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.

If you would like to submit poetry, flash fiction, or visual art, please visit prettyowlpoetry.submittable.com.
Ash Fiasco - My friend has a new puppy. The next day when I asked her where it is she tells me her other dog ate it, then continues to play hide and seek. I leave her hiding to go find dead bugs in window sills. [page 17]

Ash Fiasco - She buys me two bras after laughing and commenting about my growing breasts. They're blue and green with iridescent patterns. I hate them because they remind me of her. [page 25]

Jessica Lynne Furtado - All Alone in Wonder [page 29]

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Walking with My Baby Daughter, I Imagined Violence

Amy Watkins

Attacks, snatches, accidents. Desperate actions of the unstable or insane. Secrets lurking behind friendly faces. I could have been the woman who, in a rush of adrenaline, lifted a car to save her baby, the force of her love turned to action. I dreamed someone took her. I dreamed a villain grabbed for her, and I stabbed him in the abdomen and, when he didn’t fall, stabbed again and again until he died, and the dream ended.

Many things no one told me about mothering, including this: that my love for her would be a forest, a darkness, a fire tended all night, creatures circling, a witch’s hut, a pact with the darkness, a wary traveler, a wilderness. All that day, I felt the tension and give, like breaking a layer of cellophane, but my hands were steady on the stroller as we walked around and around Lake Lily. My voice was steady when I pointed out the baby ducks, diverted her attention from the dead one at the edge of the parking lot.
All the Bright Things

Amy Watkins

We learn the bright flame burns, but first
a crueler lesson: that all the lovely shiny things—
the baubles on the Christmas tree, the coals
in our uncles’ cigarettes, the silver
in our babysitter’s ears—are not for touching.
They slap our fingers until we learn
to tell ourselves “no.” We learn the brightest
berries are likely poisonous. We read
about camouflage and insects drowning
in the throats of the most vibrant flowers.
We begin to mistrust beautiful things,
which is the point. The new convert trashes
her lipstick but saves her jewelry in a
velvet bag. Long after the holes in her lobes
have scarred over, her daughter pushes
opals and garnets into glittering piles
on the bedspread, begins, without
knowing what it means, to dream in color.
The Working Hours

bennett joan nieberg

I do not like my own skin I peel it off & underneath there are more layers. Inside is a tiny room where I live, or pray or eat or inside tiny eye slits I lie awake when it is dark out.

the people I love do not love me anymore in my dreams but I do not sleep

sudden stillness, waking drywall. a room in a house in a layer of shit & dirt

we sure are lucky, darling, don’t you think?

the clouds are changing but I don’t sleep.

inside this shirt is another shirt, a human body, a chest compressed. I am willing to crawl inside a layer of myself to shave it all off, to peel back the curtains of skin, fear & filth, fear & breath
either the body is free or else it is barricaded. either the body is strip-sparkle mine or it belongs to
the men. they own everything. the silence. call me again & try to tell me. either the body breathes or
it breathes, but restricted, but “decent,” but it’s no longer a body? more like a net, like suffocation, like
the body is silenced, as if manifested in the mouth. the men own the body, the body all stark-strip all
theirs, call me again. tell me what it is i’ve done wrong, tell me my name, cowards, men who own it.
deadname the body & the mouth—silent. either the body can or it can’t. if it can’t, then the men
own it. if it can, they will buy up all the noise you can make.
In this world, pictures appear on blank canvas-like skin whenever something important happens. The death of a loved one can produce their name inked across the heart, or a permanent black ribbon tied around your wrist. Falling in love can create a balloon that floats from your stomach up to your chest, or a white sparrow around your hip, or even a simple heart bordered with lace and a Cupid’s arrow flying through it. Any manner of significant event can leave any kind of mark on your skin, and as the feeling fades, so does the mark.

It never disappears completely, but just as all tattoos do, time and exposure mar the lines to a blur, as opposed to the beautifully bright, radiant colours that existed when the feeling was still fresh.

One.

