



I GAVE BIRTH TO ALL THE GHOSTS HERE

LYDIA HAVENS

*I GAVE BIRTH TO ALL
THE GHOSTS HERE*
Lyd Havens

Nostrovia! Press

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Invocation for my own voice

O, all the places I've yelled
while still coming off as quiet:

into an ocean. Across a mosh pit.
With a mouthful of pillow and rage.

All those humid dive bars I had
no right to be in. At poetry slams.

Do you know how often I think
of the hinges on all the doors in

my childhood home? I think
of how they squealed and whined

and begged when my father
came home angry, then left

the same way. I've always been terrified
of raising my voice, so I've learned

all the ways I can safely make a
racket without beginning

to turn into him. I am a floor
covered in bobby pins. The heaviest

pair of feet christening a flight
of stairs. O, what a clamorous lineage

I was screamed into. The first time
I actually yelled back, it wasn't

at my father. It was at a boy
I had a crush on. He called it *cute*.

Said I *didn't look like the bitchy type*,
but that was *a good try*. Lord, give me

the strength and power of every man
who believes himself to be

the most sacred knife-prayer. Just once,
I want my throat to drip in garnet stones

and spite without feeling the weight
of guilt I should have never been

cornered into. I want a healthy coping
mechanism that still allows me to be

heard. Where do I find something like that?
When will the hum of the happy hour crowd

downtown stop feeling like
the anger management class I never

got to take? When did being angry
become synonymous with being alive?

Is this what I was always meant to be?
Once, I wanted to stop having a body

and I guess now I have to be all voice.
Last summer, I told my mother I was

thinking of buying a pocket knife, in case I ever
needed it for protection. She looked me

up and down, like I had only just started
being her child, and said:

*That's ridiculous. Look at you. You'd be
better off getting a whistle.*

Putting on Ernest Hemingway's clothes

After sam sax & Billy Collins

First the simple white button-up
& all of its rugged wrinkles—
the ones he found in Paris,
or maybe Idaho, or that
he might have just been born with.

I roll up the sleeves until
I create muscles for myself,
an illusion of strength,
and suddenly everything
I have ever survived is living
in my biceps. I pin back
all the hair I started growing out
when I still called myself a woman
and I am reminded of the version

of myself that always felt so trapped.
Too distant. Like a bouquet only
of stems. The pants are a little loose.
I tell myself I'll grow into them.
If I let myself grow into them—
into masculinity, or at the very least
androgyny, maybe then people
will remember my pronouns. Won't
let their mouths become slippery

with *girl* when talking about me.
Won't call it *an easy mistake*

the 27th time it happens. For
who else does the bell toll,

but for the bodies that are
comfortable, and for the
environments that are not?
When does the sun also rise
for the genderless who find
themselves aggressively
gendered every day?

I leave two buttons undone.

Try to learn how to tie a tie
and almost strangle myself.
Spill shoe polish all over
the carpet. All these fabrics
become the Gulf Stream
around my misplaced body.
I guess now I have to learn
how to swim.

*“But anxiety’s just all in your head,
right?”*

I learned how to make myself small at 8 years old. Angled my spine like a magician’s geometry. Made my stomach into the most intricate Boy Scout knot. My shoulders always digging graves for dead weight. I held my breath for a decade. Made every meal into a crisis. My sympathetic nervous system turned to stone. Fingernail-shaped scars cluttered across both my palms. The counselor asks, *doesn’t it hurt, shrinking yourself like that?* The massage therapist asks, *what sort of secrets are you keeping in your body?* The lover asks, *why can’t you just relax?* My teeth grind against what I want to forget. I fold myself into dread. I ache like a burning house, waiting for the last beam to collapse into a newborn silence.

*Poem written after accidentally
telling my philosophy professor I am a
survivor of sexual assault*

Fact: It was Derek Parfit who questioned whether your own personal identity would still exist if you were cloned. You are sent to Mars, where your body will disintegrate in the heat of a new god. Your replica is sent to your home planet to live on in your place. Somehow, you still feel the sting when they cut themselves shaving in what used to be your bathroom mirror.

Theory: after it ended, my body had to rebuild itself. I am still finding pieces of myself in the exosphere.

Fact: John Locke believed that if even a single atom were removed from a living thing, it would not be the same living thing.

