

Pretty Owl Poetry

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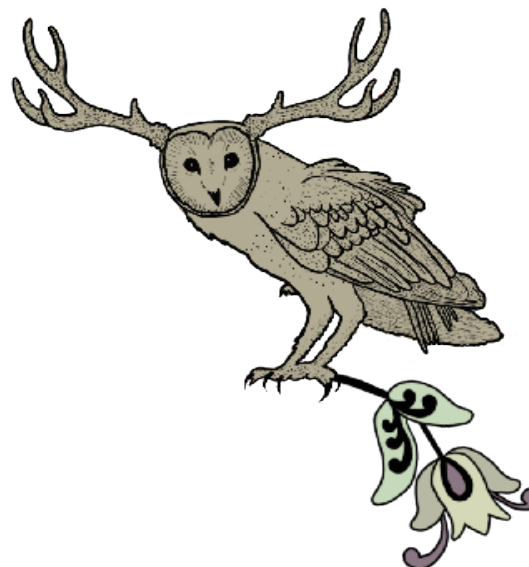
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We Died by Folktale in Three Parts

Kelly Gray

The Lion, The Fox and The Deer

On our first date, I showed you a photo of a deer I butchered. Look, I said, I hung it up from a tree. Look, I said, I pulled its skin from its body. Look, I said, I held its heart in my hand, bending low to place it in my mouth. A creek of blood. Chin, clavicle. I believe in violence, I offered. My invitation.

Look, you said, as you showed me a picture of your neck. Look, you said, as you hung me up by my throat. Look, you said, as you held my breast in your hand. That is rare, you offered, to believe in violence. I am a caved lion, I am sick, you said. I could see it in your ribs and the hallow of your eyes. A beast that used to be. Look, you said, as you pulled off my dress and bit down on my ear so I could not hear myself think.

You left strips of meat in my bed. Me, the dead deer. The fox before you, my heart in a den. I wish you could have seen the fences I leapt over. The way my belly shone white to the grass. You would have loved to have chased me, back when I had a heart, when you could roar.

The Black-Eyed Corvid and the Pitcher

Imagine me a pitcher, almost empty. The beautiful curve of my capacity. Pebble by pebble.

You look about, as if you are so smart. The inanimacy of my predicament lost on you.

The Boy Who Cried

You used to say you liked to suck my cock. Slip wet, corner mouth. Now, we both know I don't have a cock, but you would get down on your knees and pray to sheep of flock. Priapic. Reminding you of you. Mirror boy mirror, you are so pretty. The way yours would hang. Dragging. Only good in service.

Look to lap up Mama Story, make a girl a wolf. Watch me weep my way through your childhood, the woods of your wander. The smell of me on your lip. The villagers sniff. Getting low to make your mountain top seem high.

Peter, Peter, Peter. A shepherd boy dead.

The Fawn

Kelly Gray

When the children found the fawn, they dropped to the soil,
sweet morticians of the plains, gathering grass and flower,
the pink of coastal buckwheat, the yellow of prairie,

to tuck beneath the open cavity, all exposed ribs,
the space where a heart should be, coilings of a stomach removed,
carved out by the patience of a vulture beak,
the small mouth of beetle, now filling the inside of body with child song.

Their shoulders touched, heads bowed,
counseling the removal of teeth, a pocket memorial,
to remember. A collective nod.

I thought to interrupt, but held my urge on my tongue,
observing the work of people closer to the ground than I.

A seamless ritual, a knife pulled, tip between soft tooth and gum.
Not a cringe, only murmur in their gentle work,
small hands, a petting of the body.

The light spilled gold as we walked back across coastal bluffs,
stopping when we saw the doe, her ears cupped towards movement,
tracking. We could only intuit her blink.

Again, the children dropped, knowing without asking,
to dig a hole in the foot of the grasses, giving back the teeth,
realizing that motherhood beyond their own walked this land,
grieving.

