



PRETTY OWL POETRY





PRETTY OWL
POETRY

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POETRY EDITORS

Kelly Andrews

Gordon Buchan

FLASH FICTION EDITOR

B. Rose Huber

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prettyowlpoetry@gmail.com

*Pretty Owl Poetry is a quarterly online journal with big print dreams
and its head in the sky. We publish poetry, flash fiction, and art.*



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Valencia

by Michael Albright

I was walking a road on a barren shore
in one of the maritime provinces, sky
slate, day still—nothing moving at sea.
When I turned, I saw you, stepping fast,
trying to catch up.

Three bears, colossal,
white, nuzzled a carcass at water's edge,
and when you saw them, they saw you.
Before I could tell you *don't*, you did;
they took chase, and you disappeared
over the horizon.

I found you in a room
of freshly dead—all still warm and pale—
in drowsy thrall to a glowing ghost, who held
your face between his hands, tasting lips,
touching tongues. I wanted to join there,
taste there, too—

Suddenly,
the phone rang to break the spell, our eldest,
in Valencia, calling to say the shoot went well.

The Nurse

by Ziggy Edwards

In the white room, a man propped in bed.
He pats the mattress, so I sit.

His sheets, his gown, the sun glaring in.

The man smiles
as if we've known each other a long time.

He brings a tooth from behind his pillow,
shows it in the palm of his hand.

"I asked them to pull the whole thing,
root and all, so they did.
She's named Nicole."

I nod, not understanding.

The man rubs Nicole's point with a fingertip.
"I can't tell," he says,

"if they humor me because I'm crazy,
or do what I say because I'm rich."

Auditory Hallucinations

by Jen Ashburn

Listen, says a needled voice in my sleep.
Blackberry jam between her teeth, my mother
 in a stand of nettles spits black seeds
in the breeze.

We are on a cliff over a black ocean
and she sings, *Baby, baby*. We are in a patch
of strawberries, and she hisses, *Listen*.
I pull at the runners but the roots are long.
I pull, and she pulls—our war, a tug-of war.
Clumps of dirt hit the ground by our feet.

I fear
 whispers
in daylight hours when I can't blame sleep—
echoes across a dark ocean.
We pull, and pull, and we pull.

Ghazal for the Shrine Gods

Japan

by Jen Ashburn

My friend Charlie thought he was a god
and took the offerings left at mountain shrines.

On Fuji, we slept on cold stone
while night hikers ambled by—the shrines

as quiet as orange peels, the hikers
all headlamps and giggles. The shrines

as purple as witchcraft. We were gods,
back then, and stole apples and sake from shrines,

and grocery stores, and gas stations
with greasy bathrooms. The city shrines

hide in cinderblock grottos and rain-caked dust.
They're swept out by old women who love, I guess, shrines.

Are they the ones who leave the apples?
It rained that night on Fuji, a retaliation of the shrines,

which are holy because old women love them.
Are holy because we, in the shadow of a shrine

still whisper. Even as we bite the apple.
Who would make love in a shrine?

When I remember that night, I remember cold skin,
sweet pine smell. An abandoned shrine

of raw plank boards. Take me back to that mountain of night
whispers and wet lips. That unholy, quiet shrine.

God of Internet

by Joanna Valente

In the beginning, we were programmed
with light & light we turned our backs
upon / & night defaulted so darkness

curls toward us / unthinking as a falling
body embracing pavement / it is
impossible for a child to come out of us

there's nothing / for it outside but endless
data / growing like a lump inside a woman's
breast which are too beautiful to die

so we stuff & mount them on Google /
a museum of graves avoiding the gods
who don't know the color of waves surfing

the web / in an effort stay on earth
we all become dot.coms in time / life
is easier when it's pixelated / there is

nowhere to stand huddled near
the gravestones of human history /ask
Chrome's search: Whose yr daddy?

Stepmother

by Joanna Valente

What do you own?

The world is between
My legs

When are you happy?

Who I am when I
am not myself

Why did you marry?

Why would anyone jog on
This road

It's asking to die

What has aged you?

Everyone reciting someone
Else's wedding vows--

Describe your twenties.

Parties celebrating watered
Down versions of god

After the Earthquake

by Margaret Bashaar

After the earthquake there was only after the earthquake.

