Calliope

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EDITORS

Robert Douglas Anderson
Marie Costello
Katharine Fair
Nanja Galoppi
Laurie Goldschmidt
Wendy Goodman
Robin Mello
Doreen Orsini

ADVISORY EDITOR Martha Christina

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CALLIOPE is the continuing project of the Literary Magazine class at Roger Williams College. Students function as staff, not contributors, and are responsible for all stages of preparation and publication except the printing, which is done by photo offset.

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Address all correspondence to Martha Christina, CALLIOPE, Creative Writing Program, Roger Williams College, Bristol, R.I. 02809.

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This third issue of CALLIOPE is devoted to the number 3 in a wide variety of interpretations in subject, theme and form. Poems about 3 people, 3 places, 3 things, triangles, and the magical qualities of the number itself appear in forms ranging from the strict formula of the triolet to the equally demanding shaped poem.
NUMBERS

As spring turns you three
and me thirty
I fumble for revelations
in these numbers,
some ultimate design
clear only at a great height
like the landing strips
on the Plain of Nazca.

But at this level
nothing is more profound
than your cornsilk hair
and February bringing you with the crocus
pushing yellow around the grey walk.
THREE LIVES

I
For over a month
she picks up Arabs in bars.
They have eyes like her dead husband.

II
When her father came home from the mill
she washed his feet each night.
When her husband left her for that woman
she burned all his clothes in the bathtub
but she did not touch his shoes.

III
When he died at home in the afternoon
she went out and asked the yard man,
"Will you come in and see if he is dead?"
Laurence J. Sasso, Jr.

TRY NATURE

Bellies yellow as tusk ivory, three rough-shinned hawks settle onto pine limbs heavy with chins of snow

Under the narthex of conifer boughs the urban refugee burns cans and picks at ice encasing the buried, the unknown

It is March and the dog eats hay the prey has bled on

The earth is three months into this attempt
VerKuilen Ager

BEACHCOMBER

Walking the shore
I came upon a trunk
all bound and gagged
pulled it from nibbling kelpie
from undertow ripples, grasping starfish
undid its seaweed and algae fetters
The lid unlatched and my hands were explored
with kisses
Inside was a note which read
Please climb in and say Gidup
I did

With sailor's grace
we hornpiped along surf's brink
over broken nautilus, soggy rockweed
A sand dollar scurried for its mamma
We bumped atop windward boulders
sniffed salty dune grass and straw flower
scared a convention of field mice
looked all ways near an interchange
squided into traffic
along the trade route
We ran all toll gates
passing from cancer to capricorn
emassing bandit bills
displacing economies of several duchies

Illuminated symbols
were zodiacal light inside my compartment
A conductor noodled through on sea legs
tucked me into a berth
starched with a stewardess
wearing neither cap nor wings
She punched my ticket
Later in her sleep
she whispered that she was liberated unless delayed by headwinds
could expect to arrive released
Her exhalations puffed prayers of milkweed silk
sleep to my ear
collected my brain up in a fresh pillow
parachuted it down to sea in shifts of swells
lifts of a porpoise kiss
Various organs entwined with octopi
mollasks clasped my arms
Seaweed wrapped my trunk as I drifted to beach
looking for someone
walking the shore
Marilyn Basel

"OLD AGE":
A Photo by Pete Turner

Dressed in black
your husband is leaving
his thin life
with knees crossed,
arms folded,
hands stiff
as mittens on a pole.
Your hand curls
an umbrella strap,
other fingers cradled
between your lips.
Your legs still
come up your skirt
like pillars.
In time, your umbrella
will be switched
for a cane
while the bone
of you husband
unwraps, spreads open.
This photo catches him
as shadow gone in
between your legs
and we see him emerge
from your body
forked,
three branches from
which generations
of grandchildren
unfold his veins
into their bodies
like leaves.
3 ON DARK WATER

1

Your tongue, under
my tongue,
a catfish lunges
for lily roots

2

that space between us:
you are wing, I am wing,
looking for a lost bird.

3

a star
falls
invisible,
heart cannot follow
how quickly the sky heals!
Diana Der Hovanessian

Three things I miss about you most: your voice tricks, your wolf masks, and your eyes.

Two things I miss about your voice are Rimbaud's vowels, and your words.

