

Pretty Owl Poetry

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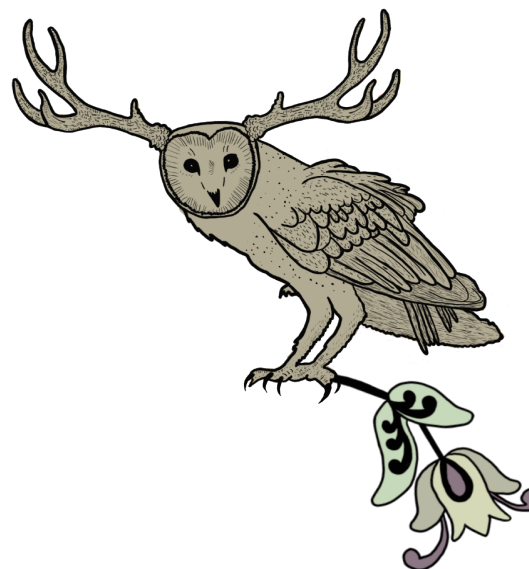
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My Heart Is

Cameron Barnett

after William Evans

My heart is the color *Run*—a 10.5-sized organ
double-timing it on the pavement, moonlighting
as a pair of Nike's slashed and segmented
in the sole for flexibility.

My heart is the color of *description*, the color of *reports*
and of *dispatch* and of *in the area*; it's the color of criminality
cast over my body like a wide net on fire.

My heart is the color *Why did he run?* My heart is
the color of *The cop feared for his life*. My heart is
the color cops see when they see fear.

My heart is the color of *gun residue found on his hands*
mixed with *an empty clip found in his pocket*; the color of
Stop blocking the highway and get a job!, a subtle shade of
If he was so innocent he wouldn't have run.

My heart is the color of *Do what the police tell you*
and you won't get shot, which is to say my heart
is the mud on the bottom of 10.5-sized pieces of
“evidence” in Ziploc bags.

My heart is the color *privilege*, the color of
a massive mirror hung high above the city.
My heart is a set of skeletons in a closet
swapping bones. My heart is the color of a ghost
in a coffee shop revising the chapters of its own making.

My heart is the color of 17; the color of a city
of gymnasts contorting themselves beneath
a mirror just right to make a black kid's death
look like his own fault.

The color of justice. A color just north of red;
my heart is the color of his poem and its tragedy;
it's the color of tears only a mother can cry;
the color a mirror makes when it breaks.

Black Holes

Cameron Barnett

Consider the body. Consider the pulse and pump
and thump of life within. Consider this: there is
a squeeze of life into you somewhere, always.

You are, in a sense, a sentient sack of plumbing.
Consider the body cavernous—a video I watch
asks, “How many holes does a human have?”

and it turns out we are not the donut we are so often
colloquialized to be. A jar, a cup, a bowl, a plate—
holes only exist if there is a body to host it—the paradox

of containment. In the video, I learn that openings
aren’t holes, just parts of holes—that a straw
is one thing with two parts. Consider Blackness.

Consider the body black—the whole of it sucked
through the kinked straw of history, opening to
opening. Consider how whole lives were squeezed

out of black bodies. Consider the ancestors who prayed
for shipwreck, who prayed to be flooded in order
to be freed. Consider the weight of what’s been kept

inside the spaces of our bodies in order just to make it.
Consider the spaces in the world where our bodies hide,
that visibility and invisibility are the same weight

double-stacked on Blackness. Consider the weight
of black holes—supermassive ghosts who lurk dark
in deep space. They say at the event horizon, a body

sucked in would stay frozen in time forever. Not every hole
has an exit. Consider chambers and dead ends and their
singular openings. Consider Black descendants praying

for singularity at the heart of this gravity in order to be free of space and time's cruelties. Physicists consider this point so dense that the laws of physics as we know them break down.

Black people might not consider this such a bad thing—how long have we prayed for a different physics? Were it not for gravity we would bend the world holy. As it turns out, gravity is the weakest

force the universe has to offer. As it turns out, the physicists are silent on the force of justice. Not even a consideration. Consider Blackness, supermassive and free of gravity, bending the arc of the moral universe all the way around until it's whole again.