The youngest Heather had ever seen anyone with a tattoo was her friend’s son on his third birthday, when his parents agreed that he would get a puppy for his next birthday if he was a very good boy all year. The excitement and happiness of the moment was too much for him, and it manifested in a paw print tattoo on his wrist. He proudly showed it off to all his friends at school, telling them that the pictures were starting up early for him. Everyone was jealous. His parents got him the puppy. She knew that it would affect the rest of his life, too. Every day that he looked upon that tattoo, etched forever into his skin, was a day closer to him growing up and getting more, and making his way towards a path in life that he felt was what he should be doing. After all, nobody becomes that excited over a dog and doesn’t grow up to become a vet.

She knew that that was what had happened to her, anyway.

Not the vet part, no. But Heather’s first tattoo had appeared when she was ten years old, when she looked up at her father as he explained to her what an archaeologist was, and the skin around her shoulder blades burst with a fiery pain that she welcomed. She knew that she was finding her purpose — the tattoos did that for you, helped you understand what it was that really made you happy. When she checked her new, first mark in the mirror later, with another mirror propped up behind her to help her see, she saw that the mark was of a mummy, wrapped up in beige wrappings and holding a Feather of Maat and a Uraeus. She was obsessed with Egyptology at the time, you see, and it would be only fitting that her first mark was that. She resolved, from then on out, that she would remain faithful to that happiness she felt when she heard the word ‘archaeologist’ for the first time. And that she did.

The marks on her skin grew in number and in size, but that first one stayed as bright as anything.
She was twenty-five when she realized that she had accumulated a fair amount of tattoos that everybody could very easily see. Going out in the summer, in shorts that stopped mid-way at her thighs and tank tops that showed off her shoulders and a small part of back, meant that most everyone would see the incredible amount of stories that she’d accumulated over the years. Of course she wasn’t the only one, but she was one of the few that people saw who openly just had so many.

Her friends themselves often forgot how many she had. She herself found it difficult to remember. But on those days she stripped naked and stood in front of the mirror and counted each and every one, and told herself why it was there.

The anatomically correct heart happened after she found her first mummified sample.
The compass came from her first trip outside the continent.
The ten-sided die came from the first time she led a roleplaying campaign.
The skull and crossbones appeared when she almost died of food poisoning.
The trident had come about when she went to Greece and visited the temple of her favourite Greek god.
The shark tooth was from her first heartbreak.

She remembered all the stories, and each tattoo was just as vibrant as it was the first day it appeared.

She often wondered why it was that she had so many, or why they were so colourful. But she never thought about it too much, anyway.

And on those days, Heather would turn around the soft clicking of a tongue against teeth as her husband, clad in nothing but grey sweatpants and staring at her lovingly from the mirror, would raise his hand to her and beckon her to join him on the bed. And she would crawl into the space his arm made for her and they would sit together and count both of theirs.

Two people sharing in their openness is exactly what this world was made for.

Two.

Nancy Holden had tattoos, just like everybody else did, but Nancy hated showing them off. And somehow, something in her subconscious mind knew that. All of her tattoos lay in difficult to see places — her ribs, her back, her inner thighs, all the places that she hid when she wore clothes. They were vibrant and colourful pieces, never really fading past their original colours, but still very difficult to spot.

Often in bed, she would run her hands under her shirt and feel the bumps that some of them left, tracing them and seeing them in her mind as she remembered.
The rainbow star from when she saw the Northern Lights.
The polar bear silhouette from her first visit to Canada.
The Saturn-like planet in between her breasts from when she lost her virginity.
The Roman numerals for the year ‘1980’, for the day she realized that she would die one day.
The tiny T-Rex that she and her best friend shared.

She hated the looks people gave her the most of all. It seemed like people trusted you less if they couldn’t see any markings on you, couldn’t make out any splashes of colour or dark lines. The more she noticed this, the more she was a strange kind of thankful that she didn’t wear her heart on her sleeve like everybody else. She would rather be judged by people for something other than what she couldn’t control.

Nicky was the only person that she trusted enough to tell about the tattoos. He was a strange figure — many faded pieces all over his body, except for one very prominent and colourful one. A snake that curled around his bald head on the right side, its mouth open to reveal fangs dripping with venom that slid down his cheekbone. He was a menacing-looking man with a heart of gold, who always welcomed her to his apartment on days she felt like venting, and they would sit on his balcony and drink beers and smoke cigarettes together while she told him about everything that had been plaguing her over the last few days, and he patiently listened and interjected with his own stories sometimes.

