

et al.: Calliope 13.2

# Calliope



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# Calliope

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## **EDITORS**

Mike Briody  
George Hanlon  
Erinn Roy  
Michael C. Russo  
Heidi Trimbach  
Susan Wiegand

**Advisory editor:** Martha Christina

**Cover design:** Eleanor Richards

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Manuscripts are discussed with the writer's name masked  
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prejudice.

Address all correspondence, submissions and subscriptions  
to Martha Christina, *Calliope*, Creative Writing Program,  
Roger Williams College, Bristol, RI 02809.

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Kathleen Aponick

## DOWNTOWN CROSSING

At Downtown Crossing, where pigeons dive  
and squabble for crumbs and we move

on intersecting lines with our packages,  
a derelict is trying to get our attention.

Long-haired, unshaven, ageless in his way,  
he staggers toward us, wanting to talk.

But we turn from him deliberately,  
quiet as a hush, all of us turning from him,

not wanting him to notice us as he calls out  
half-mockingly: *Isn't anybody happy?*

We smile at first hearing the question  
from him, out of the blue, each word

an echo off the high city walls.  
But our silence just makes him louder

with words thrown now like knives  
that fly so close they make us flinch.

*Hey! You!* he shouts again and again,  
*Isn't anybody happy? Isn't anybody happy?*

*Kathleen Aponick*

## **POEM FOR MY FATHER**

1

Toolmaker

Where the arsenal rises up,  
block after block of red brick,  
you appear again, badge in place,  
wire-rimmed glasses set purposefully  
on your dark face.

A whistle blows, your heart's signal  
to race with the tasks ahead,  
though it is worn now from age,  
and emphysemic lungs.

And slowly as the day proceeds,  
despair will make its claim, press you  
to itself like the lathes you mold.

How can we free you, what can we do  
with your sidekick, Suspicion,  
holding forth as he does,  
his grip unrelenting.

Your binges drain us; we shun you  
as you drift in your bar life,  
returning home to rage and sleep.

Your world destroys, confuses—  
as when flames trap your mother  
in a kitchen fire, or when Mother  
turns you out, then takes you back.

Aponick/Poem for My Father

Seeing you now, I want to follow you  
inside, want you to show me  
the carpentry of steel that brought you  
joy, the surfaces of arcs and planes,  
smooth and resolved.

2

Forsythia

It's not true that I always see  
your darker side. I think of you  
the day this photograph was snapped,  
the shutter clicking as you crouch  
next to Bobby's shoulder, he screaming  
with laughter on his tricycle  
at something you or Mother said  
as she brought you into focus.  
It was Sunday; you're wearing  
your white shirt, sleeves rolled up  
as if the day were too warm or formal.  
Behind you the brown-shingled house  
is outsized by your happiness  
and the forsythia blooms  
discovering the warm spring air.  
What was it captured and lost  
that could have saved us then,  
when the failed versions of ourselves  
were all we knew?



*Sally Bennett*

## PORTRAITS

There—in velvet and chiffon:  
1944, a year turbulent with war,  
we occupy a time already passed  
of easy affluence and rootedness;  
my hand firmly placed on Mother's knee,  
her arm circling my sister's waist.

A faint smile lifts the corner  
of my mouth, brushes past my eyes  
then disappears. I am ten years old,  
too serious, oppressed by a narrative  
already over dramatized; my character  
bound up and stuffed beneath the seat.

My sister, four years younger, her braids  
tied back like mine but dark, her cheeks  
deeply dimpled, is the one completely present.  
Mother sits as she was taught, never to lean  
back or slump against the chair: a posture  
of compliance and endurance, right for exile.  
Her speech turning to babel in our ears.

Not content with photographs, she had  
our portraits done in oil to reassure  
herself we still existed in some world,  
unchanged, dressed, ready to be recalled;  
our braids loosened to catch the light  
of falling hair, arms bare; unclaimed  
kisses raised to just below the surface  
of our lips; her necklace—starlight  
shining on us from another age.

**Bennett/Portraits**

Yes—we would have said had we returned—  
painted in America during the war.  
How frightened we were; how good to be home.

*Robert Cooperman*

**MRS. EMMA COOK OF CARRISBROOKE,  
ISLE OF WIGHT, APRIL 24, 1817**

When Mr. Keats leapt up my stairs,  
more chamios than man, he stopped  
before the painting of Shakespeare  
a lodger had left in lieu of rent  
just before lowering himself with bedding  
to escape Wight in a stolen row boat—  
all to avoid paying me, various items missing,  
girls growing plump as pears months later.

I made Mr. Keats pay in advance,  
but when he saw that portrait,  
I thought he'd fall in heathen worship.  
I let him keep it in his room,  
heard him ask it advice, sob  
when nothing of his own verse came—  
until I tired of listening at his door.

Then yesterday, after days of scribbling  
notes to his brothers and friends,  
of crumbling pages empty but for a crossed-out word  
to waste good packing, he announces,  
"It's Shakespeare's birthday; I must leave!"  
his hair as if he'd spent a night  
in our ruined castle's haunted dungeons.

He begged me for the portrait,  
strange, raving boy, in need of a trade  
and a sweet wife, like my niece,  
but there's plenty of steady local gentlemen  
for her to choose from, all in good time.

He's gone—that likeness with him—  
like a crab desperate for the sea,  
a man after someone who owes him money.

Ruth Daigon

## DACHAU REVISITED

By the light of the ovens,  
the neighbors are still dancing  
and the ashcans enchanted into urns.  
Blackened roots are showing.  
No living things fall from the sky.  
Outlines crowd the walls—  
the scratch of men.

Edges of the present have  
barbs on either side.  
The future spins  
on a gray thread hooked  
into the past and the dead  
make impossible demands.

