

Summer 2003



The Summerset Review

The Somerset Review

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The Sunnset Review



We're taking a poll, and would love your participation.

Simply email us (at the address below), giving the name of a story, article, or book that influenced your life, that had a profound impact on yourself in some way, caused you to cry, to write a long-lost family member, phone your best friend and say "You have got to read this!" The only catch: It must be literary. Winning Chess Moves and 30-Minute Meals will unfortunately be cast aside.

Why should you bother doing this? Think of it as a service to fellow readers. We'll publish a list of suggestions we receive in our next issue, and won't disclose your name or email address. Who knows? Maybe you'll be turned on to something you enjoy just as well. You never know.

We thought we would break the ice here and mention one of our favorite stories. In fact, the paragraph you are now reading was originally drafted to talk about it, but upon contacting the author (whom we did not know - Google can be quite the friend at times) and asking for a quick review and approval, she graciously allowed us a reprint. And so, instead of simply a synopsis, we are happy to give you "Finishing First," by Sue Dormanen, which was published in the Summer 1998 issue of Lynx Eye.

You'll find more than just this one story under the spotlight in our Summer 2003 issue. We've interviewed the newly appointed Executive Editor of Other Voices, Gina Frangello, and in addition to asking about the journal and literary writing and publishing, we've also asked her and the staff of OV to

cite some favorite stories that have appeared in their pages over the years.

The title alone discloses the character with the problem in Thomas Brennan's "Silent Martha," but if you don't read the story you'll be missing a beautiful piece of hope and affection for a loved one.

Is it poetry or just extremely short fiction? Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz thinks the latter with her "Four Extremely Short Stories," having a common thread that is left for you to discover.

The protagonist in Linda Boroff's "Doctors" is a freshman at Berkeley in the Vietnam war era. Combine this with several college friends and lovers, anti-war protests and addictions, and we have a potentially combustible mixture that she and the doctors she works for try to sort out.

In another story set in California, James Francis' "Dry Run" gives us a nameless jogger and many of the things she comes across on her typical day, some of which are within her controlling grasp, some of which are not.

We would like to thank our contributors and all those who took time to send us their work or feedback. Our First Anniversary Issue will be released on September 15.

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Finishing
First
by
Sue
Dormanen



I got a letter from the government awhile back. It wasn't from the IRS or the unemployment office, two branches I've tangled with before. This was from the Department of Education.

'It has come to our attention that you have not completed the first grade,' the opening sentence read. Technically, that was true. Halfway through my first year I'd been skipped ahead to second grade. It gave me the creeps that anyone would still know about this, more than thirty years later.

'As it is now mandatory for all citizens to finish each of the elementary grades, you have been enrolled...' The rest of the letter went into detail about when and where I was to wait for the school bus on the Tuesday after Labor Day. It concluded with instructions to bring milk money with me. Surely one of those computer snafus. It really was addressed to me though, without even a typo in my name or street number. I scrawled 'Your Tax Dollar in Action' across the letter and stuck it up on my refrigerator to amuse visitors. I forgot about it.

It came up again at my six-month interrogation down at the unemployment office. I'd brought in my job search records to show I deserved an extension on my claim. Somehow it was taking me an awfully long time to find another job. I suspected my ex-boss at the newspaper wasn't giving me a great reference. The discussion got around to my education and damned if they didn't have a copy of that idiotic letter in my file. The interviewer was sympathetic with my explanation that it was obviously a computer error, but they couldn't do anything with my claim until I cleared it up.

I went home in a huff and tore the letter off my refrigerator. There was no phone number on it so I spent a frustrating half hour, long distance at prime time rates, trying to track down the records review office that sent the thing. The first few people I spoke with had never heard of the Every Grade Counts program and seemed to think I was some kind of crackpot.

Finally I got hold of the bureaucrat who'd signed the letter. I explained that I was a thirty-nine year-old college graduate. This did not impress her. "I already proved I know the alphabet when the school decided to move me up to second grade," I pointed out.

"The Every Grade Counts program is not primarily about mastery of the course work itself," she responded. "There are

certain social skills which are developed in each of the elementary grades. We now know the lack of even one can have far-reaching effects." I had a sinking feeling I was talking to the genius who'd dreamed up this brilliant program. "For instance," she continued, "your problems at your last job with the newspaper appear to have been mostly personality related."

I was floored until I realized she must have access to my unemployment file. I patiently explained that the problem personality at the newspaper had been my editor's.

"And how did your co-workers handle that?"

"My co-workers were a bunch of sheep."

"Ah." She sounded pleased, as if I'd proved her point about socialization. I tried to argue but she cut me off. "Thousands of citizens around the country have already benefited from EGC. Independent evaluation of our first year shows eighty-five percent of participants satisfied to highly satisfied with the results."

"That is the most asinine thing I ever heard," I finally yelled in the phone.

"Ah!" she chirped as I hung up.

The thing bothered me, more than it should. I remembered a remark I overheard from my older sister a few years ago when my smart little niece was doing so well in first grade. The school wanted to skip her ahead into second grade mid-year. "No way," my sister had said to her husband, not realizing I was listening from the other room. "That's just what happened to Chris and it totally screwed up her childhood." I hadn't realized that was the opinion in my family. And it bugged me that my sister took no blame for it. She'd started the whole thing by playing teacher with me so I already knew my ABC's and how to read a bit when I started school. First grade had been a boring let down.

It was true I'd been shy of the second graders. They'd all made their friends long before I moved into their classroom mid-year. I was a quiet kid anyway, already a bookworm. I took to going to the library during recess instead of out to the playground where I could never find much to do. In a way it set the tone for the rest of my school years. I was studious, an A student, which the boys seemed to dislike. Mom was proud

of my good grades, didn't expect me to be popular too. I didn't date at all in high school. Not that I'd had any great success in that department since. This last year or so I'd quit trying, let myself go, gained ten pounds.



Near the end of summer I saw an article on the Every Grade Counts program in the newspaper, about how great it was that our city schools were participating. The article mentioned a local mechanic and "a long-term unemployed woman" would be joining the program this year. I recognized a jab from my former editor. I wouldn't call nine months exactly long-term.

I still thought the thing was asinine by the time September rolled around. But some of my friends and relations who saw the letter on my refrigerator had put two and two together about the news story and a certain momentum of expectations seemed to be building. I hadn't gotten an unemployment check for weeks and I didn't have much else to do. It occurred to me that the experience could be interesting. Maybe it would make a good story. Maybe I could sell it to the newspaper.

The upshot was that the morning after Labor Day I got up earlier than usual and went through my closet, wondering what to wear. I didn't want to look like I was trying to dress like a little kid. On the other hand I didn't want to scare anybody with a suit and heels. I picked out a pastel yellow sweater and soft corduroy jeans with my best sneakers. I wasn't planning to wear any makeup; at the last minute I changed my mind and decided on just some eyeliner. By this time I was in a hurry and I stuck the tip of the brush in my eye, leaving a small brown blot floating on my blue iris. Then it went on overly thick, turning up at the corners like Maria Callas on stage. I rubbed some off with a tissue while I ran down the block to the corner of 2nd and Century, as per the letter stuffed in my pocket. I didn't want to miss the bus.

