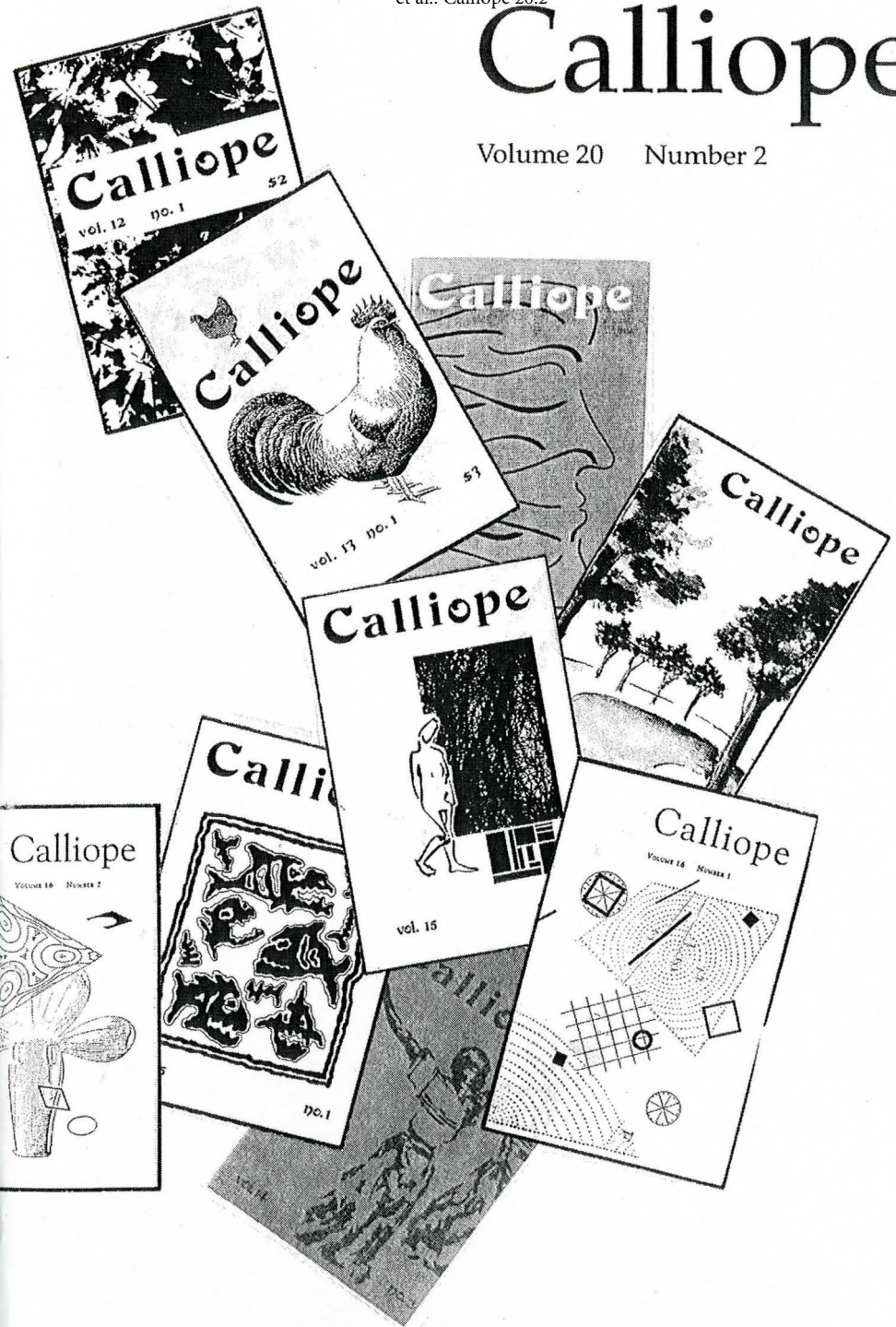


et al.: Calliope 20.2

# Calliope

Volume 20 Number 2



# Calliope

Volume 20, Number 2  
Spring/Summer 1997

A Retrospective Issue Celebrating 20 Years of Publishing

## EDITORS

Jenny Grandpre  
Liz Hanks  
Charlie Meyer  
Noah Sassaman  
Mary Ellen Spinelli

*Advisory editor:* Martha Christina

*Very special thanks to Kathleen Hancock for her repeated generous and gited assistance on covers.*

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Until further notice we will not be accepting fiction submissions. Submissions of poetry (3-5 poems) are welcomed from

August 15 - October 15 for the Fall/Winter issue and  
January 15 - March 15 for the Spring/Summer issue.