The ashes still remind us  
and the gas sends sharper signals  
of the lullabies of barbed wire,  
of skins scribbled over with prayers,  
of heaped bones calling:  
"Here in this narrow ditch,  
in this hollow,  
I am catching cold.  
Where is my tea and honey,  
my feathered quilt?"

With quiet hospitality,  
I receive them.  
And the silence from those bodies  
curls into my mouth  
like a mother tongue.



*Ruth Daigon*

## **THE MESSIAH'S LATE AS USUAL**

(a line from a poem by Edmund Pennant)

Sleep

Sleep

The grass is growing  
and a single bird tests the air  
reminding us today is all there is.

Sleep

Sleep

The grass is growing  
and the well's not deep enough  
to drown the moon.

What is loose flows.

What is fixed withers.

And the guest not yet visible.

The dream still in our mouths,  
we drift to a room  
where the thin gruel  
of early morning light  
falls on a scarred table top  
and a white plate  
with its burden of black bread.

Now we keep very still  
and wait for the missing one  
to come again and share  
this heavy loaf of silence.

James Doyle

## HERITAGE

My grandfather was not constructed  
from board. Vermilion glass and tar,  
layer upon layer, piled up  
and there he was, an accretion  
of the twentieth-century, staring  
us down from a hundred prisms  
until we broke into crystal  
for his blood. My grandmother spent  
a lifetime polishing the attic;  
its air at the end was silver-lamé,  
fragile splinters that latticed  
our throats as we inhaled. I have  
decorated their grave in red  
and black. If I could,  
I would exhume their bodies  
as my own. But I thank them  
instead for all the burins,  
for the line of bone needles strung  
on a single helix, for  
flint knives smudged with ochre  
from uncovering in the darkness  
the sudden strike  
of bison and wind on the cavern wall.

*James Doyle*

## I'VE HAD IT

The morning lurches  
this way and that like a common  
drunk and falls  
flat on its side across  
rock and pasture. I try  
to revive the promise  
it showed as a youth, feeding it  
platitudes and coffee  
by the gallon, but it feels  
no obligation anymore, rolling  
over with a moan  
to be sick. And to think  
of all the time and hope I  
invested, getting up  
at dawn, nursing  
it through the hours, even  
writing it poetry. Now  
look. No matter  
how it tries, it can never  
regain my respect.

John Flynn

## **WHEN THE HORN OF PLENTY WEARS A MUTE** *for Marco*

For you to trust me, my trumpet-playing  
shadow of a brother, is all.  
With your creed stating there's never a need  
to improvise, I represent what you refuse.  
Just eleven months behind, you've learned me  
and question if I've been worth the price.

Now, as facts partially inform  
of your latest trials—the house sold,  
wife gone, loans overdue—I consider  
we have never been wrong, only opposites  
and sometimes ignorant in choosing  
to conceal an inevitable derangement  
as we keep to scores, rhythms  
penned by other men.

When the horn of plenty wears a mute,  
I conjure your solos, watch you work your chops  
in a basement sweaty with impulse, meter and eloquence.  
*Improvise, improvise.* It's a simple beat  
that sells, seeing us.



*John Flynn*

## **ON A STUMP, HEWITT**

Once the milking is done, dinner's digested, he'll open up,  
rub the scar across his crimson throat, a red trickle  
of barbed luck, happened when a bull hurled him into sunrise.

So much frost and horn as he speaks of praying  
through many a storm. Says if She called him he would go for sure  
and ask only if he first could eat with his wife and bless himself.

He says someday She will have us, She'll have us all just the same.  
Says he rejoices when blood rises in every rock, stream and calf  
cuz that means She, Blessed Mother, is bringing along Spring.

He grins and slaps both his knees. He's said enough for one day.  
His eyes close. He listens. His face serene  
with the weather-cracked give, the stamina of barnboard gone grey.

Malcolm Glass

## IN THE ARBORETUM

*for Nancy and Neal Bowers*

Crabapple blossoms tinge the air  
with fragrance, like a melody remembered  
soon after waking. Choke-cherries,  
plum trees, and red buds sing their

pale harmony. And elderly couple  
picnics under an apple tree rich  
in blossom, snowing petals on the brim  
of his hat, filling her lap with a song

she remembers from the war, the year  
after they met. And far beyond  
us, the century turns, notes descend  
again: an elderly couple picnics beneath

a flowering tree. How well I know  
their faces, and their many names.

*Malcolm Glass*

ONE

Hundreds of miles north of here, the late  
sun, hazed bronze against a pale, cloudless sky,  
slips behind the ragged line of the horizon,  
trees too distant and dark to name. On

the cabin porch you stare west as you wait  
for the blazing disk to sink, molten, gone,  
at last, simmering into evening. My  
sun has already fallen from sight, one

more day drowned in rain. Wrapped in slate  
clouds all points of the compass, I had begun  
to believe the sun had set before dawn.  
Yet through darkness, across all distance, I

see your hair edged with flame. The sullen weight  
of your absence slips from me. My blue eyes  
reflect yours, flecked amber by the sun,  
however far north or west light has gone.

Michael Klein

## THE DOUBLING EFFECT

*for Frankie Paino*

With your twin sister, you, too, had a language of your own  
as I did, consciousnesses away,  
with my brother—a language. Ours sounded like wolves  
from space, scratching paper.

O what could we have known then to withhold? to code?  
Why did we want English, if we could have  
each other without it, remote controlled?  
Even twins don't know what it's like, being twins.

I'll bet something gets into the firstborn and divides  
in two before it becomes actual again;  
something makes them different to themselves.  
But what is that? God? twice? The souls?

We were unlike anything, we kept saying  
so we had a language unlike anything: phrases  
revolved around the doubleness.  
And though learning the English may have freed us,

that other language, that oral illusion,  
left patterns in our voices like ghost images on screens  
and patterns in you and your sister's voices  
so that even now it could be the other tongue,

re-ordered, that twins are everywhere speaking  
in this amazing world of voices.  
We could be running  
out of breath, having forced it early

into placebo-speech, having had to emphasize ourselves  
as ourselves in adulthood now,  
knowing the words spoken on the other worlds  
are not needed in this one.