Statement of personal truth: everybody wants me to hate it when I'm told I lost something, but I don't. Abuse is the act of taking, after all. I just wish he'd taken my atoms instead.

Question: if A, who exists at Square One, equals B, who exists at Square Two if and only if A's body at

Square One equals B's body at Square Two, how does A get their childhood back? When will they be gifted with a new existence, completely separate from B and all of his violent consuming?

Educated guess: I can't eloquently connect to any of these thinking dead men and their hypotheticals because they found the far-fetched easier to relate to. Trauma is not as exciting as science fiction.

Question: why would any philosopher want to focus on what it actually means to be human when they can just focus on the idea of being human?

Question: how is it that A is still taken from, even in the prolonged physical absence of B?

Theory: somewhere in eastern Washington, he will accidentally nick his face while shaving, but he will not feel a thing. A minute later in western Idaho, my own chin begins to bleed.

Body as landscape as moon landing

Dermatillomania: a psychological condition that manifests in the form of repetitive touching, scratching, picking, and digging at one's own skin.

I make lightning of my hands, splitting every gorged corner until there's only empty fire. Coax the mountain out of the mole hill to make room for the malevolence. All my fingerprints come back to me red-brown and wilting. A lover stares at the small of my back and asks about an accident. There are scars on the insides of my forearms that always remind people of moon craters, and what July I've made of my skin. I Armstrong all the scabs on my face. Kaufman my way into the faintest permanence. When my hands inevitably come back to me, they're always stained. A boomerang in a vineyard. A lost dog returning with the whole mudslide. A bloodoath I can only make on my own.

Lion honey

After every nightmare about another pair of hands trying to unravel me, I'll wash my hair in the bathroom sink I'll cover the floor in a forgiving kind of rainfall Draw a self-portrait against the ivory acrylic with my own loss or growth depending on how you look at it—

—if, in this story, I am supposed to be Samson, then let me be the pair of scissors too I haven't had a haircut in over a year haven't heard anything about M[] in almost four Saw E[] on campus for the sixth time this semester four weeks ago almost ran into C[] two and a half weeks ago but didn't but almost did and I've been sweating out of my body every night since—

—I'll probably never hear from R[] again
he was from Tinder after all and the city where I left so much behind I had so little hair back then so little to hold onto
but O R[]'s hands were so adaptable almost shaved my head after he left left my body after he left even mania couldn't dull that recoil—

—I've spent a lot of time thinking about how

sick I was when each of these men took from me.
They saw me un-lucid, heavy with a most violent
grief, and I think that made me prey even further—

—the mad prey loses their tongue,
and now every pair of hands can
get away with everything—

—the mad prey regains their tongue,
and now years have past; all the hands
are so far away—

—if I am supposed to be Samson, I can't
ignore the parts of me that became
Delilah weakening me after a lifetime
of trust submerged in the sunlight
of that ambiguous guilt when they saw
what the men had done to the rest of me—

—if I'm supposed to be Samson, I also want
to be the honey born from the carcass
of trauma let it slip like sink water
down my throat allow my own hands
to weave my hair tenderly—

—I mop the floor. Try to forget all their names.
Ask which ever god is listening to make my body
a temple—

—No. I ask whichever god is listening
to make my body a crumbling pillar.

Compel

Nobody in my parents' neighborhood recognizes me anymore and one of the eleven kids who live next door thinks I'm breaking into their house with the garage door remote

// He shouts THAT'S NOT YOUR HOUSE // and he's not wrong but I still want to shout back // FUCK OFF I GAVE BIRTH TO ALL THE GHOSTS HERE // and of course he will not understand that I made this whole HOA cursed with my own wailing before he even knew how to talk // but later that night my mother and I reminisce about the therapist in the next small town over who once recommended I be exorcised

// and we laugh // and I do not tell her that eight years later I'm wondering if I should have agreed to it // I have been sleeping in the same bed I stopped being a child in for five weeks now // there are four knuckle-shaped blood stains on the left wall of my closet // I can't remember where they came from // the boy who used to call me a crazy bitch every morning at the bus stop still lives in the house at the beginning // of the street and yesterday when I went to get the mail he winked at me // I shout I AM SO

SMALL HERE to nobody in particular // I am
possessed by the memory of every night the walls //
of my bedroom almost killed me // what do you call
a house that is only haunted a few weeks out of the
year // is the house actually haunted then

// am I selectively haunted // am I selectively
haunting //

////////////////////////////////////



Drowning, 2011

I was born while water
pushed away from the sky
and introduced itself
to the gravel
 and the concrete
 and the soil

& I am going to die
while water slips
into something
more comfortable
 like my hands
 or my mouth
 or my lungs

My mother hopes
that right now I'm
getting some sleep,
giving my manic-
broken-stoplight brain
 a rest.

