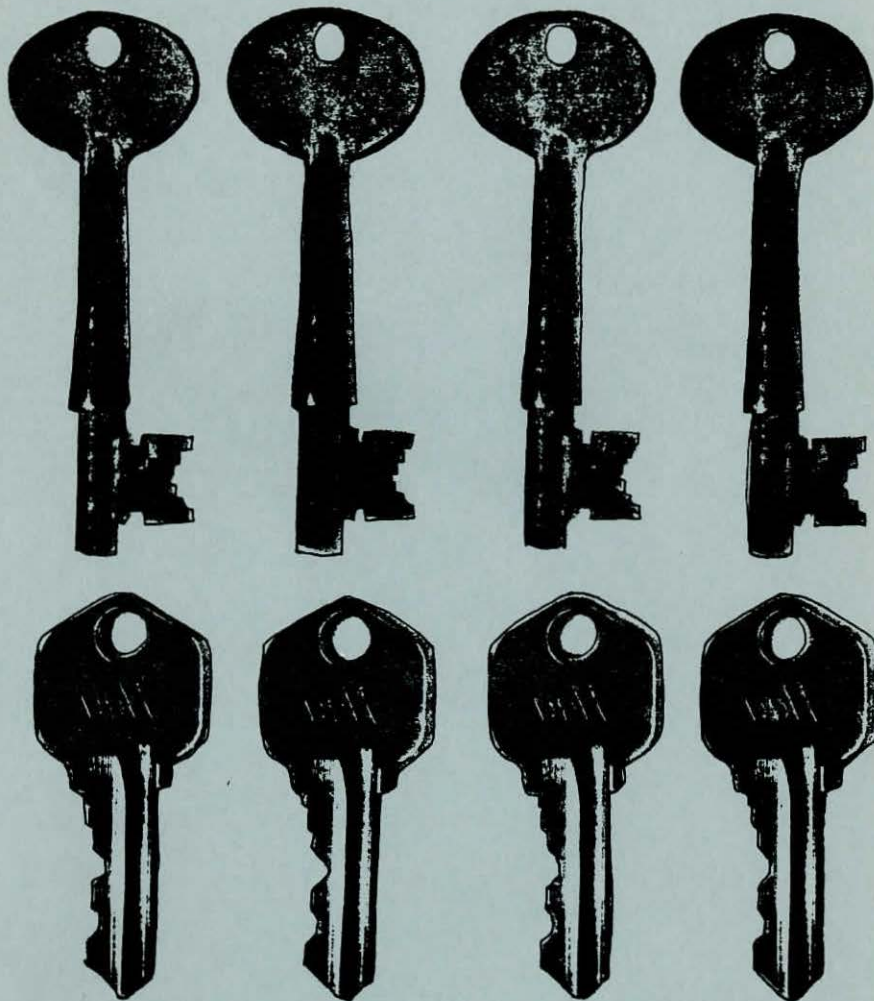


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# Calliope

# **Calliope**

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Marilyn Kay Basel

ESCAPING HER

He has come to this lake  
In the low hills alone  
At his elbow, a plastic-bound *Fisherman's Bible*,  
Feathered hooks, threaded weights (new equipment),  
Feeling well-prepared.

He tears himself from contours  
On the topographical map  
Long enough to pull in a small-mouth bass  
Which he lands clumsily, stunning it  
Against the side of the boat.  
He notices the razor fins  
Tangling his new yellow net.

He frees it at last, slicing his thumbs  
And the palm of his hand.  
Then he sees only the fish  
Troughed in the canoe bottom  
Gasping, white belly up  
The size and color of his wife's bare foot  
    somewhere inside it  
        a pulse  
            fading.

*Maria Acker Blair*

# WHISTLER'S FATHER RIDES AGAIN

The pony man never hung around long once he knew your mother's NO was firm. Oh, he tried his best. He took off his hat and smiled at her. He asked if surely there wasn't some mistake, if she wasn't your *sister* instead of your mother. He must have expected her to say No, right at first. He stood by quietly while you cajoled her for him. Then at just the right moment, he would sigh, fold up the little leather vest and drape it on the painted saddle with a solemn face. He would slide the wooden bead slowly down the twisted string underneath your chin and lift the red felt hat with the snake-skin band off your tousled head, as the pony gave a steamy little snort.

"Of course, if you don't *want* the photos....," he would say to her, and you would suck in your breath hard, concentrate on the dusty, dried-grass smell of the pony's hide, run your fingers through his tangled mane and silently pray.

"Well...I didn't say I didn't *want* the pictures," she might stammer, and you would breathe out again, placing your trust in the pony man to handle it from there. Your eyes would glaze wide picturing yourself up on that saddle, and you would almost feel the pony's ribs begin to swell between your legs.

*My* mother had a way of staring down the pony man, stony silent, as if to say, "You skunk!" And when the silence went on a fraction longer than you knew it should, if you saw the pony man's moustache quiver like a caterpillar just sprayed with Flit and stiffen up and freeze, then you knew that you had lost.

"Well, maybe next year!" he would mumble to the back door, annoyed, and he would push on fast to the next house, shouldering his camera, grabbing the



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reins in the center of a squealing whirlwind of other kids' legs and arms reaching in for pets, leaving you behind.

The year that I turned ten, at last my mother said YES to the pony man. It was the first and only time. I'll never forget that year. Mother had had a vision--after three nights without a word from father, after three mornings of Franny and me finding mother asleep on the kitchen table with a big ashtray full of butts beside her head. It was Saturday. She called us in from the yard and made us sit on the kitchen chairs. She had just washed her face, and stood drying it on the backs of her hands.

"I've had a vision," she said slowly, picking up a cigarette and puffing hard. "The Lord has told me your father is still alive, and that he's safe, only lost."

Franny began to cry softly. I put my hand on her shoulder and gave her little pats.

"All will be revealed to me in time," mother went on. "The Lord says for me to just have faith and watch for signs."

"What kind of signs?" I asked.

"Signs from the Lord," she replied.

The pony man was the first of the signs. While we sat there in the kitchen praying, we could hear a lot of noise outside. Suddenly I realized what it was. *The pony man* was coming down the street. My heart began to race. It was September already. School had long since begun. All summer long, without any trace of him--I never thought the pony man would come at all that year.

Franny finally realized it was him and began to squeal and wriggle in the chair. I thought for sure that mother would slap her for interrupting prayer, but mother only stared at the



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big round clock that looked like a frying pan on the wall. She stared as if the clock, itself, were the face of the Lord. This made Franny brave.

"The *Pony* man! Mother, the *pony* man! Can we, mother?"

From the noise outside, I could tell that he was already way past McWhirter's house. I could hear Busty McWhirter's desperate, froggy voice hol-  
lering in vain for his granny to come. She was stone deaf, and hated all animals.

We all stood absolutely still and listened as the pony's shoes clomped down our concrete drive. We heard the knock, three crisp raps on the solid half of the wooden screen.

Franny dove for the door and flung it wide. There he was, standing at the bottom of the stairs, holding out the leather vest for her to slip into. We all spilled out on the steps, even mother.

"Pony Pictures, Ma'am," he sing-songed smiling. His big gold tooth gleamed in the sunshine. The pony sneezed and flicked his mane.

"Please, mother!" I begged, tugging on her sleeve.

"Two dollars each, or two children for three dollars," he said quickly. "Have the photos back in four to six weeks. Your choice of one eight-by-ten, or two five-by-seven's all in plenty of time for the holidays."

Mother stared at his gold tooth and fingered her wedding band. Without saying a word, she went inside and came right back with her purse.