Manuscripts received at other times are returned unread. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. **No simultaneous submissions, please.**

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

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

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue celebrates our twentieth year of publishing with a retrospective collection of the work of seven poets who have been frequent contributors. Their diverse voices are representative of what "suits our editorial needs," to use a phrase of the trade, and I am pleased to thank them again for their interest in *Calliope*.

Over the past twenty years tens of thousands of manuscripts have been submitted to *Calliope*. Even at its most overwhelming, I have been privileged to read so much wonderful writing. I feel equally privileged to have worked with so many wonderful staffs over the years, and to have accumulated so many fond memories of editorial delights, and difficulties overcome. Thanks again to everyone who has helped *Calliope* thrive.

Martha Christina

*Martha Carlson-Bradley*

## INUIT CHILD

Your mother newly dead,  
you were set out on the ice, an act  
meant to spare you pain,  
guarantee survival of the group.  
Understand now, if you can—  
it wasn't lack of caring—  
they placed you tenderly  
among the older dead,  
all of you wrapped in fur.  
Unlike the others  
disfigured by time, torn leather and bone,  
at six months your small body  
stayed whole—your skin today  
gold parchment, empty sockets like eyes  
dark and startled, lashes  
stuck to the browbone:  
you died awake. And watching.  
Five hundred years later  
the same face, the same last moment.

*Martha Carlson-Bradley*

## WINGS

The strange noises she hears  
don't trouble her sleep.  
It's morning when the wind roars for a second  
inside the house  
or something sighs in the heating duct.  
Today, the sound of enormous wings  
makes her glance, startled, at the windows,  
where she half-expects some mutant urban pigeon  
to bump the glass, insist on getting in.  
But the venetian blinds hold nothing back,  
innocent, half-open.  
The plane passing overhead  
clears the signal tower;  
the radio stops sputtering static.  
Nothing flutters across the kitchen,  
no angel bringing news,  
the light slicing the table,  
ordinary sunlight.

*Martha Carlson-Bradley*

## THE CARDINAL

He throws himself at dawn  
smack against our bedroom windows,  
challenges the dimmer self  
reflected there

and scares us into day, his beak  
like blood, eyes fixed, black—and every day  
the mission's more frenetic, wings  
struggling to hover, drab underdown  
ripped up against the red—

The body fails;  
the mind holds on—

*get through, get through—*  
blind to the leaves and the sun.



*Martha Carlson-Bradley*

## TO A ONE-MONTH-OLD

See the window? landscapes  
of frost, ridges and valleys  
silver under clouds  
packed with snow, a sky of glass

and every day it's different,  
distant forests, thickets  
of fern obscuring what varies  
only in the depth

of the drifts,  
                    the light:

lawns and walls, our garden,  
defunct. This morning  
as a curl of lupine  
pierces the crust of snow

you focus on my face,  
my voice; you learn this winter  
the climates of tone.

*Martha Carlson-Bradley*

## ANOTHER COUNTRY

When the house is quiet  
late at night, after a long enough time  
of silence on the TV, the clocks  
in separate rooms not quite  
synchronized in their ticking,  
the lamps burn a strange  
warm light—and without intending to  
you’ve suddenly arrived  
in a different country,  
where the rules of home and daylight  
don’t apply. You take for granted  
here how you can rise from your chair,  
cross the room to the phone  
and dial the dead one’s number—  
and he’s glad to hear your voice,  
that old friend, still thirty-five.  
He tells you what he’s been reading lately,  
what classics he’s watched on the VCR.  
He’s started some new project  
just like the old days, jazz rhythms  
or entertainment law, the ethics  
of medicine. Other things he’s not  
allowed to talk about, too revealing  
about the place you’re headed.  
He won’t discuss his bike rides  
for instance, that landscape  
he sweats through, nor the animals  
crossing the trail in the distance.  
He’ll listen to you, though,  
where you took your vacation,  
what your two-year-old thought of the sea.  
He’d love to meet your child  
but he won’t say so, too well-schooled  
in the etiquette of the dead,

*Martha Carlson-Bradley* / **Another Country**

wary of any untoward implications  
since the living are so nervous,  
superstitious really: he understands:  
he remembers: that flicker  
in the pit of the stomach  
when the bright afternoon clouded over  
briefly, unexpectedly, his lover  
in shadow and his own arms  
alien, ugly with gooseflesh.

*Martha Carlson-Bradley*

## WASTEBASKET

Beside the porcelain basin  
of the library rest-room,  
the wastebasket grows  
more exotic every year,  
flared like a lily  
that thrives in shade.

Salvaged in the forties  
from the office, it fills  
its frugal duty here,  
its open net devoid  
of memos, carbons—messages  
capable of being answered—

elegant nevertheless  
in its reduced station,  
catching the wet palm-prints  
we crumple and toss.