Three things I miss about your words: the pins, the needles, and the swords.

et al.: Calliope 2.1

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TRIOLET FOR ONE WHO CLIMBED THE SUN PYRAMID
(TEOTIHUACAN)

soon she had disappeared from sight
while I stood blinking in the sun:
because I had no love of height
soon she had disappeared from sight
in her pursuit of light... and light...
I curse the climbing she has done!

soon she had disappeared from sight
while I stood blinking in the sun
Carmine Sarracino

THREE DREAM SEAS

Ebb Tide

She lies beneath the moon coyly shaking her lace skirts. Her hair is loose. The moon is undone: he cups and strokes the curls and flows. He invites her up. Her bosom swells, but with a sigh she declines. It's not her way, and she must have her way. She invites him down. A moment he buries his face in her arms, but he knows his place: duties, appointed rounds. The old story goes unheard—she gathers her skirts and steps back into pools of shadows to brood, alone.

Flow Tide

In row after row they advance, again, again, throwing their bodies against the walls of the fortressed land. The lunacy of the battle only inspires them, and they are urged on by small gains. Each falls bravely, arms outflung, and a whispered vow dies upon his lips.
High Tide

Gulls swipe crumbs from the hero's beard. He does not mind. He is kind with his pets. With strong fingers he combs his beard, tumbled and white, and sings chanties he sang as a boy. Barrel-chested, moon-faced, thick in the wrists, he has always exceeded himself. He presides at a board of endless feast, tells tales of impossible deeds. He is at home with excess.

Too much is just enough.
THREE WOMEN

Gloria

In the west, a man has driven all day by the arroyo, through box elder, arcanus tundra, lodgepole pine, to the desert where it rains where the ground shakes while blackbirds explode at the corners of his eyes. In the morning, he will pick wildflowers and mail them to you in Vermont. Everywhere he turns, canyons will whisper their exquisite dust to the coarse turquoise, brown and green, like your eyes turning from the dry flowers you leave on the table at dinner.

Moira

The girl caught younger than yourself, who is your mother, stands tilted like a stone in the sun. Her skirt drops past her gentle knees, hovering like the edge of sleep. She bears your name in her eyes. Her cheeks name a color: dusk, glanced off the greenhouse glass. Inside your family blooms and teeters in glazed clay pots; the empty chair that you would stand on holds a cactus, wet brushes in a jar.
Now your father grows as hollow and as spiked as dawn. Behind your mother's dark lashes you dream a slab of ironstone clung to the insatiable sky. You have your picture taken.

Sharon

A woman is not a religion yet rituals swerve to you like a flock of cackling bats. Cripples clutter your aisles wheezing like a desperate chorus of hinges. At night, they sit like whetstones sharpening their eyes on the dark, dreaming of your gentle smile and burning away at a part of themselves, yowling and grunting.

So stain your glasses, dear priestess, and sacrifice; rehearse small rituals.

Though they strike sparks in rotted hearts, they will keep the torches from your timbers.
George E. Murphy Jr.

DIRECTIONS
(for Richard)

1. The day you get this poem, stop!
   Take the rest of that day off.
   Go to the ocean. Find a forest.
   Walk if at all possible.
   Find the time.

2. Hold this poem between your thumbs.
   Hold it to the sky, to the horizon,
   to the ground, and to yourself.
   Notice all the space between the letters
   of each word.
   Consider this a window screen
   through which, like summer drizzle,
   you must slip. Or stick, stretched and squared.
   Look through to see tomorrow's weather.

3. Hold these margins with your thumbs.
   Find some sky as white as the page.
   When the page spills off, let go
   and spill yourself
   into that future.
Three weeks after you left
I started picking up
rocks.

Harvesting them
like potatoes
arranging them
in neat piles
like fruits or vegetables.

I've developed this
terrible craving
for something
that will never ripen
never rot.
WOMAN INFATUATED WITH THE NUMBER 3

She seduces men in three cities, believes in the trinity, imagines herself the mother of triplets, loves the tinsel note of a triangle, its indeterminate pitch, divides herself into the number formulating the irreconcilable crowd.

She gathers three strawberries each morning to eat their sweet hearts with cream and brown sugar, holds three white roses in the photograph she sends you, wears three red stones on her ringfinger like the three drops of ominous blood in fairy tales.

She touches her breasts and crotch the original triumverate, builds her house in a valley between three hills. Every night she counts three falling stars, says her luck is common as three-leafed clovers.
FLASH FLOOD

It's a dry year
we're climbing along the creekbed
all the glistening stones gone lackluster
not even a trickle of the surge
that hewed this blind canyon wall
rising far overhead.

It circles in dried-blood rings
to wed the centuries
where the waterfall gouged
its burnt sienna cup
in which the light, pouring from some high spout
puddles like weak lemonade.

