

# Calliope

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# Calliope

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Submissions of poetry and short fiction are welcomed from August 15 - October 15 for the December issue and from January 15 - March 15 for the May issue. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. **No simultaneous submissions, please.**

Manuscripts are discussed with the writer's name masked so that beginning and established writers are read without prejudice.

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*Cynthia Ballou*

## A SMALL DIFFERENCE

He's called Daniel now,  
and breathes the air.  
Small nostrils open  
like new spring petals  
hungry for life.  
His eyes, in which we see  
your husband, self  
and generations of retreating  
scrap book memories  
are his own.  
With them, he'll discover  
your warm breast,  
understand colors  
of dancing gingham elephants  
strung across his sky.  
He's learned, in a single week  
of living  
to form his mouth in a perfect "O"—  
his contemplative pose,  
the grown-ups agree,  
each trying vainly  
to demonstrate the roundness  
of his infant lips.

*Fran Barst*

## ART IS NOT LIFE

The orange lips  
of the flowers  
close at night

Still  
from the windows  
of our home  
I can see them

They spot the blackness  
like strokes of paint  
breathing

the way Van Gogh's  
wild irises do

or his stars among cypresses  
in his mad mud-blue swirls

My lover  
has shaved his head  
and planted the hairs  
in the garden

He believes  
Isabella's bush  
will grow there  
for me

He is drunk  
and sits  
in his vomit  
eating chocolate  
rabbits

shadows  
of those he's shot  
popping  
from the briar patch

He weeps  
over a past  
that I  
cannot change

He has read too many books



*Robert Cooperman*

## **MISS ELIZA HITCHENER LEAVES THE HOUSEHOLD OF PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY**

He treats people like socks past darning;  
now I'm the Brown Demon when once  
he called me Wise Portia, his mind-mate—  
before his Harriet's nervous tears  
and her wolf-snouted sister's looks  
said I was no longer welcome.  
They who begged me to leave teaching  
as if a piece of meatless carrion,  
to join them like Christ and his disciples.

To think I could listen to his gibberish;  
that I loved his voice, his explosions  
of what I took for a mind higher than mine;  
that I adored our walks at Lynmouth  
as if a maid mad with her first love;  
that I let him take me behind the boulders  
along the shore, the whole town watching,  
as I sighed to be touched by great Percy Shelley,  
who took no more notice of my gift  
than he would of a servant bringing tea—  
for all his pamphlets on the brotherhood of man.

A rich boy playing at poverty,  
and I told him so when I took my leave;  
and told him too I would have a hundred pounds  
a year from him—compensation for losing my school,  
my reputation among the folk at Hurstpierpoint.  
I know he'll forget, his way with debts.  
Still, it pleases me to get his pledge,  
to know that he knows he's one  
of the privileged few he hates  
for feeding off the sweat of the rest of us—  
one of that litter even if he won't see his spots,  
the claws he sharpens on mice like me.

*Lynne H. deCourcy*

## THE LOVERS ON THE BEACH

A distant whale-bellied fisherman  
flings his line deep into the ocean,  
speaking to it as he would a woman,  
casting from the shore for more

and these quiet low-tide laps  
of tongue whisper there is enough  
there is always enough love  
cast deep, draw it up,  
take another fish, for it has  
spawned a hundred more,

dear, yes. The sea exhales  
as though to hurry our  
pulse again, oh yes

this ocean will hold and feed us  
this ocean teems with flopping life;  
see, the fisherman's bucket is full  
and still he casts and still we will.

*Lynne H. deCourcy*

## WIFE

The stretcher was too short for your body;  
I took note of every unfairness within  
the curtains, pulled to a smothering  
cubicle around us, while the  
doctor calmly explained the reasons  
you might be lying under sheets  
of crisp white pain.  
He needed my consent for tests. (Sign here,  
on this line.) He needed my consent  
as though your body was my own flesh,  
as though we had never untangled  
our arms, our legs, and risen  
from our bed to shower alone  
and go to separate mornings.  
He needed my consent as though  
your body were my flesh like the bodies  
of our children, home sleeping,  
whose ventures into small unknowns  
have required my consent a hundred times.  
How I felt the word then, wife,  
the way a word can suddenly  
saturate your cells like heat,  
like the sun outside your  
hot, dark room that whole week  
while April opened into May without me;  
someone else must have seen to  
spring's proceeding while I was your wife  
and nothing else.

Lynne H. deCourcy

## THE SKATER AT PRACTICE

*for Brooke*

This is my child but I can only  
watch the practice that is her own  
daily scratching pencil making  
wordless starts toward something  
she sees behind her eyes,  
which is all that finally matters  
and all I cannot give.  
Now she knows only  
inside edge, outside edge,  
the chips her blades  
chisel in try after try  
like the leavings of my eraser.  
In secret she sees a fluid  
certainty of wings  
when the music will rise  
from her own body  
and the nectar of ice will yield  
its smooth memory of sweet  
fruit to the blade.  
In dream she is alone  
on a night-lit lake  
in a communion of frozen sky, being  
herself the unspeakable  
liquid cry of the loon  
rising silver to the stars.

*Lynne H. deCourcy*

## LIKE ANY WOMAN

Like any woman, I can read  
the shadows that flicker like fish  
just beneath the cool surface  
of a face;

like any woman, I was tutored  
by a Mother whose own  
face could turn in an instant  
from a flower to a stone, no  
matter what she said.

Like any woman I beg for words,  
and like any man you think  
they are what I want  
but the truth is no matter what  
you say; I look

for a flower or a stone,  
or a swimming of something  
changing as love or rage beneath  
the cool surface of your face.