"We can *do* it!" yelled Franny, leaping the steps in a frenzy, dancing down the driveway calling to the other children.

I just stood there stroking the pony's mane, watching what mother would do next. She took out her wallet and removed two soft *ones*. Then she opened the coin flap and dumped it into her hand.

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There were lots of pennies, a nickle, a dime, fifty cents, and one--no two quarters. A little patch of goose bumps exploded on my scalp.

"Two please," whispered mother.

And I let out a holler and grabbed the red felt hat from the horn on the saddle.

"Do you want the one eight-by-ten, or the two five-by-seven's so's you can give one away?"

"No," she said. "There's no one who'd want it."

And the pony man pencilled in our name and address in his notebook with "one eight-by-ten, two kids. Paid," beside it. Then he sprang into action.

"Here," he said, setting up his tripod. "Little ladies first!" He calmed Franny down, put the vest on her, took the hat from me and clapped it on her head, sliding the bead up tight against her chin. Then he hoisted her up by the shoulders in a big swing, so her shoes kicked a circle in the air. As soon as Franny's legs touched the saddle, the pony shifted his weight and Franny screamed.

"He's moving!" she wailed. "Don't let him run away!"

"Just settle down, little lady," coaxed the pony man. "Old Gambler here's gentle as a lamb."

Gambler snorted and picked up his hooves. Franny froze stiff.

"Young man!" he called to me. "You come over here and stand by Gambler's head. Hold his reins tight, and that'll settle him right down."

My heart burst. "But don't I get to..."

"Just do as you're told!" snapped mother.

Gambler quivered, and Franny shrieked. "I wanta get off!" she yelled. "I don't like it!"

"Now, now," crooned the pony man, crouching behind his tripod. "Everybody say cheese!"

Franny started to cry.

"I'll get on him," I said. "Let Franny down,



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and I'll..."

"Hold real still!" yelled the pony man. "On three now, let's have a *big* smile. One--two--three--*cheese!*"

Just as the shutter clicked, Franny buried her face in both her hands. Mother's eyes flashed. She stamped down the stairs, raised her arms and yanked Franny off the horse. "You're never satisfied!" she screamed at Franny and slapped her hard on the backs of her legs. Franny sucked in her breath and held it in till her face turned white. The pony man stripped the hat and the vest off Franny fast, and then she burst away up the stairs and into the house, her legs turning red in the shape of mother's hand. Mother strode straight in after Franny. I could hear her yelling in the kitchen.

"That was my last three dollars!" she screamed. "And you had to act up. You had to ruin the picture with your stupid, baby whining! My last three dollars in the world. Oh my God," she cried. "Why did I do it? What will we ever do now?"

I looked around and saw the pony man was gone. When I went inside, mother was slumped in a kitchen chair with her head on the table sobbing. Franny's face was red and streaked with snot. She was standing in the doorway snivelling, with her legs crossed tightly and a little puddle of pee on the floor around her feet.

Mother sobbed so loudly I didn't know what to do. I leaned against the sink and watched an ant carry a crumb of bread up and over the white rubber toes of my black canvas shoes. Finally, mother raised herself up on her elbows.

"Go get my Bible, Roy," she said, "And my glasses." Her voice was quiet and dead sounding.

I hoped she wouldn't see the pee. I pushed past Franny into the parlor and hurried back. Mother

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lit a cigarette, took a long puff and set it down in the ashtray. Then she put on her glasses and set the Bible on its spine on the table between her prayer-like hands. All of a sudden, she pulled her hands away and let the book fall wide open, its thin, crisp pages crackling like fire. She took another long puff, then closed her eyes and ran her finger down the page as if she were feeling braille.

Suddenly she stopped, opened her eyes and began to read silently. Her shoulders started to heave. She buckled at the waist, wrapped her arms tight across her ribs and sobbed into her chest. I had seen the passage underneath mother's finger. It was the one about the marriage feast at Canaan, and I couldn't see why that would make her cry.

"Listen, children," she said, wiping her nose on her wrists. "It's a sign from the Lord."

"So Peter was being kept in the prison?" she said as if reading it in the book. "...but prayer was being made to God for him by the Church without ceasing. And behold..."

"But, mother?" I said puzzled. "That's not..."

"And behold!" she yelled, "an angel of the Lord stood beside him saying, get up quickly. Gird thyself, put on thy sandals, wrap thy cloak about thee and follow me."

Mother was shivering.

"You see!" she said to us, running over to Franny and hugging her. "It's a sign from the Lord." Father's name was Peter. "You see!" she turned to me, "All will be revealed. Just as He has said it."

"But, mother?" I cried, "that's not..."

She picked up her cigarette and her Bible and went in to lie on the bed. I got some toilet paper and wiped up Franny's pee, and found her a fresh pair of underpants in the laundry basket.

Two days later, father came home. He was sandy-eyed and his beard was rough. I never liked him to



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kiss me when his beard was rough, and when he smelled like that. Mother was so happy.

"Oh Peter!" she cried. "Thanks be to God you're safe!"

"You see!" she beamed, with tears in her eyes. "Everything's going to be just *fine* now!"

Father walked right past us all and went straight to bed.

It would soon be cold fall. Crickets had come into the house. They were everywhere, hiding in corners, squeaking to stay warm. There was one near my bed, but I could not find him. I lay in bed and listened hard, trying to figure out where he was from the sounds he made, but all I could hear was father shouting and mother crying out in the kitchen.

"You promised!" she sobbed. "You took a solemn vow to the Lord to give it up!"

Then I heard the screen door bang.

Mother started cleaning closets. The next day when Franny and I got home from school, there was a great big pile of stuff in the middle of our bedroom floor. All the clothes and empty hangers were tangled in with shoe boxes full of cancelled checks, the vaporizer, mother's scrapbooks and father's lodge swords and his great big Captain Hook hat with the fluffy plume, and all of Franny's stuffed animals and my baseball cards, and mother's stamps, and her Jack Lalanne Glamour Stretcher, and the Twenty-Mule-Team-Borax Wagon Train model that father had put together, mounted on a long piece of varnished wood and then kept in the closet with his bowling ball and the stack of *National Geographics*, and the box of photographs and mother's remembrances of Grandma and Grandpa in Grandma's old black leather purse with the broken strap.

Mother was up on a chair with a bucket of wash water, wiping out the upper shelves with a ripped old pair of father's underpants. When she saw me and

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Franny, she set down the bucket, climbed off the chair, and wrung out the splintery rag.

"Go rinse your thermos bottles," she said, taking her cigarettes out of the pocket of her dress. "Then come right back in here. I 'll need some help."

She was sitting on the edge of Franny's bed with Grandma's purse in her lap when we got back. Franny snuggled up beside her.

"Please, mother," she wheedled, "Can't I see the watch?" She pushed her face into the mouth of the big satchel. Mother smiled and reached in and took out the small old-fashioned, gold watch. It was the size of a quarter and opened when you pressed the top. The face had very sharp, lacy hands and Roman Numerals, so Franny did not know how to tell time with it, but she loved to look at it anyway.

"I always loved this watch, too," mother said. "I always wanted to have it when I was little. Now I have it."

She started to cry, and then quickly put away all the souvenirs. She zipped up the purse and set it back on the floor. She turned to the bucket, finished her cigarette fast and doused the butt in the water so it sizzled.

I had been sitting in the closet with my knees pulled up against my chest, and then I saw the cricket. He was lying dead on the floor in the corner near the door hinges. His knees were bent just like mine. His antennas were long and thin like thread. He was brown. As I picked him up, he crackled like a dried leaf.