It wasn’t uncommon that they would fall asleep on the balcony, waking up when the night got too cold to stay outside and crawling back inside where they would fall asleep on the sofa, heads on opposite ends of the furniture and legs tangled up together to keep warm. She would often wake up from their nights of deep, meaningful conversation to find a new piece added to her collection, a tattoo reflecting something that they had discussed the night before, or something that he had said that had made her really think and re-evaluate things.

On those days, Nancy was glad that she had at least one person in this world who didn’t judge her based on her seemingly-clear skin.

Three.

They had been in love for a while, of course; they just hadn’t said it yet. Eleanor had known from the minute they met, but she’d refused to say it out loud until she heard Courtney say it. But it seemed like it would never actually happen. Courtney kept a lot of her feelings to herself, and Eleanor was starting to wonder if maybe they’d ever move past this part of their relationship.

She loved it all, of course. Being together in general was always a good time no matter what they did. But she knew she’d feel better if there was, maybe, just a tiny indication that they were on the same page.
On some mornings after she’d slept over, she’d watch Courtney dress and get ready for class, and she’d look at all the little pictures she had all over her body. She’d never bothered to ask where half of them had come from, but she was endlessly fascinated by some of them.

The green clover behind her left knee.
The bee behind her right knee (which she knew was because of an inside joke with Courtney’s older brother).
The bright yellow band-aid on her lower back.
The syringe on her left bicep.
The silliest one — a dog doing the yoga warrior pose — on her right shoulder blade.

Eleanor loved every single one of these little pictures, little windows into her girlfriend’s past that she hadn’t learned about yet, but she just wished she could be a bit braver about it and ask.

And then one day, lying in bed watching a movie, Eleanor noticed a small marking that looked relatively new, emblazoned across Courtney’s right wrist where she would normally wear her watch – a single light bulb that seemed to be emanating a rainbow of colours.

“What’s that?” she wondered aloud, running her fingers across the bumps that the newness had left and smiling. “When’d you get it?”

“A few days ago,” Courtney muttered, her attention still on the movie, but Eleanor could see her colouring slightly as the skin behind her ears grew red.

“What’s it about?” She had no idea why she was asking, but she knew that the curiosity would kill her if she didn’t ask right this second.

“Remember when we went to the movies to watch that Slash Horror Showcase?”

“Yeah.”

“We went to a bar after that and we got all those fancy cocktails.”

“Oh, yeah! I got the one in the lightbulb.”

“Yeah,” Courtney smiled so softly, turning her eyes up towards Eleanor, and reached the newly-tattooed hand up to Eleanor’s face and cupped her cheek, still smiling in the way that reminded Eleanor why she loved her.
“Remember how excited you got that the drinks were all so cool and like having all these chemical reactions and making smoke or bubbling up coz they were kinda hot or that they were in just all these cool containers?”

“Yeah.”

“I realized something that day.”

Eleanor grinned widely, leaning down to kiss Courtney softly.

“I love you too.”

**Four.**

Fiona had never heard of something like this happening before. She knew that tattoos appeared and disappeared on bodies regularly, but they never really *disappeared*. They only ever faded, but the mark still existed.

But to disappear entirely? That was something very new.

She was in her fifties now, she had collected her fair share of tattoos. She didn’t think they were an extraordinary amount, really, just enough that was normal for a woman her age. Words and dates and small pictures strewn all across her body showed a life well-lived and well-travelled. But her favourite was on her right bicep — a blue house with a red-bricked roof, very much reminiscent of a child’s drawing, and next to it were stick figures. Herself and her husband at the front of the line, with their three children standing beneath them — Chelsea, Leslie, and Sasha.

Sasha, her eldest, had just gotten married. He looked stunning in his suit, and his bride looked just as beautiful in her white gown, and they made a rather handsome couple together. She knew that their children would be beautiful — not because they would be her grandchildren, but because they would inherit some truly spectacular genes. She smiled to herself often when she thought about being a grandmother.