## **Klein/The Doubling Effect**

We no longer carry the weight  
of a brother or sister the rest of the way.  
We are adults without shadows  
or psychic power.

Sister in twinhood, tell your twin  
again, and I'll tell mine.  
Tell her that the made up language may have been  
the only way to say how it felt to have a soul.

Paul Nelson

## MACHIAS RIVER MEDITATION

Here at the edge of the sea, in January,  
ice cakes broad as shed roofs  
happen to attach and sometimes lift  
mats of peat as thick as whale blubber  
napped with eel grass.

Near spring, gulls, ravens and gallinules,  
compulsively picking the tidal marsh,  
hop from one to another. Then the agent ice  
disappears, as agents seem to do. The mats  
round and settle: cut sods to mowable lawn  
in the graveyard on the hill.

My father is carving a full-sized loon, shavings and dust  
piling at his feet as the shape from poplar takes  
its place in air. It will never be a loon.

But if I carried it down to the marsh,  
set it on one of the mounds, sooner or later  
an eagle or osprey, perhaps ambitious marsh hawk  
would fold and dive, helplessly, as some decoyed  
hunter in the fall would be compelled by the sitting duck,  
the fear of missing something,  
to stud its finely painted feathers with steel shot  
chilled by passing briefly through the universe.

*Paul Nelson*

## **SOLSTICE**

Cracked mug, oiled coffee, chrome yolk  
broken on the anadama toast, wine jam smear  
and the bleached, chipped, farm china with a bent fork.

No mistakes. Today's an exact, long, missed beat,  
theoretical stall, though the dog  
barks for dawn's pink wash beyond the screen.

Having survived winter, beloved dusk and half-sleep  
past brush, comb and hornet Norelco, day coming on  
like fanned coals in my chest, I can't balk

on the way to the barn. Hell must break loose:  
fired, driven valves, pistons and hydraulics,  
hideous compression.

Because I love my red, greasy, loud machines, diesel  
clatter, blades chatting in hay, chainsaw snarling in a log,  
roto-tiller rattling my arms, thrumming my thorax.

May's dull rain, fog was nice, my body a cultured mushroom,  
a comfortable patient in TV's bluish, thoughtless gloom.  
No blinding attack from the overhead sun.

I waver again. . . by the wall of glacial stones  
to commiserate with short-lived, determined lupin,  
too phallic this morning, damp contusions of purple and rose.

Above their thrombotic blooms by the weathered pole,  
martin house on top, beyond the white clothesline  
straightlining my eye, iris unravel on the knoll,

**Nelson/Solstice**

late narcissus stink in shade of lilacs, and the iridescent  
birds, swaying on the line, beep and cheep,  
scissoring blips that fly to the nail, squeeze into the hole,

the box where their gaping, pulsing, idiotic young  
feather out, feed and sleep toward noonday's  
seamy, stupifying heat.

But I can't wait, not even for the snake, my epic pal,  
catheterizing the wall, to haul out  
its stanzaic constrictions along the heating slates:

a braid of rug, green and brown and yellow  
inching from my mother's winter basket,  
her wry, arthritic fingers, signing to themselves.

I stride into the grotto barn,  
climb on, yank the choke, twist the ignition,  
cough the swollen pigeons from the loft.



*Paul Nelson*

## **GATHERED BY THE RIVER**

Under the bridge in shadow,  
brass, sac-bellied carp  
shoulder each other in bourbon.  
The breeding run is on, stolid as buffalo.

Archers line the bridge, some in survival gear,  
draw their compound bows, release  
arrows tipped with triple barbs,  
monofilament shining out, settling  
behind the aluminum shafts  
fired into the mob.

Gaunt, in from ridges and runs,  
shoppers from K-Mart, Mr. Moneysaver, Odd Lots,  
stop to gawk, take up some of the punctured bodies  
grappled from the river, twisting in air,  
carry them like babies in plastic sacks  
back to battered pickups  
before their boys can heave them  
under bridge-quaking semis  
just to hear the pop and crunch,  
see the smatter, crushed candles  
that draw racoons at night,  
that rub their hands like rabbis.

Steamed in a pail, the smock-white flesh  
flakes like fillet of haddock, or orange  
roughy from the, lord help us, azure  
waters off New Zealand. But the flavor,  
the sulking aroma is mud, swollen  
boots drying in an oven  
after the long march.

**Nelson/Gathered by the River**

More lowly than cat, they seem  
no relation to koi, the Emperor's pets  
fed breadballs in jeweled, temple pools,  
growing old, gold, expensively  
tattered as spaniels. No one wants the roe.

Survivors part the shallows,  
waggle over the wavy, ochre dunes of silt,  
paunches dragging trails  
up this river that dilutes  
treated village innocence, milky  
industrial spite, paradoxical soda  
of a university with herbicidal  
cheer of creeping bent and bluegrass,  
nine holes over the custard of an old dump.

But pink students, going with the flow,  
raft on herniated inner tubes, their laughter  
booming under the span, exploding the roasted pigeons,  
tempting the bowmen

who will age, fatten and breed,  
their kids wade, get rashes, their flesh  
shriven by leeches and current  
bitterly pure, while the carp  
bump to get by like hotel jokes, your rhino  
aunt's forearms, swollen, unreadable scrolls  
rolled in damp amphorae, wicker bread-baskets  
freighted with dull pennies,  
saved, swiped from eyes  
that flashed white, once, deep in mines.

Joyce Odam

## MIND WANDERING

I am taught.  
I am taught to obey.  
And to hold still.

But I do not obey.  
And I do not hold still.