She does not know
I stole two knives
from the kitchen
before going upstairs.
 She does not know

that if I can't drown myself
in a full bath

then I will drown myself
in my own body.

Almost thirteen years ago,
my mother gave birth
to a thief, and almost

three months ago, my brain
gave birth to a voice.
The voice is now pregnant
with some kind of blood-wish.

A growling stomach
caught in its throat, greedy
for an implicit ending.

& I have already spoiled
the conclusion of this story
just by being alive enough
to write all of it down:

it typically takes three or four minutes
to die by drowning, or

it typically takes three or four minutes
to dry off, walk downstairs and tell
your mother you tried to kill yourself
in the bathtub because a voice told you to, or

miscarriages typically occur within
the first 13 weeks of pregnancy, or

I had already tried to kill myself twice
before I was 13 years old, or

I was born while water plummeted
from the sky, but I did not die
while water plummeted from the faucet.
I did not come full circle. My mother
did not have to bury her child.

& tonight, a thunderstorm
begins outside
and I don't see it as an omen.

Tonight, I'm sitting in my bathtub,
warm water
spilling across my skin, marveling
at how quiet it is in my head now.

Aubade for gender (or a lack thereof)

If I must have a corporeal form I will do so
on my own terms: I will exist the most when
the sun also exists the most. Raging

against the dying spite. Making every
third-story window into my own
reflection. There is pink in the sky

every morning, so there will be pink
in my own face always. My hair will
grow into its own astronomy. I have

entire months under my fingernails,
and they all taste like the pronouns
that do not rest easy in my mouth

anymore. May this be my coming out
poem. May this be another liminal
Sunday morning. I'll fall asleep at 10AM

to the rhythm of my legal name,
wake up to the effortless syllable
that all my friends call me.

There is light coming in through
the shutters. It all reminds me
of my own arms.

*Ode to the last two letters
of my first name*

I grew up shuddering at you: two whole letters,
two whole syllables, a whole other dyad of trouble.
Said, my name is More. My name is Gone. My
name is a series of misunderstandings and secrets

annexed to my personhood. You are the holy
ghost-girl idol, half-dissolved on everybody's
tongues, constantly trying to set me ablaze with
doubt. Doubt in my body and every way

it's cornered. In my empty gender. In my own
disjointed lineage, abashed with addiction, sudden
deaths and deceptions, injuries of the brain
chemistry, passed on and on and on.

Autonomy, or a lack thereof, could be
intergenerational—if I shorten my name, will I
myself grow taller? “Lyd” is not an abridging
of my identity. “Lyd” is how I

illustrate my love for the name my mother
so tenderly chose, and my love for the person
I so tenderly became. Forgive me. I don't
whittle you away maliciously, or completely.
But this is how I

alchemize into an existence I enjoy. It's how I can start introducing myself without getting caught in my own throat.

Against T.S. Eliot

Every state I've ever lived in makes a hobby
out of being on fire, and I have considered myself
burning more than I've considered myself home.
That fall when the sky turned vermillion, I named

it after my own fists, and I named it after
my own palms. It just depended on the morning,
and how glad I was to be alive to see another
swelling September. Every cruelty I have
ever known comes from the season of the
death rattle—the crunch under our shoes,

the echo in the now-empty spaces. Somebody
died for four consecutive autumns, and somehow
I still consider this my favorite season. It could be
survivor's guilt, or just survival, or even growth.
The flames are always inevitable, and
so is the grief it rekindles every time,

but I remember best in this heat. I can cook
dinner for my friends under it. Boil the sorrow
off my clothes in it. Fire was discovered
out of necessity, just as I discover myself
every September. There isn't any cruelty
in that anymore.