But today, something was different. She could feel it in her arm as she watched them dance together, as she watched them share a drink and a piece of cake, as her son came up to her to drag her onto the dance floor for a mother-son dance together. She could feel it in her arm all the way home, until she took off her dress with the sleeves that had been hiding that particular tattoo, and stared in amazement at the way that the little stick figures had changed their order.
The one representing Sasha was gone. Chelsea and Leslie stood closer to each other, still smiling their little stick-figure smile up, and her husband was too. But Sasha was gone, and unless she was going crazy, she could have sworn that her stick figure looked a tiny bit sad and smaller than it had before.

Fiona had never heard of tattoos changing that much before, but she knew it wasn’t for nothing.

**Five.**

In a world where tattoos appear on your body without needing to go to somebody to do it professionally, you would think that there wouldn’t be a need for people like that. But Janeth was pleasantly surprised by the amount of business she regularly had.

Of course, she didn’t advertise herself as a ‘tattoo artist’. That would just kill her business strategy altogether. No, she had a shop that supposedly sold knick-knacks and junk, and she did actually sell those things, but she also had a whole other shop in the back where she gave people markings.

She didn’t know why people craved getting the images, but she didn’t complain when those same people were willing to pay good money for her to give them just a few hours of pain in exchange for a picture.

She enjoyed the artistry to it, too. She loved getting text messages and designing the tattoo for somebody she had never met, sending it to them over email and then meeting them at her shop, where they would enter as inconspicuously as they could, and leave her shop buying some kind of old tea set or Russian doll set, making sure that it looked like they had really been in there to browse for tchotchke and not to get pictures drawn on themselves.

She asked somebody once, why he was getting his fifth tattoo at her little shop, and he looked over at her, eyes watering through the pain, and just bit his lip as he thought of his answer (or maybe tried not to groan from the needling pain).

“Because some of us are so boring, we think maybe people will like us more if we had more pictures.”

She found it hard to believe that there were people out there who didn’t have any experiences at all, who lacked the colour and spice of their life so much that nothing excited them enough to produce an image on their body somewhere. But she never complained, and just counted her money at the end of the day.

And sometimes, on quiet days in the shop, she could play around with the needles and add to her own markings, borne over years of living, and she would smile to herself, understanding (even if just for a little bit) what it meant to want to add colour to your life yourself when you hadn’t been dealt the right cards.
Why I Think of Ace Ventura When I Tuck

Zoë Estelle Hitzel

The man in the loud shirt oozed charisma like an old hot dog left in the sun.

His haircut was a huge wet knot of fungi. I will not glorify Ace Ventura.

His disgust reached through the television / when he realized the woman he had sloppily made / out
   with was trans / and his face collapsed.

His tongue gag-leapt from his throat to fling implied and spectacular vomit.

His frown farted. His lips wrung.

His tear ducts gushed magma and chaff and he gnawed / his fingernails beyond the screaming cuticles.

The gel fell from his pompadour / and ignited on contact with his insecurities.

The blood which rushed to his cheeks was ashamed / it could be attracted to someone attractive / to
   a man like him / and fled his elastic face.

He ran to his bathroom on feet which slapped / like porpoises squeaking their trepidation!

In the bathtub he shivered / revolting and naked / a patriarchal caricature unsure of himself / his desire
   satisfied and somehow not / while a remarkably fragile cisgender-hetero-masculinity shattered as he wretched.

He attempted a hasty shower. Can the past be so easily cleansed?

He burned the clothing he wore when they kissed / as if to burn his passion passionately / and
brand me a heathen before I knew anything / of how I could slide my testes up / and into
the cavity they fell from / then tug the rest between my thighs / when a lifetime later I
would want to wear leggings / without the thought of my bulging junk / shrieking through
the spandex.
How to Water Chrysanthemums

Zoë Estelle Hitzel

I can trust none of the clocks in my life. All of them tied to some distant keeper who marks a rain of cesium electrons jumping each nanosecond between two states of excitement. Such attention I cannot stomach. Such attention I must admire as an on-again-off-again cartographer of the inner lives of very small things.

Today I am off again. It rains on February twenty-third no matter where you are or what or how and if no one yet has said that rain is bad for mapmaking then let me say it. Rain is bad for mapmaking. Don’t make maps in the rain.