*Lynne H. deCourcy*

## LIKE ANY WOMAN: AT THE CORE

I know this much:  
I am alone in my own skin.  
Like the core of an onion, I  
am wrapped in silvery layers  
of men and children,  
and the heft of my life rests  
round and solid in the  
palm of my mind

But when I peel myself  
down to the naked heart  
of the matter, I see it whole,  
gleaming, fragile and strong as bone,  
and I know this much:

the men and the children  
can be peeled off in layers  
thin as words,  
thick as pain,  
but like any woman I am  
alone as white at the core.

*John Gilgun*

## OWL

I have been reincarnated in the body of an owl—Class: AVES: Order STRIGIFORMES: Family, TYTONIDAE Subfamily, BUBONINAE: Genus, OTUS. I am, in short, *Otus asio*, the Common Screech Owl. But none of these Linnaean categories mean anything to me as an owl. As an owl, speaking out of my experience of the essence of "owl," I am simply nature's Ultimate Killing Machine, *Otus Terminus*, crunch, rip, slash and swallow. I am Nature's necessity—bill, throat and belly, protein processor, shredder of flesh. I cough up bones. Can this calcium live? Can this limestone dance? The answer is no. No is the owl's favorite word. Is there hope? No. Is there love? No. Is there a future? No. Negation is the owl's perpetual nest partner. We return to it every morning and brood on it through the long day. I sit here on this branch trapped in the body of an owl, Nature's Nay Sayer, hating every minute of it, wishing it would end. Sleep is my deliverance, waking up my curse. When I sleep, I do not dream. And when I'm awake, I kill things.

In my three previous lifetimes I was, respectively, a soldier who liked to go on night patrols, a mortician in a midwestern city and a Shakespearian actor who killed himself after his hundredth performance of *King Lear*. I don't believe in Karmic Retribution (as an owl, I am not equipped to believe in anything) but a case could be made here for something like it. Owls know there is no poetry in death. Leave the poetry to water voles. We owls are realists. Death is a bullet, a bottle of formaldehyde and the silence in an empty theater after the audience has gone home. Can the carapace of this cockchafer beetle sing? No. Can the incisor of this wood mouse contemplate the cosmos? No. I bring every living thing to the realization of its own frozen bones. I am an owl.

Sex for an owl is a joyless fuck. It is also exceedingly dangerous, but that doesn't make it interesting. The female is larger than the male and her weapons are formidable. She must be courted and the courtship gift is always a corpse. I find that dead rabbits usually do the trick. Plus, beak snapping, twittering conversations, puffing out my feathers, stretching my head and neck upwards—and all for what? To seize her by her neck feathers and sway from side to side. Fifty percent of the

owlets die during the twenty-four months after hatching and those that live never thank us for bringing them into existence. And why should they! If I could return in time, I'd separate my parents before the swaying began, screeching at them, "No, no! Can't you see what you're engaged in here! Stop now before it's too late!" Owls are monogamous, too, which only makes it more dreary. Mice seem to enjoy sex, but owls never do. Maybe that's why, as the moon rises, my talons itch to kill mice! Stupid mice.

Owls have no illusions. Listen to me, humans! Will the feet of the screech owl, if burned together with plumbago, keep away serpents? No. If you place the heart of a screech owl on the left breast of a sleeping woman will she utter all her secrets? No. And if you carry that heart with you into battle, will it protect you from bullets? No. Will owl broth ward off whooping cough? Is owl's flesh an aphrodisiac? Will soup made from owls' eggs cure epilepsy? Is the bridge to the other world (there is no other world!) constructed of owls' feathers? Will an owl act as guardian spirit when you go underground? If an owl hoots and you remove your shoe and turn it over, will the owl stop hooting? If you take off your shirt and put it on inside out, if you lay a broom across the door, if you heat a poker in the coals and then drop it into water, will we stop hooting? Are we ever going to stop hooting? No, nothing will ever stop us from hooting. After all life ends on earth, there'll be one last hoot before the final frigid silence of space. It will be an owl's hoot. So put your shoe backon. Hoot hoot hoot!

*Joseph Hutchison*

## **BARE MAPLE**

Then autumn came on, peeled  
leaves from the red maple  
like time that strips desires  
from our memory, until the past  
stands forth sharp and wooden

upon the blue. Now wind can't  
punish the branches like regret,  
making them ache, making them  
cry out. Sunlight can no longer  
dream through weaving boughs

and swim on the deep grass  
until the grass becomes a sea.  
Now there is no more shelter  
for nests, no intimate rustling  
to soothe our nights. Autumn

has plucked every brightness  
from the gray limbs, left  
but a scrawl on the emptiness  
like an ideogram that means both  
"forgetfulness" and "peace."

*Joseph Hutchinson*

## THE MUSIC OF CHANGE

A beard of greasy mohair; face  
filthy and turned firmly downward.  
If you wanted to know the number  
of cracks in a stretch of sidewalk,  
he'd be the man to ask: his eyes  
look weary from counting them.  
But there's more. A determination  
you might mistake for optimism  
(after all, it's America). I mean  
how he stops at every newspaper box  
in front of the highrise bank building  
and punches the coin-return buttons,  
cocking his head—like the dog  
on RCA Victor records, but leaner  
and bedraggled with mange. He doesn't  
bother trying each cup, but merely  
listens for the music of change  
jarred loose through a hidden  
flaw in the machine—which must,  
in such a world, pass for charity.



*Allison Joseph*

## TRESPASSING

This dark province, full of burr  
And thistle, is where I should  
Not be, patch of scratchy trees,  
Hard bark, tough roots, a land  
Not arable, so dry I can scratch  
Nothing from it, no emergency alarm,  
No warning that I trespass  
Upon unavailable land, ground  
Scorched and stony, rigid  
As the hollow I ridge into it  
With my stick, trying to stir  
Dust, a bone chip, some  
Small sign of previous inhabitants.  
So from me comes  
This foreign music, this alien  
Speech a consequence of being  
Where I am not wanted.  
I move guardedly, tiptoeing,  
Then down on all fours, up  
Running, in a crouch again,  
Over the hard plain you once  
Owned, earth gone  
Ghostly now, grudging.  
Blistered, I am still here,  
Swallow through underbrush,  
Speaking through my scarred mouth  
A whisper distinct and true.