Outside, in the bright light

Megan Nichols

We practice harm. Bloodletting
from peeled scabs. Exorcising weakness.
Bramble scratches, horsefly bite, scraped knees,
twisted ankle, dirt in your eye, wasp sting,
fall a thousand more times.
Collide with the earth's heavy truth, collide
until you ache with knowing
all that is unavoidable.

Outside, in the bright light
your fatherlessness is unrecognizable.
Here you're a child of the sun.
Can I really raise you on rainwater,
mudpies? Sometimes your wildness
looks like it could consume us
like honeysuckle overtaking a forest.

How could I be the one to cut you
into a carpet-soft lawn, forever
green and tidy, awaiting fake flamingos
and other lifeless charms. I'll risk
complete obliteration to keep
the sweetness. So creep
like a vine or erupt like an August bloom
I can be your trellis, at best.



"A sometimes dark forest"





13 Moments of Being a Blackgirl

Elizabeth Upshur

I.

No better feeling than a Black woman
touching my hair. it's all soft today from the honey
rinse, and she bats it softly out of the way to shine
her fingers on my gold Spanish earrings
like she knows me. she knows me. that's where my center is.

II.

It takes a lot of prayer to fix what's not broken.
Hair. Skin. Ass. Attitude. The first syllable of your laughter peeling
like a church bell from your mother's large lips into their ears,
but the bell is cracked, the sound is off, they seem
to be saying, so you hold the laughter in your throat.

III.

It takes a lot of prayer to fix yourself
in the splintered mirror. you hold the ghastly, grotesque, Gorgon
parts of you that are goddesses in other women, but turn
hearts to stone with your skin. their gaze is a whetstone
that will carve you sharp into a blade that seeks blood,
like all knives do.

IV.

She burrows into the sand
under a cactus. tarantulas and emperor scorpions take turns walking
across the granules on her back and one tickles the upturned
palms of her feet. *dead girl dead girl, come alive*
come alive at the count of five,
one, two, three, four, five...
...but today is yet another day for evanescence,
not a day the missing girl comes home.

V.

She shows me her palm,
blue veins snaking like serpents

under the Fate line
a little pulse in the thumb.
 I hold it to my ear,
 and like a conch, I hear
the Atlantic, and remember that Mami Wata
walks on the waves,
desire, future, history,
wholly in her long locs of hair.
 She turns her hand over
 and all the moons have been cut
off of her fingers.

VI.

Sister turned around
flipped her soft gray t-shirt up to confirm
she was my sister, the wing scars extrusive,
her shoulders jagged mountain ridges,
 the vanguard of summer storms,
and still hopeful of flight.

VII.

Sister-girl put her fingers in my mouth,
so, I kissed her. she kept calling god
as a witness as she held me, came
to me, called me beautiful. a thorough beauty
asleep in my arms, crescent moons hand over hand
that leave an empty, darkly starred night
 —to fend for itself.

VIII.

My mother washed out my mouth,
orange Dial soap in the kitchen sink. my
cousin blew bubbles after.
 we all put Whitney on when we scour the house
with Pine Sol until nothing can be touched.

IX.

It takes me three tries to open my mouth
to ask for help myself, but negative one
to advocate for anyone else.
this is a gift I can't always take pleasure in,
as much good as it has done the world.

X.

It started off a good day at the philosophy panel, until she (yes, she was)
interjected "do you mean restoration?" when I said,
restitution is compulsory for ethical forgiveness
in the Q&A, this word as foreign to her
as my voice looks to my skin, an object my light fingers seized.
as if this was anyone's language but hers to claim mastery of,
to "talk white" in, not genocide of my own ancestor's Yoruba,
appropriation of my mother's AAVE.

XI.

my white ex-boyfriend asked if I could blush,
a white friend if I could tan, the first Black person they could query,
how much like me are you? Listen,
yes and no, but I won't bury the lede: we all have
an after image when we press our skin,
that pumping of the Creator's breath in Eden.

XII.

Heroes are all con artists, two faced, the dupes of good cosmetics,
who leave me no other idols or icons. If I believe I can fly,
the Pied Piper waits for me in the dark and history will swallow me whole.