After the earthquake Pittsburgh had no rivers and Ohio gathered mountains to her. All dairy cows came to live in our rust belt, husks of bridges, not knowing this was sheep country. They pulled grass out by roots and the city began to wilt. There is so much steel will cover if you let it. So much the earth will take back.

After the earthquake we dreamt about the earthquake, woke mornings curled into one another.

After the earthquake land split but it was not just land that split – bodies split. We all suspected ones whose skin cracked were those who'd been penetrated before, but no one was left to study such things. My ankle blossomed into a scarlet *A* tattoo, ink half fallen out. You sprouted a barbell through your flesh. We both were happier. I didn't know you before the earthquake, but suspected you of things that lead to breaking. I'd never cut myself, but taken too many men into my body to remember names. My ears were pierced when I was 8, closed up immediately.

After the earthquake maps were useless.
We were all useless.

After the earthquake we spoke less, but when we spoke voices carried from one new hilltop to the next. There were no roads because the earthquake devoured them. There were no cars because they lived on roads. There were no angry sirens or grind of rusted gears, no bridge to lift, no tugboat to pull coal barges from dried rivers. Some people tried to dig down into riverbeds where they believed the Allegheny, the Monongahela had been. We thought they'd grow ill with it, but after their eyes fell from their heads each one to a man grew them back, and again and again.

After the earthquake you came
to my porch and you were naked
and I was naked and we'd not met
but I knew you.

After the False Starts

by Margaret Bashaar

When first I desired you I did not know your real name.
Now we are renaming each other all the time, Kepler or Venus.
Like good twinned planets our orbits drifted 9 years
before they lined up, bundled in coats when we passed
one another on streets of cities where we never lived,
me off to double-fist cheap cocktails in lingerie, you to
wherever future lovers go when you have not met them yet.
I imagine we touched once back then - press of bodies
in some hallway, heel of my pump on your toe as I reeled
back, hands full and I am certain I did not apologize.

That wet snow night in Boston I watched your hands
though my own were already full of what I told you I needed
and you didn't move to me, but your fingers are long and my
fingers are long. We are both bodies made for reaching.
And I know it seems we stumbled, you telling me about girls
in your bed, me responding with a list of men in mine,
but love, you have no idea how much falling I've done.
Now we careen together in a city we said we would never
return to and you ring out in the bell of my ribcage.
Our language will always have a new word for more.

Crepe Sole Shoes

by Cameron Barnett

I.

You were anchored fast
by the cotton gin fan
pinning your head in shoal.
Barbed wire plaited around
your collar. Tell me how still
the water was—squashed
bullfrog for a face. Did the fish
notice you? Did they nuzzle
by your cheeks? Or scatter?
Tell me how the river broke
around your bloated body, for days.
Tell me where it was deepest.

II.

How many buttons
were on Mrs. Bryant's
dress? Tell me how it
clung to her behind
the register. Were you
really so cocky? What
did you say to her?
Did you make eyes
at her—skin the color
of cracked pearls—
call her baby? Why?
Tell me it isn't true.
You didn't sass her.
It was Mississippi
and you were just
a nigger
buying gum.

III.

When was the last time
Mamie ever called you
Bo? 14 years old.

Today, you could
be my grandfather.
I want to put you
back together, but
how can I rebuild
you? In Chicago
you left your watch,
took your father's ring
and the train to Money.
That summer of '55
the rails beneath you
steadily pinned down
the Illinois horizon.
Were you ever afraid?

IV.

Bryant and Milam wrapped
their trial tongues in stars and bars.
Old uncle Mose pointed a finger
as tired and strong as
every southern black.
In the jury room
white men laughed
and drank pop to stall—
just enough to look good.
Months later, \$4,000
and a confession.
*Damn if that nigger
didn't have crepe sole shoes.
You know how hard they are to burn?*

V.

Was Orion watching
down from the sky,
or Libra, the night
they snatched you?
Who did you miss most

when they took you
to their shed? You
were tied up like meat,
hands numb up to the wrists
while they took turns
smashing your face.
He chopped your nose
with the pistol butt,
crammed his fingers in
your socket, pulled your eye
out, down to your cheek
rested, then threw you back
into the truck. They Picasso'd
your face. Took it to the backwoods,
that hillside slope. How do you
scream when no one cares?