Look— am over there  
on the sunlit wall.  
I am making poses.

You think I am funny  
and you laugh.  
I am not funny at all.

I am taught.  
I am taught everything  
you want me to know.

But I cannot listen.  
I am in an ear  
the ear of deafness.

I am in the sea  
the sea of myself,  
and the shell's silence  
goes inward to where  
I am hearing the silence.

I am taught what to do  
with my patience  
which is loud  
which is loud as snow  
after it has blinded everything.

## Odam/Mind Wandering

And there is my footprint  
going into myself  
just before the sun  
shines upon it  
from the patterned wall.



Joyce Odam

## GAME

Something holy lifts us,  
takes us on a long white board  
to a playful cemetery.  
Death is a laughing child  
clapping its hollow hands upon our reality.  
Our yelling falls silent. We stare  
at the coming rule of darkness,  
full of stars. Mothers! Call us in.

Ken Poyner

## SNOWMEN

One year he set up sixteen,  
Good work for his small yard,  
And knocked them down in one stiff shouldered run.  
The sixteen he had to lay out like a course,  
Be sure not to use too much ice—  
But most often it was only one, or three,  
Or, with children around to be impressed,  
Five. That year of sixteen  
Neighbors watched panting fog on their windows,  
Smearing the glass clean with fingertips or noses,  
Watched eight, nine and ten go,  
A spray of snow and the busted globes  
Of snowmen chests rolling with a limp away—  
And still the man's shoulder primed forward:  
He running, out of breath, but with the backs  
Of his legs, fourteen, fifteen. In retirement  
In Florida, he studies in the humid winters  
Snow on the Christmas specials, on the cards  
Sent by past neighbors. He thinks  
Had the snow been less wet, had the city  
Not salted the streets so soon, sixteen  
Would have been nothing, he would have borrowed  
His neighbor's corner lot and gone maybe  
For thirty. A boy someplace  
Where the snow is drier and the city  
Hasn't the salt for backland streets  
Builds snowmen six feet high, loves them  
A week, sometimes less, as their soft bodies  
Melt, run into the yard only to be days later  
Built again with another change in weather.

*Ken Poyner*

## THE MULE

What they could do they did. Two years  
Almost every day the talk was of what  
To do about it, thoughts being smashed together  
And their electricity swept under the kitchen table.  
A few local remedies seemed for a few days  
To work, but piece by piece still  
Their daughter would change and one day  
The last of it came over and the daughter  
Was a mule. For a time they tried  
To hold the condition as changeable, would have  
No doubt if the girl's room had not been  
On the second floor left her there,  
Pretended perhaps for as long as it might take  
That nothing had happened. A month  
They kept her downstairs, but the furniture  
No matter how it was set was always  
In the many wrong places, chairs looking  
For a rear hoof and the doorways misplaced.  
The back of the barn was painted pink,  
Stuffed animals, wall posters and the phonograph  
Brought down from her old room—but even then  
The feeding, hygiene and everyday upkeep  
Fit a mule better than a daughter, and the family  
As well as the neighbors could see the outcome.  
Farms these days are machinery and news  
Of a mule in a man's barn travels.  
Not long and the McClellan boys will sneak  
Half drunk in and take her for a ride,  
With the sheriff calling next morning  
Her father to say come get your mule,  
It's loose on the courthouse lawn.  
The pink paint will not be renewed.  
Stuffed animals, phonograph will go out

Poyner/The Mule

To the trash as they variously get in the way.  
The parents will think less of the girl, more  
Of the mule, come to terms of it and not she.  
One day another man will come into the kitchen  
And note the family has no use for a mule  
On this land, and offer pleasantly to take the animal  
Away, even pay a little for it. If not  
With this man, with one of the next  
A deal will be made. No questions asked.  
What can be done and what can't  
And a slap on the animal's rump as it is led  
Easily, perhaps a numb happy quickness, out.



*Ken Poyner*

## **THE NEIGHBOR OF THE SEMI-RETIRED PSYCHOANALYST**

He doesn't think it is a good idea to pry  
Into people's dreams. All the popular literature  
And late night movies might give it high marks,  
But trying to turn a person inside out, and for pay  
At that, still seems, to him, a bit left-handed.  
Not that he'll make any less of a good neighbor.  
Both he and his wife will go over just after  
The last of the hired movers drives off,  
Bring their own pot of coffee and enough rolls  
For conversation, dinner and to fry tomorrow morning.  
He will talk about the soil as though  
The man who bought the land intended  
To grow anything by design on it. Phone numbers  
Will be exchanged, the names of children,  
Gossip about the strip of road near the county  
Package store, and skeletal information about what families  
Can be counted on to do what the community  
Has for years assumed to be their sum purpose.  
He will tell his wife that he really doesn't mind  
As long as the man practices in the city,  
And no one for miles has the spare change to put into it.  
But still for weeks his dreams will have a shell about them;  
And even with them being straight lined and without  
Language, he will worry somehow they will leak out,  
The neighbor will get hold of a corner and pull  
Until the last fifty years unravel. He might try  
To put himself into a mind for black, thoughtless sleep—  
But his dreams will come back yellow and naked  
And maybe twice in a week he will wake his wife  
To put to good use the energy left from them.  
She will be thinking why couldn't the man  
Have moved in thirty years earlier, and why  
Can't he move away now.

Tom Russell

## NATURAL HISTORY

We walk on tiled floors, inlaid  
with crabs and whorl shells.  
Behind a wall of glass, bending  
as the world bends upon a bone pile,  
are the dioramic hides,  
loafing in combustible grass, blind fur  
working to preserve a human pose  
while holding back surprise.

