in on a welcome wind. Once at Tulum, we made our way through bulldozed paths, scaled pyramids in the sun, missed getting stung at pricey tourist stands and by a swarm of bees. We also missed the last bus back. But this story is not about the bus, those who peopled it, or even where we would go next.

Jungle monkeys barked as the sun set fast. So when headlamps came toward us, we flagged that bus down. Onboard, headed in the wrong direction, we were off to the colonial town of Mérida. I drifted off to sleep dreaming Puuc Hills, a rain god's hooked nosed mask, the pyramid of an egg hatched dwarf. Awakened by diesel smoke at the dash circling the bobble head of a Virgin icon, we gaped at each other wondering what would be next. Other riders stood to stretch in the aisles, watched the driver tinker with hammer and wrench. No one asked questions.

I got lost in a book of poetry about living somewhere else, identities hidden beneath layers of everyday living. But this story is not about the ruins or dreams or the bus we missed or bus we took or even about how we would get home. This story is about finding a way.

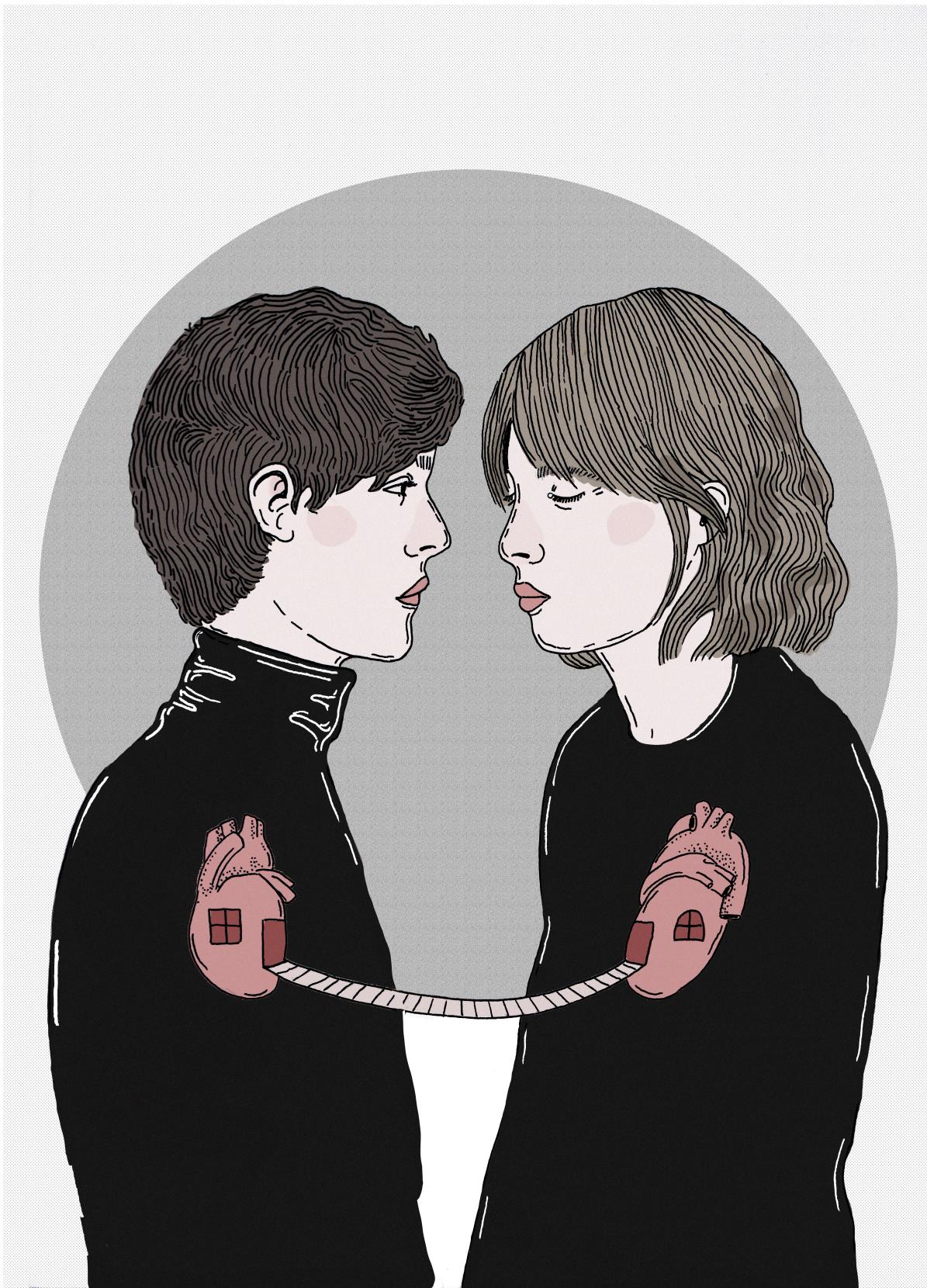
seasonal affect

Elaine Cannell

Untethered, I am crumbling leaves and the grounds
in my cup, marching to somewhere warmer or at least
less gray or at least not the sterile sidewalk lined
in broken-blinds observers. I want you to understand:
I am queen of the Midwest, a creature in two scarves
with hand warmers in its boots and a great black umbrella
like folded wings beneath one arm. I won my crown
after winter took me. Like that. Hard, on my knees.
An event which stopped green trees from growing.

This is not that story, the secret one sitting
south of my organs, all singing sap. All fiery-red
and seeping. Listen: the cold crackles, burrows deep—
through cashmere and wool and the sweat
two hands make in their centers. The cold laughs
at our red noses and the wetness of my lips
and the way my fingertips are bluer than spring violets
and the way the heaters dry up our eyes at night.