"Look, mother," I said, walking over to her quickly with the cricket in the palm of my hand. "Could this be another sign from the Lord?"

Her eyes swam in hot, thick tears, and she slapped me hard across the mouth. The smell of



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ammonia on her wet hand burned way up inside my nose, and my eyes watered.

"Don't mock me, Roy!" she snapped. "When you mock me, you mock the Lord."

"But I wasn't..."

"No more back talk! What I need from you is help, not sass."

I didn't want to, but I knew that I was starting to cry. "You never believe me!" I screamed, crumbling the cricket in my fist. "I hate you! And I hate father. And I never wanted to ride that dumb old pony, anyway--so there!"

When I woke up, I was on my bed with my arms clamped tight around my knees. The room was very shadowy. Finally, I recognized the pile of junk in the center of the floor. Mother was standing in the doorway.

"Well?" she said. "Are you ready to apologize yet?"

I closed my eyes and nodded my head.

"Do you have any money?" she asked. "I'm a little short."

I looked in my Chinese Puzzle Box and took out thirty cents.

"Can I borrow this until payday?" she asked, and I shook my head yes.

"Okay. Now get up, because I need you to go to the store for me."

She handed me a quarter, some nickels, a dime and lots of pennies, besides my thirty cents, a dollar in all.

"Get a pound of hamburger, a loaf of bread, and a pack of Pall Malls," she said.

"They won't let me get the cigarettes anymore," I told her. "Mr. Jones said."

"I'll give you a note," she argued, scribbling on the back of an old envelope.

When I got home from the store, the room was clean. I opened the closet and stared at the

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wonderful neatness. All the hangers were turned the same way, the shoes were all lined up, the shelves stacked perfectly like Mr. Jones' Grocery. It was beautiful. Then I heard another cricket, but I knew no matter how loud he chirped, I'd never track him down either, not until he was dead, dead, dead.

Halloween was wonderful. I was a hobo. Franny was a princess. Father burned a cork, and when it cooled, he smeared the black stuff all over my chin like a beard. He drew me a real handlebar moustache, too. It was perfect. While mother put on Franny's rouge and eyebrow pencil, I sat on the sofa next to father. He was so happy, his eyes were sparkling. He started to whistle. Father was a wonderful whistler. He puffed his cheeks out wide, curled his tongue between his lips, and trilled all up and down the scale. Then he whistled one of his favorite whistling tunes, "When the Red, Red, Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along." Oh, it was beautiful. I put my hands on his cheeks, and they were so smooth, round as apples and clean-smelling, and his eyes were so blue, and his hair so orange. I started to whistle with him, and then he tickled me, and we rolled all over the floor, trying to whistle, but we couldn't do it because we were laughing so hard. Franny joined in. I laughed so long I got a stitch in my side.

"Okay!" said Father at last, putting his big arms tight around me and Franny and hoisting us up. "Let's get this show on the road!" he roared, straightening Franny's crown. We raced out the back door, Franny squealing, me beating her by a mile. Mother always stayed home to hand out the candy and to make sure the pumpkin did not catch the whole house on fire.

Afterwards, we always sat on the parlor floor and emptied our bags into great big kitchen mixing



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bowls, so mother could inspect the candy. We would eat and eat and watch the monster movie on T.V.

"I bet everybody's a little dry from all this candy," said father out of the blue. "I know what!" he said, all excited. "How about I go down to Jones's store and pick us up some sodas. And then when I get back, we can turn out all the lights, and tell ghost stories!"

"Yeah!" screamed Franny and I.

"I don't know..." said mother.

"I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail," he said, pulling on his coat. "Now all of you be thinking up some real good stories. I want to hear some good ones this year, none of that baby stuff, now."

And he was gone. We never saw father again--even after the pony picture came, and Thanksgiving and Christmas passed. We prayed every night, but there were no more visions. Mother told us just to pray that wherever father was, he would be safe and remember his solemn vow to the Lord, and someday we might see him again. But we never did.

She said that I could keep the pony picture if I wanted. It was kind of ruined because Franny had her face hid, and my eyes had come out red, but Gambler looked wonderful. So I cut away everything but the pony, and put the cut-out in my Chinese Puzzle Box along with the burned cork, and a dead cricket, and some loose change.

It was years later that I suddenly realized three startling facts about life: you never see the pony picture man anymore, do you? Also, it's very seldom you hear people whistle, I know because whenever I do, I always look to see if just maybe it might be father. And, though I'm fairly careful about most things, I have absolutely no idea what ever happened to that wooden Chinese Puzzle Box--yet I can still remember to this day the trick way to open it. Franny has the gold watch, I know that, and mother's Bible too. But as for the rest? The important things are the ones

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that are gone, the things that can never be kept except as memories.

In my heart, I rode that pony. I rode him, holding up the red hat in a grand salute. In my memory, father loved us. He jumped on behind me, and we rode away together laughing and tickling and drinking sodas. We rode together whistling.

*Maryann Calendrille*

AFTER SEARCHING FOR WEEKS I FIND THE BODY OF  
MY CAT ALONGSIDE THE ROAD

One last look at the locked-up summer house  
Ridiculous against the yellow sky of approaching  
storm.

It smiles like a porch light left on through  
the afternoon.

I can barely smell the musk of dirt,  
Feel the wind grow careless with the sparks it throws  
Through screaming trees. I call for help  
On a disconnected phone,  
Stumble over a small mound of fur and flesh  
I slowly recognize like the rotting vegetables  
That crouch in the refrigerator  
I grope in, hungry, awakened from a bad dream  
Where my greatest fear finds me, sweating and pale  
But somehow stronger than we both imagined.



Maryann Calendrille

EVERY STREET POINTS UP

The problem with directions is  
Who knows if the left turn, or  
The boarded up Carvel comes first?  
And if it's after Bob's Bicentennial Deli  
    you bear right  
Around the curve, or before?  
We might as well drive blind,  
Trust our nose to the gravel and tar --  
Drive by desire, anticipation.

Last night I waited miles for your car  
To lumber up the drive.  
Small reflectors on parked cars  
Twinkled false alarms.  
As a kid, tucked in the back seat  
    of our big blue Pontiac,  
All the cars behind us were also leaving home,  
And those oncoming were returning, safe and large.

But now the town is flat and smooth  
And each road ends in the mouth of a sky  
That sucks up tree tops and  
And wandering out you might easily reach  
The line where the curb turns into lips  
Bouyant and edgeless, the world,  
A series of cliffs placed loin to loin.



*Carl Conover*

INERTIA IN JUNE

The pigeons are too hot  
to eat the mulberries  
and the fragrance of the honeysuckle  
has evaporated.  
The air conditioner strains at full-throttle  
as the saxophone plays "Love for Sale"  
in the next apartment  
and I am down to my last skin.  
There is nothing left to peel away  
but civility,  
nothing to appease July  
whose breath stalks  
the flickering lights.

Ruth Daigon

"HOW OLD WOULD YOU BE IF YOU DIDN'T KNOW  
HOW OLD YOU WAS" *Satchel Paige*

A door in a sudden garden swings open  
and everything comes back.

Ma's wheedling: "C'mon Cookie.  
Smile for the camera  
Sing a song."

The rock I'm standing on--  
smooth,  
hot,  
the sun bouncing off my Buster Brown,  
I sing, and Mr. Shuckett  
hands me a dollar.

Pa, just up from the city,  
crouches in the lake,  
washing his arms past  
his carpenter tan.  
Then, swimming with eyes shut,  
he splashes everyone.