We sit in the hollow recalling
how other years we'd never
have come this far,
how even now one cloudburst
up country could send the river
blasting along the limestone trace
tearing our memories
from their moorings as easily
as the seedlings that sprout
everywhere here
in the path of disaster.
NOTES FROM ANATOMY CLASS

Flesh can be preserved,
cured brown as paper
under the winding sheet,
but bone, on its own,
resists decay, high heat.
Even in urns
large chunks remain
to confound, perplex, delay
our resolution.

Bone predates pulse.
Early as the sixteenth day
the spine begins its coil
in worm of body, ersatz clay.
The fetus claims its tail—
sometimes till birth—
but still is forced to refound man,
vestigial, upright, grave.

Throughout life,
this hot internal stuff with spongy core,
these spidery cells of bone
are misconceived as trees for muscular clothes—
hangers in the hall of body.
Thought cold and stern—
this 18 percent of weight,
this sturdy, resilient,
hard but mobile bone.
TRIANGULATION means something more than being strangled with a triangle.

I'm talking about the thirdness when people sit in a living room and discuss the antics of the dog for hours, their eyes fleeing to the walls like ice skaters on a pond that's breaking up.

Instead of cupping your eyes over mine, you are transfixed by a vase, throw pillow or unplugged television.

You don't have to come on like a hypnotist or make staring a contest, but look at me.

Triangles are for racking poolballs. Triangles are the instruments played by the loneliest men in symphony orchestras.
THREE CAVES

We will enter here with only the clothes we are wearing to curse away the cold. Descending steel stairways through layers of Kentucky limestone, you will look back at me, a question etched into your eyes.

When we found the dog washed up on the rocks in the sea-cave, half-eaten by crabs, you screamed and dug your fingernails into my arm as the waves swirled around our feet.

In the cave above the Dordogne River, great bison take their contours from rock; the sleek elk lock horns through centuries of silence. We lower ourselves by sighs into each new chamber, carving our shadows into the walls.
Tony Fusco

IN OCTOBER, AT A CAFE

That it is warm enough to sit outside at a cafe, is in itself a miracle. But this sparrow that perches on the backs of chairs to beg his daily bread, and this careful old woman from London whose fingers tremble to share her toast, and this collie whose patient eyes provoke no fear in either, this is a trinity.
ALL SAINTS' EVE
for Betina

I have just dropped the last
Tootsie Roll into the pillow case
carried by a midget mummy.
Magnified with delight
his eyes laugh out at me
through his fake bandages.
We play this night's game,
pretending we don't see each other
for what we are:
a neighbor's mother,
a neighbor's son.

Betina, his eyes are like yours,
immense against that white background.
He is coming unswaddled,
but I think of you
as I caution him
about our steep steps.
Someone is sharpening
the scalpels for tomorrow's cut
into your mummified eyes.

I watch my neighbor's son skip home,
my eyes widening in the dark,
half the dark you wait in
for morning and another chance at light.
Martha Christina

NURSING A NEWBORN AT 2:10 A.M.
for Margot

Fresh from your chrysalis
your butterfly breath
beats its wings against my breast.

I weave hastily
a net of soft songs.

Already bright flowers attract you.
1. Pollination

My husband's mother carries a grief so personal she won't tell even herself. She expects an extra place to be set. Her friend she says cut himself on purpose and pulled back the edges of his wound to see inside the lives he separated. A waste, she says.

Looking back, she's a bride again, slender as a black-and-white aspen that puts out its first leaves in a shy trickle like pubic hair. She comes to her husband pulling back, not so much not wanting to share herself as wanting not to accept a new self inside. She keeps pulling back till he moves away. She forgets then to wipe her yellow bee fingers after swapping dust in the wide blossoms of crookneck squash.

2. Planting Green Beans (She speaks.)

Perhaps we planted too early or pushed the seeds too far down the hard rows.

The few that made it came stumpy, withered cotyledons drooping, empty packs clinging to exhausted hikers.
A strange cat squats on the far branch tucked neatly into herself. Our cat hones himself on his wet sharp words of urge. I slop a full pitcher to scramble them, get back in bed still ruffled. Quiet now, the words get stronger, their gurgles hiss in my gut.

I mark the liquid snore in the next room, my husband's mother, whose freak wedge of bone kept a bullet out of her sinus, out of her brain. She dries out a little more each day, a raisin, roasting out that liquid sex no will can cure, roasting out her leftover life.
Peggy Shumaker

CIMA SADDLE

The patch snow thickens
in the shade, hiding the trail
on purpose.

We keep our way
by the distant splinter
of a frozen waterfall.

At Cima Saddle
we shelter in time,
cook, and watch the night eating.

Squatting in the moist ring
scraped around the firepit,
we try the green nuts.

Perhaps we planted too early
or pushed the seeds too far
down the hard rows.