*William Kloefkorn*

**CAMELBACK MOUNTAIN,  
DUE NORTH OF PHOENIX**

Tonight I am retired beside a Velvet Mesquite  
in Echo Canyon. Cartop

folded back,  
I am practicing the sounds of the names of things,

Saguaro and Succulent,  
Senita and Organ Pipe, Candelilla, Sweet Acacia,

Cow-tongue Cactus, Creeping Devil. Desert  
is a word too deep, too vast

ever to be wandered sufficiently into,  
so I speak softly only the names of things

into the dry night-blooming air. Totem Pole  
and Ocotillo, and the certain tactile cure

of Aloe Vera. What the earth beneath does not send  
spreading upward, the stars above send

down. O stay with me when bodies swarm and bellow,  
and this space wherein we paused

to test the atoms of our lives against  
lies gone.

*William Kloefkorn*

## BLUE RINSE

In his tan washpants  
and white cotton T-shirt  
Carlos has the outfit to match the smile  
that so often cracks  
those lips above that chin. And I  
would be like Carlos,  
those slender legs, that torso  
filled to the very edge of overflowing.  
How the dark eyes lighten everything,  
the dark hair tempt the nearest hand.  
And clean: how he starts each day  
with the mark of the woman whose face  
does not reveal itself ever or at all  
downtown. I have seen her  
only at a distance, always both arms reaching,  
one to hold, the other to attach the shirt,  
the overalls, the socks, the underwear  
so precisely to the clothesline.  
She is a wide figure made wider  
against a rising sun. And watching her  
I breathe the breath of early-morning life,  
blue rinse the smell, the color of the sky,  
grease and guile and vinegar  
all washed away like flotsom  
from the fabric of a new beginning.

*Joanne Lowery*

## MELON

The table rests with a ripening melon.  
One of them is an anchor,  
one of them has wings.

Perfume the color of dawn  
fills the room  
like a warm bath.

A melon in June is the whole world  
rough-skinned and reptilian  
to the touch

an imperfect globe  
equatorless  
nodding on the table

with a soft spot on one pole  
like a skull still open from birth,  
a remnant

reminiscent of severed stems  
and night  
and the sweet pull of the vine.

*Joyce Odam*

## TURNING IN SLEEP

She is sitting on a bar stool  
in a transparent dress.  
Her eyes are red from weeping.  
The song has been sad.  
She has ordered another drink.  
Her hand is wet where it melts  
around the glass.  
Her foot taps a rhythm.  
The ring of her other hand  
clicks a counter-rhythm  
against the glass.

\*

Her purse slips to the floor.  
Keys fall out of it  
and dollar bills  
and children  
all her homes  
her outgrown wardrobes  
her newspaper horoscopes.  
All she owns.

\*

She has closed her eyes  
so the room will stay.  
She is swaying and humming to the room.  
No one is with her.  
She is holding the room behind her eyes.  
She won't let the place close without her.  
She wants to forget  
but she has forgotten what.



Her shoulders are cool.  
Her shoe drops off her foot.  
She turns in her sleep  
and the arms she falls toward  
catch her.

*Joyce Odam*

## **ALAS, BY PALE SHIPS WE MUST TRAVEL**

Alas, by pale ships we must travel  
and I tell you this,  
how the moon is always full,  
how silent water lisps under the gliding.

There is always too much blood at the horizon  
and too much darkness in the shore-trees.  
The passengers are always standing at the rail  
in muted positions.

Sometimes a heavy bird will come  
and balance near, centering its wings  
though it is night.  
There is a certain rocking of the sky  
when the bird lifts off again.

If no one laughs  
we will forgive the lack of laughter.  
Our mouths are torn by refusals  
and useless arguments;  
our mouths are chapped by the alien weather.  
Only staring fits.

This is not about drowning  
though we do,  
though we try to get life over with.  
Our wardrobes are damp in the cabin.  
Our papers are no longer important.  
Who are the others, we wonder.

*Susan Harned Roth*

## ON IMPULSE

Grandfather loved the dance of words  
on his tongue, their leap into waves of air,  
and, better, the electric skips through  
the microphone, amplified, bleeping  
across the continent into California, Alaska.  
He built a room of transistors,  
tubes, switches and, on the roof,  
an antenna, large as a mechanical man  
swaying over the house, to catch  
the invisible signals and pulse out  
his recitations of Virgil, Shakespeare,  
Tennyson, till the other hams  
gave him the code name Einstein.  
During storms I felt the house  
crackle and once, as he stood in the middle  
of that room, I saw his hair  
stand on end like a shocked halo  
of blank white lines framing his face.  
Words he thought so solid, he hoped  
to invent one of the dictionary,  
one to be spoken forever.  
It never happened, but in the hospital  
he refused to die until he had snuck  
into the nurses' station and recited  
"The Charge of the Light Brigade"  
over the intercom. The nurses scolded him  
into silence, put him back to bed.  
He may have watched them walk away  
in their white shoes, so soft, they made  
no sound, leaving him alone  
in the white room, without a microphone,  
words useless and lost still  
leaping through the charged air.

*Marcelle Soviero*

## DIARY WRITTEN FROM THE WEST WING

*March*

I had my mind  
when I came here  
but now it spills and spreads  
like a big puddle of piss.

Jesus only knows  
what day it is—  
but I know I'm alive  
I can feel the needles.

This morning  
I woke up screaming  
my nose was bleeding—  
I think my therapist shot me.