Friday.  
I can hardly wait for Friday.  
Every other day's like  
jumping up and down  
on one foot in the same spot.  
But Friday, pa arrives from the city.  
Friday, the butcher comes to kill our chickens.

"Stay in the front," ma yells  
from the back. But I crawl  
through the dirt underneath the house  
to watch the headless chickens  
dance their miracle.

*Ruth Daigon*/"How Old Would You Be If You Didn't  
Know How Old You Was"

I spin like them,  
flop in the grass,  
split a blade down the middle,  
whistle through it,  
and the sun spills its tropical on me.

If I never learned to count,  
I'd be back in that feathered time  
with nothing to forget,  
nothing to recall,  
starting all over again.



Mark Doty

LATE AUGUST

Fruitstands multiply on the backroads,  
shooting up like the pluming spouts  
of schooled whales, as if the fields  
were so full they required these fountains  
of produce, leafy geysers  
of violet kohlrabi, scarlet-veined chard, bouquets  
of dusky beets mattered with earth,

all spilling from barnboard  
lean-tos, stacked bins. Handlettered signs  
in broadbrushed red paint: *sweet corn,*  
*snap beans, vine ripe,*  
*native melons, pick ur own blueberries*  
from the lowflying azure cirrus  
hovering a foot from earth. The paper chronicles  
how one old woman wandered lost  
in the promises of the height of summer,  
blue-dazzled, from bush to bush  
to a blue glory like a sky descended  
in hundreds of Pointillist flakes,  
the blue sequins of the air's evening gown.  
No one's seen her since July.  
Is she still gathering those handfuls,  
tongue gone blue with praise,  
giving herself over entirely  
to increase?

*Kathi Gleason*

WITHOUT HANDS

All those artists' sketches  
without hands. As if

what they reached for  
could not be grasped  
by ordinary flesh. Limbs

coming to a sudden end  
like the smooth branch  
of the maple

I once fell out of,  
my tongue splitting  
open between my teeth

with its one long syllable  
of blood,

the earth not letting me in,  
the sky, with all  
its accoutrements of wind,  
not letting me stay.

I didn't know then  
it was an act of love,

the tree letting me go like that  
the firmest grasp  
I've ever had on anything.

Mike Gregory

CROWS

Crows often sound paradoxical  
in the blue hum of desert.  
Shoretown people don't know that  
& get gypped of a sense  
of smypathy. Crows understand us.  
They squeeze knuckled talons into our fenceposts,  
glide like ink to the roadside to watch us.  
We zoom past in the shell  
of our dreams, one life shrunk to a dot,  
& another, its circle yawning closer.

The crows hop down. They inspect.  
Inches from earth, the debris must look  
magnified, disproportionate--each odd scrap,  
every lost part of motion, a giant wreck.  
The blank curtains of heat sashay  
& they begin to pray for us. At twilight  
I risk abandonment of the highway  
loose in its heat, walk to  
some arroyo that cracks open  
with their voices & listen to them pray.  
I let one shift a scorched eye  
& summarize my life.  
His tongue licks the smiling corner of his mouth.

They are not perfect, but I'd  
love night to fall like they do,  
strong wings not black with malice  
where they find me, another casualty,  
face up in a dead gesture.  
They move & aim their beaks  
until I'm picked clean, pronounced healed.



*Mike Gregory*

FOR MY SON

You again, on a bus, in the face of  
some older man beaten down & bitter.  
Your eyes & chin. My headache of lurching  
stop/go scenery jumped out the window  
hustling between a jigsaw puzzle of cars.

Shine of the last bicycle spokes.  
It's fall. You weren't expected.  
The glint of sunlight off automobile chrome  
makes me want to be what you need me--  
well-employed, close at hand. Instead

I run with a small animal's fear  
around the corner of last week, down  
the long stairs toward winter. I want to  
bring you asparagus home in a taxi  
as the moon turns its horns for rain,

scrunch in a chair under desklight as you sleep,  
be watchful as trout under skipped stones.  
Aaron, I whip myself with you  
as though some awful power could  
lift this bus off dead streets & wing it

to your porch. I'd be that bird  
with one song to sing & all day to sing it.  
Love has its impact. Don't expect me for dinner.  
My last 50 cents till payday paid for  
a seat near a window, a man who looks like you.

Mike Gregory

THE LAVENDER WOMAN

She keeps her pills with kitchen  
herbs and spices, in a cabinet near the pantry  
where potatoes stretch dumb roots, tunnel  
weeks in air dark as loss. She keeps her  
knives sharp, and in rooms like holy lands--  
the 1930's couch, the chestnut clock--better  
spit your Nietzsche in the brass waste can.  
This year the harvest was abundant  
behind stone garden walls, bouquets  
of reddish violet rising like faces in fog.  
Old London. A voice would cry out  
'Who will buy my sweet lavender?'  
and faces appear in doorways.  
Lavender made into wine, crushed  
in the sugar, capped in jars or floating  
on a steamy bath, her hair that arcs and rolls,  
ravens in flight. Mrs. Santolina  
curves like light around noonday crowds,  
its conversations buzz her ears like flies.  
'The world is power, and nothing else'  
Etcetera  
Her dress wraps her up in question marks  
and where does she go,  
her walks announced by flowers  
on that World War 2 blue nurse's hat.  
Maybe bread on sale at the deli.  
Maybe she collapses at the foot of a cross.  
At night, the wind exports sweet lavender  
and her footsteps drop like candle wax  
in the grass. She has her life.  
No one will trespass twice.

Renee Harlow

PIE APPLES

In the yard, there are Duchess apples  
    *walk into the apple orchard*  
        *under the waning moon* I am  
waning gravity apprehends my muscles,  
    the flesh, the flesh wanes  
and we sleep now in opposite corners  
an old lover sleeping in each of us,  
dreaming. We reached as lovers, once,  
for a child; that small death  
stands between us with its inarticulate wish  
for future, ours, focusing as people do  
on some child...

But I live in a glass body  
any child could shatter, and we come apart.  
Are you seduced by silk embroidery  
on tiny dresses? The toystore  
rockinghorse runs through my sleep, chestnut,  
with small rider. And perhaps, sometime,  
    you will want a child again,  
        a woman who can carry...

I walk into the apple orchard  
    breathing under the waning moon,  
stretch my arms through rough bark, pick  
the full and gleaming globes of Duchess apples,  
surrounded by blue-green flickers of fireflies.



Lynn Martin

ALTERING THE SCENE

Because you believe to name  
is to make visable,

love rubs its furry back  
against my ankles, sensuous and kneading,

rain knocks on the back door  
under a gray straw hat

polite, offering  
soft hands, a silken touch.

I never believed I could walk barefoot in snow,  
melting my own way through any landscape,

altering the scene with a turn of the hand,  
cupping blizzards in the palm of my mind.

Weary, I flop on the bed, announcing my exhaustion,  
a litany of a day rubbed rough.

You ignore me, talk of a poem you saw  
in the face of the 90 year old woman

you interviewed only after four locks  
and a chain scraped open on her door,

where she lives alone, works with a steady hand  
a quilt with a design forgotten

before she is dead, and once again I rise  
to your faith with believing arms.

I name myself awake, imagine  
you asleep, dreaming me alive.