*Robert Cooperman*

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

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

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

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



*Robert Cooperman*

## STENDAHL FLEES THE CHURCH OF SANTA CROCE, FLORENCE

Not the proximity of so many ghosts,  
the marble floors trembling  
under the bones of dead priests,  
the cold heft of skulls moldering below;  
but the paintings jewelizing the walls:  
Masaccio, Titian, Tintoretto,  
so much beauty staring down, pitiless,  
my novels—twisted, hectic skitterings  
unworthy of this immortality:

These perfections of color, composition,  
the passions all bright and gorgeous  
upon the faces of Madonnas, holy children,  
martyred saints, crucifixions, baptisms,  
an Angel radiant, robes fluttering,  
the domes of Jerusalem in pale perspective;

The niched sculptings of Christ,  
head collapsed onto His chest  
that couldn't bear a dove's weight—  
to make me sob for His agony;  
or the Lord risen, the Man  
before me in the spirit of flesh.

I almost fainted in the hushed aisles,  
had to stagger out, used the backs  
of pews for canes, and collapsed  
onto a bench in the open air,  
breathing the reviving dirt of life,  
eyes closed, lest I be crushed  
by the further beauty of architecture  
more delicate than a Fragonard;  
that lacework of eternity weaving  
its web around a dabbler like me.

*Robert Cooperman*

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

When Mr. Keats leapt up my stairs,  
more chamois 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.

*Robert Cooperman*

## PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, ON THE DEATH OF HIS SON WILLIAM IN ROME

I could join Mary in her wish  
to be underground, numb  
to the laughter of Lear's gods.  
A boy of four, squirming terrier pup—  
taken with the snap of fingers.

I seem a plague to all who love me:  
first Harriet, playing Ophelia,  
but hardly needing a nudge  
to float, a lily down the Serpentine;  
then our flower Clara, choked by dysentery;  
finally, William, Wilmouse  
burned by typhus like a butterfly  
vicious boys toss into their campfire.

New life grows in Mary;  
if I knew its death-date  
I could bear the loss-to-be.  
But fate delights in lending a bauble,  
watches our joy, waits for us  
to think all will continue  
placid as lemon-April.  
Only then it sends storms  
to smash us against continents—  
a tap with its mallet fatal enough.

Mary and I trudge north  
to quiet summer mountains;  
we'll stare at diminishing tree-lines  
and try not to remember  
our little Wilmouse, laughing  
to be tickled and told stories  
of ogres and princes.

*Robert Cooperman/Percy Bysshe Shelley, . . .*

Even in sleep he galloped,  
sheets tossed like manes of ponies  
loving runs over hard ground.

*Robert Cooperman*

## FAMILY REUNIONS

Battalions of relatives  
shouted, laughed;  
their names and the exact knot  
of kinship impossible to unravel.  
I was supposed to love them all,  
though older cousins  
stuck noses so high  
they could smell heaven,  
blind to anyone  
not impossibly gorgeous.

I'd wander room to room,  
searching for a quiet sanctuary,  
but my mother always tracked me down,  
introduced another cousin,  
as if play were possible  
in best trousers,  
not a chance  
of getting soiled and friendly.

I hear of them when my mother calls:  
operations, divorces, funerals,  
names to make me feel guilty,  
still strange children  
who hated each other on sight.



*Robert Cooperman*

## **FIFTH GRADE GIRLS AT RECESS**

They've learned a new game:  
shrieking, voices scratching  
like branches against siding,  
each agonized soprano  
vying to outdo her rivals.

They slouch against a fence;  
then, when the spirit claws free,  
they stand, spines arched,  
arms plunged taut as yo-yo string,  
mouths open, demented divas  
for that soaring of flung air.

Maybe it's to bother the boys  
trying to concentrate on softball,  
or to practice the tactics  
parents have taught them  
when disreputable men approach.

Or maybe they're letting the world know  
they're impatient to be teenagers,  
the years taking so long  
all they can do is scream  
their maidenly desperate peril.