Are there smoke alarms in the Vatican?

The story goes: a white dove landed on a man named Fabian's shoulder in 236 AD, and he was declared Pope thereafter, as it was considered a sign from the Holy Spirit.

The story goes: a social worker in the first psych ward I tried to God myself out of told me that the Lord had a plan for me. That she could see how special I was, and prayer would help my brain heal from any and all maladies that plagued me between those sterile walls.

I tell people I never learned how to properly pray. Grew up Catholic only in name. Read too many books. Invented new deities when things got lonely, or desperate, and things were always lonely or desperate.

There is something to be said about talking to your bedroom wall when every other part of your life is brokenly quiet, and naming the wall God. Maybe that's called praying. Maybe that's called surviving.

There is also something to be said
about signs. I'm still alive. Is that a sign?
I think I made myself into white smoke:
potassium chlorate, lactose, pine rosin.
Rose above all the chimneys and clouds
when it was finally decided that I
would not try to die again. Landed
on the shoulders of all my past burdens,
said, "go serve God now," and by *God*,
I did of course mean this new joy.
Not always overt, but always present.

The story goes: I stopped pulling out
my own feathers. I stopped fixating
on the word "miracle." I became
my own omen.

*The act of loving myself is also an act
of becoming*

I started growing my hair out around
the same time I stopped calling myself a girl,
and this was a coincidence. Got lipstick on my
teeth. Ripped my favorite pair of floral
netted tights, and kept wearing them. I
am finding comfort

in the stains and the unspooling, in the same-ness
of all of this. The frayed femininity. Fistfuls
of fabric gone soft with age. This is how I have
always been: I just never quite realized it.
I'm trying to remember

not to shrink when people use she/her pronouns
when talking about me. To be as brazen as I am
kind. There's something so compassionate
about being unashamed, after all. Isn't it funny,
how being feminine

started feeling a lot more comfortable after
I came out as non-binary? Most of the quiet
conflict in my posture: gone. Rose gold on each
fingertip. Head held high. The tail-end of a braid
resting in my left collarbone. How effortless. Even
when I'm at my smallest, and angriest,
and most tired: I still become.

*Ekphrasis on the first nude I ever
took voluntarily*

In the right lighting I look like someone
who has never worn their own body
like a stone-filled coat / and maybe
this is why I always write about bodies
of water / but never compare myself to them /
but back to the mirror / and the algebra
of finding a pose that doesn't look
too much like a pose / the
Renaissance paintings in my belly /
the playfair ciphers in the crook
of my left elbow / Frank Lloyd Wright
would have loved my tits / would have
built whole houses in homage to my tits /
and would you just hear me now /
would you just look at the camera phone
in my hand / and the lack of fear
in my eyes / there is no science to this /
but there's a part of me that definitely
doesn't understand it / I won't argue
with the mirror / though / not today /
all the lights are humming my
favorite song / tonight I walk into
the current of my own body /
willingly—

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* *
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Lyd Havens is a nationally touring poet and performer currently living in Boise, Idaho. Their work has previously been published in *Winter Tangerine*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, and *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, among others. They are the author of the full-length collection *Survive Like the Water* (Rising Phoenix Press, 2017), and the chapbook *Eight of Resilience* (self-published, 2018).

In 2017, they were a member of Boise's National Poetry Slam team, which placed 7th at group piece finals. Lyd is currently working towards a BFA in Creative Writing at Boise State University, and is one of the main organizers of the Boise Poetry Slam. They were born on their due date and have been intensely punctual to almost everything since.

***if, in this story, I am supposed to be Samson,
then let me be the pair of scissors too***

this is giving birth to all one's ghosts. giving them voice, forms, breaks, breadth and breath. names are praised and names are named. the self is extracted from the darkness and the self endures. Havens' ghosts light the way ahead to help us see. to make us seen.

—Jess Rizkallah, *the magic my body becomes*
(University of Arkansas Press)

Like a howl through a crowded room, this collection draws attention, an urgency unconcerned with politeness. An honest, youthful exploration of personal history and the queer body, *I Gave Birth to All the Ghosts Here* builds a world and invites you in. Lydia Havens is special, plain and simple. They are truly an artist to watch.

—Clementine von Radics, *In A Dream You Saw A
Way To Survive*