There was already a knot of kids milling around the corner and one mother standing guard. I stopped on the outskirts of the crowd. We waited. The mother watched me. She was alarmingly well groomed for so early in the morning, turned out in perfectly pressed linen. A would-be Martha Stewart. I looked at my wrist watch. No bus in sight. It occurred to me that I'd be better off driving myself to school anyway. That way I could leave early if this didn't work out. The problem

was, I didn't know how to find the school. The letter had gone into detail only about the bus stop. "Where do you go to school?" I asked an angelic redheaded kid near the edge of the group.

Before the child could answer the mother was alongside. "Remember, we do not speak to strangers," she hissed, laying a hand on the kid's shoulder. I backed away a few steps. Then I retreated down the block to where my car was parked in front of my apartment building. I got in and lit a cigarette. The bus arrived, the kids piled in and the sliding door slammed shut. I'd definitely made the right move by driving myself. It wasn't really a bus at all but a beat up old van, already overloaded. I started my car and followed as it pulled away from the curb. The mother made a note of my license plate.

The school van drove around the neighborhood making a few more stops, packing in more kids than you'd think possible. I trailed it at a discreet distance. After a bit it headed down the highway to an unfamiliar part of town. It stopped before a one-story building of grayish brick. The kids piled out and disappeared between the double doors. I sat in my car wondering if I was really going through with this. The grandmotherly van driver gave me an encouraging smile and wave as she drove away. "What the hell," I said as I got out of my car and walked toward the doors.

A hallway monitor looked at my letter and pointed me to the first grade room. I wavered in the open doorway. They'd already started roll call. I heard my name and answered "Here." The teacher looked up, startled by my voice. I took a few steps inside the room and handed her my letter.

"Take a seat in back, Chris," she said, very matter-of-fact. I saw there was one adult-sized folding chair behind the rows of knee-high desks. I sat. Roll call finished and Miss Brunell printed her name in block letters on the chalk board. I gazed at the alphabet border running above the board, a limp flag slouching in the corner, a shiny new world globe on a pedestal and dusty radiator under the windows. It hadn't changed much since the '60s, although a couple of computers, Macintoshes, were now prominently displayed. I only knew DOS.

Miss Brunell was easing into it with a music lesson. The song was "Getting to Know You." She sang it one line at a time, waiting for us to repeat each one after her. She had quite a pleasant voice. The rest of us sounded terrible. She spent a

long time on the getting-to-know-you bit, going around the room, asking each child to tell their name, how many brothers and sisters they had and if they had any pets. I gazed out the window, not expecting to be called on, but she included me at the end. As I spoke my piece I wondered what the kids thought of me. I made up a pet iguana named Itchy.

After getting to know you, it was break time. Miss Brunell handed out paper cartons of milk that had been waiting on the radiator. They were slightly warm, just like in the old Bill Cosby routine about first grade. I was dying for a cup of tea. I passed on the milk and asked the teacher if there was a coffee machine anywhere. She shook her head but said I could bring a thermos tomorrow if it was plastic, not glass. Then she announced recess and herded the kids towards the door. "Hurry up, Chris," she called over her shoulder. I grabbed my purse and followed them out.

Dead leaves like crumpled lunch bags plastered the playground. I looked around for a quiet place I could maybe have a smoke. I felt more awkward than in the classroom. The day was already hot and I felt a trickle of sweat break through my deodorant. I must have been out of my mind to wear wool in this weather. That beautiful, red-haired child I'd noticed this morning was crouched on the ground, staring at something in the dirt. I wasn't sure if it was a boy or a girl; I hadn't paid attention during the name game. "Look!" the kid pointed at the ground. I saw there was one late dandelion growing in the gravel.

"Pretty," I said.

"It's bugged," the kid stage-whispered to me. I stooped down and saw ants climbing the yellow spikes. The child pulled the head off the stalk and threw it at me. Must be a boy, I decided. "Eat it," he yelled and ran off, laughing like a maniac.

A bell rang and we filed back into the classroom. The teacher passed around a stack of alphabet worksheets. I raised my hand, holding up one finger. "You may be excused, Chris," said Miss Brunell. It was funny I remembered so well how all this worked. I walked down the hall to the lavatory and crouched to look at myself in the mirror above the wash basin. The smeary eyeliner and my bloodshot left eye where I'd poked the make-up brush made me look like I'd been on a binge. Which was not fair, as I'd had exactly one beer last night. I looked a lot older under the fluorescent lights. I found

my way to the nurse's office and told her I had to go home now because I felt sick to my stomach. It was absolutely true.

There was a message on my answering machine when I got home. It was a woman from the regional Every Grade Counts program office, asking how my first day had gone. She said she'd check back tomorrow.

Being out of work was one thing but not being able to make it through a day of first grade was really hitting bottom. I finished the six pack of beer in the refrigerator and it was still too early to go to bed. Although I knew I'd be sorry in the morning, I decided to call up Steve, the last guy I dated. We hadn't seen each other for more than a year but at one point we'd been pretty serious, even talked vaguely about marriage.

He was nice on the phone and I got kind of maudlin, asked him why things hadn't worked out between us. "I think I'm just more family-oriented than you are, Chris," he told me. "I want to have kids someday when the time is right. That didn't seem to be true for you. You really don't seem like the mother type."

I didn't admit it to Steve but I could see his point. Having kids never felt like a real option to me. I'd gotten pregnant once, almost twenty years ago. But I hadn't gone through with it. Even now I felt too childish myself for that kind of responsibility. After hanging up I realized what Steve probably meant was that I was just too old to start thinking about kids. And that was the truth too. I hadn't had a real period for over three months. There was no possibility I could be pregnant. So I was probably heading into menopause. I'd heard it starts earlier if you've never had a baby.



I had an actual hangover the next morning but I made myself get up and go back to school. I wanted to see that red-haired kid again. Kelly was his name. It cheered me up, just the spastic kind of way his hands hung off his wrists whenever he wasn't doing anything in particular. That day went better. We had art instead of singing. The teacher handed around colored construction paper and round-tipped scissors and the kind of water and flour paste that smelled as good as I remembered. I made a fortieth birthday card for myself. Kelly made a boogeyman mask with real boogers. I stuck it out the whole

day and reported as much to the EGC program woman when she called back. After that I was into the routine. I started leaving my car at home and taking the school bus every morning.

It wasn't so bad when you got used to it. Better than moping around the apartment doing nothing or going to a dead-end job writing birth, marriage and death announcements for the society page - talk about life passing you by and rubbing your face in it to boot. My unemployment checks started up again. My period did not.

Kelly and I hung out on the playground and drank tea together from my thermos. He really was a great guy. Better company than most men I'd dated and lots cuter. With his russet ringlets and fey blue eyes he looked a little like my sister and me when we were young. If I had kept that baby I'd conceived so long ago, he just might have turned out like Kelly. And I might have ended up like his mother: chipper, well-dressed, sure of myself.

I found out the Martha Stewart woman I'd seen the first morning at the bus stop was Kelly's actual mother, which was a shame. At first I'd daydreamed about getting to know his family, about being allowed to take him to the beach to build sand castles, to the science museum to visit the mummies, to DisneyWorld. All my favorite places. But I didn't have a chance with that woman.

The harder I tried to ingratiate myself with her at the bus stop, the more she gave me the evil eye. I retaliated by fantasizing about running away with Kelly. That felt creepy to even think about. All I wanted was to have him to myself once in awhile. But she was waiting on the corner every afternoon when the school van pulled up. So Kelly and I had the ride back and forth and recess on the playground. About an hour a day together, all told.