The food that made it come swampy,
withered cotyledons drooping,
empty packs clinging to exhausted aliens.
Bruce Edward Taylor

LOVE'S BEAR

If one cannot overlook a hurt, many hurts will grow from it. It is a fatal style of living--one catches bears with it.

Gottfried Von Strassburg

Put a hat on it, some festive pantaloons, a bicycle under it. Ribbon it with crepe. Avoid however its mythic embrace. It's an old brute and kills by crushing.

When wild it fears man and famine only. When tamed it circles instinctively. For sweets it dances upright to a simple flute and cymbals melody.

What winter dreams! What sleeps to practice the curling up alone that death must be. What wonder it hugs so close, rolls over, over and over for love.
If love could be gathered like ducks' down,
tied in a white kerchief,
carried on a stick from place to place,
then I would clutch a lightweight bundle
to stay the long night

but ducky babies grow smartly tall,
leaving a cluttered nest.
My leather wallet falls apart
from credit cards, photographs, and all
this lucky money.

Here's an old picture: three fine children,
handsome father,
a pregnant woman's high-teased hair.
The cameraman told me to stand at the rear.
He called me the big mother.
AUTUMN TRASH

1
Last week the birds went crazy in the meadow.
I saw a sun-splashed warbler and another among the band of nervous sparrows.
The butterfly gave her innocence to the company of birds.

2
Two ragged silhouettes fly north against the weather.
All the bird-song gone, the butterfly beats her fatal wings to the blast of stereo rock:
a truck parked in the meadow behind Flavorland lulls the sense of a young man hired to rake the autumn trash.

3
One robin snared in flight by an iron fence dangles from the mesh.
If you want me, find me in the afternoon
where ribbons of shade unveil a day
already on the ravel, or watching at the
bend of night, a mumbled sigh, toward morning.
I am the youngest son, dozing in the stable,
tumbling into kingdoms easily as sleep,
a werewolf watching from another tense,
a pattern birds have formed from singular
concerns, the mystery gift,
the guest you weren't waiting for,
the key to every door, the point
of every joke, the final knock.
CONTRIBUTORS

VerKuilen Ager is a freelance writer-researcher who lives in Rochester, N.Y. He has been published in Aldebaran, Intro 7 and Intro 8.

Barbara Akins lives in North Canton, Ohio. An earlier version of her "In a Field - Not Singing" placed second in the poetry contest of the Midwest Writers Conference.

Marilyn Basel teaches English at Bowling Green State University.

Martha Christina teaches creative writing at Roger Williams College and is the advisory editor of Calliope. She has previously published in Tendril, and Cincinnati Poetry Review.

Joan Colby lives in Streamwood, Illinois and works for an advertising agency. Her poems have appeared in Images, Tendril and Aspect.

E.R. Cole is also a playwright and critic. He has been published in Saturday Review, Beloit Poetry Journal and Northwest Review. He lives in Whiting, Indiana.

Billy Collins is co-editor of The MidAtlantic Review. He has previously published in Images, Yellow Brick Road and New York Quarterly. He lives in Baldwin Place, N.Y.

Diana Der Hovanessian is from Cambridge, Mass. She has worked in PITS programs in Mass., and is Secretary of the New England Poetry Club. Her work has appeared in APR, Paris Review and Southern Poetry Review. She is currently working on an anthology of Armenian poetry in translation.

https://docs.rwu.edu/calliope/vol2/iss1/1
Tony Fusco lives in Boston. He has been published in Panache, Wisconsin Review and Penny Dreadful.

Pat Gray lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

George E. Murphy Jr. co-edits Tendril and operates Wampeter Press. He has published two poetry books and a children's book.

Jean Nordhaus is co-editor of the Washington Review.

Bern Porter is internationally known as a publisher, poet and graphic artist. His design is from a recent collection, "Gee-Whizzles."

Carmine Sarracino teaches English at Elizabethtown College. Earlier this year "Three Dream Seas" was awarded the Herndon Memorial Prize by the Poetry Society of Virginia.

Laurence J. Sasso, Jr. is the director of the News Bureau at Rhode Island College. He has published widely in little magazines.

Christopher Scanlan is a reporter for the Providence Journal. He took "The Disciplinarian" while he was a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa.

Joanne Seltzer lives in Schenectady, N.Y. She also writes fiction and has a story forthcoming in Trailings.

Peggy Shumaker lives in Tucson, Arizona.

Bruce Edward Taylor has appeared in many little magazines. He is the director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Wisconsin in Eau Claire.

Susan Scott Thompson lives in Bloomington, Indiana.

Daphne E. White is a studio assistant in the Art Department at Roger Williams College.
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