Isabelle prays to Sweet Jesus  
to save us—  
I told her I'm Buddhist so she ran  
and hid behind the drapes  
for eighty-three minutes.

There's a bomb  
under the radiator  
in the East Wing, I hear it tick  
when we're in group therapy,  
it smells like hydrogen peroxide.

The doctors are Communist Neurologists  
who plan to ruin me:  
they whisper in Russian  
and pretend to know  
*exactly* what's wrong with me.

I wouldn't kill myself  
I'm afraid of disposeable razor blades,  
plus I could never  
hold my breath long enough.

There's a boy here, Arthur,  
who whirls around in circles  
counter clockwise  
until he falls down,  
if I strangle someone  
it will be Arthur.

They tell me  
I need more tests tomorrow,  
if the nurse comes near me  
I will bite her,  
this god damn place makes me crazy.



*Marcelle Soviero*

## DIARY WRITTEN FROM THE WEST WING

*April*

I've been moved  
to a different ward  
where the attendants  
look like Buddhas,  
where the nurses gather  
like flocks of birds  
to talk about me.

This morning  
mama came to visit,  
she brought me  
pink carnations  
in a plastic Windex bottle,  
they remind me of bacon fat.  
She told me I should comb my hair  
when I have visitors.

I kissed Martin's bald spot  
so I could follow my red lip prints  
wherever he walked,  
he doesn't notice,  
he crawls like a big beetle,  
I think he reads too much Kafka.

In art therapy  
I drew men without faces  
and women without hands,  
they will come up  
with some fancy new diagnosis now,  
I tell them I'm androgynous,  
thank Jesus I haven't lost  
my sense of humor.

*Marcelle Soviero*

## DIARY WRITTEN FROM THE WEST WING

*May*

Jesus Christ is alive  
in the body  
of a seventeen-year-old  
black girl, Sylvia,  
she got down on her knees  
and warned me to give up  
all of my worldly possessions.

I dream about  
my stiff white corpse,  
lying on these starched sheets  
surrounded by thick walls,  
I am almost there,  
I can barely make out my toes.

Arthur is out of here,  
before me,  
the beds change, but I stay.

I've forgotten how it feels  
to be touched,  
Mama hugs me  
and the hair on my forearm rises,  
she leaves my body bloodless.

Keith and I are going  
to get married  
in another life,  
his fingernails are lined  
with black, I wish I had  
his long blond hair.  
He tells me not to fear the Reaper.

The guards try to dismantle me  
limb by limb,  
but I resist, I will not  
succumb to these demons.

I don't ever want to go home—  
when I do leave this room  
it will be on a stretcher  
and all the blue lights  
will scream and flash, just for me,  
just like they did for Arthur.

*Maggie Valentine*

## TIDEWRACK

I didn't know where I was going  
or what I might see in the rubble  
of stones and green beach glass—a fist  
of weed tangled with rope,

my own icy face in the wind,  
a bearskin sky with blue rain drying  
before it touched earth  
or water or the sharp bright perfect horizon,  
a man in a Day-Glo slicker in his dinghy  
motoring calmly far out on the dark.

At the water's edge gulls wrangled,  
exploded up and left  
a live fish lying there alone  
with a staring eye,  
a flap of the tail. I looked away  
as if someone were dying in the street,

and then I saw my old grief, a net  
wearing thin, bunched up  
full of shells,  
half-buried in sand under a March snow squall,  
under a new, watercolor sky  
not yet dry, not yet touching earth.

*Maggie Valentine*

## TABOO

Barely acquainted, we go  
for a walk across the fields  
to where the trees begin.  
No more than that, and yet  
when your face opens to me

very suddenly  
it is my brother's face  
and we are children, barefoot,  
escaping, finding blueberries  
in a long Kentucky afternoon.

There were bees that day, too,  
in the ladders of light tilted in the barn  
where we lay for hours, weedflowers  
wilting around us, each knowing the other's heart  
beat and beat like a pony running.

Anne Vance

7-11

Daddy is in there coughing himself to death and I have to go out to the Seven-Eleven and pick him up a pack of Luckys. I just got home and here they send me out again before I get my coat off.

"He's been calling for them all afternoon," Momma says. "I couldn't go out 'cause my hair is up in rollers and I look a fright."

"Just let me wash up first," I say. I stink from the raw chicken I've been cutting up all day at the plant.

Then I hear Daddy from the other room: "Is that Ryman come home?" He yells pretty loud considering he's only got about a half a lung left. "Maybe he'll go for me. I can't get anybody around here to do a thing anymore. Not a thing." I look at Momma, and she looks at me, then I turn around and head out the door.

What it really is, is that Momma's afraid to leave Daddy alone. She's afraid he'll die while she's out somewhere, then he'll be mad at her for eternity because she wasn't there when he might've needed something during the process. So she hardly ever goes anywhere anymore.

The front steps are rotten. I jump the few feet from the porch to the ground then still have to watch my step over what's left of the walk.

"What about your check?" Momma says. "Did you get your check today?"

"I put it in the bank," I say.

"I hope so, 'cause tomorrow's the last day I got to pay the heating bill."

It's been hard on Momma lately, with even less money than usual to make ends meet. I don't know how they'd get by if I wasn't still around. But all I ever hear is, "your brother Jerry this and your brother Jerry that." Jerry packed up and left four years ago. Joined the Army.

"Jerry's learning how to work on trucks and them big tanks," Daddy says. "He's making something out of himself."

"Jerry sent us a postcard today from Amsterdam," Momma says. "He's seeing the world."

Hmph. He's spending his vacation time screwing his way across Europe instead of coming home to see his momma and daddy, is what he's doing.

With my luck, I'll run into Marlana. She works the cash register at the Seven-Eleven. If I walk in there, she'll say, "God you stink, don't you ever take a bath?" And if I ask her out for Saturday night, she'll say she's got to work. So instead of the Seven-Eleven I head across the street to the drug store to get those Luckys.