VI.

Muddy water caught the bullet
spilling out from your head.
Your corpse broke the Tallahatchie
waves. And splashing, you
sparked a powder keg
of negroes, who marched well
after your lungs became thermoses
clod with Mississippi's shame.
When your picture hit
the newspapers, even white
America doubled-over
and groaned.

VII.

They say your whistle
curdles the wind in
Montgomery. They say
the sidewalks were heavy
with your footsteps in Selma.

They say after a storm
in Money, the ground
turns pink in memory
of you.

Almost Exorcism

by Clare Welsh

*A strange lump is found
on the ribs of a dog*

1.

Children place their palms
on the dog, hands hovering
over the lump as if it were
a holy relic. They wonder
what the lump looks like
from the *inside*. Maybe

it is a second heart.
When one heart fails,
the other will push

air from wet
gooseflesh nose,
a howl from a husk,
maybe

when the dog cries
it is because he is
twice as heart broken.

2.

One child
swears the lump
is the philosopher's stone.

He imagines cutting
the dog open
and living forever

inside a warm skin.

3.

A teacher
sees children holding
down a dog, one child
holding a knife,
a teacher breaks
them apart, says

*the lump
is a sleuth of cells
that won't stop*

*growing, the lump
will kill the dog,*

and every child walks away
thinking death is a dog
you can't cut open.

Koi in a Shopping Mall Pond

by Clare Welsh

No hurry

No hurry

No hurry

These are the thought bubbles of pudgy gems, fish
in native Japan would slip between fingers
as seaweed ghosts, slim-slime, but here,
in the King of Prussia pond built yesterday
or 50 years ago, they glide in the style of hoagies
or trash in the Hudson, whispers to be ignored
lest the deep-fried-high-heeled-gum-ball-machine
grind to a halt. Somewhere a man in an Armani suit
wings his hands for fear that we remember we are children
who do not buy happiness, but throw money
to fish that swallow our coins trustingly
before spitting them out as if to say *more worms, please*

more earth

and slowness

Momen

by Malcolm Friend

The ocean breeze
used to dance to the barriles' bomba,
my machete cut cane
to its cadence—
hell, even my father's horsewhip
swayed against my back to its swing.

No one's heard of bomba
in Pittsburgh.
This Steel City
moves at an industrial pace,
its tune a clockwork nine-to-five—
keep up, keep moving, keep up...
momentito...momentito.
If you move too fast,
you'll miss the drums
initiate Caribbean mating calls:
co-quí, co-quí, co-quí.

My mother called me "Momen,"—
momentito, momentito—
a name made for bomba.
Here they call me "Bobby,"
a name fit for rigged steel
and cold concrete;
their footsteps sound less
like a beating drum
and more like the march of soldiers—

Maybe I will shape my own song—
Infield hit: tu-cu-tú.
Home run: tu-cu-tú.

Throw from right to third: tu-cu-tú...

In un momentito,
I will teach Pittsburgh
to dance bomba.

Future Tense

by Mark J. Mitchell

Tomorrow:
Horses will beg.
Numbers will trip.
Walls will multiply like flies.
Leaves will organize.
Tomorrow
Death will sleep.

Tomorrow:
Light will drip like wax.
Televisions will be mute.
Water will strangle lizards.
Soft dirt will swallow your fish.
Tomorrow
Death will weep.

And then:
Coins will melt like chocolate.
Rain clouds will collect tolls.
Gnomes and children will reign.
Grass will carpet the sky.
And then
Death sweeps.

A Stirring

by Adrienne Jouver

She'd kick us out of the trailer every morning after breakfast. The weather was mild so we didn't mind. He was red and white, some kind of hound, a good dog who listened. I was 11 or maybe 10. She had a golf cart she used to get around on her land. She'd let me borrow it but I hardly did. It didn't hold a charge well and I was worried I'd run it dead. Plus we liked to go into the woods.

Once we escaped those bare hills surrounding the trailer, the painted garden statues and crunching gravel drives, we'd just run. Not from anything or towards anywhere, but because it felt good and it felt necessary. He was more graceful than I, bounding and bouncing like a fox, looking back every little while to check on me.