My son will not be instructed on Saturdays—  
not by bodiless voices from a speaker,  
throwing down animal facts like cane snakes,  
not by his father, a reasonable goat,  
studying this illusion for poetry's sake.  
He is seeing beyond the dusty teacher  
moose, poised in collision.  
He is wondering why the lack of gore  
when the objectified mountain lion  
stands over the toppled stuffing of deer.  
Then, as if he'd never left home,  
he comes around to answering himself:  
the fatal wound  
is on the side we cannot see.

I want to tell him  
the deer will rise during his nap,  
reveal its slathered tear,  
and limp away to lemur forests  
or walrus floes,

## Russell/Natural History

to a heaven of ape men  
with veterinary skills.  
I see myself there in the glass,  
remiss in front of the beaver clan,  
depressed and edgy around the porcupine,  
nudging my kid along.

Virginia Walter Schonwald

## THE PATTERN UNFOLDING

Blue and yellow triangles  
lay on the sofa and the floor  
around the room. In the middle she  
struggles with a pattern  
that folds back while she folds it out  
and the light fades from the room.  
First it is the wedding picture that falls  
into shadow. The young couple looking  
at their hands. Next it is her dog  
lying by the long window.  
She holds her hands upon the crinkled paper  
as if it will fly up in the half-dark,  
and the colorful pages of the quilting book,  
left to themselves, turn--star patterns and circles,  
letters of the alphabet go past like childhood  
memories. The heavy black outline of the pattern  
erases itself from the paper soft as a wing  
beneath her fingers.



*Christina Shea*

## IN ANTARCTICA

Sitting in the kitchen, with a teapot and a book, is my mother twenty years ago. It is snowing outside, snowing since well before dawn. Wild winds today and tides to fifteen feet. The radio weatherman says don't go outside, don't go down to the shore for any reason. My mother decides that she will put her boots on, maybe even snow shoes, and venture out, judge this thing for herself, just as soon as she's had her tea. On the stove, the kettle quivers then whistles. She lifts her nose from the pages, stands, and swiftly scoops the kettle from the flame.

The teapot is filled. It is a pleasant pot, rose colored spout and wide white belly, often full. My mother is a tea drinker. This means she is a person of occasion, warm hands and unusually dark teeth. She fills her cup and sweetens it with cream. The color now, a drop of cream inside the cup, is my mother's favorite; an un-nameable shade, two things at once. My mother sips. Sits in a chair, fingers a chestnut in her apron pocket, eyes on the pages of her book.

The house is quiet, hushed by the storm pressing its frame. In the big bedroom upstairs the window panes tremble. The bed is unmade. Underneath the folds of flannel sheeting, dark green blankets, something stirs. It is Lily the cat twitching her ears, burrowed inside my parents' bed. My parents left this bed at five a.m., my father to dress for work and my mother to draw the curtains, watch the snow, and list for him the reasons why he should stay in, stay home today. My father is a fisherman, but he works a large boat, a boat with pully-nets, a crew, and he says to her quietly, watching her neck, her jaw line and the sleepy hair touching it, "It is safer than it seems, always is. We won't go out if we can't handle it." She shakes her head, goes downstairs to light the stove, set the kettle on.

Downstairs at five-thirty, my mother has cooked eggs and toasted bread. My father sets the marmalade out and the

## *Shea/In Antarctica*

silver cow pitcher of tea cream. They move carefully. They whisper if they speak. The baby sleeps in the little room next door. I am the baby. I remember a white crib, a brown monkey strung up to dance and sing, brass knob turned, before each nap time, each night.

Before he goes out, my father pulls on boots, hip high rubbers that shine even dry. My mother stands at the stove and fingers up a mouthful more egg. He watches her and she knows he watches her. Under his gaze, she likes to do things like eat egg with her fingers, pick a scab perhaps, or swat a fly with one of the baby's toys. His boots are on. He stands. He walks over to the stove and the egg pan, and he tells her he'll be careful, promises her that.

My mother holds the chestnut in her apron a long time before she takes it out and looks at it. She is pressing the nut to her cheek when she hears me stir. I am standing up in bed with the help of the crib rails and I am smiling. My mother comes and lifts me, "Morning, Lexa. Sleep well? You're not wet." She shifts me to her sholder. "Let's go see about Maddy," and together we go upstairs.

Maddy, my brother, is four years old and I, in my mother's arms, have just reached eleven months. Maddy's room is dark. He draws the shades past the sills even though my mother tells him this is a good way to unravel them forever, they'll get stuck this way. She tugs the shade and it rolls slowly, retreats only halfway up the window. This is as far as it will go and she frowns. She sits down on Maddy's bed; I slide from her shoulder. She says, "Okay, Mad, let's get up now, Maddy." Maddy doesn't budge.

My mother looks around the room. Maddy is a neat little boy. His books, his shells, his silver train cars are carefully arranged on shelves above his desk. On his desk there is a clean block of paper, a box of crayons, and a coffee can with colored pencils, pipe cleaners, and an ink pen in it. Maddy is excited by the inside of things. He keeps a stash of walnuts



## *Shea/In Antarctica*

just for cracking. He keeps boxes, small boxes in his desk drawers, fills them with hard inedible berries he has pierced, driftwood chips he has split, little pinecones he has peeled and cut. He pens a "b," "d," or a "p" on the lids, tapes them shut, shuts the drawer. Insides inside.

My mother sets me down beside Maddy, "Wake him, Lexa, wake your brother up." She goes to the window, lifts the shade and ducks under it. She stands with her nose against the glass until I turn, poke Maddy's ear perhaps, and he wakens.