A bum is lying across the park bench at the bus stop catching the last



rays of sun. There's been some bum or other sleeping on that bench as long as I can remember. When we were kids, Jerry used to lean over the back of the bench and let the soda from his straw drip down onto their faces until they'd roll up out of sleep, waving their arms, thinking it was raining and where were they gonna go to keep from getting wet. That's just like Jerry, picking on somebody can't fight back.

When he couldn't find some bum, it'd be me. He'd put my bike on the backdoor step where Daddy'd trip over it on his way out with the garbage. I'd get the daylight beat out of me. I'd still be rubbing my rear end when he'd walk up and say something like, "Got to be more careful where you leave your things, little brother," making me light into him so's I'd catch it again for fighting.

Mr. Winslow is busy behind the soda fountain making a malted for a woman and her kid, so I flip through the greeting cards on the rack at the front of the store. One of them has a picture of a barn on it with a horse out grazing in the pasture. I'm wondering if they raise chickens in that barn. The card says, "Happy Birthday Father, from your Son," and inside there's this poem about him being the best father anybody ever had, even if the son's never said so before. I think about getting it for Daddy now, cause he ain't going to make it to his next birthday. Ha. I can just see me giving him that card. Then Mr. Winslow says, "What can I do for you, Ryman?" and I put the card back and move on up to the counter.

"I need a pack of Luckys for Daddy," I say.

"Still smoking is he," Mr. Winslow says and reaches up on the shelf behind him to get the cigarettes.

"I suspect he will till the end."

"That's a dollar, five." I give him exact change and head out the door.

On the way back past the Seven-Eleven, it's gotten just dark enough outside that, with the lights on inside, I can see Marlana up behind the cash register, just past the poster on the window that says Milk, 89 cents a half gallon. She has on one of those blue and green aprons. It goes around her neck and she pulls it tight at her waist. From way out in the parking lot, I can see how her chest presses against the apron front and spills out at the sides.

She let me take her out last Friday night. We took a six-pack from the cooler and drove up the ridge in my daddy's old Galaxie to where we could see the lights from the city. I was afraid the clunker wasn't going to make it up the hill.

It was Marlana's idea to go up there. She said she likes being high up, overlooking things. It was the first time I'd seen her without her apron on, and it felt to me like she didn't have on anything at all. Like she was just sitting there next to me, baring her chest. She had on a shirt that buttoned up the front, and the buttons were barely holding it together. Where the shirt puckered, I could see the lacey white of her bra.

I have a thing about breasts. That's what I do at the plant. I whack

chicken breasts in half as they come down the line. They've already been skinned. I put one hand firmly on the warm, fleshy meat and split them with a knife right up through the bone.

So here I am in the parking lot, thinking about Marlena's breasts and I just walk right on in, like my feet got a mind of their own. I guess I'm a glutton for punishment. There are a couple of guys lined up at the counter, wishing they could get more than a Slushie, I'll bet. So I move on down the first aisle like I'm taking my time looking for something. Once they clear out, I walk up and throw a pack of gum on the counter.

"Just came in looking for something to chew," I say.

"Sure you didn't come in for air freshener?" Marlena scrunches up her nose and rings up the gum.

"I knew you'd say something like that."

"Forty-five cents," she says.

"Want to go out this weekend?"

"Maybe. If you take a bath first."

"I got some more ideas for the store."

"Oh yeah?" Now she leans over the counter at me, and if it weren't for the apron, I could see straight down into the crease between her breasts. "I've been giving it some thought myself," she says.

I told her about my idea last Friday night when we were parked up on the ridge. I told her I'm going to open a video store with my daddy's insurance money. Then I'm going to get a place of my own. A man twenty-seven years old ought to have an apartment of his own and a woman like Marlena to take care of it. I didn't tell her about that part of the plan yet.

"Listen to you talking about your Daddy like he's already dead," she said when I told her about my idea last Friday. Then she said, "how much is he worth?"

"Twenty-five, maybe thirty grand."

"What's your Momma got to say about you spending her money on a video store."

"She ain't got nothing to say about it," I said. "She wouldn't know what to do with that much money." I said that then, but I'm not so sure. One day last week she told me to stay with Daddy while she went out. I said, "sure." I was just glad to see her get out of the house for a change. Well, she came back a couple of hours later with her hose bagging around her ankles, wearing her old Keds she puts on when she's got an errand that involves a lot of walking.

"What you been up to?" I said. I was in the kitchen fixing Daddy another cup of coffee the way he likes it, three heaping spoonfuls of instant in a cup of hot water, enough to turn your stomach.

She made a face and sat down at the dinette like she didn't want to say. But then she looked up at me sideways, and with her voice all trembly and excited but kept low like she was telling me some big secret, she said, "I been thinking. I been thinking we ought to have a nicer place for Jerry to



come home to."

I was thinking, "What about you? You deserve something nicer yourself," but I didn't say anything because I was thinking about the video store too.

"We're going to need more space," Momma said. "Ya'll are too big anymore to be sharing a room. And I'm tired of renting. I'm tired of handing money over to that old coot Mr. Delby. Won't come over here and fix a thing. Doesn't want to put a penny in this old shack. It's falling down around our heads. I found a cute little house over on twenty-eighth avenue that doesn't require much down. It needs a little fixing up, but with both you boys home. . ." I was about to say I haven't heard anything about Jerry coming home, when Daddy started yelling for his Nescafe. "Don't you say nothing to your Daddy about this," Momma said. "Not a word." So I took his coffee and let it go.

I moved over in the seat a little closer to Marlana. "I thought you said you got a brother," she said. "He might be planning right now how to spend that money himself." She rolled down the window and threw her empty beer can out onto the road.