Atop this stiff seat in a terminal, I am learning my new favorite part of the airport is all the huge windows, how they make you feel you could watch almost anything through them.

Lamps light the taxi lane as air zooms away, punched by a gigantic object.

I think of the time I killed Nicole’s chrysanthemums immediately after she showed me how to water them. An elk passed by, then a doe. The dog noticed, then pretended not to, decided to imagine everything around it was dogs.
The Planet’s Dying but Don’t Freak Out (Couch Cushion)

Zoë Estelle Hitzel

The world is in the middle. The middle is on fire.
Which is better than being on ice because
temperatures don’t mean anything when you’re on fire.
The blooming daffodil means even less.

The world is exposed to unpredictable collisions with cosmic errata:
asteroids the size of Texas, dying stars’ superexhales,
idots yelling on the news, poorly
-written yet expensively-cast characters.
A character is when someone asks for your attention,
then sympathy, then money.
The cynic wrote that last one.
The world is not cynical, but it’s not a cakewalk either.

The world is underwear flapping with violence!
underwater or flimsily clipped to a clothesline
strung through a halcyon grassland fireball sky!

The world is stupid! Brilliant! Savoy!
The world is drunk, just leave it alone,
it’ll be better in the morning.

The world is a bunny rotting on the side of the road.
The world is the armadillo that eats the bunny carcass
and not enough priests or scientists observe this.

Myth math: three bunnies, twelve armadillos,
one hero holding the remote control,
burning a hole in the middle of the couch,
as sacred as flammability allows,
exuding calamity for showing the couch
what’s to come while telling the future
to fuck off.
The trick is to be three of something and try to ignore the pain.

*Click.*

And now the world is young and pretty and we can all go back to sleep. Except you. You are still on fire and I don’t know how to tell you.
Dream in which you serve in the military / Dream in which I am fertile

Susan L. Leary

Except this is neither of those dreams. Which means, despite training; we misfire. Which means, a scalpel is more invasive & less effective than a gun. Because sometimes a woman can shed as much blood as her country. Sometimes, between her legs, she can cradle the most miniature corpse—& she’ll do this over & over: a massacre of flowers hemorrhaging from her thighs like canned peaches onto the bank. The success rate of a skilled surgeon is significantly less reliable. Meaning, sometimes to the body, the spine is more destructive than a bomb. More hell-bent than metal or the starched precision of a uniform. So then let paradise begin here. Let it begin at the water’s edge of a river the color of a ghost. At each place it has stalled & failed to start over. Maybe, then, every man & child will live through the war. Maybe, now, when I look at you, our lives won’t be much different at all.
When You Tell Me How It Was When Your Father Died,
You Tell Me First about the Dog—

Susan L. Leary

For weeks, the smell of Thanksgiving refusing to wash from her coat. Grief reeking like a rotting belly that protrudes, mistakenly,

from the skin. Meaning, upstairs— for days,

the long wait of your father.

Meaning, life everywhere.

Tenderness tied to what we will want to turn our eyes from:

Such as the simple fact of the lawnmower left out front.

Around the house, bowls crusted over. Beside the sink,

a blender draped with the mush & peel of banana.

How suddenly the most everyday things are out of place when paused

in the midst of their use. Death just as dramatic—

just as perverse.
As if instinct were nothing more than what
the body knows to hold on to.

So that asked what happened,

You say, *enlarged heart.*
You say, *bi-polar.*

When really you mean:
*what if we’re meant to die here?*

*Alive in the very best ways*
*we know how* ...
Sting

Hatcher Grey

The summer before high school, my best friend joined the nice country club in the neighboring town. We, still young enough to care about first kisses and first dates, stood around in our bikinis all summer, waiting, for the boys to finish their sting pong. A game where the winner ended up with the girl and the loser with welts on his back the size of a dollar coin. Eventually, we grew tired of the chase. We watched as girl after girl was invited to the golf course while we stood under the wooden overhang alone. It didn’t take long for us to turn into the fiercest rivals. Each day, we both left the pool with bruises crawling up our backs. She might tell the story a different way, but I can remember the polished wooden paddle against my palm. Swinging so hard my shoulder gave out. If only to prove to the boys that I was just as strong; but also, so that when Maggie and I returned home, I could unhook her bikini, press ice against her shoulder blades. I could lay on her bed and trace the spaces between the swells like catching a rough wind in an old sail. Our eyes, sore from staring at the sun. Our hands, now aware of the damage a small, round, perfect thing can do.
Lying to my Barber