Therese Mattil

HANGING ON

Suppose we do this:

let's pour buckets of sand onto the floor of the car  
so that the ocean might comfort our feet  
the long ride home. I could flex

my toes in the diamond grains and you,  
your heels carving halfmoons in the cool underlayer  
of moist granules, could still manage clutch, brake,

accelerator. *No*, you say, practical as a tired  
housewife, *it'd be a bitch to clean*, as if every basket,  
towel and shoe in the back seat hadn't already conspired  
to unload secret reserves. This morning,

in a foggy awakening, I tried  
to hold on to the night's dreaming  
while missing persons floated beyond  
the emerging sun. I closed my eyes tight

against the day, calling back father, grandmother,  
some familiar child. Your touch  
opened my eyes and I let the night go, rose  
to the folding of blankets, the packing  
of tent and poles, the return. So

it goes on. We keep letting go. Of oceans,  
dreams, lovers, summers, years, selves. But  
these loose grains of sand, stubborn, keep appearing  
just when we think the surface is clean,  
persistent reminders of what it was

we once thought we had.



*Therese Mattil*

NEON FUNERAL

You're lost, naming birds at the feeder,  
your thumb caught in mid-air at the count  
of six. I stare through different glass.  
No serenity here. These fish are in peril.  
Seven, I count, *he's eaten eight since*

*yesterday.* Ultraviolet lights in the rear  
of the pet store drew us like tourists  
to a tropical jungle. We considered  
the aggressive tiger barb. Glass cats  
and silver-tipped tetras vied for purchase.  
Which of us chose the neons? Fifteen  
babies. Angelicus catfish was my choice

but I hate him now, his belly full of glowing  
neon. I want you to stop this foul cartoon, black  
mouths of fish swallowing smaller bodies  
like a closing telescope. You're there

at the window, still, watching cardinals  
and bluejays increase. This catfish substracts  
neons and I am divided. It's a question  
of perception when the world is viewed

through glass. I mourn the suffering of a tiny  
universe. Your counting echoes all that is possible.

Paul Milenski

## LOST KEYS

The old dziadz was always the first out of the car, heading downstream, fishing as rapidly as the flow of water until he put some distance between him and me. I used to kid him about it in the company of my brother when all three of us went ice fishing together, standing out on early ice, three figures suspended above water on crystal, waiting for red-flagged signals on our tips. "Maybe that's why you never took to trout fishing, Ron, the old dziadz does not like to keep company. Isn't that right, dziadz?"

"Together, you just scare fish on a stream. You need distance. You know that."

"Ron's sociable, that's why he likes it on the ice."

"He's right, dziadz. When I went with you, I felt like a horse left at the gate."

"Either you fish right or you don't."

The old dziadz drove, had his boots on, his pole put together, the crawlers in a shirt pocket. After he parked the car near the stream, he tossed you the keys and he was gone. "I'll catch you later."

Then, in an hour or two, he would appear quietly, instantaneously, like a stag poking its head through the brush, taking you by surprise. "How you doing?"

After his retirement, he slowed down a little. Once he fell on a slippery rock, broke his glasses. Another time, he got caught in the middle of the stream in a swirling current, filled his boots, had to carry half the stream with him to make it to shore. Then, he turned his ankle terribly when he dropped himself from a high bank to the stream bed.

He began to keep the keys. I asked why, and he said, "So you won't have to worry about them."

*Paul Milenski/Lost Keys*

The last time out it rained. A cold rain, hard and steady. I caught lots of browns, orange-bellied, hook-jawed. They were right in the middle of the stream, in the rain-swollen currents. You had to get in there, fight the swiftness of the water.

We did not meet on the stream as usual. When I returned to the car, he was already there. He was sitting on the wet ground, his back up against a wheel hub. His clothes were soaked, his hair matted down, his curl gone. His lips were blue.

"Did you limit out already?"

I am sure he heard me.

"Did you quit early?"

His voice was barely audible. "I lost the car keys."

He was somewhere on the stream, so he said, reaching into his pockets for a handkerchief to wipe dirt from his eyes because he was whipped by a streamside branch. That's when he realized he did not have the keys.

"Maybe you locked them in the car?"

He said he had already checked, through the foggy windows, the ignition, the car seat, the mat. He had traced his path along the stream, back and forth. No keys.

"I swear I'm losing everything lately."

"One set of keys--that happens."

"Now what are we going to do?" He made a face that I'd never seen him make before; there was so much pain in it. His lips were twisted, his eyes almost pressed closed by the compression of his skin.

I suggested we walk to the nearest house, call my brother, ask him to deliver a spare set of keys. He did not like this idea. I said we could hide our equipment under the car or in the brush, bum rides, be driven back later. This was no good.



Paul Milenski/Lost Keys

I asked if he wanted to look some more; maybe two of us working together would spot them. No, his looking had been enough.

What was left?

"I deserve to be left out here in the rain."

"What kind of talk is that?"

"I'm losing everything lately."

"I'm not listening to that."

"It's true."

"No it's not. Jesus, one set of car keys."

"I don't even remember taking them out of the ignition. That's the real truth of it."

"Check your pockets again."

"I did."

"Inside your boot. Maybe they fell in there, are hooked over the leg strap."

"I'd feel them there, wouldn't I? Wouldn't I feel them there, rubbing against my leg?"

"Maybe not."

"I would hear them jingle, I think. Wouldn't I hear them when I walked?"

Then, unaccountably, he moved back down to the stream, staring blankly into the water.

I noticed the keys. They were laying near the wheel hub, where he had sat on them, in the indentation from the weight of his body.

I called to him, told him when he came back that he had given them to me, and I had forgotten. But I saw clearly that this did not work. He dropped his head as though it were a burden, spent a lot of time on this our last trip together standing in the rain, continuing to look at the ground, not wanting to be the first to take his pole apart, not wanting to leave.

*Larry Moffi*

IN HOPE

Hope...I remember now. It was  
College, a teacher-education class  
I had taken out of desperate need  
To know something of myself could last,  
That sense of accomplishment suggesting  
Confidence and, at best, future.  
Yet the professor turned me back  
As if I might become again that one child  
Among the many I would aspire to reach.

The assignment: recall an image  
From childhood's earliest memory,  
Describing the picture clearly  
In words chosen with care. Before me  
My grandfather was walking  
Off Long Island Sound into the direction  
He must have believed was home; the salt  
Mist had turned him that much around.  
He seemed so old from behind.

In writing then, "I loved him too much  
To correct him," I wanted to make the end  
Attractive by building on the appeal  
Of love between us. In truth  
I said, "No!" and pointed him right.  
And that, like most lies, is one  
I have since failed in clear words--  
And care--to fix, though the silence  
I speak of continues to change me.

Sheila E. Murphy

OF DISTANCE

Living in a place,  
You lose the sense of beauty,

Definition and  
Repose felt from far away.

I think of poems  
That I would write of Phoenix

When living somewhere  
On another continent,

Australia, Hobart,  
In Tasmania, it would

Seem that Phoenix was  
A whole connected piece of

Somewhere I could feel  
By closing my eyes, closing

My life to the lost  
Easy warmth of here, writing

Endlessly of my  
Unhappy past long before

Arriving where I  
Thought it time to stop the flight

Away into some  
Long peace as the birds enjoy

When summer seems to  
Last beyond full trees, shadows.



*Jack Myers*

WHERE I'VE BEEN

At last I am ready to report  
how so much of my time  
has been spent lost between  
thinking and feeling

that seen from above  
it must look like a river  
cutting its way between  
age and circumstance  
leaving behind something wet  
and abstract as the insides of a jewel.

How I came to accept this habit  
after wiping these journeys out  
like dirty thoughts, pronouncing myself  
time after time as being lost  
is a testament to whatever lies  
beyond my will.