It wasn't enough, but it didn't take us long to become best friends. I loved his ladylike white skin and weird sense of humor and the way he didn't see that I was overweight and unemployed and a general mess. All that just didn't exist in first grade. He liked how good I was at pick-up sticks and the way I drew my eyeliner up at the corners and my stories about Itchy and the Duchess of Clouds. He said my real name was Christal Ball because I knew everything. He laughed his head off when I told him about hot flashes.

We both loved spelling and thought all the other subjects boring. During arithmetic Kelly slipped me a note that read 'F2.' He said it meant Friends Forever.

Things went pretty well until the Halloween party. I hadn't gotten a costume together so Kelly gave me his booger mask to wear. He had designed a whole creation for himself around a new term he'd just learned: Party-pooper. It really cracked me up. But just my luck, Kelly's mother was one of the parents who brought in treats for the party. She baked individual pumpkin tarts with each child's name in frosting. Just showing off. I heard her giving Miss Brunell the third degree about what I was doing there and suddenly I was too self-conscious to go on with the wild game of charades Kelly was leading. I slid my mask up on top of my head and smoothed down my bangs and walked over to make grown-up conversation.

"Kelly is so creative," I gushed, trying to warm her up. She was bent out of shape because he'd refused to wear the Barney outfit she'd bought for him.

"His name is Kellogg," is all she said. My god, the poor kid; imagine being named after corn flakes. He'd never told me. I was furious with the woman. I picked up a pumpkin tart in each hand. Neither had my name on it. I ate both.

"You fat pig," she snapped at me. So I kicked her on the shin. It couldn't have hurt that much with my sneakers on but she squealed like a wimp. I was sent home in disgrace. It was the only time that happened all year. I stayed out sick on Valentine's Day; I didn't trust myself.



When spring came Kelly's mom sometimes let him walk to the bus stop by himself in the morning. I started going earlier so I was sure to be there when he showed up. One day he got there early too. We decided to walk to school.

What I didn't consider until we were well on the way was that last part along the highway. The shoulder was narrow, not meant for pedestrians, and the rush hour traffic was too loud for us to talk. I tried to hurry us along but Kelly seemed to hang back. I kept getting ahead of him. Near the end I looked back and saw him so far behind he couldn't hear my shouts to catch up. I beckoned for him to hurry. He ran towards me

pumping his arms but didn't seem to move any closer. I stood frozen like in a dream. He was tiny in the distance and the cars and trucks were too close to him, going too fast. We didn't try that again.

I still felt bad about that walk when I ran into Kelly's mom a few weeks later in the Pick 'N Save. She was in front of me at the checkout counter with a box of corn flakes and a jug of non-fat milk. She turned and smiled like she was willing to let bygones go. I wondered if she'd heard about Kelly and me walking to school; I wanted to tell her I was sorry, that it wouldn't happen again. But then she spotted the six pack of Coors I was holding. She dropped the smile and turned her back again. I understood how she felt. She always seemed to catch me at my worst. Just yesterday I'd been in here buying non-fat milk myself and hadn't seen a soul I knew.



The school year ended too fast. The last day of class we had Oreos with our milk and sang that same Getting to Know You song we'd learned the first day. Miss Brunell handed out rolled up First Grade diplomas. Only mine was an official Certificate of Completion from the Every Grade Counts program. We autographed each other's scrolls. 'F2,' Kelly signed mine.

Afterwards on the playground Kelly twined his arms around my legs and butted his forehead into my thigh. "I'm gonna marry you when I grow up, Christal Ball," he said. The first thing that came into my head was the arithmetic. I'd be fifty-one when he turned eighteen and at that point he'd still need his mother's permission.

I slid to the ground and squeezed him hard, pressing my forehead into his, tracing the sweet curve of his ear with my finger, breathing him in. Then he was off and running down the sidewalk with the guys.

I hadn't told him I wasn't going on to second grade. I thought about next September, when the door slides closed and the bus pulls away with Kelly and I am not there. Already I could barely make him out in the distance, far off as my own childhood. "I'll wait for you, sweetheart," I answered at last, to no one in particular.



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This morning Martha sits in the kitchen, but not huddled in her usual place in the corner, staring at the red flowers in the wallpaper. She is crouched in the alcove by the bay window, her arms clasped around her knees, her head tilted up slightly. Her eyes are closed. The window overlooks most of the meadow where there are real red flowers, Blazing Stars and Bee Balm. She is trying to absorb the sun's golden rays through the window. I can sense the heat on her face. I take this as a good sign.

She holds a half-eaten banana in her hands between her kneecaps; the spotted yellow-black peels hanging down as if the banana is a bouquet. I take this as a second good sign. Bananas contain potassium, I say to her. I expect her to answer me and I am again surprised that she doesn't. She turns and looks right through me, as if someone was

unexpectedly at the kitchen door. I turn. No one is there. I inhale slowly and hold it. A slight breeze stirs outside. The hanging chimes on the back porch ring and I remember our childhood when we attended daily Mass. The breeze blows again and the chimes resonate. I return to reality and am no longer surprised. I am no longer concerned. I am now worried. Martha hasn't spoken in three days.

We did not have a fight this time. In fact it has been almost three months since we had a fight, and that one was minor, a discussion really, about who forgot to buy the lamb chops for dinner. We ordered pizza and laughed our way through the slices. Martha eats formally using a knife and fork, and dabbing her fingers on a napkin. I use my hands and bend the slice in two, letting the grease run on my fingers and then licking them. Lately, we have been very close, like we have returned to each other after a long journey. When we fought before she would at least grunt at me, and talk to people on the phone. It has now been over three months since our last fight if you count the four days she hasn't talked at all.

I fix coffee in the automatic drip percolator. She gave it to me on my last birthday. I asked her to buy the best but she said the best was too expensive and she couldn't afford it. So she got me this one. I understand about her money. I did not give her a present. I gave her money. That's what she said she wanted. That's what I gave her. I ask her if she wants coffee. She doesn't answer. My sense of shock is wearing down. My desperation is increasing. I drink more coffee than I should. I sleep less than I should. Martha has not spoken in five days.

I feel a bit reassured because our doctor says it is a mystery to him. I tell the doctor it is a mystery to me. The doctor and I agree about mysteries. We do not understand them. The doctor asks me if she fell or hit her head. I say no. When did it happen? he asks. A week tomorrow I say, on Friday evening. I came home just before five. She was sitting at the kitchen table with her head between her knees. I asked her if she was sick. She didn't answer. I asked her if she forgot to take the hamburger out of the freezer. Sometimes she forgets the simple things. Every Friday evening we make Sloppy Joes like we did when we were kids. We have hundreds of recipes for Sloppy Joes, some from as far back as our father who said he did not care about eating meat on Friday. I ask the doctor if there is any kind of medicine. He

says no. I ask him how long it will last. He hesitates and then suggests she will come out of it in a couple of days. I tell him a couple of days is too long. Martha has not spoken for six days.

Martha is sitting in the living room. Her face is quite close to the television. She has turned it on but there is only a black screen. The window is open and the curtains are waving. There is an early morning breeze. She is shivering. I slide her favorite blanket around her shoulders, the one she crocheted, and kiss the top of her head. I think she does not feel it. She is watching the television intently, holding her hand to her mouth as if she is about to gasp at something awful happening on the show, but it is still a blank screen. I see in the upper right-hand corner of the screen it is channel sixty-six. I forgot to change the channels back last night before I went to bed in my room. I usually switch to channel three or four where there is news in the morning.