"Yeah, I got a brother," I said. I pulled another Lite off the six-pack and popped it open for her. "He couldn't care less."

Jerry isn't ever coming back no matter what Momma might think. He told me one time, the only time he ever came home for Christmas in the four years he's been away, he told me, "You gotta get out of here Ryman, before it's too late. They're dragging you down, little brother. If I hadn't left when I did, I'd still be working at Bullock's garage making minimum wage, going nowhere. Hey," he said, "you can't have your momma doing your laundry the rest of your life." We were standing out behind the big elm smoking some of the dope he'd brought back with him. "Good shit, isn't it?" he said looking all pleased with himself, his chest puffed up from holding in the smoke. "Everything's better in the army." But I knew he wasn't telling everything there was. I know other guy's that have come back and don't paint such a pretty picture. Jerry's always making out like whatever he's doing is *It*.

I looked over at Marlana. The lights from the city were twinkling in her eyes. She scooted up in the car seat and put her arm on the dashboard. "It's not a bad idea, opening a video store," she said. "I could be a big help to you. I know all about movies. I'm even named after a movie star."

"What is it you can do to help?"

"I'm a whiz on a cash register. I know all about advertising, and I've even started to do some of the ordering down at the Seven-Eleven."

"Whoa," I said. "What's left for me to do?"

"You supply the money. You and your Daddy." Then she said, "Where

are you going to have this video store?"

"If you're a good girl, I might just show you." I reached over to slip my fingers underneath one of those puckers in her shirt.

"I am a good girl," she said and grabbed my wrist. "Let's go see this store now. It's got to be on a busy street where lots of people pass by."

"You are a smart one aren't you," I said. I put my hand back on the steering wheel.

Now Marlena's leaning over the counter at me, and here in the bright lights of the Seven-Eleven her eyes got that same twinkle in them again, just the way they did that night in the car. She's saying, "I've been giving it a lot of thought. The other day I browsed through Video Village over on Main. We're going to need us some of those racks to display the tapes like he's got. Says he made them himself out of two-by-fours and press wood. Could you make something like that?"

"Probably so," I say. "I'll have to go over there and take a look at them." Then some guy walks up to the counter, his arms loaded with six-packs of co-colas, and I have to move out of the way so he can put them down. "I'll pick you up here Saturday night, and we'll talk about it some more." Then I'm out the door before she can say no.

It's almost dark by the time I get back to the house. Even in this light I can see how bad the paint's peeling and how many shingles are off the roof. A rotten branch from the elm hit the roof last spring and caused a leak. Momma has to keep a pot next to a dresser where it rains in. There's only one light on, over the sink in the kitchen, and the light from our old black-and-white Motorola is beating against the front window like a moth throwing itself against a screen. From outside I can smell white beans cooking in fatback. That's all we have anymore, white beans and country ham. "It's all your daddy will eat," Momma says when I complain. This sickness of his has been going on for months and we live our lives to suit him, just waiting for him to die. I walk in the front door and take my coat off.

"What's took you so long?" Momma says. "Your Daddy's having a fit." She's gotten rid of the curlers, but she hasn't brushed her hair out. Standing there in the half-dark with her hair flying out on all sides in red ringlets, she looks like one of those old worn out wives they're always making fun of in the comic strips. Her house dress sags on her like it hasn't been washed in so long it's taken on the shape of her body, and she has a long handled spoon in her hand from stirring the beans. Those comic strip wives always got some weapon in their hand to beat on their husband with when he comes in the door after gallivanting around till all hours of the night.

I want to laugh like I always do at the comics, but somehow it isn't funny—momma all worn out from having to wait on that mean-old sick man, and living in this run-down house that won't ever come clean no matter how hard she tries. It just ain't funny. I hand her the Luckys.

"You take them to him," she says.



Daddy's sitting in the worn out Lazy-boy all patched up with duck tape. Nobody's ever sat in that chair but him. His robe is pulled open at the top, and I can see his bones pressing against the skin of his chest. His face is the color of the chicken meat I cut up at the plant, sort of a clear white. "Where in the hell have you been?" he says. I hand him the Lucky's and he snatches them from me like a stray dog going for table scraps. "You never were good for nothing."

"Mr. Winslow asked about you," I say. "Wondered how you're doing."

"The hell he does. He's making a mint off me, all the pills I have to buy from him. He'll be able to retire before I die." Daddy's fumbling with the pack, trying to get it open. His hands are the same color as his face except for the yellow tobacco stains on his fingers.

"Let me get that for you," I say and reach down to help him.

"Leave it be," he says. He jerks back his arm with more force than I thought he had in him and hits the lamp with his elbow. The lamp goes flying off in one direction and the cord pulls an open bottle of pills and the ashtray full of butts off with it.

"Goddamn it," Daddy yells, "How do you manage to screw up everything you do?" His voice sounds like it's being dragged across sand paper. Then he bends over forward and starts in on one of his coughing fits. The pack of Luckys drops to the floor. I'm standing there bent over him with my arm curved up like I'm carrying a load of wood. I want to help, but I'm afraid to touch him. I can't even remember the last time I ever touched him. Then Momma comes running in.

"Do something," she cries. She's tearing at her ringlets with her hands.

"Do what?" I say, "Do What?" Then Daddy looks up like he's going to tell us what to do. His face is red and his eyes wide. His mouth forms a round O and everything is strained forward so's he looks like he used to when he was showing me and Jerry how far he could spit a watermelon seed. Then he slumps back over his knees and he's still. Momma gets down on the floor and picks his face up in her hands.