I can hardly look at anything  
as complex and frightening  
as the human face, its ability  
to imagine moving inward  
at such tremendous speeds  
it outruns the Postmaster's fear  
of having to read his jumbled horde of letters.

All this is to my shame, my chandelier  
of egotism burning in an empty head.  
I feel as archaic as a candelabrum  
floating in outer space.  
I have even stopped writing poetry  
thinking a simple report will do.

Alan Nasland

OVANDO HAY

The grass had been cut twice by mid-August, and the second was the last cutting for the ranch; what grew now would be late fall pasture when the cattle were brought down from their high summer range. Around the cabin the mountain grass of the yard had not been cut and it was in some places well over two feet high. Above the cabin the ring of faceless mountains burned a dull green in the sun. The blank, unminted silver of the snowpeaks of a more distant range glinted farther off, almost lost to sight. Close in around the cabin the valley swept away as flat and light green and mown as a city lawn. A gentle bulge of darker green wandered across the hay-meadow where willows marked a watercourse, and farther, where the mountains met the flat little valley, there were abruptly trees and pine forest.

They liked the shades of green, the brightest and most glaring of which was the tall grass that was near the house and extended to the creek beyond the dirt road. On the near side of the creek where the pole fence was, the grass was higher yet, and seed heads waved like ripened grain.

They had thrown their blankets on the grass under the kitchen window near the screen door, but it wasn't enough; the blankets rode the top of the grass like a tentfly on poles. So they took out their sleeping bags from the camper. Zipped together and tromped down in the grass, they made a nice bed to put their blankets on. They lay on the smooth and comfortable blankets in sunshine and looked up at Douglas fir sprawling skyward around the cabin and scenting the air around there with pitch.

Royal's hands were tanned and orange-brown for working in the hayfields and they contrasted with her white, naked skin, her breasts as soft as rising bread.



*Alan Nasland/Ovando Hay*

When a truck started coming down the road from the highway Royal had been asleep for fifteen minutes, and his bride didn't know from which direction the truck might be coming, out in the fields or back toward the highway and the ranch. Anyway, it might only have been a bumblebee somewhere in the weathered fir eaves of the cabin to someone unfamiliar with the sounds of the mountains.

"It'll be that nosey Farnsley," Royal said when he was awake. "But there's no rush."

Still, they made it over the grass to the cabin faster than they had taken to come out. Angela hit a large thistle with her knee, spikes bringing red pinpricks of blood to her pale skin.

In the cool shack they struggled on with the thick fabric of their jeans. Angela had not come to the West an unschooled Easterner, and she preferred the authentic, button-fly jeans. Their plaid, rancher's shirts with snap buttons matched blue and red. Without underclothes they still felt daringly nude to the roughness of the country as they went back out to sit on the porch and await the oncoming truck.

"Wants to check if we are snakebit or worse. At least his wife does. She sent him."

Royal had put in a month helping Farnsley stack his slippery, unpredictable grass hay, snorting over the anthills and dry creekbottoms in a gasoline-powered buckrake. He it was who pushed the huge green blobs of cured hay up to the beaver-slide stacker and also spelled Farnsley's son off forming the stack in the sweltering July sun. He who had sworn never after obtaining a bachelor's degree to work with a rancher or farmer again. He had done it; it was the only work to be had out of the town of Missoula as the summer wore on. There would be nothing more until high school opened its doors in September in a more remote little town--his first assignment as English teacher. But then



Alan Nasland/Ovando Hay

there was Angela, she had turned up pregnant, and that had finalized their plans. He had needed money for the wedding.

He remembered how the old guy Farnsley had responded when he, Royal, had asked could he rent the old cabin in the meadow for a honeymoon retreat. Farnsley's grey-stubbled jowls didn't move any more than the granite sides of Rocky Mountains canyons do, but his eyes whitened, round in surprise. In the end it was Mrs. Farnsley who had agreed to let him have the cabin. And, actually, she had done it because he was country. Though he tried to pass himself off to her as a seasoned schoolteacher, she had known. She looked into his face, reading close like a poem, and finally asked him if it were to be just him and Angela.

If it were, "Free. T'otherwise, thirty-five dollars the week."

It was to be free.

Now the truck eased by the front of the cabin and Ed Farnsley and his adolescent son studied the deserted blankets and sleeping bags casually through open windows of the truck, their straw hats white blurs in the cavern of shadow in the cab.

"You ain't seen no stray steers up hereabout have ya?"

Angela was older than Royal. She was a graduate student who took pity on him--the untutored, rural Montana man with obviously more going for him than farm and ranch labor were ever going to reward him for. Why else was he getting a degree in Education? But she was worn out a little with being a knowing Easterner, worn out with being the one who had gone to Europe in their little group of wiser undergraduates and MA students in Humanities. She had just relaxed into the affair with "her cowboy," like a country girl into a haystack and tried to

forget about any gaps in their personal contact.

When she turned up pregnant, that last summer of his degree, she was at first very surprised that he wanted to make her an honest woman. Marriage at first seemed as absurd as her grandmother dying suddenly and leaving it all to her, Angela. She couldn't see how she could take on such a change, spring from the doldrums of outlandish nonentity to being dubbed an integral part of the community. She had really come to Montana with her limited annuity just to escape the East, an MA in drama was a ruse. Now the sorrow of society--marriage--looked her in the face with dusty eyelashes.

It turned out easy for Royal to get a job in a remote town in the sticks with just a few phone calls paid for by his department chairman, but of course that was not enough, that was only for fall, after they were married. He had no money, so he had to go back to the farm or ranch and get some more--had to work again in the country to pay his entree into the city as usual. But this time not for entree into the city, but for his sense of ceremony--for a honeymoon in Glacier. Well, she had been married before, hadn't she heard this?

When she'drove him to the Farnsley's she watched with mild despair as he changed from the hopeful teacher back to the farm and ranch worker. He grinned and shook hands with the jean-jacketed Farnsley in his dusty ranchyard, reaching out clumsily as though across a canyon, elbows akimbo to make this overly formal gesture. He turned to her, where her own arm rested casually on the chrome of the car door, with a whimsied sheepish face. Well, at least she'd have him back when the job was done and he'd made his check. But the worst happened. He was so sucked into the old home world that he was even too shy to kiss her face goodbye through the car window. Hell, wasn't she pregnant by him? What was this? But she let it pass--drove glumly out of the ranchyard and



Alan Nasland/Ovando Hay

back to Missoula.

They had been married two days before they began their stay in the cabin on the edge of the hayfield. The morning they were to leave again and go on to Glacier Park with the borrowed camper, he had an unsatisfied feeling that he was late for something--a class he had to make it to. Pedagogy.

The sheets had been pushed down in the night and the coarse blue-and-white ticking of the mattress was under his cheek. The cold bedroom of the cabin was filled with yellow light filtered through the pulled roller blinds. Angela rose earlier than he, as usual.

Out of bed and naked, he went in the chill across the pine-floored room to grab some shorts and a tee shirt from his duffel. Then the same clothes he had worked in in the hayfield a month before--jeans and western shirts, a coarse denim jacket with brass rivets at the stress points. Through a square archway to the little, knotty pine kitchen he could see Angela wasn't in sight. Probably she had left some coffee for him on the wood cookstove though.

But there turned out to be no fire in the stove and the small aluminum coffee pot they had brought with them remained upside down beside its empty percolator basket in the sink. She must be outside, although it was a bit early for truly warm sun.

Royal plunked down in a stainless steel kitchen chair and pulled his boots on. He leaned a hand against the screendoor and called her name. No answer came from outdoors. She could be down beyond the bend in the creek or up on the slope behind the cabin. She couldn't hear him from those places.