*Allison Joseph*

## PURSE

Never knew what I'd find  
when I reached inside  
her battered leather bag,  
too curious to keep hands  
from zippered pockets,  
torn linings. Unearthing  
all contents, I pulled out  
every item wedged  
in my mother's purse:  
pay stubs coded in money's  
arcane dialect, scissors  
too tiny to cut paper,  
leaky ball points that seeped  
their ink all over,  
pencils whittled  
with a kitchen knife.  
I thought everything  
was a present for me,  
felt free to roam fingers  
over anything inside:  
blue plastic compact  
with its cracked mirror,  
vials of rouge she carried  
even after no color remained,  
faded billfold of receipts,  
few credit cards. How I loved  
those symbols of her:  
perfume bottles, prescriptions,  
stray bobby pins, hair clips,  
brush she pulled through  
glossy hair, its bristles  
stiff with spray, pomade.  
I would have given anything  
to switch lives, to leave

*Allison Joseph/Purse*

my ten year old body  
to live in hers, my life  
important then, so crucial  
I'd have to carry it with me  
wherever I went, all I needed  
tangled inside a handbag.  
I'd never feel empty  
with that full bag slung  
on my shoulder. Mother  
didn't snatch her purse back,  
didn't scold when I stole  
all her pens, her chiseled pencils.  
She let me keep them,  
and I signed our names  
over and over, scrawling  
our signatures onto every scrap  
I found, marking us both  
onto the world.

*Allison Joseph*

## THE LEAST COMMON DENOMINATOR

In long school hours we learned  
about the least common denominator,

the one trick that would reduce  
our numbers neatly to indivisibility,

that secure state I could not  
attain, blustering with multiples,

long division. Instead, I'd stare  
at the zero's empty eye, joggle

extra-credit points against  
red marks of mistakes, my digits

strung out too far along  
the number line, with x,

the unknown, coming out  
both negative and positive,

each value in accord  
with only itself. Now,

I pull together the edges  
of my life, engage in

ambivalent words, not  
absolute values. I don't

even trust the numbers  
in my mail: account balances

*Allison Joseph* / **The Least Common Denominator**

and amounts due conspiring  
to diminish my gains, reminding

that one tragedy, multiplied  
by itself, is still one tragedy.

But our lives need another  
kind of accounting—sufficient

to solve the geometry of loss,  
to settle configurations

that happen without the comfort  
of rulers or protractors,

the confidences we cannot  
wish away, even as we know

that solving for the unknown  
is impossible, the unknown

itself singularly human,  
flawed as our arithmetic.

We need the legacy  
of error, sums that do not

easily add up, totals of  
rich and forthright memory.



*Allison Joseph*

## THE TROUBLE WITH MICHAEL

Once I loved a man  
whose promises rang  
falsely in the air,  
edgy, pause-filled.  
He'd disappear for weeks,  
reemerge without warning  
with a bottle of gin,  
the bribe of his lips.  
Though his pockets  
were empty, his clothes  
were sharp—pant legs  
pressed lean, cuffs  
weighted with gold links.  
Taken in by the cut  
of each neat suit,  
too young to know  
that this would pass,  
I wanted to call it  
passion, to revel  
in his half-truths,  
explanations, the swift  
rush of his fingers.  
He'd call at night,  
voice husky and hot,  
not tepid like boys  
I knew from school  
who fumbled with bras,  
blouses. Talking of what  
he'd buy when his next job  
came down, he'd call me  
emerald, ruby, pearl—  
all the gems he'd buy.  
I didn't know what he did  
for money, didn't care—

*Allison Joseph* / **The Trouble with Michael**

all I wanted was to want  
him, brooding like an adult,  
calling myself wild because  
of a few midnight conversations,  
a few fast turns in my sagging  
twin bed. I'd like to say  
I was smart, growing wise  
to his schemes, plans,  
that I caught him with a stash  
or a blonde. Instead, he just  
stopped calling, coming,  
bitter scent of clove cigarettes  
fading from my one-room rental.  
I moved out that winter,  
not because I couldn't stand  
to be where he was not,  
but because it had grown  
intolerably cold—wind  
rattling heating ducts,  
thin walls. All I could do  
was bolt the door, leave  
that cold, celibate cell  
behind, knowing nothing could  
grow there, in so little light.

*Allison Joseph*

## TRESPASSING

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

Joyce Odam

## TRAVEL POSTER

where am I missing the boat?  
even though I don't know  
where boats are going  
I keep missing them  
arriving at docks to see  
the small speck in the distance...  
the wisp of smoke...

others return  
to tell me of their travels  
secret with joy  
intense with detail  
I nod impatiently and sneak away  
to my schedules and wardrobe  
that I keep packing and repacking  
until it fits small

each day is shrunken  
with my anticipation  
my off-sense of timing  
that I keep perfecting  
each day is waging  
its size against me

Sweet Envy  
smiles from her poster  
and I, her collector,  
study her closely  
to memorize where she has been  
for I would go there

Joyce Odam

## I DANCE WITH THE GHOST OF MY SISTER

I dance with the ghost of my sister  
she is me  
I am one

it is summer  
and childhood again

we play catch  
we play hide and hide  
in seeking twilights

we laugh together at secrets  
we sleep together in dreams

when I am angry at her  
she disappears  
I cannot punish her

only I am punished  
by my envy  
by my only-childedness  
by our tearful mother  
who lives only for me

I twirl in the fates of my sister  
who is featureless  
and has no existence  
except what I give her

I pull her after me  
in homesick years  
in worlds where I am a stranger  
and she has outgrown me

*Joyce Odam*

## ONCE UPON A LONG ROAD

Once upon a long road  
into difficulty  
we took turns  
watching for signs.  
But our eyes were slow  
or looking at distractions.  
And we always went deeper.