The cold is a lot like forgetting, or, it forgets
your limits, your car-talk, the way flesh dies.
I want you to understand: this is the kingdom.
Its hot tower rises between thighs and the electric
blanket, its only prisoners gloved and wanting.
It asks that you sip this, this warmed whiskey
and tea, this embodied promise, this dark piquant
liquid of remembering the right word, the hidden
thought, the fleece envelope. The heat that tongues make.



Staging Ground

Nichole Brazelton

The air is too warm for October.

Still, the tree knows

she must push her own leaves,
those little extensions of herself

from her branches,
to make way for an unimagined spring.

You look planted, green and breakable
standing on the corner, waiting for the bus

with an early slip of sun
draped across your shoulders.

No longer my small golden boy
who turns his face up for a kiss

this strange autumn
has wrapped itself around you and won't let go.

Unsure of what comes next,
I look to anxious maples

for advice on how to write
gentle amber-red goodbyes and

trust the openings and closings,
the heart's way of breathing.

Safe, unsafe, safe, unsafe.
The beautiful fragility of being Mother,

the treasured burden
of remembering the weight of a child

curled in my arms like a comma
forcing a pause, a moment of breath.

Now I silence the worry of a changing season
by folding my hands into a crepe paper crane

that might be able to fly across the new space between us
its wings beating like a heart.

Let There Be Light

Anna Sandy-Elrod

And there was light then, splitting
the gray day to flood two

high windows and puddle gold
around the poet who named fruits

one after the other, ripe and rolling
names that made our mouths hurt.

I drove a sharp fingernail into the palm
of who I loved. The cerulean clouds closed

back up. The poet kept on reading.
We didn't have money for food

that week. Do you want this
poem to mean something?

It only means that there is beauty
here, and people going hungry.



Contributors

p. hedges adams is a poet and playwright from Michigan. Currently, they are an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of Virginia. Their work has previously appeared in *Bombus Press*, where it was nominated for a Pushcart prize. When not writing, they enjoy performing onstage and stargazing.

Chelsea Margaret Bodnar (she/her) is a legal secretary and co-founder/editor of *Everything in Aspic*. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in: *Crab Fat Magazine*, *The Bennington Review*, *Cartridge Lit*, *Dream Pop Journal*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Rogue Agent*, and others. She is the author of the chapbooks *Basement Gemini* and *dead people's bedrooms*.

Nichole Brazelton's poetry often explores the relationship between the natural world and human longing, and the importance of "ancestral magic" to both. Nichole lives in Pennsylvania and is pursuing her MFA at New England College. Her poems have recently been featured in: *SPLASH!*, *For Women Who Roar*, and *Beautiful Cadaver Project*.

Elaine Cannell (she/her) is a poet and PhD student studying feminist literature and performance at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Cleaver Magazine*, *Ghost City Review*, *Rogue Agent*, and *After Hours*.

Xiola Jensen is an illustrator based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She graduated from Chatham University in 2019 with a degree in Media Arts: Graphic Design (BA) and a minor in marketing. Xiola has a special interest in editorial illustration and working with musicians to create album art, show flyers, and other merchandise designs. Her personal illustrations explore a variety of themes including love, heartbreak, and introspection.

Ellis Light (they/them) is a trans, queer writer living in the Hudson Valley, NY. Their poem 'Bird Boy' was a 2018 winner of the Academy of American Poets prize. They are working on a dissertation at Fordham University about bodily fluids in medieval literature.

Sierra Rose Lindsay (she/her/hers) is an MFA candidate in fiction at Adelphi University whose current work explores the conditions of girlhood, female sexuality, and society's invitation of violence upon the body. Her poetry has appeared in *Bad Pony Magazine*. You can find Sierra on her third-floor rooftop in Brooklyn, NY.

Brynn Martin is a Kansas native living in Knoxville, where she received her MFA in poetry from the University of Tennessee. She is an Associate Editor for Sundress Publications and co-host of the podcast *Shitty First Drafts*. Her poetry has appeared in *Rogue Agent*, *FIVE:2:ONE*, and *Crab Orchard Review*.

Rita Mookerjee (she/her/hers) is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Women's and Gender Studies Program at Iowa State University. Her poetry is featured in *Aaduna*, *GlitterMOB*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Berfrois*, and *Cosmonauts Avenue*. She is the author of the chapbook *Becoming the Bronze Idol* (Bone & Ink Press, 2019). She is a poetry staff reader for *[PANK]*.

Keely O'Shaughnessy is a writer with Cerebral Palsy. She's currently an editor at *Flash Fiction Magazine*. She lives in the UK with her partner. Her short fiction has appeared in a number of anthologies and literary magazines, including *Flash Fiction Friday*, *Down in the Dirt Magazine*, *CultureCult Magazine*, and most recently, *fresh.ink*.

Anna Sandy-Elrod is a PhD poet at Georgia State University, and the current Editor in Chief of *New South Journal*. Her poetry and nonfiction can be found in the *Green Mountains Review*, *North American Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *Iron Horse, Fugue*, and others. She recently won the Prism Review Poetry Contest, and she lives in Atlanta with her husband and three cats.

Cathy Ulrich does yoga every day, but she's still not very flexible. Her work has been published in various journals, including *CutBank*, *Wigleaf*, and *trampset*.

Andrena Zawinski's flash fiction has appeared in *Unlikely Stories, Summer Shorts II Anthology*, *Digital Paper*, *Panoplyzine*, *Beneath the Rainbow*, *Short Stories & Poems Weekly*, *Ginosko* (where she has been flash fiction judge), *Sabr Magazine*, and *Loud Zoo*. She has three full poetry books and six smaller collections in print.

Established in 2013, Pretty Owl Poetry is a shoestring operation based out of Pittsburgh, PA, where its small staff occasionally hosts the reading series POPpresents.