Hatcher Grey

She asks, how short on the sides? Three, I respond. My voice disappearing beneath the hum of the clippers. She trims my sideburns as she speaks of her love for feminine men. Those with the sashay in their step, the slippery slope of their tongues like a calm rush, like being swept away by the tide. This is the kind of man I am often assumed to be — a lightness of step, a tendency to smile at strangers. Because she is up close, heard my tongue curl around the letter “s,” because she has touched the softness of newly christened boy cheeks, my barber believes she knows me. She tells me I have a feminine face, that I could go shorter if I wanted. I do not tell her that two weeks ago, a man leaned out of the side of his pickup truck to call me a faggot in the pouring rain. I laughed, once I was ten miles away. By then, sure he wasn’t going to kill me. My barber finishes, wipes my neck clean, asks me if I feel pretty. I nod and do not correct her. I leave. The sun outside too hot for September. As I walk, a man wolf whistles. I smile. I do not know what else to do.
Never Have I Ever

Erin Elizabeth Smith

Made out with your best friend.

Shoplifted chapstick because it was raspberry.

Mangled Piano Man at karaoke.

Went home with a man because he loved French cheese.

Went home with a man because he hated Bukowski.

Went home with a woman because her neckline made you think of birds.

Threw up the good scotch your grandfather gave you.

Thought of the easiest way to kill yourself.

Bought a pet so something would love you.

Blacked out more than once.

Planned your funeral as a ghost.

Had a threesome that ended well.

Had an orgy that ended well.

Known the words to a Hanson song.

Pretended it didn’t matter anyway.
She was all alone in Wonderland.

(You know how things are in dreams)

Disappearing through a mouthful of sharp teeth.

The world of human beings...
Alaska

Carolyn Wilsey

I see now we were girls
in a nothing hotel,
a stuffed Grizzly in the lobby
rearing up,
looking as if he were pausing
to smell the morning news

A gray-on-gray outskirt of Anchorage,
shiny with rivers and men
who looked twice

I know we’re young because
there was joy
in realizing the restaurant
didn’t put anything in our takeout bag
to break the crabs’ legs open

We wadded up hotel towels,
gripping the crabs’ studded bodies,
their secretive meat inside

We laughed and laughed,
not yet knowing our lives,
and then crack! like the sound
of a baseball bat
cutting a summer night,
broke the crabs into a pile of kindling
for a future fire
WHERE I STORE SADNESS
or HOW I AM TODAY

Carolyn Wilsey

Pull the weathered cord and moonlight
flicks on in my chest
like a bare closet bulb

a windowless box behind my lungs
hums with the blues
I already know half the words to this one
Scabs

Janelle Greco

My scabs always felt like the mountain ranges on a globe. I would run my fingers over the bumps and craters of them, wishing I were in Nepal or Mongolia or the French Alps. My legs and elbows were covered in them from falling or being pushed or sliding to a base. There were valleys of scabs with little hairs poking through before I got told to shave, when my leg hair was still soft like Bermuda grass.

It’s a wonder the skin ever looked the same again. I’d press the scabs to make sure they were secure. I’d poke them, rub them—small exams to make sure my body was still my body. I picked them before they were ready, like peeling off tree bark with the sap and raw flesh underneath. The bathroom would fill up with the smell of pine needles and Neosporin, of bikes and blood the color of a rusted swing set. The scabs stuck to my pants and caught on the sheets at night; I woke up blinking in the sun only to realize through crust-coated eyes that a wound had reopened. The scabs got red around the edges and dried up until I had the skin of a pachyderm—gray and parched and tough like an oyster shell.