Each blamed the other.  
We tore each other's maps  
in half  
and watched for Nature-signals:  
Streams of water.  
Crows.  
Whichever way life goes.

At last we understood.  
The roads went nowhere.  
All that effort—  
for this place  
that we named  
"County of Lost Love."

Others followed.  
Settled here  
with us.  
We raised our children.  
Sent them out  
with folded maps of prayers.  
They would make it—  
anywhere but here.

*Joyce Odam*

## MY GHOST STORIES

I have no siblings. I am in their dark.  
I am the one with no mirror.

Mother broke the glass.  
Mother took it away from me.

She hid it in pockets  
of tiny dresses.

\*

I cut my hands. I blamed others.  
I said others threw glass at me.

She believed me.  
We moved to a new country.

Nobody there  
knew how dangerous we were.

\*

I achieved power.  
I became famous for my lies.

I wore dresses with pockets full of glass.  
I would not look in mirrors.

Children believed  
my ghost stories.



Joyce Odam

## CROSSING THE BRIDGE INTO BLEAK TERRITORY

Crossing the bridge into bleak territory  
fields of flowers pull away.  
It is winter here.  
The old illusions freeze into shadow.  
One must not touch the dark until  
one also becomes the dark.

There is no easy way to say it.  
Illusions are everything.  
They mold to agree with the changing reality.  
Whatever waits has been waiting a long time,  
moving, echo-like, away from you now,  
pulling a soft cape along the ground  
with a shredding sound.

*Joyce Odam*

## A HOVERING OF NEWS

Sliced.  
Sound and light.  
A long afternoon.  
Bright.  
A hovering of news.  
Old and futile.  
Late.  
Like a sunset at the horizon.  
Gone as you see it.

Joyce Odam

## SORROW'S NOCTURNE

In the  
white  
halo  
of night  
death enters  
with its  
pale violin  
making  
such  
pure  
music  
holding  
one  
note  
so  
fine  
one could  
listen  
forever.

*Marcelle M. Soviero*

## HATCHED

If you opened me,  
you would find skulls, not rainbows.  
You might expect tulips,  
daisies. But nothing so pretty  
grows. Instead there are vines  
and rows of dead corn stalks.  
My organs are dusty as unread books,  
each artery is black. You could carve your name  
in my stomach's wall, and I will not flinch.  
You will not find white fences, or cobblestones,  
and the honeycombs have no honey.  
Forgive me, you had hoped for more, I know.  
You with your thick heart,  
I say this only to show what over-loving  
the outside will do.

*Marcelle M. Soviero*

## PAPER DOLL

Sometimes I forget  
that I have a mother, a father,  
as if I were created  
by accident with a child's scissor  
cutting out a paper doll.

Brought into the world  
by a small hand who cut me out  
as neatly as possible,  
left me with the same number of ribs  
as any man. I am happy to be paper.  
It is less complicated.

I have no sisters or brothers,  
the child stopped snipping  
after she made me,  
so I am alone, flat out on the little table  
before her. I have two arms, two legs.

Then she colors me—  
puts me in a pink dress  
that can not come off.  
She gives me blond hair  
and blue eyes. The girl-child  
has laid her sex on me.  
I am the perfect doll,  
made of paper, not glass.  
I do not break. I bend.

Marcelle M. Soviero

## ARMS

I come to you  
needier than a newborn.  
I want to be all body,  
to have my mind shoveled out  
and buried in the sand at Long Beach.

How free my arms could be then  
if my mind wasn't busy  
with the memory: My sister's body  
in the white bed, knives in jackets  
on the kitchen counter. I simply want  
to forget everything and concentrate  
on the embrace—your fingers  
at the base of my back.

As a child I imagined we came from hugs,  
born from two pairs of entwined arms.  
I wanted the warmth of a body  
around mine. I wanted each bone  
to be held in, always afraid I'd fall  
into darkness. Later I searched for anyone  
who could pack me tightly against them  
roll me in their arms like flour  
being kneaded into dough.

You have taken over  
where they left off,  
so tall your belt presses just below  
my chest; *"This is why we have arms,"*  
you say, careful to look at me.  
It is all connected, I think,  
the arms hugging, the smile on the face,  
the knowing that even something  
this simple won't last—your fingers

Marcelle M. Soviero/**Arms**

touching my spine, my hands placed at your neck,  
and your breath in my hair  
like someone never born.