"Gaylen," she shouts, "Listen to me, Gaylen." But Daddy's past listening now. "Push the head of that chair back," she says to me. I push it back and the foot rest pops out and flips Daddy's legs up in the air. Momma gets up and pulls him back by the shoulders so he's lying out straight. "He's gone," she says. "Your daddy's gone and left us." We both stand there looking at him lying back with his eyes still wide open. "Shut his lids," Momma says. For a second I don't get what she's saying. "Shut 'em," she says again. So I reach down and push them closed. The skin sort of springs back, the way chicken does when you touch it with your fingers. But all that's showing is a thin bit of the whites of his eyes like two fingernail moons hung up beside each other in the sky. "We got to call Jerry," Momma says.

"Right now?" I say. "Shouldn't we call an ambulance first, or the undertaker, or somebody?"

"It's too late for an ambulance, and the undertaker can wait. A boy ought to be the first to know when his daddy dies."

"Jerry's in Germany."

"I know where he is. Don't you think I know where he is? I got his number in my purse. He told me to call him if I ever needed to." Momma goes back to her bedroom and digs around in the bottom of that bag she calls a purse for the number. "I got it right here," she says. "Get ready and we'll go down to the phone out front of the Seven- Eleven. You got any change?" She starts brushing her hair out, then she goes to the closet and brings out her best dress like she's going to a party or something. "Get what dimes and nickels you got and we'll get what else we need changed at the store."

I go to my room and sweep the spare change off the dresser and into my hand. When I walk back by Momma's room, she's pulling on her girdle so I go on into the front room to wait on her. Daddy looks like he's only resting, so I bend over and put my ear on his chest just to make sure. I don't hear nothing, but leaning over him, with my head on his chest, it occurs to me this is the closest I've ever come to hugging my old man. Then I hear Momma behind me putting on her coat and I stand back up.

Let's go," she says. In her Sunday best, she looks better than I've seen her in a long time. It makes me smile.

Walking down the sidewalk, I have to slow down my pace so I won't leave Momma behind. She keeps reaching up to push her hat on straight, and every time she raises her arm it looks like she might fall off those heels she's wearing. She reminds me of those acrobats I've seen in the Shriner's Circus, trying to keep their balance on a thin rope strung up in the air and no net underneath. It's hard to hold back, I've got this urge to just take off and run and keep on running. Where to, I don't know.

Around the corner, the Seven-Eleven comes into view, lit up like a Christmas tree. It's then I remember Marlana. I'm hoping maybe she's gotten off by now. I don't feel like seeing her, not just yet. But there she is behind the counter stuffing cigarettes into the counter bin above her head.

"You come in for some more gum?" she says when I walk through the door.

"No," I say. "Just change."

"We aren't supposed to give out change to folks that don't buy nothing."

Man, that's just like her. That's Marlana all over. She don't give out change to folks that don't buy nothing.

Then she notices Momma. "Who's this you got with you, Ryman?" she says and she starts smiling nice and pretty like I've never seen her smile at me before.

"It's my momma," I say.

"Well, aren't you going to introduce me?"



"Look," I say, "How about some change. I'll buy a pack of gum." I get a couple of ones out of my pocket.

"We're going to need more than that," Momma says. She pulls a crisp, new ten dollar bill out of her bag. "We got to call Germany. We got to call Jerry and tell him his daddy's died."

"Oh, I see." Marlena rings up "No Sale" on the register and starts making change. "I don't do this for just everybody," she says, "but I can see this is a special occasion." Momma's counting out the coins, putting all the quarters in one pocket and the dimes and nickels in another. "You didn't tell me your daddy's died, Ryman," Marlena says.

"Just did," I say. I look up at her and she gives me a sideways wink. The smell of hotdogs and popcorn from the self-serve machine is rolling around in my head, making me feel sick to my stomach.

"You think this is going to be enough?" Momma says.

"How should I know," I snap out at her, and it sounds so much like Daddy used to talk, for a second I don't recognize the sound of my own voice. Then I say more quiet-like, "I've never called Germany before, Momma." If I'm going to have to take his place, it's not going to be like that. "Come on, let's go do it." I open the door for her and we head out to the phone on the corner.

"I've got all the numbers we need right here," she says. "International code, and country code."

"Give it to me," I say. I dial the numbers, then the operator comes on and wants eight dollars and seventy-five cents for the first five minutes. It takes a while to plug in all that change. Momma's handing it to me, wringing it out coin by coin. "Give me a handful," I say. Finally a man's voice comes over the line and I tell him we want Jerry. "We're calling from the United States," I say so he won't mess around. Before I know it, Jerry's on the phone. "Jerry. Jerry, it's Ryman." I'm shouting, thinking how far my voice has got to travel.

"I hear you, Ryman," he says. "What're you calling for? You finally gotten smart? Want to join the ranks? There's sweet chicks for the plucking over here."

"No Jerry, it's Daddy. Daddy's died."

"What's he say?" Momma says. "Let me talk to him."

"Quiet," I say, "I can't hear him. Jerry are you still there?" All I can hear is a low clucking noise, like the chickens sitting out back before they've been unloaded from the truck. I think maybe he's crying, but I can't be sure.

Then I hear him say, "What about Momma, how is she?"

"She's fine," I say. "She's standing right here pulling on the cord, can't wait to talk to you."

"Listen, Ryman," Jerry says. "Don't put her on just yet. I won't be able to make the funeral but buy a big wreath, a really big one. Say it's from me and how sorry I am and all that. I'll send you the money for it, all right?"

"Sure, Jerry." I don't argue. What's the use. "But here," I say, "talk to Momma. You got to." I hand the phone to her and step away from the booth.

"Jerry, is that you, honey?" she says. "It's good to hear your voice. When are you coming home? Mhmm, I know it's hard. Tell them it's your daddy."

I know what he's saying, how he'll try, and I feel sorry for Momma standing there alone in the circle of light given off by the single street lamp above her head. She's twisting the phone cord around her wrist, waiting, always waiting on a hope as thin as a voice stretched across the Atlantic Ocean. Marlena's just inside the glass doors to the Seven-Eleven with her arms resting across the door handles, like she's holding them shut, standing there looking out at me and Momma. I put my hands on my hips and look up to keep the tears from rolling down my face. The sky has a purple cast to it from where the lights of this town are reflecting off the heavy air.