I feel depressed now. Channel sixty-six is showing black, although late at night, sometimes into the early morning, the preachers are on that channel healing people. Most are lame with crutches and they hang the crutches over the stage. What about mutes? What can you hang? Maybe I will bring Martha to the show on channel sixty-six but there really aren't any miracles any more. Even though her hand is at her mouth I do not think she will gasp. I think she will continue to be silent. I want to gasp, or better, to scream. I want her to gasp and scream. It has been a week. I have fish for dinner instead of Sloppy Joes. What would our father think? I wonder if he is in heaven even though he ate Sloppy Joes on Fridays. Martha has not spoken for seven days now.

I tell the doctor she continues to be silent. I think he expects me to say she has spoken and then the problem will be gone. He asks me what she eats. I tell him simple foods: apples, oranges, bananas, finger food. She likes to drink water and she holds it in her mouth for several seconds before she swallows. She picks at the grapes. She holds one in her hand and studies it, rolling it between her fingers. She puts it on her tongue and brings it into her mouth. I do not see her chew it. How can a grape melt? She takes bread and breaks it into many small pieces and then swallows the pieces whole without chewing. The doctor examines her. He takes her blood pressure and says it is very good. He takes her temperature and it is normal. He tests her reflexes with his tiny hammer. He knocks on her knees and her leg swings. He

knocks on the back of her ankle and her foot jumps. All her reflexes are fine. Her body is well. Her mind is sick. He listens to her lungs as they expand and contract. He listens to her heart. What does he hear? He looks into her eyes. He shines a beam in with his thin pencil light. She looks into his eyes but I do not think she sees him. He asks her to open her mouth but she does not. I wonder if she can hear. He opens her mouth gently with two wooden tongue depressors, as if using thick chopsticks with two hands. He asks her to say ah but she remains silent. She has not spoken in two weeks.

Our doctor introduces us to the new doctor. Only I say hello. Martha looks at her like she is invisible. The new doctor is a specialist, a psychiatrist. She tells me that Martha has some condition. This condition has a long name. I try to repeat it but can't. The doctor explains that it is like a person in a coma but still awake. I tell her I know Martha has this condition. I tell the psychiatrist it is a very bad condition. I ask her if she knows anyone with this condition. She does not answer me. I never heard of this before, I tell her. I think I sound gruff. I think the new doctor has not had a case like this. I think the new doctor is taking too much time. She talks very slowly. She uses big words I do not really understand. I ask her to use smaller words. She uses the same words but says them even slower. Maybe she thinks they break up into two or three words if she says them slowly.

The new doctor sees that I am getting very upset. She puts her hand on my hand. Her hand is very cold. I think she is afraid because she does not know. I do not know and I am afraid. I guess she thinks she shouldn't be afraid. I tell her it is okay to be afraid in the face of mysteries. She pats my hand and then lets my hand go and takes Martha's hand in her hand. She strokes Martha's hand. She says hello to Martha. She asks Martha how does she feel. Martha does not talk to the new doctor either. She has not spoken in three weeks.



Martha is not in the living room watching the healers on the television and she is not in the kitchen and she is not in her bedroom. Her bed is made. Her dolls are lined across the pillows waiting for her when she returns. She is in the hospital. I come at six o' clock each evening and I ask the

nurses the same question. They shake their heads. I realize that it is useless to ask the question. If Martha had said something they would be happy and tell me right away before I ask the question. I see the unsure psychiatrist doctor is talking to the nurse tonight. They nod a lot to each other. I tell her I am lost. She tells me maybe I should take some pills too. I say why. She says I am depressed. I know that. Will the pills make me not depressed? Isn't my depression normal? I do not feel like talking about it. I wonder if Martha is depressed. Suddenly, I do not feel like talking. I shiver. I understand how easy it would be not to speak. Martha has not spoken in two months.



Martha is now in a new hospital. It is a big hospital made of red brick. It is far away from me in the mountains. So I only go on Fridays after work and stay until Sunday. I do not mind going. My house is very empty without Martha. I am lonely without her. I am glad I must work very late now since I have been promoted to assistant manager of the office. They are very kind to me. They tell me I should not work on Fridays but go to the hospital. I thank them but I work.

The big hospital is a nice place. I smell candles everywhere. There is a circular lawn with three statues of the archangels around the edge, and a big fountain in the middle of the lawn. It is late Sunday afternoon and many people are walking toward a geyser in the big fountain. On the top of the fountain the Blessed Virgin is ready to crush the serpent with her foot. I ask Martha if she wants to walk over by the big fountain to see Mary crush the serpent. I am hoping she will laugh and tell me how silly I am, like she used to when we were little, and I said these kinds of things all the time, but she doesn't say anything. I want to tell her I am now an assistant manager. Martha does not know about me any more. Martha has not spoken for several months now.



Each Sunday we walk around the fountain like we are on a merry-go-round. Today I see one of the Sisters walking toward us. She is smiling. She is wearing a brown habit but it

is not much of a habit. It has short sleeves and I can see the hair on her arms. Her tiny brown veil is bobby-pinned to her hair and I can see her gray hair streaked with thin white strands. Her hem is just below her knee but I can see her calves. She is wearing a crucifix on a chain around her neck. It should be a cross not a crucifix. I think of telling her this but I do not. It is not like before when we were children. She says the Mass is about to begin. I tell her I have a long way to go. She answers that we all have a long way to go. You must be there this evening, she says. She sounds as if she knows something I don't. She says goodbye to Martha, as if Martha is going away, but Martha does not say goodbye to her. It has been over a year. Martha needs a miracle. I wonder if Martha will ever speak again.

The priest is in the pulpit saying his sermon. He tells of Jesus curing the blind and healing the sick. How odd? People here are never cured. He is giving us false hope. I wish Jesus would come here now. I would walk up and tell him the doctors do not know what is wrong with Martha. The psychiatrists do not know what is wrong with Martha. The good Sisters do not know what is wrong with Martha. I do not know what is wrong with Martha, but He knows. Don't you know everything, Jesus? I will look Jesus in the eye and say all this to him. I am no longer afraid of Jesus. I will ask him when Martha will speak again. I want Jesus to be here to see Martha and have pity like He did long ago. Martha is a mute.

The Chapel of the Resurrection is small but it still smells like a cathedral, damp and still. The priest raises the host high above his head. He stretches his arms upward toward the diffused sunlight beaming through the stained-glass window. The host is transparent. I can see the stained glass window through the host. The altar boy rings the bells vigorously. The priest genuflects. No one is looking at him. Everyone's head is bowed. I am looking up. He genuflects again. I think I hear Martha moan "Oh."

I turn to her. She is looking at the altar. The chalice is now raised. It is golden with a large base studded with shiny stones. I say to Martha, do you still believe? She looks at me this time, not through me, and nods her head. The bells ring for the last time.

Martha has spoken.