*Marcelle M. Soviero*

## THE BODY THAT WANTS

This is the body that wants to remember  
its own birth, the new skin pushed through  
a tunnel of muscle, the eye's webs broken  
by the first shock of light,  
the last touch to the sticky temples and neck,  
the slow accumulation of breath  
as small as thimbles.

This is the body that wants to be blessed  
by the earth, to know that my strength comes from  
this mis-shaped stones stacked in my bones  
and that I have everything to do  
with the bird's song, each note caught and released  
from the throat one stitch at a time.

This is the body that wants to remember  
my father's hands carrying me up to the room  
of crowns and roses, my small body flanneled  
and warm as alphabet soup,  
tucked in bed, sheets-to-chin.

The yellow bedposts stand erect  
behind my father's back as he tells the story  
of the angel and the bear with pictures  
spread across both pages, colors blending  
with his fingers and voice.

This is the body that wants to remember  
the first desire; the body's cavity opening, turning thick as  
bread,  
swapping a lover's blood for my own,  
the flesh like a fire burning in one spot,  
the tender ache in the stomach growing wings,  
each nerve unravelling  
ready to know everything at once.

*Marcelle M. Soviero* / **The Body That Wants**

This is the body that wants to forgive  
where I was loved wrongly,  
where the skin was split like the apple  
chewed and left to its skull, the definition  
of touch changing from soft to hard  
like the muscles in the abdomen stiffening,  
or the alien force pressed into my backbone,  
shoulder blades splitting like logs,  
my slow drowning in oil.

This is the body that wants to be sure  
of my hips too big, curved like a half-moon  
but noticeable in their roundness,  
and my stomach swelled like a seeded fruit,  
its juice sweet enough to sip,  
sure of each vertebrae laced down my spine  
like shells strung on a windchime,  
sure that the cross-section of veins  
gathered like stitches  
just under my breast,  
mark life.

*Marcelle M. Soviero*

## DRINKS

There is nothing sadder than you  
when you drink, when you let  
the mustangs run in your head  
and wish you were dead,  
wish you were dead.  
You tell me this, me, your daughter  
who grew up on parades and lollipops.  
Sometimes I want to yell stop.  
Just stop. But last night when you drank  
I gave you the excuse you needed.  
If I were a drinker I would have drunk too.  
And because I did this, you laughed  
and did not say you wanted to die,  
you even told the story about the ladybug  
and the manbug,  
just the way you did when I was young,  
when the summer sky over our house  
had hints of purple in it, the color of plums,  
the color of bruises mending,  
ready to fade back into the skin.

*Gary J. Whitehead*

## DIGGING

Days with heavy snowfall  
school would cancel and I'd  
venture out well-bundled and shovel  
the driveway, hurling piles over  
the fence into one big hill.  
I'd dig the entrance kneeling  
and pushing snow between my legs  
like a territorial bitch marking  
bounds, till inside; then, on my  
stomach, shaving and smoothing  
out the walls, I'd rebuild  
my private domain. A candle lit  
for a minute then extinguished  
would ice the walls, the shovel  
handle poked through would make  
the hole for breathing, and  
the silence inside forgot its  
size and place; and sitting cross-  
legged, I was some explorer content  
with my life in the outdoors,  
or else I was me before I was  
me, my mother's world the cold  
and what else was on the outside,  
those smooth dark walls inside  
all that I could touch and know  
and exist in because they welcomed me.

*Gary J. Whitehead*

## **SHE BUYS A BLACK HAT**

On the train into the city  
I never let go of her small  
hand. She again wears those  
false round glasses and her  
hair down and the long green  
coat from the Salvation Army  
she wore on this same trip a  
year ago. I watch the people  
who sit around us. Inside I  
cry at the thin-haired woman  
whose nylons bunch up around  
her swollen ankles. I try to  
hold my breath against the  
artificial air the hunched  
woman tries so hard to suck  
in. She looks at me and at  
the floor, opens her bag and  
gently places a sad black hat  
upon her head. At our stop I  
hurry through the automatic  
doors, tugging on the small  
hand I know so well, and only  
let go when we ride the steep  
narrow escalator to the street  
and the open air. I breathe  
as if to forget, and I think  
of the cicada, who lives in  
the ground for seventeen long  
years before screaming against  
its few hours spent in the air.  
But it is winter, and we stroll  
up to Faneuil Hall's open air  
market huddled against the wind.  
I look at ties while she looks

Gary J. Whitehead / **She Buys a Black Hat**

at hats, as though we're already  
married. Later, after the crowds  
she buys the black velvet one.