It was early fall, the ground covered with big yellow leaves and some still dangling from the trees above. Our sounds and bird sounds were all we heard. A vast open air quiet, heavy and calm, something always about to happen. Small animal bones, secret hollows, slippery moss, cracking twigs, our breath. I imagined we lived in these woods, just us. That there was no trailer. No highway just over the hills. Just the land. And us.

Stream

by Jose Aragoz

Against the railing off a subway entrance and a brick wall covered with posters, an office chair sags like a marionette slumping in its box without an owner. Some newspaper and rags lay on the ground next to plastic bags and a boom box. I see all this as I walk, and almost trip on the curb, split seconds between me and brushes into other people, a geometry of steps I take without thinking, a dance of avoiding one another so that we pass unscathed, ears on cell phones, eyes and fingers on the tiny screens of computers small enough to fit in a back pocket. The lights of the city glow neon, phosphorescent like the moon when it's full and the clouds have no choice but to be bathed in mercury, that fluid fevers cannot hide from, pushed on by our heat, like electricity in the veins of each building, like waste and water in the pipes underneath us, pipes we walk over unaware, as we pass each other unaware, nearly kiss and kill and shove one another unaware of what or who we pass, what an empty chair might mean, what a passing glance could do to the world it takes in, world shook when the sound of water gushing to the ground in smacks like the heavy rains in summer back in Texas during hurricane season, that loud slap of water so that it seems heavy, made of our skin that it hurts to hear it, made of our faces that we run into homes, into shelter and away from that rushing, that rain that hits so hard that it answers the thunder in a roar, in the collapsing of fists upon concrete, that sound now to my right coming from the pay phone, from the man standing there, man who seems ruptured with his back to me as water pours from him in a flush like fireworks there in front of him, he stands shivering and groaning, the passing cars try to drown it out, the idle chatter and smacked gum and the chains on the purses slung on shoulders drown it out, each passing foot, each step a knock on the door the street fills up with the noise of people asking to come in, pounding and pounding like a heartbeat against concrete, where this man groans and I walk by like you walk by in this city where too much happens that nothing can happen, everyone going on with their lives, passing time, passing the empty thrones of each other's hearts, the empty place for each one of us in this city busy as the bloodstream in each of us.

I Had This System for Getting Exactly What I Wanted Out of People

by Sherrie Flick

I make dinner. Roast something dark and sweet, a beef roast, some beets. The whole house embraces the smell of intrigue. The creak of the oven door. The glug of red wine.

I hug. I cheek kiss, twice. Graciousness with an apron. The people, my friends, enter with some caution but then settle into themselves—their drinks, the cheeses and crisp bread. They can't help it. They cross ankles and chat in small groups. Tip-tapping, waiting.

I smile, my lips quivering. I try to push that down, the nerves. Thinking about confidence and a kind of ending that won't make me look bad. And then everyone takes a seat. They jumble into chairs with napkins unleashed. More wine. And just as the group has their forks poised in left and right hands, just as they raise them up to dig in, the sweet smell of all my work flaring their nostrils. Just then I clear my throat, remind them of our friendship, of their faithfulness over the years.

You can see their eyes glaze a bit, their jaws take on a firm line.

"What do you want, DeeAnn?" Jacob asks, pushing at his sleeves. "You always have these nice dinners and then people get in fights and stomp off."

"Not always," I say. "Sometimes everything goes smoothly. Sometimes we make it to dessert. Remember last July? Dessert on the screened-in porch? Nice, wasn't it?"

Jacob sighs, takes a quick bite of the beef as if he wants to get something out of the night before it goes to hell. Francie snaps up a beet. Naomi tops off her wine so it sits still like a lake—a flat red lake hovering above the white tablecloth.

"I need for all of you to work harder," I say, smiling, tapping my nails against the side of my plate. These beautiful plates that a friend supplied years before and insisted I keep. That was back when people knew generosity. And how was I to suspect those kinds of kindnesses could end?

"Harder?" Francie says. "At what?" She tears off a large piece of baguette. Looks to Jacob for reassurance.

"I mean, what have you done for me lately?" My question falls feebly into a newly formed pocket of silence.