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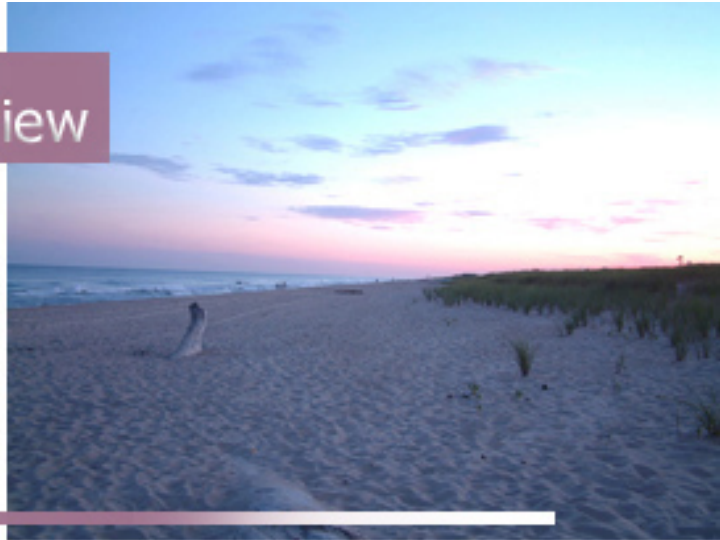
The Somerset Review

The Sunnerset Review

An Interview

with

Other Voices'
Gina Frangello



Other Voices is a semi-annual literary journal publishing some of the finest contemporary fiction available today. One of their stories was included in the Best American Short Stories of the Century anthology edited by John Updike, the publication has appeared in the Writer's Digest annual Top Fiction Markets list, and the journal receives about five hundred unsolicited manuscripts a month, of which only thirty-five are annually chosen. In April, The Sunnerset Review had the privilege of interviewing Gina Frangello, a staff member for nine years, now the Executive Editor.

We are happy to include here some brilliant anecdotes on reading, writing, publishing, and living in the world of the short story, and are grateful to Gina for sharing her experiences and views. At the bottom of the interview, several other staff members of Other Voices share some words with us as well, and for this we are also grateful to Steve Almond, Stacy Bierlein, JoAnne Ruvoli Gruba, Lois Hauselman, Mitchel Roberts McElya, and Barbara Shoup.

The Other Voices web site is at www.othervoicesmagazine.org.

The Sunnerset Review: So, who is Gina Frangello? How did you

come to be Executive Editor of OV?

Gina Frangello: I came to Other Voices in 1994, during my first year as a grad student in the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where OV has had office space since 1991. I had never been an English major during my undergrad years - in fact, I was a practicing therapist when I went back to school to study creative writing. I'd been writing fiction since grade school and had one story published in 1992, but I didn't know any other writers and I'd only taken a couple of workshops - they were good ones, one with Lorrie Moore in Madison, and they inspired me.

The thing is that in 1993, during the three months after I got married, I wrote a novel. I didn't plan to write it and I had no idea what to do once it was written, but that pushed me to study literature and fiction writing formally, not only to improve my craft but primarily to find a writing community. I knew Other Voices was at UIC before I went, but I'd never seen a copy. I became good friends with the two Assistant Editors at that time, Ruth Canji and Tina Peano, and they invited me to be on the Editorial Staff. Basically, to be a first reader.

Three years later, when Ruth and Tina finished their graduate degrees and got full-time teaching positions, they both needed to leave OV at once. They suggested to Lois Hauselman, who was a co-founder of the magazine in 1984 and the Executive Editor and who really didn't know me that well, that she consider me as their replacement. I still am not sure quite why Lois agreed, but she gave me a chance - I started with a co-Assistant Editor, but she left fairly soon too because she didn't have the time to devote, so since 1998, it's been Lois and me running the magazine together with the help of an amazingly diverse staff.

Lois was an invaluable mentor to me, and in turn she also appreciated the new perspective and enthusiasm I brought on board - we very quickly forged an exciting collaborative relationship that started taking OV in some new directions, as well as honing its existing strengths. That collaboration will continue to be a huge influence on OV even though Lois stepped down as Executive Editor following the release of OV 38 to devote more time to her own work as a writer and artist - she'll still be involved.

What good things do you have to say about the state of contemporary fiction?

The only thing that isn't good is the state of the market

financially, or I should say the state of the commercial publishing world. Independent publishing is thriving like never before in terms of the number of magazines and presses out there interested in publishing work that doesn't fall into the mainstream. Albeit there are limited markets for these venues because of how corporate the book industry has become, with big chains and media-driven book clubs basically dictating what people read, etc. I'm sure I don't have anything new to say about that - it's a common woe in the independent publishing community and I don't want to be a broken record.

What I'll say is that I think there's a lot more outstanding short fiction being written now than ever before, in part because of how accessible writing has become. That's the up side to the commercialization of the book industry - for example, Oprah probably has done more to get Americans to read women writers and writers of color - I'm talking literary fiction here - than any academic debate about what should be included in the canon could ever accomplish. It's a weird situation because on the one hand, it makes it harder and harder to get a commercial book deal - if your book isn't going to sell like *The Lovely Bones*, you can be out of luck. But at the same time, we're living in a climate where anybody can be a writer - it's not an elite privilege anymore.

I'm thinking of people like Jeffrey Renard Allen who Marie Hayes of *StoryQuarterly* referenced when she spoke to *The Summerset Review* - also Chicagoans like Joe Meno (*Tender as Hellfire and When the Hula Girl Sings*) and Don De Grazia (*American Skin*). These are hardcore working class guys - Don was a high school dropout who was writing about skinheads and violence and nobody in New York wanted to touch him. They were all terrified that he was so politically incorrect, which is pretty funny since his book is one of the most anti-racist I've ever read, and they couldn't get rid of him fast enough - they thought he was way too out there for the American public. Then his book got accepted in the UK and published here in the U.S. by Scribner's only after it was a sensation in England, and guess what, Americans loved it. It got rave reviews and got optioned for a film - it's a classic story of how the corporate publishing world is constantly assuming this state of fragility and idiocy of the American reading public that simply isn't true.

But the thing is, there are all kinds of these success stories, and luckily there are also enough lit mags and independent presses out there now to help support these writers who are putting out risky or edgy or politically volatile material. If they're talented, I really do believe that most of the time, they do end up getting

that “big break,” if that’s what they’re after. But the most important thing is that not everyone needs or wants that kind of commercial break. The indie writing community is a world in and of itself for a lot of writers and readers.

Can you go into a little of the history of the journal, how it came to be, how it has grown and in what ways? Is the journal connected to the English Department of the University of Illinois at Chicago?

Like I said, Lois was a co-founder of the magazine in 1984. The powerhouse behind OV in those days was her mentor, Dolores Weinberg, who used to be part of StoryQuarterly, actually, and was a writer too. Dolores really willed OV into being - she ran it out of her house and partially with her own money. After she passed away in 1990, another editor, Sharon Fiffer, helped Lois bring OV to UIC because Sharon was in the PhD program and teaching there at the time, and OV needed somewhere to go. UIC has donated office space to us ever since. We aren’t technically affiliated with them, and they don’t support us financially, although of course the donation of office space and some mailing and copying privileges is actually a huge contribution.

Our reciprocal relationship with UIC’s English Department is much higher now than in the past. In part this is because of writers like Cris Mazza, who is a Creative Writing professor at UIC and is also on the OV Board, who have advocated for us, and in part it’s because of a couple of grad students, like our new Assistant Editor JoAnne Ruvoli Gruba, who cross-over their involvement between the English Department and OV. They’ve helped us a lot - we’ve seen a lot of other journals that don’t have a clear “home,” so to speak, really struggle or even fold, particularly in this kind of economic climate. And we do things like offer internships and present at seminars for the Program for Writers to try to be an asset to the Department too.