Gary J. Whitehead

## THE ELL POND TRAIL

Where we enter the trail the rhododendrons  
swallow us up like some dreamed-about jungle,  
and the hemlocks roof the woods as a cathedral,  
and where the soft bed of needles and fallen  
leaves gives way to stone and mud, we

jump up  
and begin the climb. Stumbling behind me he  
never questions why I have to take the lead,  
but I do, and my only answer is that I always  
have. Perhaps it's because I think I won't  
get lost if I am out in front, or that someone  
will be there to catch me if I

fall backwards.

What is better than an open highway, or a hill?  
At the gorge above Ell Pond we pause to snap  
a picture of the view, as though we could capture  
the thrill of overlooking the dead trees that flood  
the pond, or the seventy foot drop to the swamp  
below where we can see the tiny red blotches in the  
holly, or what we know of doing this

together.

And he has the makings of a hiker,  
for he loves to walk, but yet this puzzles me.  
He dwells by the sea but he never swims, and he  
enjoys the heat of the sun, and can laugh at it  
dressed in bluejeans.

For the first time we can ford the flooded path,  
and we walk that part I've never seen.

Where the path crosses a road we

detour,

our boots clopping on asphalt like a lame  
pony, our laughs echoing through the bare trees.



We walk side by side, without measure, odd-paced,  
and after a time I wonder if we're lost.  
"Almost there," he says, this first time hiker,  
and we see my waiting car when we  
turn a corner,  
relieved, having walked too far, having gone  
through the guts of a forest.

*Gary J. Whitehead*

## IN THE GALLOWS CROWD

The bare feet of the women on their knees  
before him are black with the dust and dirt  
of the long climb, soles hard like centuries.  
They hold their countenances like their hurt,

grim and half-hidden in the folds of their  
black threadbare robes and their opaque veils.  
Where in these dark inglorious clouds, where  
in this sky, waits the rain? They wait like hail-

stones for the sun to come and melt them. They  
have felt cold pain their bones, these numb women.  
Behind them here, I am shamed; I should go pray  
with them; I should lament with them, open

my lame arms to them; I should help them wash  
the mouths of his wounds; I should comfort them.  
Where then, is the rain? Will it come and hush  
their weeping, will it wash the blood from him?

If it fell now I would take their muddy  
feet and rinse them in the rain on my knees,  
and the deep bloody holes, the deep bloody  
holes in him, I'd close like his open eyes.

*Gary J. Whitehead*

## ICICLES

We used to pretend  
they were knives  
days when the sun  
finally came out  
bright as the light  
trapped inside them,  
and that we were pirates  
in the Arctic, all we knew  
of the geography of cold.  
And once, when our play  
melted into something else,  
talk of one of us  
moving away,  
we counted the drops  
as they gathered  
at the sharp tips  
and paused there,  
as if in the change  
from one state to the next  
we could keep  
the solid things we held  
from falling apart  
before our eyes.

*Francine Witte*

## COUNTING

Sometimes, very late  
when the street shines with rain,  
you can count the cars hissing past.  
They sound like stars  
that sizzled one by one  
out of the wet night.

Or you can count the powder rooms  
of music clubs where women are painting  
themselves into the mirror.  
Soon they will follow  
their reflections  
back to the dance floor.

Every day millions of syllables  
fly from mouth to mouth.  
You can count them as they pass  
the ear and wrinkle like smoke  
toward the sky.  
You can learn to sit  
and watch your outstretched hand  
flexing at whatever just got away,  
you can count your fingers counting.

Francine Witte

X

means isn't, or anyway, not anymore,  
and if you ever hope to be  
again, you should be standing *here*  
where another train's headed your way,

and, of course, it means ten,  
or any unknown you can multiply  
by anything else, but do it soon;  
the alphabet's almost over.

X means there's been a mistake,  
you used the wrong brand  
which means you can't spell your name  
or maybe you don't have one,  
or you saw a movie you shouldn't  
cross your heart and hope to die.

*Francine Witte*

## WHEN A LOVER LEAVES

it hurts in an old way

like a song  
my mother hummed

way back, before  
I knew how young

she was, or even  
that she had

music.

Francine Witte

## I'M STILL WAITING FOR YOUR LETTER

By March, the snow had  
stained its chalky rings  
into every glove and scarf  
I got for Christmas.  
I had long since taken  
the strings of pulsing lights  
off the outdoor evergreen,  
though I left the snowman  
we built before New Year's.  
I've been watching him sink into himself  
at every thaw, never quite melting.  
Every day, I will him to stand straight  
but the buttons on his chest  
are growing closer to one another.  
I've propped and re-propped him  
with snow so many times,  
I think he must have memorized  
my touch by now.  
Today, I'll pick up  
the broom he dropped,  
build him a new hand,  
curve my own around it.  
Then I'll give him back  
his coal, so he has eyes,  
maybe even stand there  
for a minute  
because we all need to be seen sometimes.