I pulled them even though it hurt. At some point healing just becomes intolerable. They left some blood; they itched until I scratched them right off. Sometimes they’d peel off whole and other times they’d flake apart like the burnt pieces on toast. Cells that I couldn’t see would come together to produce skin that was the color of a conch. And I just had to accept this new layer after some fresh gash—scraps from being tripped in a game of tag, cuts courtesy of trying to pet the cat, casualties after ceremoniously skipping every other step on the porch.

My mother would shake her head at all the summer dresses I couldn’t wear. They hung so easily inside the closet, each color a different spring flower. “Don’t pick them,” she said, “you’ll get scars.” But it was unavoidable. I can never recount those various details of how each accident happened. They blur together in summers full of bloody knees and scars reminding me that I was young once, that I fell often and healed.
going to florida

Marina Fec

i found god in cajun-flavored boiled peanuts
the brine running down my fingers like a baptism
the styrofoam cup: an aspersorium

and i am driving
with the windows down letting the sun wash over the left side of
me and i feel clean for the first time even though my hair is in
knots and there is sweat on the back of my neck and dirt caked
beneath my fingernails

the south is cleansing
it’s the openness and the length of the grass and the diners at 3am
with grits thick and healing like a salve
it’s the still quiet of nowhere georgia where the wooden colonial houses are empty and
crumbling and women in pink bathrobes stand in overgrown yards
slippered feet gliding silent over the ground

in nowhere georgia everyone is a ghost and i am alone on the
asphalt and in the tall grass and in the gas stations it is only me and
god and boiled peanuts and grits and fried chicken and
tiny produce stands selling ripe peaches and
the juice dripping down my chin is another kind of baptism

sticky like the salt in the air like the sweat on my neck like the tears on my cheeks and i am
screaming out of the car window because this is nowhere nowhere nowhere repeating it like a
prayer baptizing myself in the saltwater near savannah burying myself under tall white ash trees
making myself holy

and the emptiness feels like home like being inside of myself and
finding georgia georgia georgia repeating it like a prayer until i am
covered in wisteria vines and peach fuzz and bermudagrass until i
become part of the landscape
until i am running through the state like a river
Black-Eyed Susan

Thomas Genevieve

Her father took her by the hand and walked her through the parking lot to the pizzeria that served her favorite pizza.

Although she could only fit one slice of pizza in her nine-year-old belly, she always asked for two, knowing she would be disappointed by her father’s curt denial. However, this evening as her legs swung back and forth in the booth, waiting, he brought her two slices—the pizza’s cheesy edges hanging off the conjoined paper plates—and a large Coke filled with ice, a straw already sticking out of the cup.

He didn’t have anything to say at first; he usually didn’t. It was usually she who talked about her school day or her friends or what kind of a mess her two little brothers had left in the playroom.

But as she neared the crust of the first slice, eyeing the last patch of cheese she could bite before justifiably beginning the second, her father told her about the plan. Though leaving doesn’t sound like it’s going to be good, it will actually be better for everyone, because there will be no more fighting. And no more fighting is, of course, better for everyone, right? And what will be even better are the sleepovers that she and her little brothers will have at his new place, a condominium, which will be like having another home, where every other weekend they will all have fun and try out new pizza and ice cream places nearby and stay up late to watch TV as long as she wants, and, because she is the oldest, it will be her choice of what they watch first.

The grease of the second slice dripped into little pools on her paper plate, and she began to think: no, unfortunately, I probably won’t be able to finish the second slice of pizza. I won’t be able to take more than two, or, if they’re small, maybe three more bites. Her belly stuffed, by the time she swallowed her last bite, she felt like she was about to burst.

She hoped that one day soon, she would be able to finish more than just one and a half slices of pizza. And on that day, to make it even better, she’d lie in the huge bed of black-eyed susans in the field behind the park, listening to the distant sounds of her little brothers on the playground. When her belly no longer felt stuffed from her grand accomplishment, she would roll and roll, for the field of black-eyed susans was the biggest she had ever seen. Eventually, she’d become too dizzy to continue and the flattened flowers would slowly straighten and surround her, so when her brothers came looking for her, all they would find is a sea of yellow petals encircling their bruised hearts.
I had a little girl
born to be
a great hunter,
curved and graceful,
in disguise.