We are going down the stairs. Maddy is rubbing his eyes. My mother is talking about the snow, "We can go out in it," she says; "as soon as you've had breakfast." Maddy shuffles across the kitchen and into the bathroom. He leaves the door ajar so that he can feel the stove heat while he's sitting on the seat. Maddy never stands to urinate and when he's older and can reason it, he says, Why should I? It's more comfortable this way. My mother talks to Maddy while he's on the toilet, asks him what he'll have for breakfast. He doesn't know, never does, so she gets a bowl out, pours cereal into it, and sets a milk bottle by its side. She sits in the chair across from Maddy's. In her lap, I lie wide eyed. She is wearing silver earrings today and I have found them. She looks down, knows what I see, tosses her head so that the silver moves. But when I reach for them, she tips her head back, she shows me something else. "Here, Lexa," unbuttoning her blouse, she draws me in. I am lucky, gentler than Maddy was, or else my first teeth are later in coming. My mother will breast feed me until well after my first year. At ten months Maddy started biting and she decided they both had had enough.

Maddy directs the milk bottle, takes up his spoon. He watches me closely, says, "So how much can she drink, Mom. A cup or a pint? Can she drink more than me?"

"I don't know," my mother says. "She can drink a lot. You finish up, Maddy. We ought to get our boots on soon."

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I am wrapped in blankets, a goose feather quilt, and then tucked into a flannel pillow case. A crocheted tea cosy is fit round my head. Before we go out, my mother puts another log in the stove. She slips me into her back-basket and swings her arms through the straps. Maddy is waiting at the door. He too is bundled, but on his head he wears a coonskin cap, a gift from my mother's brother Pete, a gift she found distasteful and told him so on the phone, Christmas morning, after Maddy had sufficiently expressed his approval and asked Pete a few questions. Did you shoot it, Pete? How long would it take a coon to die if you shot it with an arrow?

My mother says, "Should we use the snowshoes, Maddy, or should we see what our feet can do?"

"See what our feet can do," says Maddy whose little snowshoes aren't much good.

Outside. Snow. And wind and all of it swirling. My mother sets one foot off the steps and down we go, knife into it. "It's deep, Maddy," she says. "Are you going to be all right?" Maddy jumps from the porch steps, paratrooper, and sinks to his hips. "You step in my tracks," my mother says. "How's Lexa? We can cover her if she doesn't like it."

Maddy looks up at me. "She likes it," he says. My face to the sky, the sky grey and flooding snow white snow.

My mother eyes the tree tops, what she can see of them, stands and watches them shiver. "Maddy," she says, "it's angry." In the wind Maddy cannot hear her but she doesn't raise her voice. An attempt to shout above the storm would confirm it, empower the wind; you are strong, angry. She keeps moving.

Behind her, I have no worries; there is nothing different in her back, her shoulders, the wide stride. This is my mother in the snow. How can I know that she is frightened? She can't let on. I can't, she thinks, how can I? Oh, but Maddy and his questions. I'm sure he'll ask about Daddy. Martin.



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"Mom," Maddy calls, "Mom, you're walking too fast!" She stops, turns, watches the coon skin come closer. "I'm sorry," she says.

Maddy's nose is running. "Where are we going?" he says. He doesn't like having to shout to be heard. "Where are we going?"

My mother kneels to wipe his nose. "If we go down to the stilt house," she says, "We can see how high the water's come up."

Maddy steps round to me, brushes the snow from my neck and the basket's rim. "The stilt house," he says, "that's far."

"Oh, Maddy, it's not far, it's an adventure. You and I are explorers. This is Alaska, this is Antarctica. Which should it be?"

Maddy shrugs sour, "I don't care."

"Antarctica," she says, moving away, striding off. This is Anarctica. She can hear his body, little footsteps keeping up.

The house on the edge of the beach is built on wooden stilts because sometimes at high tide the water rides up that far. Like most of the island's houses, the stilt house is only inhabited in the summer. We are one of a handful of year round dwellers, a fisherman's family, accustomed to the cold. Maddy is the only one of us that minds the cold. Maddy was born in Maryland. This is why, my mother says, I will splash around in the water as soon as April comes and Maddy will sit by my side, support my back, but barely put his toes in. I am of this place; in the middle of winter solstice I popped out, so quick, my mother says, I couldn't wait to get here.

Today the stilt house looks as if it floats, as if it doesn't have stilts at all, the water so high has covered them. My

## ***Shea/In Antarctica***

mother stops short when she sees it. Maddy bumps up against her. And the next wave in, watch it come, curve, comes up over the porch and probably in.

"Oh no, Maddy."

Maddy says, "What, Mom?" She takes his hand. We move a few steps back. In a cluster of pines, twenty yards from the house, we stand and watch.

"How high, Mom, how high is the tide?" Waves split against the corners of the house and the water races up the sides, falls and rides again, fighting like that. "Is it every ninth wave's the giant?" A roar a clutch a headlong smash; a shutter flies, cast off. It's giving in. In, in. "Inside are the bedrooms getting wet?" Seven, eight, rising up a white-edged swirl, the flash of a tongue and then. Splintering glass. She covers her ears, can't bear to hear, the sound of herself in all of this, ow, ow, ow. And look! No, I can't. The lips of the water curl round, spread wide, eat the stilt house whole.

Maddy often says he saw the water take the house, but my mother maintains that isn't quite true. When she saw it coming, nine, when waves had soaked the strength from the walls, she turned us away, turned and said, "We'll roast chesnuts when we get home."

We walked back up the shore road, rounded the bend, and there the water no longer faced us. Here, too, the sound was less, a certain quiet restored, just wind and snow. "I know a short cut," my mother said, stepping off the road, "Should we take it?"

Maddy eyed the pines. He said, "I don't know, Mom. Will it really be a short cut?"

"Yes," she said, "And not so windy."

"The snow looks deep."

My mother took his hand; they moved forward carefully.



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The motion, over the bank and down to the wood, startled me and I began to cry. Been a while since they brushed the snow from me. Feeling forgotten, I cried. Soon my mother slowed. She took the basket off. She and Maddy leaned in and looked at me, look at me, got snow on my lashes can't see. "Shh, shhh," my mother said, "Shh, Lexa. You've been so good."