"How much wine, DeeAnn? How much wine did you drink before we arrived? I want to understand where we are here," Jacob says. "Are you going to throw a tantrum next? Throw things at us? Why do we even try with you?"

Troy, Naomi's boyfriend—new to our circle—pushes his chair back a little, glances at his wristwatch.

"Because you love me," I say. The obvious answer, obviously. I extend my arms as if to encompass the table. "Because you enjoy helping. You do. All of you. Because I make you amazing food and house-sit your pets and remember your children's names. I do all this stuff, and all I ask is that you listen to me right now."

"Work harder," Naomi says. She smiles, nodding. Naomi likes to get things right.

"Yes, exactly," I say. "Harder."

"Okay. I'll chop some wood. I like to do that. It's anti-femmy," Naomi says and rests her hands in her lap. "Can I have dessert?"

“Yes.”

“Dishes,” Francie says without conviction. “But I did the dishes last time we were here, and it kind of sucked.”

“Then don’t volunteer, Francie,” Jacob says. “Don’t do things you don’t want to do for DeeAnn because chances are you won’t hear from her for months after this, anyway. You’ll wait. You’ll call, but she won’t return your calls. Will you, DeeAnn?” Jacob nabs the serving spoon, heaps on a large smattering of garlic-mashed potatoes with fresh chives.

“I’ll fuck you, DeeAnn,” he says. “Even though I did that last time too and even though it also kind of sucked.” Jacob addresses the table as he speaks, his eyes roving to me and then to the empty wine bottles, and then back to me like a well-thrown dart.

“You get what you ask for, don’t you, dear?” Judy, Jacob’s ex says to me, clutching her knife, which still holds a smudge of butter.

Deep Sea Diving Suit

by Ben Arzate

Jeff has difficulty holding down jobs. There are few places with a dress code that allows deep sea diving suits. There have been very few occasions where he got past the interview stage. Most HR people are put off when a guy walks in wearing a diving suit. Even the occasions where he does get a job, the heaviness and awkwardness of the suits always get in the way of his duties. As such, he is often dismissed from those places very quickly.

Jeff's social life is not very good either. The helmets on his suits make conversation hard. Many find it awkward interacting with Jeff because they can't see his face through the helmets, they muffle his voice, and the giant gloves make shaking hands uncomfortable. Guys don't like to hang out with Jeff because they find his clumsy and ridiculous movements from just trying to walk around in the suits embarrassing to be around.

Needless to say, Jeff's love life is practically non-existent. A deep sea diving suit does not flatter a man at all. Women tend to be very put off when they're approached by him. His only relationship petered out very quickly. His ex cited his reluctance to take off his diving helmet during sex as the deal breaker.

Often, Jeff has contemplated selling his diving suits in order to buy more normal clothes. While he is aware that this would make his life easier, there is some psychological block that keeps him from taking this simple action. It seems like he is unable to comprehend on a deep level that there could be a place that does not require constant protection from one's surroundings. He is so used to spending time in an environment hostile to his survival, that he finds himself unable to leave his protective suits despite the fact they make existing in a welcoming environment difficult.

CONTRIBUTORS

Michael Albright has published poems in various journals, including *Tar River Poetry*, *A Narrow Fellow*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Cider Press Review*, *Revolver*, *Moon City Review*, *Blast Furnace*, *Uppagus*, and others. He lives on a windy hilltop near Greensburg, PA. with his wife Lori and an ever-changing array of children and other animals.

Ziggy Edwards' work has appeared in publications including *Illumen*, *5 AM*, *Ship of Fools*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Bathtub Gin*. Her chapbook, "Hope's White Shoes," was published in 2006. With her son she co-founded the online magazine *Uppagus*.

Jen Ashburn recently completed her MFA at Chatham University in poetry and creative nonfiction. She has work published or forthcoming in *Anak Sastra*, *Puff Puff Prose & Poetry Vol. II*, *The Poet's Billow*, *Grey Sparrow* and the anthology *Make Mine Words* (Trinity University Press).