He opened the door and stepped out. The blank mountains rimmed the valley, leaping up in morning light grey-green mounds throwing huge, tent-shaped



Alan Nasland/Ovando Hay

shadows across the swales. Some pink hues still clung to the gaunt granite of the higher range that hung above the lower hills.

Royal squatted down and began to tie his boot-laces. He had a wife with a mind of her own and habits of her own. It would take some getting used to. She was taking a walk in the meadow, looking at the haystacks he had helped to erect he would bet.

He walked toward the creek and climbed up the three poles of the fence, holding onto the fence post to balance and then stood high on the top rail. He had a clear view of the empty meadow filling with sun clean across the little valley to the pine trees' bluish shadows that began abruptly on the other side.

He called her name with a long haloo.

There was a silence that was the silence of the country on Sunday afternoon. Like giant loaves of bread the yellowish haystacks cast their shadows on the still fields. Royal glanced at the small horse-barn up the road and thought of its splintery rafters. Sometimes brides had the bad feeling. Unexplainable. They had been known to fall (jump?) into Niagra.

Feeling silly, his chest tuned to dread, he jogged over to the barn and gawked fearfully into the room through the doorway. Musty, smelling like hay and bird feathers. More shadows.

He called her name again, hollowly.

When he heard only silence, he went back to the stream and stooped through the pole fence along its side. He caught his jacket sleeve on an untrimmed twig on a pole. Royal felt oddly panicked.

The creek. It was eighteen inches deep, rather swift and quite cold.

He yelled in earnest. Where was she?

Royal now ran down the creek to a curve where the bank was undercut and a deep trout pool lay. He peered into the pool from the grassy bank. Bullet-nosed lunkers fanned their gills in the green water.

Alan Nasland/Ovando Hay

He could see vermiculate patterns on their grey backs. Throwing himself prone, he stuck his arm into cold water and gasped as he searched shoulder-deep below the little, undercut bank. He sucked in his breath and shivered.

Suddenly splashing into the creek up to his knees, he scrambled over the slippery, moss-covered rocks of the bottom, plunged upcreek toward the cabin site, calling her name every third step, his thoughts frozen in dread.

So he had brought her from town to a country he already knew was dead and empty, and it had sucked her life into its vast hollow. The plain emptiness of the grey pine trunks in their columned, forest slopes. A loggia of nothingness he knew well. Dry heat this day was already building up there, waiting without utterance until the brief, lonely haying time below would fill the fields with the growls of machinery and the shouts of workers. The long intervals between passages of whitetail deer foraging cautiously. He should have taken her to a resort, a dude ranch!

He splashed and jogged up the creek, wishing he could cry tears, sure that something brutal and final had happened to her.

Back at the cabin he intended to go to the pickup and honk the horn. If she were in the hills, not drowned in the stream half a mile down somewhere in a beaver dam, she surely would come down to him.

Approaching the kitchen stoop he became aware of eyes. Through the screen her outline became more clear where she stood, her arms hugged around her thick plaid shirt. She studied him with curiosity and the blank look of country women.

"Angela, for God's sakes!"

She turned in toward the stove. He thought he heard a laugh, or was it a hiss? Air between her teeth.

*Brittany Newmark*

LOSING SIGHT

We never imagine that the animal  
is aroused by the road  
at a distance it thinks: Water.  
A man dies because a jack slips.  
It's the economy of loss

A sluggish ice-jam  
under which a thin black  
carp is an only life.

I need to understand  
the pathology of stars. Why  
they burn themselves out,  
drop suddenly, why at a  
moments notice they could  
blind us completely.



Hilda L. Niedelman

STRAWBERRY PRESERVES

Childhood has unwritten points  
of reference, stepping stones  
through marshes once it leaves  
the beaten path. My aunt,  
the last to chart the wood for us  
before we ourselves picked up  
the scent of wild strawberry,  
is 92, and lies  
in a steady tick of diminishing.

She has not yet disappeared.  
She sleeps in a coma: three weeks  
kept warm inside and out,  
her body nearly an empty shell  
like the tree trunk in the wood  
through which the wind blows  
the seed of sumac encroaching:  
There we kneeled and filled  
our tin pails.

The way she was born so  
she remains: her back stiff  
and starched. She also learned  
to live among the dying, they  
who watered the roots of tiny plants  
all across an ocean of salt.

Strawberries: I stand over them  
stirring, breathing in  
the summer ripeness, character  
preserved whole in a Mason jar,  
still fresh, yet to be picked  
and tasted on the spot  
later, hard in winter.

Ken Poyner

THE POEM ALMOST ABOUT BASEBALL

It's not your yellow fingers,  
Clenched and hidden behind your back.  
It's not your forward lean, the hat brim  
Jutting out like a cliff over ocean. It's not  
The pin stripes, nor the chewing gum.  
Nor the shoes dug in, one just barely  
Touching the rubber. It's not the position  
On the mound, the center of the camera,  
The being slightly raised. It's not  
Your shoulder, rounded like the end of a  
Ball-ping hammer, wrestling under the cloth  
Like animals over recent prey. It's not the arms,  
Those magnificent strings, that union  
Between the will and the act. It's not  
Your squaring off towards the plate.

It is the throw. The pitch-out. The ball  
In the air like a clutch of new mesons.  
The son-of-a-bitch at first.  
Safe.

Ken Poyner

SELF-RESPECT

We can't get the deer off the front porch.  
The birds are roosting in our closet  
And they won't believe us when we aim  
The air rifle at the bases of their nests.  
Mornings we can't eat breakfast  
For the squirrels that crawl up our shoulders,  
Pull the food in mid-air from our forks.  
It seems half the forest has moved in with us  
And scream as I might they intend no leaving.  
The wife for weeks has been hinting

her father's shotgun,  
Pointing at the key for the lock on the case.  
Whacking the animals with a stick

does nothing to move them:  
We must brace our feet, shove with our thighs,  
Getting in and out of the door, from room to room.  
Our bed last week was taken by bears  
And since then we have slept on hardwood floors.  
The wife worries that in days

she will be cooking for them,  
Serving them on the patio and the coffee table.  
I am almost ready for the gun, to draw my wife  
Against the line of her suggestion.

She would clean the corpse  
If I make it. A bobcat curls in my favorite chair,  
Absently watches the television.

Why the woman does not know  
I need a running target I'll never guess,  
But on the floor our erotic spasms are more tactless  
and to the point  
And I can see her leaping over hedges,  
racing along black fields,  
Thick fur bristled at the back of her neck.



*Doris Safie*

AFTER SEFERIS

It's as if  
you'd been out in the cold, lost in strange  
woods, then came upon an empty house  
and took shelter. A dead house, no fire,  
just the breath of someone passing through.  
A closet hung with remnants  
that seem familiar, like the secret  
between strangers when their eyes meet--  
a tired hem, an unshouldered sleeve,  
a waist no longer held.

It's as if  
the house had buried in it the clothes  
of statues, and you press deeper into it,  
loving the friendliness of what isn't there,  
the porcelain hand that says: *let go, cold  
doesn't matter here.*

And by letting go  
you unlock the warmth of memory no longer dark  
but an old trunk filled with tatters you reshape  
in a surprise of pine,  
the shock of cyclamen in snow, and the statues  
bending now, take you by the hand and whisper  
as you tingle in the perfume of their bodies,  
supple now in the flicker of gaslight  
receding like the breath of someone  
passing through, and all that's left  
is the aroma of absence.