"Have I been good, too?" asked Maddy. He slipped his hand from his mitten and dried the snow on my lids. "Lexa, Lexa" he sang it, "Okay, Lexa, don't cry. Lexa has long eyelashes," he said. "Shh."

"Yes, you've been so good," my mother said again. "It'll be better inside the trees. She'll be all right. We're almost there."

"You'll be all right," Maddy said to me, as my mother hoisted the basket up again.

And once inside, I was all right, because the pines on the island grew thick and the forest floor bore less than a foot of snow. Maddy was also made happy, inside. He hopped along bravely, said, "Have I ever been here before?"

"I don't think so," my mother said. "Daddy showed me this way last summer. He was looking for Indian Pipe, in that clearing up ahead."

"Daddy?" Maddy said.

Her shoulders stiffened. She said, "Daddy, yes."

"Where's Daddy?"

She spoke quickly. "He's working, Maddy. Where else would he be?"

"In Antarctica," Maddy said. "He might be in Antarctica with us."

"Oh," said my mother. "Yes."

We came to the clearing. The circle of ground was covered with snow. Maddy stood on its edge. "Mom," he said, "Does Indian Pipe get cold under snow?"

"No," said my mother, "It's warm under snow. Think

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of igloos. We're Eskimos."

"What do we eat? Eskimos."

"Snow," she said, fingering some from the trees, "Chestnuts later on."

Maddy ate a fistful. "Mine is vanilla."

"Mmm," said my mother, "Mine is mint." She kneeled in the snow and slid the basket off slowly. Maddy stooped to help. "Give Lexa a taste of the vanilla," she said.

"Okay," said Maddy. He fed me a mouthful.

My mother stepped into the clearing. She walked into the middle. Maddy and I looked on from the trees. We watched her lift her arms and head up slowly. We watched her stand there, still. Stretched silent, and snow falling down.

"Mom," Maddy whispered. She dropped her arms and sank to her knees. Mom? She closed her eyes and lay back in the snow.

Maddy jumped to his feet. He shouted, "Mom!"

She raised her head. "I'm okay, Maddy. It's all right."

He said, "Oh." He sat down again. "But what are you doing, Mom?"

"I'm just thinking, Maddy."

"Thinking what?"

She brushed the snow from her cheek. She said, "Right now? Right now I'm thinking I could make an angel."

"Oh," Maddy said. "Yeah. You could do that."

My mother swished her arms and legs back and forth.

When she got up and returned to the trees, she smiled. But Maddy shook his head. He said, "It's too snowy out there, Mom."

My mother crouched beside him. "Yes. It is. I didn't mean to scare you, Mad."

"I wasn't scared," Maddy mumbled. He picked up snow. He fed it to me.

My mother said, "That's good you weren't, Maddy. We can't be afraid of it."



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"I'm not afraid," Maddy said. He looked down at the snow. He said, "I think maybe Daddy's home."

My mother took a big breath, she said, "Maybe. That's what I think, too."

So, we go home.

At the end of the wood there are lights. Maddy declares, doesn't ask, "That's our house!" His little legs start a run. There are lights. Martin? Maddy says, "Daddy's home."

The snow falling around the house, caught up in the squares of light, is suddenly easy to see. It's early still, but dark, she's glad the light are on; Martin? Maddy's at the door pounding. Then, Daddy lets him in. Maddy and Martin in the doorway. Maddy hugs, "We were worried, Dad."

My mother walks slowly up the steps. I am crying again, hungry. Take her Martin, will you? My father helps her with the basket, says, "Come here, Lexa. Look at all the snow on you." I smile. His voice is new. She stands in the doorway, faces Maddy, Martin, the flannel bundle. "Aren't you coming in? Did I surprise you? We didn't go out today. Too rough. I've never seen it like this before."

My mother says, "No, I'm not surprised." She shuts the door, leans against it closed. There is stove heat, the smell of wood. She says, "Martin, the stilt house is gone. We're going to roast chestnuts."

"Yes," says Maddy, "Mmm."

My father holds me, we watch my mother, she has silver earrings on.

Parker Towle

**VARIATIONS ON A RIFF BY EUBIE BLAKE,  
DEAD AGE 100, 1984**

*Be grateful for luck*

My daughter in tights, playful  
This drunken Thanksgiving  
Could have been worse, someone  
Moody and complex  
Could have died

*Pay the thunder no mind*

Her mother's tears surface today  
I have no quarrel with failure except  
With no one to wipe them  
They drip on the sand  
Failure of the heart

*Listen to the birds*

I know I'm growing old, grandma said  
Magnetic Resonance Images are so beautiful  
When I try  
To climb trees  
And no one understands why

*And don't hate nobody*

On her last day she said  
"Legislation is helpless against"  
Give him a stiff drink  
"The wild prayer of longing"

*Susan Whitmore*

## **EARTH ON THE INSIDE**

You have been swimming  
in the mud, only now  
strive to shake the muck

from your head and  
make way into air,  
thinking the wind

holds enough good  
to cure you, the rain  
enough water

to cleanse you,  
the sun enough light  
to make you see—

but how the earth  
clings even to the inside:  
its soil fills up

the cells of your flesh,  
the fields and their grasses  
wave in your veins.

Francine Witte

## DERBY

Forget what you hear, every horse  
is the same, lined up and waiting,  
standing still at the same speed.  
When the starting gun cracks  
its cold command across the back  
of a Kentucky afternoon, there's a hush  
in the air, and the crowd lifts out  
of their seats, and briefly, their lives.  
And it's like the second that love stops  
winking her shadowed eye so you finally move  
to close in, when whatever you bet on  
a minute ago has faded from the sheets  
where you thought you had circled a winner,  
the track was tested and sure. But, listen,  
a favorite is only a good-looking plug  
who's been beating the odds until now.  
Just lift up the gate, and his ankle could twist,  
like a question, in the mud. Or take off his blinkers,  
spook him with the hooves of the horse next door,  
and he's running the other way. A turn  
of the weather, the wrong batch of oats  
could throw a wall of air in front  
of anything, a lover's heart, or the nose  
of a horse whose neck is stretched across  
the finish line, where the sun has shifted left,  
his own shadow coming in first.