I CANT HURRY TIME FOR YOU

Vi Khi Nao

Or tie it to a doorknob to stretch it out
Like a rubber band to one tongue
Or to place it on a platter of smoke
I can't rush time out of the door as I would
With a man who sells knife door to door
I can't even ask time to tie his shoelaces faster
Or to come to my funeral a day early
I can't ask time to climb over those hills and valleys
I called your voluptuous body
Wearing tennis shoes I call the internet
While you age slowly across several millennia
I can't beg time to sit on a pressure cooker
So that his bones would break apart fastest
So that there would be more boiling point
In my desire or my small autumn for you
I can't gallop time through the four corners
Of my bedsheet just so that I could make the bed
Of my affection for you with the speed of light
I can't pound time to get the hell out of here
To sprint, hasten, dash, dive, stampede the hour,
The second, the tempo, the pulse, the rhythm,
The meter, the cadence,
The ambience, the music of my exquisite
Breath which lies between your mouth
And my second tongue, timelessness
I now hold time in my bosom and strokes his
Hair and tell him to leave his five o'clock shadow
On the driveway of my watch's face
While I lean in to kiss an ardor which
Has become my new time machine

Violent Wonder

Molly Fuller

~ After Robert Hass

I forget my body is a body until I open my mouth to let out the cold.
Like a stalk of grass calibrating the weight of a hollow-boned bird

all my pain is a ferocious shudder falling down my spine, a xylophone of wasps,
an aviary of cracks and fissures, a simple holding together of skin over bones.

The thin stalk breaks. The once-balanced bird on the tall grass stalk becomes a bee
floating in blue sky. A single pink helium balloon deflating in an empty room.

My body is pain, my pain embodied. My body violent fracture, jarring of buzzing,
a wax castle melting, honey of a stolen jar, ajar, a barely holding together.

I am alive but cannot create a life. The savage wonder of my ovaries
leave me barely able to mouth my pain. A woman with black hair and blue eyes

once held me as I doubled over. Love is and is not about blood.
Some men will say they don't want a woman to bleed on them.

Blood is sometimes a violence. These kinds of men are often brutal
and will say it is love. This kind of love is always bloody.

This kind of man hurt this woman and took her child. Violence is often a man,
is my twisted ovaries, is not the empty table where this woman whose body

was as small as a doll once held me up. Her hair was blue black and her eyes
were blue streams and there was a lost baby in the bee hive of her mouth.

My attraction to her was both savage and tender, surprised as I was by my own
body's impulsive wildness. The way I could disappear into her. This disappearance

was a wildness to her and a wonder to me. Wonder is rapturous is a bird in flight
is the violence of revelation is the pain of returning to the body. My body is pain,

is wildness, is vicious witness to disappearance, is brutal and beautiful flower,
is the blooming blood of my un-child is the bird in the hive of my mouth.



Maine Laments

Lyd Havens

Find me a fifth story window, and I will coax
a happier year out of the glass sheets before
midnight. From now on, my resolutions
won't be lobsters in a grocery store tank.
I boil the water for my bath instead. My skin
falters red, but not like delectable death.
More like the anatomy of cautious optimism.
I'm thinking of my grandmother right now,

and how when she was my age, she waitressed
in coastal Maine. Part of her job was to trek
into the front teeth of the Atlantic to catch
a lobster every time a rich man ordered one.
I'm thinking of my grandmother, and how manic
I was the last time we were in Maine together.
When I told her how much it hurt to stay still,
she suggested we run across the meadow
in front of us as fast as we could. We were
both wearing dresses. I still remember

how the skirt of mine billowed across my rushing
thighs, the switchgrass extending its spindly fingers
to meet my legs. I'm thinking of how far my legs
have gotten me in this life. I've run to the top floor
of a parking garage just to watch the sunset
countless times. My knees are permanently embedded
with the imprints of dandelion stems. This year,
I want to slow-dance with all my best friends.
Wade in a hot spring. Learn how to climb a tree—
I want to stop being afraid of heights that are of
my own doing.

Prude

Lyd Havens

I tell my past self: someday you will wear a knife
around your neck instead of against it. I sew myself
into my dress, and don't even prick my skin once. I un-pit

the cherries with my teeth, and crows follow me
home. The frat boy in front of my building motions
that he's going to punch me, and I scream

until a swarm of bees follows him home. I delete Tinder.
I obliterate Tinder. My birth control implant
will be an old maid, but I think that's how we like it.

I say that I want to be a secular nun before realizing
I probably just want to be a voluntarily celibate person.
I just want to be a person. If I picture my body

as a Pietá, I am in my own arms. If I reclaim the word
"virginity" from the men who say I am "technically" not,
I'm reclaiming every etymology. Maybe I was pulp

before I was fruit. I don't change when the seasons do
anymore. I don't wilt, I don't branch—I just sit here,
my landscape a bed I don't have to make anymore.

Chokecherry

Lyd Havens

I imagine my uncle and grandfather's last moments.