"Ryman," Momma is saying, "Ryman, I need more change. The operator's come on and said I need five dollars and fifty cents for the next three minutes." I step back into the warm center of the light and plug more change into the slot, but "It's too late," Momma says. "It's too late. We've been cut off. He's gone." And it's just Momma and me standing there. She's got a blank look on her face—I don't want to think it, but I do—like a chicken before its head goes. I take the phone from out of her hands and hang it up. Then I reach over and put my arm around her shoulders. I think about that money, how I'm going to spend that money on Momma. I want to feel sorry for myself, but I don't.

"Come on, Momma," I say. "We have to get back." I give her my arm and we start down the street. She feels light and almost giddy walking next to me but serious at the same time, like a schoolgirl on the way to her first prom.

*Marylisa Walker*

## AFTER MARK STRAND

I've been eating love poems for days.  
After mouthfuls of paper  
comes a sore jaw, a tongue  
black with ink. After eating words  
comes heartburn, and some kind  
of great hunger. Nothing digests.  
Next comes the nausea, the loss  
of appetite for love affairs,  
for mother or brotherly love,  
for the love of pets, or landscapes.  
This next poem will be bland,  
full of holes and missing  
details of how love began,  
why it ended, how long it lasted.  
There will be no one standing alone in the rain, no two  
in a room they shouldn't be in,  
none waiting for children,  
or for children to sleep,  
no one admiring a sky scape  
of stars, or a thigh.  
When I grind the paper  
between my teeth I will hear,  
for the first time in days,  
no weeping or laughter,  
no bang of slammed doors.  
I will not be forcing opened arms,  
opened legs or wounds  
or doors down my throat.  
I will not be choking on  
who has stepped through them,  
if anyone, or whether what  
they've stepped into is ugly  
or beautiful, common or rare.

I will be eating light  
white paper filled with nothing  
to upset me—  
something easy to swallow.



*Marylisa Walker*

## LETTER HOME

Yes, I have watched the leaves drop.  
Year after year after months of summer  
breathing down my neck, this season  
comes to show me that the sky is fuller  
thru bare branches. It comes in colors  
I knew as a child. It brings storms  
I cannot drive thru. It tells stories  
I've already heard, but do not tire of.  
The flies have dropped,  
finally, after months of banging  
against glass they didn't know was glass,  
after months caught inside knowing  
only that they wanted to breathe  
some kind of purer air.  
I pick them lightly  
from the sill with a paper towel,  
careful not to squash them,  
even though they are already dead;  
then search the landscape outside  
for words to make a poem of.  
Always in the thick distance  
that blurs my vision, I see either  
something I can't quite make sense of,  
or something my senses  
have tricked my eyes into seeing;  
sometimes you.  
Sometimes I see the silence we've allowed  
to drop out of us, and I swear, if I  
traveled the distance to examine it,  
it would gleam red.  
If I bent to touch it, my fingers  
would drip with it afterward. Mother,  
like women bleeding,  
we are women, bleeding.

*Carolyn White*

## LEARNING TO BE UNAFRAID OF LIGHT

Cursorily we dismiss the impressionists  
because we're scared to think we're nothing but light,  
nothing but a reflected leaf  
or a tree bark breathing in a summer river.  
Why else do we go home at dusk, turn on the lamps  
and cast black shadows across the bed?  
Why else, when I see you shimmering  
in violets and blues like a Monet cathedral,  
do I close my eyes to touch your arm?

Sometimes I walk the green woods of paintings  
to the abandoned bridge and watch  
the red lights of my hair turning purple,  
knuckles and knees blue with late sun,  
until, wondering if my eyes are still here,  
I lean to the river to see a face  
with such tenuous cravings  
that the light shines through them as they pass  
shivering into the sun's fluid eye.



*Francine Witte*

## DEBORAH KERR AND SO ON...

In the scene everyone knows,  
she falls on the beach, fixed  
as a footprint that won't wash away.  
And the others like her,  
Marilyn's skirt petaling  
around her waist, Ingrid's  
soft tears in the fog.

I remember my mother twisting  
red lipstick from a tube,  
nubbing its surface, searching  
for the faces it promised.

And the nights she tissued  
rouge from her cheek sighing  
as my father faded like the edge  
of a wave returning to sea,

the light bulb above them  
hanging like a white fruit,  
inedible, unpicked. Below them,  
the carpet, a calendar of sand  
where tomorrow would be another day.

Mary Zeppa

## A TASTE FOR THE PAST

for Wallace Stevens

Yes, Wally, they still  
candy violets. In Toulouse,  
the purple-armed  
crones

swish the bright,  
double petals  
in vats of  
le sucre  
turning them, coating them, til

they glitter  
like crystals,  
they harden  
like barnacles,

sharp  
to Suzette's steady hands  
as she places one,  
carefully,  
between my teeth  
and urgently  
whispers,

"Bite down!"

*Mary Zeppa*

## CALL THEM DREAMS

1

Somewhere toward morning  
here they come riding  
4,000 angels astride the Crab Nebula.

Great arcs of fire  
leap out of their shoulders  
and the sky  
blazes with wings.

But there are black nights  
unending nights

2

I have climbed into darkness so many times  
it saves a place for me  
it holds my shape

and I draw the night over me  
hearing that voice

the one that  
is urgent, the one that  
insists:

"Box!" and the noun  
makes its way  
up my spine, declares

itself, emanates:  
"Box!"

And I feel my four corners  
sharpen and rise.  
As solid as cardboard,  
as patient, I wait

and the darkness  
climbs in and is mine.

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