But the truth is, we’re really still quite independent. It’s not a situation of institutional affiliation. They don’t pay any OV staff members a salary and they don’t have a vote - or want one - about what we publish. It’s just a relationship of mutual respect and UIC’s genuine desire to offer some philanthropic aid to the nonprofit arts.

Our growth has been significant in a number of ways. Part of it is our reputation and relationships within an academic community - besides UIC, we’ve had internship programs with Roosevelt University and I’m constantly on panels and presenting in

workshops everywhere from Columbia College Chicago to Northwestern University to Dalkey Archive Press, to AWP conferences. That community is vital to supporting literary magazines - students, professors, other editors. If you got ten magazine editors together in a room to compare their subscription lists, there'd be a lot of overlap of names from among this community. But that by no means is the only audience for lit mags. Things like our presence at book fairs, like Printer's Row here in Chicago, help us reach a wider audience. We also have more readings and events than we used to, all of which are free to the public, and we engage in as much marketing and advertising as our budget allows.

But the biggest thing when it comes to growth is, of course, the issue of distributors and subscribers. That's really what determines if a magazine can survive. We were hit hard when Fine Print went out of business, like a lot of magazines were. At that time, we weren't distributed by Ingram, and our circulation went down to something like 700 - which was really a moment of truth. This was the late 90's, and we were either going to become a much smaller magazine circulating in a small community of friends, or we were going to push and grow and try to appeal to a new audience. So our efforts were multi-faceted, from courting Ingram and making sure we got picked up, to having more vigorous marketing and renewal campaigns to increase subscriptions. Holding contests, doing Direct Mailings - we did all that, and we came out the other end by about 1999, with our circulation up to 1,700. We're not a huge magazine - we're never going to be the Paris Review - but we're comfortable where we are now, and we're financially in a position to tolerate and encourage further growth. A lot of this, I should add, was a matter of some good strokes of luck in 1999, where we kept winning awards...

Yes, Pam Houston's story being included in the Best American Short Stories of the Century anthology must have been such a boost for the OV staff. What other honors has the publication experienced, and what has been the staff response in receiving these?

Oh, it's huge. I mean, Pam's story being selected by Updike - none of us could stop laughing. Don't get me wrong, he's brilliant, I assign his books in every class I ever teach, but let's put it this way... I would not have expected John Updike to be a Pam Houston fan. You know, women writers are always chiding him for his portrayals of women - but Pam's story, "The Best Girlfriend You Never Had," was this totally honest chick story, and I mean that in the most wonderful sense of the word. It

was, like all Pam's work, an incredibly genuine, moving, well-crafted, tough story about what it is to be female, as a daughter and a lover especially. It was about male-female friendship too, which isn't a terribly common theme in fiction. It's just an amazing piece and we were thrilled enough when it was selected for both Pushcart and the regular Best American Short Stories 1999, edited by Amy Tan. When we found out about Best American Short Stories of the Century, we were over the moon.

The thing is, though, that honors like Best American Short Stories of the Century, come along once a century. Every year we're getting Illinois Arts Council Literary Awards and nominations from Pushcart editors and, even more importantly, writers who are calling and writing to tell us we had a major role in launching their careers. Just recently an editor from Dial Press told me that Other Voices is her favorite literary journal. She's young and just starting to be able to buy her own books instead of working under another editor, and she's asked us to refer writers directly her way because she appreciates our tastes and the talent we find. That's a major thing for us because so many of our writers have books and don't know what to do with them or simply can't get editors to even read them or don't have agents yet, and now we're able to recommend the most promising straight to Dial.

This is no guarantee of a book deal of course, but one of our writers, William Giraldi, who's only in his 20's, is in the process of negotiating with Dial as a result of a story this editor found in OV. I can't be more sincere in saying that as great as it is to be included in Best American Short Stories of the Century or on Writer's Digest's "Fiction 50" list or whatever, knowing that you played a role in spring-boarding a young, new writer's career is fifty times as great. It is, with no exaggeration, the most gratifying aspect of this kind of work, and I would venture to say that it is part of what every editor is in it for. It's certainly not for the money!

Does OV sponsor or participate in any literary events held in Chicago or other area? Perhaps staff members have participated in fiction panel discussions in writers' workshops, or have held readings at local libraries, colleges, or bookstores?

I already mentioned some of the things we do in academic circles, like panels and book fairs, but yes, lots of other things. We have release parties at arts venues like The Guild Complex here in Chicago, and we just held a reading at Barbara's Bookstore on Wells. Our most longstanding reading series is through the Park District of Highland Park, which is where Dolores Weinberg lived and where OV was founded. We do at

least three readings per year for them and they're all taped for North Shore cable programming. Sometimes we do things like stage a production of one of our stories, and we're also starting to go into some North Shore retirement homes to do readings. Oh, and in 2004, OV will be one of the sponsors of the AWP Conference held in Chicago, so look for a lot of programming in March of 2004, while the Conference is going on.

OV has been known to carry some cutting edge material in the fiction world. In your years at the publication, can you comment on any apparent trends in the way contemporary fiction is moving?

It's true that OV has a certain affinity for some cutting edge writers. We've published, for example, a number of writers whose books are published by presses like FC2, which is obviously a risk-taking press, they were even the subject of a Congressional debate! - so yeah, we do like that element of fiction, and we like stylistic play, definitely, when it's sustained and not self-indulgent or pretentious.

Ideally there should be a genuine impetus for why the story is told in some non-traditional way, not just the writer proving to his or her workshop or writer friends how clever he or she is. But when somebody truly has a new way to say something, that's a wonderful discovery.

I think more of our "risky" fiction, though, is not all that stylistically radical, it's more a matter of content. We don't shy away from stories that are grim or sexual or strange or even violent, again, if we feel that we're genuinely hearing something relevant and exciting - in the sense that a story is exciting when it hasn't been told in this way, by this person, a hundred times before. When the controversial aspect of the story isn't just there to shock or prove some hipness quotient. It has to feel real, it has to resonate emotionally - Lois and I both believe that.

We are still a fairly traditional magazine - we believe there has to be a story, a plot if you will, and there has to be a character we care about, even if the character is not loveable in any conventional sense. We are not really about form for form's sake - a story that's experimental in its form, even if it's genuinely smart, needs to move us or tell a story or have a character to latch onto, or it's going to do better at some other magazines than it will at OV. That's still a somewhat traditional notion of "story" - there are a lot of sources out there now that don't believe in the necessity of plot or even character in that conventional sense. That's not new, that's been going on in parts

of the writing community at least since Modernism.

So personally, I don't think fiction writing is becoming any more radical stylistically than it's been for the past century. It's more content that's opening up. Like groups of people, whether people in wheelchairs or Asian lesbians or working class Latinos - I mean literally any group you can think of - are able to write very honestly, even graphically, and in new forms about what it is to be part of a non-dominant population, and of course, this being fiction we're talking about, that kind of honesty is freeing for more than just autobiographical writers or writers dealing with issues of political marginalization.

This concept isn't new - look at Jean Rhys' Modernist writing about working class women or non-white women - but the utter frankness, the almost in-your-face guerilla tactics that writers across all boundaries have to play with now is something contemporary. The bottom line is that, whatever group a writer identifies with stylistically or politically, being able to pull off a genuinely innovative style without losing a relevant protagonist who can impact the reader is something editors love to find.

But OV is in no way heralding the demise of the traditional short story. That form is alive and well, and it's still what Other Voices is primarily known for.