My own hands a triangle around my neck. My thumbs
just barely touch. I am hardy, like an oak

fighting a chainsaw. I cough up sap in the sink,
and the porch light goes out. When I was thirteen,
I spent three months trying to get bathwater out
of my nose. My blue socks sticky on the tile floor. The nurse
asked me what was on my mind, and I turned
the Walkman's volume up to capacity. I'm almost twenty-two

now, and stumbling over my own memory like deforestation.
What have I lost? My wallet. Four wisdom teeth. I had a roommate
who stole all my silverware once. My parents' wedding cake
is rotting in the freezer. My grandfather's last words
to me are in a stranger's handwriting. I guess I'll just say it:

My uncle broke his own neck while I was on my tiptoes
trying to hang a mirror up in my bedroom. Everything
my grandfather ate for two months straight became liquid
in his lungs. I am still as tall as I was at ten. I need
to get a new inhaler. The nurse asks if I'm a smoker. No,
but my parents are. No, but my best friends are.
No, but when I was a kid we almost lost our house

in a wildfire. No, but choking to death seems to run
in the family. Sometimes I wake up gasping for air
like my bed is on fire. Somewhere in Illinois,
there's a tree named after my uncle. It could be any tree,
though. How could I know which one? Would I see the smoke?



Between Doses

T. Dallas Saylor

2 a.m. nonstop cough on your couch when it's
two hours till next albuterol six till the oral steroid
you drive me to Giant for Robitussin half the store
lights off aisles empty men in blue vests stocking
cans on sad shelves stacking plastic cases of orange
glazed donuts beside animatronic witches
with candy bowls you joke to make me smile you
sing badly along with your jam from 2009 you ask
can we stop at McDonald's after and get a shake
I want to get on your back and ride through the store
like a king into enemy lances yes & I want a
chocolate shake with whipped cream you are
twice my withered size and strong strong I know
you will not let me stop breathing

for Jared

nested blue ceramic

p. hodges adams

i want to be dismembered not
 in the way of sinews and horror
but like clay

i want my flesh to be taken
 apart so lovingly by your hands
and smoothed and spun and painted like a smiling bowl

quartz packed into my chest
 the cracks filled with gold
your hands wet with slip taking my face apart

i know god forged a man from clay
 and in the density found space to unravel veins

or the other myth that a giant's corpse became the world
 his skull a blanket wrapped around the sky
every broken tooth a boulder

so yes wake me up from underwater
like the sweet pink clay we brought in buckets
 from the bottom of the lake or the dark
silt beneath the raft that little girls would cake
 upon their shins before jumping in

make a whole new shape of my hips
who would stop you

the swan no. 1

Kailey Tedesco

after Hilma af Klint

i break out my bell to purify
the new chair from the dead

woman's attic. all our bells exist
in the space between

wing & beak — my wing, my bone-
blades, ache me wild. wring

my grey hair out of its chignon.
i'll hide never again. there

is pride to be found in webbed feet,
blue with the cold of starlessness.

there was once a year in my life full
of swans. every day swan-plastic, swan-

cement, swan-glass, swan-cut crystals
at the flea. i took this as a sign

of luck — i transform into the negative
of myself to better see my own eyes,

lid-heavy, out of eye-breath.
find me under the ice, frozen

oil-slick. my mystics will come
to revive me.



The Slumber Party

Erin Carlyle

I heard she went and died
into another girl, in a house

near a swamp where girls are caught
face down, muck deep, and motherless.

She told me there were other girls
sitting at a kitchen table with empty

plates in front of them,
and more girls in the bathroom

draped over the shower—wet. She asked:

*What man made their bodies
into tables—arms and legs bent backward,*

a coffee cup on the sternum? She didn't know
she would be used up, but she told me

she tip-toed through the rooms
tracing her name on the walls just in case.

My girl lost herself—a blonde hair flood
on the floor, and she came back to me

years later wound tight, a coil, said: *Why me?*

Dead Things

Erin Carlyle

Once a cat climbed into my lap
in a parking lot, and I kept her
company while she died.

In my ear, I thought she said:
I don't know what is happening,

but maybe she really said something
about falling into a river,
or about sleeping under a porch.

I thought: I've never helped anyone
die before. Where do I get a brick?
Where do I find a shoebox

at this time of night? I thought
of the time my brother told me
that birds only feel one emotion—anger.

This was after I pulled an egg
out of a nest, but I never killed a thing.