XIII.

My skin and hair worship the sun wherever I go. In Cordoba, Spain,
my veneration is breached by three Chinese tourists running up to me,
flashing cameras in my face.
At least they didn't fondle their hands into my hair as white chaperones have done, they
were content with the trophy of exotic
skin and hair, slick for film, a little soul to hold for eternity
under whatever name they chose.





Weather Boy

Kyle Marbut

any day now my summer body will break in
and kill my winter body

the way the groundhog ate his shadow—
seasons slant through each other, hot rain

in February: forecasts promise beach weather,
early crocuses brave the lawns, shirtless

fitness buffs sprint past storefronts, feral
cats open songbirds where they land, and

my winter body—which is
to say, my body—lies

flat on the kitchen floor eating unwashed berries
on the cusp of rot, seeds in my teeth,

suncast square on my bare chest, my ripped
dress—from down here all I see is sky

over the sink, the glass between
the world and me too real to shatter

until he shatters it climbing in: my summer
body—jacked wrack and ruin,

what I could have been: warped-mirror
boyfriend twin atop me, rough

hands round my neck. I never really wanted
to be wanted, to be hot and tank-topped, planet

tilting toward longer days, shorter life—
one deep snow was enough—

kill the lights, I don't want to see
what I do to me next

Dog, Watching

Patricia Davis-Muffett

Cursing the dog at 5 am,
darkness clutching its final hour,
bare feet on wooden stairs
the tendons of my ankles short
from running, from sleeping,
barely seeing the next stair down.
The puppy waits at the edge of the stairs
to see if I will venture
into wet grass, dark—
to see if the lawn can be trusted.

I take the step to show it's safe
wonder if my feet will meet
a rodent killed, a slug unfurled,
deer droppings from the night before.
No matter what, I know
I can not squeal
can show no hesitation.
She is watching me,
learning to gauge
the danger of the world.

Though I don't know dogs,
I do know this—
have done it child after child.
For now, the world is just
this grass between my toes,
owl hooting from the treetops,
sun glowing on horizon,
night relinquishing its grasp.
Let's just let the truth
reveal itself in time.

Postnatal

Rachel Marie Patterson

Summer is one long wail of insects,
sirens, car radios, my newborn
daughter. I return home from the grocery
store, think—what if I forget to turn
the wheel and drive through the plait-glass
façade of the pizza parlor? The image
a sudden blip, transmission. In the bath,
milk drips into the water. Her knees
thump against the green plastic tub.
I study her there, trying to like myself.
What if a truck. What if the black pond
in the yard. What if the bookcase unbolted
from the wall, a naked wire against
newspaper in the attic. What if sadness.
Outside the dormer window, maple leaves
pucker white. I cocoon her in a towel—
the only right thing I've done.

party (like it's 2019)

danica depenbart

i wrote a love poem to danny devito, & i wanted to make you laugh
like peeing through my pants on the kitchen chair after drinks at genes
like the drone in oncoming twilight, circling above our garage
a love like peeing out on the warmth of your thighs
when i kissed you by the compost, when i kissed you in the bar
when you bought me a drink, & i spoke into you some very dark things
there are fictions that i write, there are ways i would love
if there was another life
if there was another life
if there was another life
your cinnamon stick arms drag you through the water
in the winter, i dyed my hair red,
& you slept in my bed, turning me over
you called me a bitch, & i wanted to kill you
i want to make you piss yourself on my floor
turn you on as a lamppost i want to drive
seven hours & smash into your skull i want to be inside
as a reel inside a reel to reel tape recorder i am played
backwards i am scraping against sound i want to be the waitress
at your bar i want to be versions of you, sitting in the cemetery
where everyone is on a date, but i am staring at the ceiling
stars & the man smoking the cigar, staring into the city
run by children the children running after dogs the dogs running
after cars the cars running into the mountains,
& how i would run into your arms if you ever would exist
i wanted to make you laugh, but i got nervous, telling a joke
about my father's back on the stairs it's my party,
& it's all of your friends who are laughing
it's a house party when i am twenty
& they are playing jazz in the basement
& they are playing edm upstairs & standing
on the arm of the couch, this electrical phasing of my body
i haven't let go of the way you ran through
the crowd to press your back against mine the way
we twisted ankles & bent knees when you slapped me
in the face, making strangers kiss my cheek, & i would rather
be at the apartment but don't know how to tell you

