EDITORS

Jenny Grandpre
Liz Hanks
Charlie Meyer
Noah Sassaman
Mary Ellen Spinelli

Advisory editor: Martha Christina

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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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CONTENTS

Poetry

Martha Carlson-Bradley
    Inuit Child 6
    Wings 7
    The Cardinal 8
    To a One-Month-Old 9
    Another Country 10
    Wastebasket 12

Robert Cooperman
    Miss Eliza Hitchener... 13
    Stendahl Flees the Church of Santa Croce... 14
    Mrs. Emma Cook... 15
    Percy Bysshe Shelley... 16
    Family Reunions 18
    Fifth Grade Girls at Recess 19

Allison Joseph
    Purse 20
    The Least Common Denominator 22
    The Trouble with Michael 24
    Trespassing 26

Joyce Odam
    Travel Poster 27
    I Dance with the Ghost of My Sister 28
    Once Upon a Long Road 29
    My Ghost Stories 30
    Crossing the Bridge to Bleak Territory 31
    A Hovering of News 32
    Sorrow’s Nocturne 33

Marcelle M. Soviero
    Hatched 34
    Paper Doll 35
    Arms 36
    The Body That Wants 38
    Drinks 40

https://docs.rwu.edu/calliope/vol20/iss2/1
Gary J. Whitehead

Digging 41
She Buys a Black Hat 42
The Ell Pond Trail 44
In the Gallows Crowd 46
Icicles 47

Francine Witte

Counting 48
X 49
When a Lover Leaves 50
I'm Still Waiting for Your Letter 51
Passage 52
Here's What the Mirror Said 53
Pavlov's Cat 54

Contributors' Notes 55
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
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.
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.
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.
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.
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,
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.
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.
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 jeweling 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.
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.
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.
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.
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.
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

20
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

cradle 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.
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—
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.
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-chiledness
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
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.

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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.
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.

Joyce Odum

SORROW'S NOCTURNE
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.
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
touching my spine, my hands placed at your neck,  
and your breath in my hair  
like someone never born.
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.
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.
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.
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...
at hats, as though we’re already married. Later, after the crowds she buys the black velvet one.
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.
Gary J. Whitehead / The Ell Pond Trail

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 hailstones 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.
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.
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.
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.
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.


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 Pittsburgh).

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, Bitteroot, 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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POETRY BY SEVEN FREQUENT CONTRIBUTORS:

Martha Carlson-Bradley
Robert Cooperman
Allison Joseph
Joyce Odam
Marcelle M. Soviero
Gary J. Whitehead
Francine Witte