HERE IN THE HEART-RIP BOOM TOWER

David Rawson

Here in the heart-rip boom tower, we devour
applause. Overlooking a perfect facsimile
of Lake Michigan, we are casting acre-long
poles through the arch-stone window, out,
into the water. Each color fish tells a fortune.
Last week, I caught fourteen blues, & fourteen
is a lot of blues. Here in the heart-rip boom tower,
we each call the globe of light a different name,
of someone we have *lost*. We strap smaller lights
to our chests, & we turn out all the other lights,
& we march out to the sand & stand in our best
eyed circle. We are the stars of the heart-rip
boom tower. & just because something is over
does not mean that that something was not important.



love/disaster

Talia Gordon

when I write about love I am writing about
disaster, about the way desire snags itself
on rough remains of fantasy and how we
patch the holes with scraps then test
the seams for signs of weakness. I am writing
about asking for it and then coming back
for more. I am writing about how someone
tells me as a matter of fact that they've been sick
for their entire life and *still* managed to grow
a pair of bootstraps, like their pride isn't vile,
like this is simply how we're meant to live
now, all of us a little worn to threads around
the edges, all of us a little raw from rubbing
up against the bedpost, trying to feel
the difference out between apocalypse
and rapture. I am writing about love
and thinking about disaster, listening
to the same pain echoing across
the canyons; and I am swinging my arms
to make the blood move faster to my fingertips,
to make my touches mean more, to fuck
the way we tell each other tales of otherwise,
where there is never not enough and where
too much doesn't hang there like a dense
threat, burning your throat. I am thinking
about disasters big and small, like heartbreak
and recession and the bottom falling out
at once, or slowly like erosion and bad proteins
and plastic bags and other plastics clogging up
the waterways. I am thinking about disaster
while someone wonders to me over dinner
about what kind of bassinet to buy their unborn
and I am diagnosing glimmers of the zeitgeist
in my body underneath a purple sky. I tell
the colour: you might be right about something,
clumsy portent, but there is a choice to make here
about joy, so choose.

I regularly practice holding my breath

Talia Gordon

for Lauren Berlant

Seismologists notice the earth
is vibrating less but stop short
of calling it good news. Someone
on the radio wants to know
where hummingbirds go
during hurricanes — everybody
needs a little reassurance
now and then. People lobby
for the right to be control groups;
a webinar participant wins
self-care bingo. *Tough times
don't last, tough people do.* Is that
why we're still here? Just in case,
I regularly practice holding my breath
and think about my mother
swimming laps, hoarding lungfuls
in exchange for our protection,
each length a bargain with God.
Hummingbirds survive, explains
the expert, *not by staying in their nests,
but by adapting to the storm.* Ask not
what your country can do for you
but what you can do to make yourself
last. To live a whole life fastened
to that version of freedom
would be unbearable, I think,
circling the truth of my attachments.
*Of course, people stay in bad love
all the time*, the professor tells us
— *this is the organizing principle
of our relationship to the world.*

Constellation

Kimberly Glanzman

I thirst for silence, sickened by the salt-smell
of waves against the hull, barrels of pink fish,

sweat crusted across my sun-warped shoulders.
each night, I switch and tack through the wind,

a misplaced stitch in the tapestry of stars;
my father's girl,

my father's scar.
all he'd given me: charts, charms, his mother's guitar –

the whole wide, waiting world –
stowed below. the ropes swing and saw.

the bow of the boat carves a song through
open water: a lullaby scored by my father's

father's father. for days: no rain, my skin
curling away from my bones. the telescope

rolling toward my fingertips & back out of reach;
my body splayed across the deck

beneath the stained-gray sail strapped
against the sea-bleached mast.

the ocean my monster, my master.
my prayers: ash on the water; the tide

receding, my hunger softer. the stars
I was born under mark me:

patron saint of witches, wishes,
disastrous daughters.



Relativity Theory

Hannah Cajandig-Taylor

Everything seems miniscule if you think
about the meaning of smallness. Try to

squint hard enough & the blur turns
to gears of butterfly eggs. I'm sharing my orange

sun with you from 700 miles away. Below the bur oak
a fallen birdnest, twig-woven. What differentiates

home from tree from wicker cage. Is it holding
something born above earth, deep within

tangles of cattail fluff & sticks & spider silk
left behind. The distance between outstretched

limbs & evening dirt. I string & unstring the same
plastic pearls beside my lonely window. Grey

feathered birds come & go. Our sky turns
to umber. A monarch uncurls in the dark.