*Francine Witte*

## PASSAGE

There's a thunder to everyday events  
that rolls so steady we block it out,  
like the importance a zipper  
has 30 years after the snowsuit  
it closed has been thrown out.  
Those moments are the string  
on your finger you tie and forget

till years later when you feel it scratching  
your hands like the mittens  
you peeled off with childhood.  
Changing to gloves ought to be more  
of a passage rite, growing up ought to have drums.

*Francine Witte*

## HERE'S WHAT THE MIRROR SAID:

Just a moment ago you  
were a young girl,  
frightened, new.

Your eyes have seen  
youth, young adulthood,  
and the between

years. Now you wait  
for old age  
like a patient  
in a doctor's office,  
reading a magazine,  
turning a page,

waiting,  
only to get called,  
like always, just when

you find a good story.

*Francine Witte*

## PAVLOV'S CAT

probably yawned  
through it all,

the bells,  
the saliva,  
the shameless display

of need.  
And Pavlov's cat  
might have swiveled  
its head

and, for all we know, said  
"Y'know hunger's a bitch—  
it'll screw up your life.

Now just look  
at me—I haven't tasted  
in years.

My mouth  
doesn't water  
for food or for love.

And just feel my tongue,  
my sandpaper tongue—  
so cool, uneventful,  
and dry."

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Martha Carlson-Bradley** received her MFA from Warren Wilson College. Her work has appeared in *Carolina Quarterly*, *Poets On*., *Poetry East*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Yankee*, and *Soundings East* where she was the featured poet in the Spring '93 issue. "Wastebasket," reprinted here from *Calliope* vol.18, no. 2, was selected for inclusion in the 1995/96 *Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry*. In 1995 she participated as a discussion leader in the "Poets in Person" series, a nationwide library program funded by the NEH. She lives in Hillsborough, NH.

**Robert Cooperman** is the author of two chapbooks, *Seeing the Elephant* (Panhandler Press), and *Pictures of Odysseus* (Linwood Publishers). His first full-length collection, *In the Household of Percy Bysshe Shelly* (U. Press of Florida), was nominated for the William Carlos Williams Award. His second collection, *The Badman and The Lady*, was published by Basfal Books. Individual poems have appeared in *The Literary Review*, *The Mickle Street Review*, *Pennsylvania Review* and elsewhere. He has recently moved to Denver, CO, after living in Maryland for several years.

**Allison Joseph** teaches at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale where she also serves as poetry editor of *Crab Orchard Review*. Her first collection, *What Keeps Us Here*, won the 1992 Ampersand Press Women Poets Series National Competition and The John Zacharis Memorial Award given by *Ploughshares* and Emerson University. Her work appears widely in literary magazines, and she is the author of two new collections, *Soul Train* (Carnegie-Mellon) and *In Every Seam* (University of Pittsburg).

**Joyce Odam** lives in Sacramento where she has participated in area readings. Her work has appeared over the years in many literary magazines, including *Bellingham Review*, *Bitterroot*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Bogg*, *Chaminade Literary Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Paisley Moon*, *Wormwood Review*, and *Yarrow*.

**Marcelle M. Soviero** has published poems in a variety of magazines including *Ark*, *Footprints*, *Northeast Corridor*, and *The Georgetown Review*. She has also published several literary interviews with Nikki Giovanni and others and is a former editor for *Popular Science* magazine. She is currently the president of C2 Consulting Inc. She lives in Skillman, NJ with her husband Larry and their newborn daughter.

**Gary J. Whitehead** is a native of Rumford, RI. He was a 1994-95 Pearl Hogrefe Fellow in Poetry at Iowa State University where he also served as poetry editor of *Flyway*. His poems have appeared in *Connecticut Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Northeast Journal*, *Oxalis*, *Roanoke Review*, *The Alembic*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Without Halos*, and *Yankee*. His chapbook, *Walking Back to Providence*, is available from Sow's Ear Press. He now lives in Bogota, NJ, where he edits *Defined Providence*.

**Francine Witte** received her MFA from Vermont College. She has published poems in *Bellingham Review*, *Buffalo Journal*, *Great River Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Outerbridge*, *Poet & Critic*, *The Pittsburgh Quarterly*, and elsewhere. She teaches English in the New York City public school system and is poetry editor of *The New Press*.

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Martha Carlson-Bradley

Robert Cooperman

Allison Joseph

Joyce Odam

Marcelle M. Soviero

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Francine Witte