sounding like a joke after i have spent the long night
like a lark i sang to you like a lark i sang to you
i want to be a magnet on the reel, starting over
it is almost halloween in a winery in wisconsin
a man with a neon mustache is spinning me around
around around around, his sweat his smile, says
i am a run for his money, & he was the best
dance partner i ever had, & i watched you turn
around to watch us, & i realized that the love
was all around us like the fog from the fog machine
coming from the ceiling
coming from your kitchen
held in both of your hands
how we sang you happy birthday
into the screen how you said i love you through
the door, then pressing your hand to
the glass, then pressing my hand to
the glass, but you lived there, &
i lived there, so it meant something different
watching you, pissing in my backyard, laughing
at the poison ivy, & the houses in the alley can see
me naked through the window, dancing by myself
alone because i miss you, going back often
to the middle of the crowd where you told me
you liked my eyeliner & touched my back,
& she was the love of his life, but she was
already pregnant, & i got down on my knees,
asking prince to grant me mercy on the floor,
soaking up beer & what i took for granted
passing through another life
passing through another life
passing through another life
there is a joke i wanted to tell, & i wanted to watch you fall in love
like the punchline on the sidewalk, slipping from my clumsy hands
like pissing off your mom at her christmas party
a love like kissing your hair, frigid on the bathroom tiles
when i sent you a postcard, when i sent you a photo of my ass
when i broke the bottle on my forehead, & you caught me from behind
there is a year as a terrible joke, there is a love story as a tape rewind
again again again again



Dick Cheney is A Robot

Kristy Bowen

Sometimes, things misfire. In the brain, in the woods
in the trigger finger. In the 90's I was plum and sugar,
so shiny with hope. I licked the back of stamps

and sent letters into the universe in the form of poems.
In the form of goblins, full of milk. Silk underwear
lined with lace. So flush with democracy. After all,

everything's a catastrophe when you're knee deep in machinery.
Everything monstrous when you're a monster.
America like a spider in its mechanical web

while the markets grew fat and fell. Everything
pink and luscious with all that funding. In Texas
the highways went nowhere, slick and bigger

than they should be. I counted out singles at the rest stop
to buy a soda. The roads smooth, but the terrain
rough and full of cows, lined in rows. All that Bush era

capital falling like bricks from the overpass, so white
in all that sun. So terrible in the sound it makes
smashing all the cars one by one below.

I'm Still Here

E. Kristin Anderson

(after Kesha)

This year has been a calendar of witness, porous enough to store
my messy yesterdays. And in all my wickedness, it turns out shadows

keep me warm. As much as it hurt I danced last night for the first time
in years and found myself feral with oxytocin. Sometimes I can feel

the glass ceiling pushing right up against my face and that's when I
pull the hammer from my throat, crack everything open, fill a mug

with holy whispers and swallow all the arguments I won in my head.
I am the teacup shattered by boiling water, resurrected as flame. And

I'll be both the keen-eyed raven and the hissing possum, my golden
heart beating wild in the sun. If you let me I'll show you how to laugh

to keep from screaming, how to scream to keep from breaking. When
you wonder what is lipstick and what is blood I will show you that

these pigments are the same. That we can stain ourselves with power.
Because even though I never went looking for trouble it found me

every time and teenage Sunday after Sunday I spent all night wishing
I knew how to be the kind of girl who could wear wicked like a smile.

This year I'm giving up shame and singing my own hallelujah. My every
breath is a séance and as I light all the candles I can hold I do so with

the knowledge that this heat will give me the peace that a quiet heart
never could. And in this timeline I validate myself. I let this rhythm

fuck me up, let it run through me until my tongue wraps around it like
a blessing. As I enter my thirty-seventh year I paint celebration down

my arms because I'm alive, my own creation. If they ask me whether I'm
wearing lipstick or blood I'll tell them again and again: I love this dress.