Joanna C. Valente is a human who received her MFA in writing at Sarah Lawrence College. She is the author of *Sirs & Madams* (Aldrich Press, October 2014). Some of her work appears in *The Paris-American*, *The Destroyer*, *The Atlas Review*, *El Aleph Press*, and others. In 2011, she received the American Society of Poet's Prize. She founded and currently edits *Yes, Poetry*; she is also a copyeditor and staff writer for *Luna Luna Magazine*. She resides in Brooklyn, New York. More can be found at: <http://joannavalente.com>.

Margaret Bashaar's first full-length collection of poetry, *Stationed Near the Gateway*, is due out from Sundress Publications in 2015. Her work has also been collected in two chapbooks – *Letters from Room 27 of the Grand Midway Hotel* (Blood Pudding Press) and *Barefoot and Listening* (Tilt) – as well as in numerous literary journals and anthologies. She lives in Pittsburgh, PA, with her partner, her son, and their kitty cat, where she edits *Hyacinth Girl Press*.

Cameron Barnett, a resident of Pittsburgh, PA, is working toward his MFA in poetry at the University of Pittsburgh, and is a member of staff for the journal *Hot Metal Bridge*. His poems have previously been published in print and online through *Lines + Stars*, *Blast Furnace*, *Shadow Road Quarterly*, *Off the Coast*, and *Tipton Poetry Journal*.

Clare Welsh is a freelance writer/illustrator from the rust belt. She loves adventuring, fancy peanut butter, and climbing fire escapes. For more pictures/poems, follow her on Instagram at *ClareWelsh* or on Twitter at *@cc_welsh*.

Malcolm Friend is a poet originally from Seattle, Washington. He received his BA from Vanderbilt University, where he was the 2014 recipient of the Merrill Moore Prize for Poetry, and will be an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Pittsburgh beginning Fall 2014. He is also a 2014 recipient of a Talbot

International Award for writing. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in publications such as *La Re-spuesta* magazine, *The Vanderbilt Review*, *fields* magazine, *Pretty Owl Poetry*, and elsewhere.

Shane van Hayden was born in Biloxi, Mississippi. He now lives in Portland, Oregon. He is currently working on a collection of poetry about car camping with John Wesley Powell called, *Car camping with John Wesley Powell*.

Mark J. Mitchell studied writing at UC Santa Cruz under Raymond Carver, George Hitchcock and Barbara Hull. His work has appeared in various periodicals over the last thirty five years, as well as the anthologies *Good Poems*, *American Places*, *Hunger Enough*, *Retail Woes* and *Line Drives*. It has also been nominated for both Pushcart Prizes and *The Best of the Net*. Two full length collections are in the works: *Lent 1999* is coming soon from Leaf Garden Press and *This Twilight World* will be published by Popcorn Press. His chapbook, *Three Visitors*, has recently been published by Negative Capability Press. *Artifacts and Relics*, another chapbook, is forthcoming from *Folded Word* and his novel, *Knight Prisoner*, was recently published by Vagabondage Press and another novel, *A Book of Lost Songs*, is coming soon from Wild Child Publishing. He lives in San Francisco with his wife, the documentarian and filmmaker Joan Juster.

Adrienne Jouver is originally from Atlanta, GA and now lives in Pittsburgh, PA. She is just okay at a lot of things and that is fine with her. More recently, she has taken up bird watching. So far, it's been a whole lot of robins.

Jose Angel Araguz is a 2014 Canto Mundo fellow. He has had poems recently in *Rattle*, *RHINO*, *Hanging Loose* and *Poet Lore* as well as forthcoming flash fiction in *NANO Fiction*. He is presently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Cincinnati. He runs the poetry blog: *The Friday Influence*.

Sherrie Flick is author of the novel *Reconsidering Happiness* (Bison Books) and the flash fiction chapbook *I Call This Flirting* (Flume). Her flash fiction has appeared in many anthologies including Norton's *Flash Fiction Forward* and *New Sudden Fiction* and recently in Tom Hazuka's *Flash Fiction Funny*. Stories have recently appeared in *Passages North*, *Revolution House*, *SmokeLong*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Corium*, *Cortland Review*, and *Wigleaf*. She lives in Pittsburgh and teaches in Chatham University's MFA program.

Ben Arzate lives in Des Moines. He can be found at <http://dripdropdripdropdripdrop.blogspot.com/>.