A little daughter
rolling out with the smoke,
spoked of fright
the way other animals
took to the sky.
Contributors

Marina Fec is a student at the University of Pittsburgh currently working toward degrees in English Literature and Poetry writing. She has won the school’s Writer’s Cafe contest two years in a row, and has performed readings around Pittsburgh hosted by the Hell’s Lid Reading Series.

Ash Fiasco is a visual artist who practices in fiber based sculpture and digitally illustrated bindings. Her work is in the permanent collections of both the Cleveland Museum of Art and moCa Cleveland. When she is not in the studio she works as a Creative Production Specialist at American Greetings.

Jessica Lynne Furtado (she/her) is a poet, photographer, & librarian. Her artwork and writing have appeared in apt, Hobart, Muzzle Magazine, PANK, Rogue Agent, and Stirring, among others. Her chapbook A Kiss for the Misbehaved was a finalist in the 2019 Paper Nautilus Debut Series Contest. Visit her at www.jessicafortado.com

Thomas Genevieve’s fiction appears or is forthcoming in the Baltimore Review, the Sierra Nevada Review, Hobart, Crack the Spine, decomP magazine, and the Valparaiso Fiction Review, among others. When he is not writing, he maintains a steady diet of the cultural arts.

Janelle Greco is a writer and education director living in Brooklyn. Janelle’s work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in Hobart Magazine, Maudlin House, Crag, and Crab Fat Magazine. She is also the co-host of Eclipsed Reading Series and an Assistant Fiction Editor at No Tokens Journal.

Hatcher Grey is a college senior studying fiction. He likes vintage stores, big windows and his favorite Joni Mitchell album is Court and Spark. Hatch hopes to write novels and own a dog sometime in the future.

Zoë Estelle Hitzel earned her MA at NAU and her MFA at OSU. Her writing appears in Uproot, The Fourth River, Blue Lyra Review, entropy, and elsewhere. She is the Fall 2019 Ofstad Writer in Residence at Truman State University. Her debut collection, Gender Flytrap, is available from Sundress Publications.

Susan L. Leary’s poetry has appeared in such places as Posit Journal, Arcturus (Chicago Review of Books), and Into the Void. Her chapbook, This Girl, Your Disciple, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press in fall 2019. She teaches English Composition at the University of Miami. Find her at www.susanlleary.com.

Katana Lippart (she/her/hers) is a collage artist and printmaker. While rooted in the memory of the familiar, she aims to provoke the viewers’ understanding of uncertainty: in the natural world and beyond. Many of her works are directly linked expressions of personal history, ideas of self, or definitions of home. The feelings that visual imagery or placed text evoke call to memory the viewers’ own memories, experiences, and ideals. Growing up in a rural part of historic VA, she currently resides in a small town in MD where she continues to develop these ideas and themes.
bennett joan nieberg (they/them) is a queer Jewish poet pursuing their MFA at Virginia Commonwealth University. They are a Pushcart Prize nominee and their work has appeared in Crab Fat Magazine, Entropy, Western Humanities Review, and The Indianapolis Review, among others. They are a co-founding editor of What Are Birds.

Erin Elizabeth Smith is the Creative Director at the Sundress Academy for the Arts and the Managing Editor of Sundress Publications. She is the author of two full-length collections of poetry, and her work has appeared in Guernica, Ecotone, Crab Orchard, and Mid-American. Smith is a Distinguished Lecturer in the English Department at the University of Tennessee.

Amy Watkins is the author of the chapbooks Milk & Water, Lucky, and Wolf Daughter (coming in 2019 from Sundress Publications). She lives in Orlando with her husband and daughter and a mean-spirited ginger cat. Find her online at RedLionSq.com or @amykwatkins.

Carolyn Wilsey loves living within walking distance of the continent’s edge. She has an MFA in creative writing, fiction, from Emerson College. These are her first two published poems. Her poetry is also forthcoming in The Virginia Normal.

Victoria-Melita Zammit is a twenty-five year old queer poet and librarian in training from Malta. She mostly writes incredibly personal poetry that focuses on her struggles with mental illness and LGBT issues, but she also enjoys a good spoken word poem, read out to a crowd of people who are ready to listen to the baring of her soul. You can find her and her publications on https://ofscriptedshadows.wordpress.com/