*Francine Witte*

## HEADING WEST

And one day, you were just done,  
had moved the East Coast around  
like unwanted food on a plate.  
Yours was not a mother  
who warned of starving Chinese children,  
or else you figured there was always more.

So, there you were, hauling 2,000 pounds  
of yourself in a rented trailer,  
one state leaking into another.  
You crossed borders as easily  
as the invisible lines  
around a lover.  
I could feel you tipping the world  
as you went west.

Now you call and your voice  
is as small as the legend on a map.  
Even the sunset reminds me  
that you are on the other side  
of this sky.  
I have tried lining you up  
with the farthest corner of the sun.

I am beginning my childhood again,  
breaking up the letters of your name  
and knocking them aside like wooden blocks.  
Maybe tomorrow I can learn  
to count by fives until nothing,  
not even miles,  
has numbers anymore.

## CONTRIBUTORS

Kathleen Aponick received an MFA from Warren Wilson in 1989. Her work appears in *Osiris*, *The Worcester Review*, and *Tar River Poetry*.

Sally Bennett's poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Seneca Review* and elsewhere. She received her MFA from Vermont College and has taught part-time at Syracuse University since 1978.

Robert Cooperman's collection, *Pictures of Odysseus*, is forthcoming from Linwood Publishers. His work has appeared in *The Literary Review*, *The Mickle Street Review*, *Pennsylvania Review* and elsewhere.

Ruth Daigon is editor of *Poets On:.* Her latest book is *A Portable Past* (Realities Library Contemporary Poets Series, 1987) and her poems appear in *Shenandoah*, *Poet Lore*, *Kansas Quarterly* and elsewhere.

James Doyle teaches at the University of Northern Colorado at Greeley. He has published widely in literary magazines, including *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Louisville Review* and *Poets On:.* His first book, *The Sixth Day*, was published by Pygmy Forest Press in 1988.

John Flynn resides in Kansas City where he teaches English. Recent publications include *The Newport Review*, *Angus Journal* and *Thresholds*.

Malcolm Glass's second volume of poetry, *In the Shadow of the Gourd*, has just been published by New Rivers Press. He is also a fiction writer and playwright, and co-editor of *Zone 3* at Austin Peay State University where he co-directs the writing program.

Michael Klein's poems have appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *Black Warrior*, *Sonora* and *Antioch Reviews* and *Pequod* among numerous other journals. He is the editor of *Poets for Life: 76 Poets Respond to AIDS* (Crown, 1989) and lives in Brooklyn.

Paul Nelson's latest book is *The Hard Shapes of Paradise* (U. of Alabama, 1988). He lives and works in Machiasport, ME, but spends winter months in Providence, RI, where he is currently teaching for Roger Williams College. For several years he directed the Creative Writing Program for Ohio University.

Ken Poyner works as a programmer/analyst for the government. He has published widely in little magazines, including *Jam To-Day* and *The Iowa Review*.

Tom Russell's poetry has recently appeared in the *American Poetry Review*, *Northwest Review* and *Nebraska Review*. He directs the Creative Writing Program at Memphis State University.

Virginia Walter Schonwald is a freelance writer and editor. She lives in Rochester, NH with her husband and 16 month old daughter. Her poetry has previously been published in *South Carolina Review* and *Aegis*.

Christina Shea received her MFA from the University of Michigan. She is currently serving in the Peace Corps, teaching at a university in Budapest, Hungary.

Parker Towle lives in Franconia, NH and will be on the resident faculty at the Frost Festival there this summer.

Susan Whitmore is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and the author of a chapbook of poems entitled *In the Silence Following* (Phenix Press, 1988).

Francine Witte is a graduate of the MFA in Writing Program at Vermont College. She lives in Buffalo where she works as a typist. Her play, *Burying 4-D*, was produced last fall by the Buffalo Ensemble Theatre. Her poems have appeared in *Poet & Critic*, *plainsong*, and *The Hiram Poetry Review*.

cover artist Eleanor Richards is a junior Fine Arts major at Roger Williams College, specializing in Graphic Design.



Francine White is a graduate of the MFA in Writing  
from the University of North Carolina, and is currently  
teaching at the University of North Carolina. She is  
also a poet and a writer of fiction. Her poetry has  
been published in various journals, and her fiction  
has been published in various journals.

Paul Nelson's latest book is *The Great Silence of America*  
in which he explores the role of the poet in American  
society. He is currently teaching at the University of  
North Carolina. For several  
years he directed the Creative Writing Program at  
University.

Ron Taylor works as a program coordinator for the  
government. He has published widely in state magazines,  
including *Down Today* and *The New Yorker*.

Tom Russell's poetry has recently appeared in the  
*American Poetry Review*, *Northwest Review* and *Midwest  
Review*. He directs the Creative Writing Program at  
Memphis State University.

Virginia Walker Schenckel is a freelance writer and  
editor. She lives in Rochester, NH with her husband and 15  
month old daughter. Her poetry has previously been  
published in *South Atlantic Review* and *Arctic*.

Christina Zhou received her MFA from the University of  
Michigan. She is currently serving in the Peace Corps,  
teaching at a university in Budapest, Hungary.

Parker Davis lives in Farmington, NH and will be on the  
reading faculty at the Frost School when they convene.

Susan Whitman is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the  
University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and the author of a  
chapbook of poems entitled *In the Silent Following* (Pharos  
Press, 1990).

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Michael Klein

Joyce Odam

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Robert Cooperman

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Virginia Walter Schonwald

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