Do you have a feel for what the biggest OV reader base is? Would it be writers looking to get published in major literary publications? Readers who just enjoy great stories? Students of literary writing?

I don't think most magazines have students as their prime subscriber base. I could be wrong about that, but students are often broke and also there are usually literary magazines floating around any Creative Writing department that they can read or borrow at their leisure. I think the biggest base for OV is just readers who enjoy good contemporary fiction - who like to see writers taking risks, but also expect some level of accessibility and readability and enjoyment. Many of our subscribers have been loyal to us for at least ten years. Of course all literary magazines have writers and writing professors on their subscriber lists. But I don't think this constitutes the overwhelming majority - otherwise there couldn't be as many thriving literary magazines in the United States today as there are. The world of professional writers is fairly small. The list of readers who also write primarily for themselves, and who maybe publish a story now and then but are first and foremost avid, engaged, dedicated readers of fiction is much larger, I think. I

think these subscribers subscribe for the love of it, not the hope of getting published.

In Contributors' Notes sections of popular literary publications, we've read all too often that the author has had short stories published in various places and is now working on a novel. While this, of course, is a noble desire and one reason literary journals exist is to provide a means of helping novels become reality, isn't there something to be said simply for the short story, that short fiction is more than just the proverbial 'stepping stone?'

I couldn't agree more. In fact, I've recently felt a bit demoralized by how little acceptance there is of this fact in the commercial publishing industry. It's harder and harder to sell short story collections by authors who don't also have novels, and many agents won't even consider collections by first-time writers. A Contributing Editor of OV, Stacy Bierlein, who is an incredibly talented writer whose work is, I believe, very marketable and also well-crafted and smart, is having a hell of a time getting an agent to take an interest in her sexy, fun, elegant collection, *A Vacation on the Island of Ex-Boyfriends*, simply because she isn't a novelist. These agents are praising her work, but saying they want to see a novel. I think collections are being more and more relegated to the independent publishing world, which is great for us but a real loss for readers who get their material primarily from the commercial houses, and a very big loss for the many brilliant writers of short fiction.

That said, there are always wonderful exceptions - look at *When the Messenger is Hot*, which is a recent hit in the commercial publishing world. And three members of the OV Board, Pam Houston, Aimee Bender and Steve Almond, have made their careers primarily as short fiction writers. So it's important always to keep perspective and not to become extreme in one's ire towards the New York publishing world. It's important to remember that most of those editors and agents love literature too and they may seem "big business" to those of us in the nonprofit world, but you know, they'd probably be making more money as attorneys or stockbrokers too - they're usually in it for the love of words, just the way we are.

What does Gina Frangello like to see in a short story, in its structure, style, and content?

I think I've already addressed a lot of this, but I'd add that both Lois and I are very prone towards stories that have a lot of scene vs. summary. We like dialogue, movement - things that take the reader outside the interior voice of a story for a moment,

particularly if the story is in first person, so that we can see a broader picture and draw conclusions for ourselves. For example, if a story is told from the point of view of a wife who hates her husband, but the husband never actually has any dialogue in the story, if we hear about everything he does from her point of view, we have no choice but to believe her that he's a jerk. I find that kind of situation too easy and even manipulative in some cases. I don't like to feel the reader is being forced to see something in a certain light.

Some voice-driven stories are wholly successful - Joe Meno is a writer who has carried this off very well in a number of pieces - but by and large I like to be able to draw my own conclusions rather than feel like I'm reading someone's diary. Likewise, in a third person story, I hate having the characters explained to me - so and so was the kind of person who . . . just have him act and speak and I'll come to my own conclusion what kind of person he is.

Lois and I have rejected many stories where the writing was lovely and the plot was compelling, but where the summary or explanation was excessive and felt claustrophobic to us. We don't always have the same views on fiction and don't always love the same things - which is good and the way we like it - but this is one point on which we usually agree. In fact, I think it'd be fair to call this an OV sensibility that many of our staff members share.

Again, there are always exceptions to any rule. Fiction is a subjective business - you never know what will hit you in the gut and just compel you to publish it despite it flying in the face of everything you say you don't usually like.

Do you have a few favorite premises that always seem to pique your interest? Can you talk about one story recently read that you fell in love with, and what it was about the story that made you feel that way? Also, how did you come to find the story? A friend's recommendation? Luck?

I'm a real sucker for female coming of age stories. In saying that, I also acknowledge that there are a lot of really poorly-written, overly sentimental ones that I reject all the time. But we've published a lot of mother-daughter stories, and a lot of stories about women in their twenties trying to cope with some ugly aspect of sexuality or family. As a matter of fact, we've published a lot of these same kinds of stories about boys and young men, now that I think of it. There's nothing like a young, fucked-up protagonist, in some ways, because we've all been there, it's

very universal. The challenge is in doing it a new way. We've already had *Catcher in the Rye* and *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and we can't just keep publishing them over and over again.

Recently, some of my favorite stories have fallen into a couple of categories: young boys struggling with their individual morality in wartime situations, and young women traveling overseas alone and struggling with their sexuality. In the recent issue, we have two stories about boys in war - one by Josip Novakovich who is also interviewed in that issue. I love his work and I loved the story even though we already had one, "The Mystic Branislav," by a new writer Michael Winter, which dealt with some very similar themes. We still couldn't resist, and so we ended up using the two stories to open and close the issue, which creates a kind of symmetry. Ha, now that I've said this aloud, I won't be able to publish any more stories like that for awhile! Though of course, it's certainly a relevant topic right now.

I have to say that my favorite story of the past few issues is called "The Unpardonable Crime of Love," by Jodi Daynard, and that it's about a woman whose older sister's adult daughter dies. It's the kind of story that I'd usually fear would be sentimental and maudlin, but totally isn't - it's beautifully elliptical and irreverent in a creepy, sad way, and utterly devastating in the end. Some of our staff members say I have depressing taste. It's true I have to struggle to get some lighter pieces into each issue. Lois always helps with that - she loves humor in fiction.

We've interviewed M.M.M. Hayes of *StoryQuarterly* in our last issue and asked her to name a few favorite literary publications. She mentioned many of the 'big guns.' (And, yes, she did include *OV*!) What about you? Would you have a few favorites and would any of them be smaller publications, perhaps underrated in your mind?

My favorite all-time literary magazine was probably the short-lived *Fish Stories*. They came out with four issues and then folded. They were based here in Chicago, and they garnered a Best American inclusion for a Tobias Wolf story. Personally, I respected their taste so much that I snagged up as many of their staff members as I could when they folded, and whenever somebody sends to the office with a cover letter mentioning a *Fish Stories* publication, I read their work myself instead of sending it to a first reader.

I really love the *Missouri Review* too. I've taught a lot of their stories. *Water~Stone* is a beautifully-produced journal that always captivates my attention and is intriguingly lesser-known

while also attracting some highly acclaimed writers, like Li Young Li. The current issue of Pearl has three of my favorite emerging women writers in it - one is Lisa Glatt, so really anything she's in. Of course I adore StoryQuarterly because they publish a lot of fiction writers whose work I already admire and their issues are fabulously fat and just pack an incredible amount of talent between the pages. I do especially love the all-fiction mags.

In Brendan Gill's *Here at The New Yorker*, he tells of the Fiction staff being bowled over when they received Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" submission. I'm sure OV has some 'stories' of their own like this. Can you share some examples and describe the reactions you saw?