Doris Safie

MURASAKI'S TOMB

Hard to tell which one's yours. You'd think  
the big one at first--gray slab  
of commemoration, incisive--  
characters cut all over it.  
But it's too monotonous.  
Kyoto's folding  
like the wing of a big ambiguous bird.

Father Kawasaki was happy  
someone was looking for you. It took hours  
walking the city, asking. The church  
seemed so cool, this priest alone  
knew. The tapered one  
over there's more like it. Subtle

under my fingers over the stone,  
looking to see beneath  
to your tenth century theory of art's why--  
*emotion so passionate*  
*it cannot be kept shut in the heart.* Whispers

of alien names--*Tamakatsura Rokujo Aoi*--  
imperial sleeves of gentle feeling,  
glow-worms that make stars seem ugly.  
*Yugao Utsusemi Kiritsubo*--names to stop  
traffic, extinguish neon, rekindle nature.

Sudden dark cools stone to the degree  
time forgets. Legend says  
your ashes are south,  
in the lute-shaped lake that bore you.

*Doris Safie*

BURNING MAMA'S GRASS SKIRT

*In memory of Dolores Hale Walsh*

Manhattan's glitter lit up your face. We could see  
the end  
of Riverside Drive, and over Hudson's grave a motor-  
launch  
fought garbage. We'd been talking on the roof garden,  
woman to woman, and the river you loved sent up  
its brine  
to salt our talk. *Mama, you said, was a dancer.*  
*Did I ever tell you how I set fire to her hula skirt?*  
How you laughed! I remembered this, in that sterile  
room  
with its Moloch-mouth waiting to take you,  
to make ash of your laughter. You were looking  
clear over the river you thought

beautiful, like the picture of a broccoli stalk  
on the last card you sent me saying *Damn feet*  
*won't walk right!* This place is just as green but  
soon  
the smell of burnt grasses will overtake me. These  
rivers  
are nothing but streams, you can't drown in them  
or wash off the smell of smoke and champagne  
swirling  
the room our last New Year's Eve you played maracas  
by rubbing two saki cups together, elated  
we hadn't found out your ribs were already held  
with tape, and when we did, you didn't stop

laughing, saying *Jimmy loves me too hard.* I  
remembered this  
when we gathered around you in that other room and how  
you laughed that time we got lost on the turnpike  
looking for a Mexican restaurant that didn't exist,



Doris Safie/Burning Mama's Grass Skirt

but we found another where your mouth burned  
on hot pepper. The next day, still laughing, stabbing  
at life with every nerve you headed east  
for Kenya, then south for Guatemala, making the world  
yours in less than a year. I remembered this  
before going to the feast you planned in advance  
in your garden-lit room full of champagne  
and the music of your laughter, leaving us still  
looking for grass skirts to burn, and when we joined  
hands around you Jimmy said: *Remember, that's the link.*

*W. A. Smith*

## SEEN FROM THE BACKGROUND

I saw my father and grandfather together by the pond. The place was so big I could sneak up on anyone, stealing from an azalea bush over to the magnolia tree where I'd gather a few of the hand grenades it manufactured, in case of enemy attack. Light and shade were everywhere. With all the dry grass and twigs on the ground, it was difficult to be quiet when I skulked, but they each had a line in the water, whispering to one another. They couldn't hear me.

My father was sitting near the flood gate, his father stood a little ahead of him on the bank. My grandfather, Big Charley, had on his favorite fishing cap, with the long green visor. Emerson, was wearing the vest Mother sent him during the war, when he was in Belgium. It was lined with alpaca. I could see the lining because the side with buttonholes was permanently creased back from being packed wrong for the trip home. It didn't matter about the weather--hot or cold, my father wore the vest whenever he fished. Today he had on a blue button-down shirt, short sleeves. He'd told me that in Africa the vest was always buttoned up. "It was cold as hell," he said. He was somewhere in Africa, maybe Morocco, the first time he was shot. He told me right then he was pretty damn sure the Germans were aiming at the cross painted on his helmet.

My grandfather looked like The Old Man And The Sea standing there with his line reaching out from him. I watched him pull one in, but it was too small, like most of them. He gave it back. My father stocked the pond around that time so my grandfather could put a line in whenever he wanted, even get a good fish now and then too. Big Charley had a deep relationship with fishing--and then, in his seventies, he might have dropped a line in the pond even if there wasn't anything there. It didn't

*W. A. Smith/Seen from the Background*

seem to matter so much about the big ones anymore. It was more for the setting I think.

Big Charley turned to say something, and I sneaked from the magnolia tree to the pine where our rope swing dangled riderless in the breeze; then made another quick hop over to the old oak character whose moss hair dragged the ground. I'd crouched in its empty trunk before. It was hollowed by age and disease, but it was a good tree to smoke cigarettes in--for the rustic flavor, but also for camouflage. Though my mother and father knew I smoked, it was not condoned because I was "only twelve." What they didn't seem to grasp was that only-twelve was as old as I could be right then, and I didn't have the time to wait until I hit the age when smoking was okay. I thought of the soft fingers on Big Charley's right hand, nobly stained by Lucky Strikes.

My father was looking at his father while the old man spoke. I saw the lips moving. My grandfather took off his cap for a moment and his white hair stood up, lifted by a tiny breeze. I looked at my father's profile while he listened. He loved Big Charley, I could see. I thought there was something biting at his line but he didn't seem to notice. Then Big Charley broke off what he was saying, motioned Dad to pull in his catch. But this fish was just getting started, like the first one. Emerson watched as his father relieved it gently from the hook and dropped it back into the water.

Emerson stood up and put his arm around the old man, pulled him close for a moment. My grandfather's long green visor shaded their faces and cast a thin shadow on my father's vest. The water was sprinkled with bits of light which seemed to float toward them from the far end of the pond.



*W. A. Smith/Seen from the Background*

Emerson's voice was suddenly loud enough for me to hear it. "Damn!" he said, sliding, jerking his arm from Big Charley's shoulder, his knees buckling under him, sitting him down hard on his behind, flicking his head back into the high grass near the flood gate. Big Charley quickly knelt down beside him, throwing both fishing poles up on the slope behind them, then holding my father's head in his hands. Emerson rocked back and forth, as though he were shivering, freezing in the July heat, and his father rocked with him, holding the head steady, running his fingers through Emerson's hair. Big Charley was saying something, but I couldn't hear it. Just saw the lips moving.

I was unable to do anything but watch them. As the seizure slowed down, Big Charley moved behind my father and cradled Emerson's head in his lap. He stroked the forehead, talking softly, looking down at his son. Then my grandfather lifted his head and for a moment looked out at the pond.

They stayed there for a few minutes so my father could rest. Then Emerson sat up, slowly, pushing himself with his hand; finally they stood again. My father brushed the grass and flecks of dirt from the seat of his pants. He felt along the back of his head, rubbing with his fingers. Big Charley walked over to get the fishing poles. He gave one to Emerson, they each checked their line. They cast toward the edges of the pond.

My father passed his pole to his left hand and put his arm around Big Charley's shoulder, turning to say something. When he finished talking the two of them looked at each other for a few seconds. The air was full of that silence. Except for the sunlight floating on the pond, the afternoon seemed to stand still.

No one would have thought they were two doctors. I saw a father--no, two fathers, one a son. Emer-

*W. A. Smith/Seen from the Background*

son's fishing pole dangled from his left hand, forgotten, its point lost beneath the glassy surface of water, unwatched by those two men. I wondered if the biggest fish in the world was now effortlessly working the bait from his hook.

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