You as a Toxic Downpour

Hannah Cajandig-Taylor

You are not in the mood to dream about acid rain. Last night, you thought somebody was following you even though nobody is ever following you, so you drove for thirteen extra minutes *just in case*. You try & try to write & write about a spiderling, but never figure out how to end the first paragraph. You dress it in bricks & daydreams. Can't see the clouds, but glance outside anyways. Nothing but dark. Not even the moon wants to be seen. You have written stories here, but none of them are blue.

my boob popped out in the pool today

Marcy Rae Henry

so i very gently placed it in the water

and swam away without it

if it wanted to be free then so did i

Contributors

p. hodge 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.

Cameron Barnett is a Pittsburgh poet and teacher, and an editor for *Pittsburgh Poetry Journal*. He's the author of *The Drowning Boy's Guide to Water*, winner of the Autumn House Press Rising Writer Contest, and Finalist for an NAACP Image Award. Cameron's work explores the complexity of race and the body for a black man in today's America.

Kateryna Bortsova is a painter and graphic artist with a BFA in graphic arts and MFA. Kateryna's work has appeared in international exhibitions (Taiwan, Moscow, Munich, Spain, Macedonia, Budapest etc.). She won the silver medal in the category "realism" in participation in "Factory of visual art" in New York, and the 2015 Emirates Skywards Art of Travel competition in Dubai. Kateryna is open for commission and you can view her work on Instagram: [@katerynabortsova](https://www.instagram.com/katerynabortsova), or on her website: <http://bortsova6.wix.com/bortsova>.

Hannah Cajandig Taylor (she/her) is a poet and flash writer residing in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where she reads for Passages North and Fractured Lit. Her work has appeared/is forthcoming in *Kissing Dynamite*, *Hobart*, and *LandLocked*, among others. She also loves playing Nancy Drew games. Find her on twitter [@hannahcajandigt](https://twitter.com/hannahcajandigt).

Erin Carlyle's work has been featured in literary magazines such as *Driftwood Press*, *Poetry South*, and *Prairie Schooner*, and she has a chapbook, **You Spit Hills and My Body**, published with Dancing Girl Press. She holds an MFA in poetry from Bowling Green State University, and currently lives in Buffalo, NY.

Molly Fuller (she/her) is the author of *For Girls Forged by Lightning* (All Nations Press), and two chapbooks *Tender the Body* (Spare Change Press) and *The Neighborhood Psycho Dreams of Love* (Cutty Wren Press). You can find her on Instagram and Twitter [@mollyfulleryeah](https://twitter.com/mollyfulleryeah).

Kimberly Glanzman (she/her/hers) holds an MFA in poetry from the University of Kentucky. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Electric Lit*, *Sky Island Journal*, *South Dakota Review*, *Blind Corner*, *Sleet Magazine*, *Stonecoast Review*, and *Porter House Review*, among others. Follow her — at your peril — on Instagram: [@speculativemermaid](https://www.instagram.com/speculativemermaid)

Talia Gordon is a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Chicago and managing editor of *Somatosphere*. Talia lives in Flint, Michigan and is currently working on a dissertation project about crisis, adversity, and collective life in the postwelfare United States.

Lyd Havens (they/she) currently lives in Boise, Idaho. Their work has previously been published in *Ploughshares*, *The Shallow Ends*, and *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, among others. Lyd is currently an undergraduate at Boise State University, where they study creative writing and history.

Marcy Rae Henry is a Latina born and raised in Mexican-America/The Borderlands. She has lived in Spain, India, and Nepal and once rode a motorcycle through the Middle East. Her work has received a Chicago Community Arts Assistance Grant and an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship.

Vi Khi Nao is the author of four poetry collections: [Human Tetris](#) (11:11 Press, 2019) [Sheep Machine](#) (Black Sun Lit, 2018), [Umbilical Hospital](#) (Press 1913, 2017), [The Old Philosopher](#) (winner of the Nightboat Prize for 2014), & of the short stories collection, [A Brief Alphabet of Torture](#) (winner of the 2016 FC2's Ronald Sukenick Innovative Fiction Prize), and the novel, [Fish in Exile](#) (Coffee House Press, 2016). She was the Fall 2019 fellow at the Black Mountain Institute. vikhinao.com

David Rawson is the author of Proximity & A Jellyfish for Every Name (ELJ Editions).

T. Dallas Saylor is a PhD student in poetry at Florida State University, and he holds an MFA from the University of Houston. His work meditates on the body, especially gender and sexuality, against physical, spiritual, and digital landscapes. He currently lives in Tallahassee, FL.

Kailey Tedesco is the author of She Used to be on a Milk Carton (April Gloaming Publishing), Lizzie, Speak, and the forthcoming collection, FOREVERHAUS (both White Stag Publishing). She is a senior editor for Luna Luna Magazine. For more, follow @kaileytedesco.

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.