Contributors

Based in Austin, TX, **E. Kristin Anderson** is the author of nine chapbooks of poetry, including *A Guide for the Practical Abductee*, *Pray, Pray, Pray: Poems I wrote to Prince in the middle of the night, 17 seventeen XVII*, *We're Doing Witchcraft*, and *Behind, All You've Got*. Kristin is a poetry reader at *Cotton Xenomorph* and an editorial assistant at *Porkbelly Press*.

A writer and book artist, **Kristy Bowen** is the author of a number of artist books, chapbooks, and zines, as well as the recent *SEX & VIOLENCE* (Black Lawrence Press, 2020.) She lives in Chicago, where she runs dancing girl press & studio.

Patricia Davis-Muffett (she/her) holds an MFA from the University of Minnesota. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in many journals, including *One Art*, *Bluepepper*, *The Orchards*, *Blue Nib*, *Neologism*, and *Amethyst Review*. She lives in Rockville, Maryland, with her family and makes her living in technology marketing.

danica depenhart (she/they) is a Pittsburgh based writer, maker, & educator. They are a recipient of The Alex Rowan Award for poetry writing, & their work has been featured in *TriQuarterly*. you can find them on instagram @motherweather, where they would love to talk to you about birds, dreams, & the weather.

Natascha Graham (she/her) is a lesbian writer for stage and screen currently working on a continuing radio drama for the BBC. Her work has been featured in *The Sheepshead Review*, *Acumen*, *Ponder*, *Litro*, *The Mighty*, and *Yahoo News* to name but a few.

Kelly Gray is the author of 'Instructions for an Animal Body' (forthcoming, Moon Tide Press, 2021) and her writing has most recently appeared or is forthcoming in *The Atticus Review*, *River Teeth*, *Lunch Ticket*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *The Account Magazine*, *3Element Review*, *CULTURAL WEEKLY*, *Burning House Press*, and *Bracken Magazine*. To read more of her work, please visit writekgray.com.

L.I. Henley lives in the Mojave Desert of California. A mixed-media artist and writer, she is the author of several books including *Starshine Road*, which won the 2017 Perugia Press Prize, and the poetry and art book *From the moon, as I fell* with artist Zara Kand. Her art, poetry, and prose have appeared most recently in *The Indianapolis Review*, *Waxwing*, *Thrush*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Arts & Letters*. Visit her at www.lihenley.com and follow her on Instagram @lihenleyart.

Mane Hovhannisyan is an Armenian fine-art and conceptual photographer. The preferred topics of her art are the reflection of the state in-between magic and reality, the correspondence of the human body to the natural and urban environment, also the discovery of old soviet architectural leftovers through the means of photography.

Kyle Marbut is lying low in a blanket fort in a cool basement in Virginia, where they write, teach, and take long walks with a lantern in the dark. Their poetry has appeared in *Homology Lit*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, and *Cosmonauts Avenue*.

Megan Nichols (she/her) works as a copywriter and lives with her son in the Ozark Mountains. Her poetry is forthcoming with *All Female Menu*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and *Versification*.

Rachel Marie Patterson is the co-editor of Radar Poetry. She holds an MFA from UNC Greensboro. Her poems appear in Harpur Palate, Tinderbox, Thrush, Parcel, and others. Her work has been nominated for Best New Poets, Pushcart, and Best of the Net. Her first full-length collection is forthcoming from Future-Cycle Press. www.rachelmariepatterson.com

Elizabeth Upshur comes from a long line of Black Southern storytellers, and her work can be found in *storySouth*, *Mujerista*, *Pomona Valley Review*, and *Red Mud Review*. She is the inaugural winner of the Brown Sugar Lit Mag prize and recent Gigantic Sequins flash fiction winner. Follow her @ <https://www.instagram.com/elizawriteswords>.

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.