I think the most striking example comes from a contest we held during the summer of 1998. I was living in Amsterdam at the time, so Lois was sending all our entries overseas for me to read. They were all blind submissions - only our intern had the cover pages with the authors' names - so Lois and I didn't know who we were reading. It was permissible for a writer to submit more than once as long as he or she paid separate entry fees.

Anyway, out of some 1,500 submissions, we ended up choosing ten stories to pass along to our final judge, Karen Karbo. Understand, we weren't using our larger Editorial Staff - Lois and I were reading every submission ourselves. And out of those ten stories, it ended up that three were by the same writer, Kate Small. The stories were so different from one another that, since we still hadn't seen the cover letters, we didn't suspect a thing. We sent them in - still without a name - along with the other seven stories, and Karen ended up choosing one of Kate's stories as the winner. It was about an African American housekeeper whose employer was dying of cancer, and it was the most lyrical, brilliantly-written story I have probably ever read by anyone who wasn't already absurdly famous. One of her other stories was about a bunch of street kids with Hepatitis C, and it was really harsh and hip and not at all poetic, but equally disturbing and gorgeous in its way.

Basically, the moment of surprise when Lois, Karen and I realized that three stories out of ten were all written by this same unknown writer, and that she'd won our \$1,000 prize, was really incredible. We were so thrilled to have "discovered" her - when we called her, the first thing she said about her winning story was "My workshop hated that story." It was just very exciting. That same year, she went on to win something like five other contests, but about a year later she wrote us to say how much winning our contest still meant to her and how it had been the

most important experience of her writing career because it happened at a time when nobody else believed in her work.

I think what stood out so much about that experience is that it really validated the fact that if you're truly good, your work will rise above the masses. Lois and I were reading blind - and even if we hadn't been, we didn't know Kate or her name - yet of some 1,500 pieces, every piece she submitted ended up in the final ten, and then the judge, a frequent New York Times book reviewer, agreed completely with our take on her talent, and then in the following year four other magazines felt the same way.

Sometimes in this business, one starts to wonder what the standards really are, if it's all just about the Editor's subjective tastes, what right we have to impose those tastes, etc. The experience with Kate brought home that there really is just raw talent, and that it is our privilege as editors to seek it and find it and bring it to the world.

In addition to our interview with Gina, *The Sunnyside Review* has also contacted some of the staff editors of *Other Voices* and asked them the following question: Aside from *OV* stories that have received any additional recognition, there must have been pieces that were favorites of yours, not having gotten the visibility they deserved. Would you be able to cite one memorable story having appeared in *OV* over the years, and provide an excerpt of it, as well as short commentary on what you thought most inspiring about the piece? This would serve to give a little extra honor to the author of the story, and allow readers and writers to get more of a feel for what *OV* likes.

Steve Almond writes about "Engagement," by Ellen Litman, in *OV* 36: The best task that a magazine like *Other Voices* can perform is to discover and foster young writers. And that's what they've done with Ellen. Her story just knocked me out. The language is startlingly original, beautiful, imbued with a sense of loss and urgent hope. She writes unlike anyone I've ever read, and she offers a perspective (that of a female Russian immigrant to America) that I've never encountered before. I'm certain she will soon have a book in the world, more than one, and *Other Voices* will have proved prescient, once again, in its apprehension of serious talent. An excerpt:

We still got annoyed at our boyfriends occasionally. For being too negative and not ambitious enough, for sulking and being selfish. But somehow those little annoyances didn't seem very important anymore. We were learning to work through problems the way Americans did. We studied Mars and Venus books about relationships and tried not to nag our boyfriends too much. They bought us little necklaces from K-Mart and took us to Lake Erie. Vadik found a better-paying job to support his new family. Kiril quit McDonalds and announced he was going to study computers. It was called life; it was called compromise. One day, we knew, we might actually get married. No American engagement rings, no long and elaborate planning. One day we might just do it.

Marisha was smiling at us, serene and unaware. We promised her to keep in touch. For the first time we were ahead of Marisha; for the first time we understood something she hasn't discovered yet. The evening air was fragrant, and dense, and filled with uncertainty. We walked away from "61C," dissolving in the Squirrel Hill flow: a couple with a rottweiler; a man in a "Go Steelers" T-shirt; two Orthodox teenagers, happy and awkward, holding hands.

Stacy Bierlein writes about "A Girl Becomes a Comma Like That," by Lisa Glatt, in OV 35: In every issue, there have been stories that really grab at me, that capture my attention as well as my imagination. These are the most rewarding moments for the staff of Other Voices - seeing these powerful stories in print, knowing we will return to them again and again. Lisa Glatt's story is one that I feel particularly drawn to. Glatt gets to the deep emotional truth of the main character. She writes with a raw and vivid honesty - the sort of deep truth I believe one is more likely to find in fiction than anywhere else. An excerpt:

On a Saturday morning in early December you are deciding what it is that you want. You want your mother healthy, you want a husband or at least a boyfriend or at least a date for Friday night. Right now though, you're in bed with one more man you barely know. He's sleeping, and you're wondering how to get out of bed without waking him. The two of you are on your sides, his soft crotch up against you. You're facing the wall, and his arms are wrapped around your body, his fingers intertwined, locked under your breasts. It feels good and suffocating at once, the position you are in, and you think that if this man were your husband he would know when you want him like this, bundled around you, and when you don't. But he's not, and he doesn't.

JoAnne Ruvoli Gruba writes: Your question was more difficult than I thought it would be. There are so many stories that I really adore. But O.K., if forced, I have one that typifies what I like about many stories in OV, although I have to also add that I think the magazine does a great job of offering very diverse stories in every issue.

Dana Mollin's "An Aria" in OV 30: The narrator is a blind woman who realizes that perhaps she has compromised her dreams of being a classical composer. It is the kind of story that takes many risks. It takes on the challenges of writing from the point of view of a narrator who is blind. How does that limit the choices of the writer? How does that look in language? What does it mean in the world? It also tackles writing about music which is elusive and abstract. Again, how does music translate into language? And it takes on the idea of wanting to be an artist against the odds. It questions the limits of this character's world - which are very specific and personal - yet opens the question to the readers' larger experience. Within all these layers, Dana Mollin also tells a dangerous, heartbreaking story. There's much at stake for the character.

If I wanted to spoil the ending for you, I'd excerpt the last two paragraphs, but here is one paragraph from the first page:

There is no bitterness. I hear and feel all I need to see. There is such a fuss made over sight; certainly there can be no advantage to seeing the homeless man in addition to smelling his tangy odor. The human voice betrays emotion quite readily; the sighted do not appreciate this because the visual is all encompassing. The voice is naked. It is ripe for interpretation. I can hear the voice of the homeless man on the corner and understand his desperation.

I would add that I think we have great interviews as well. And another thing I adore is the contributor's comments. When I read a great story I'm always a little disappointed when it is over, so it is an added bonus after reading an OV story to get that little extra from the writer.

Lois Hauselman, who has been at OV from the beginning with Dolores Weinberg, writes: My task is the hardest because I've read and published the most stories - twenty years worth! So... I choose Karen Karbo's story from Issue 6/7 because it's truly a masterful short story that stands the test of time, and because it resonates with a time in the life of OV that so captivated all of us when we discovered it. We were so impressed, we nominated her story "Death By Browsing" which went on to win the CLMP Award for Writers Under Thirty and we were all invited to New York to receive our awards and celebrate Karen's and OV's success.

So what captivated us? "Death by Browsing" is hilarious. A truly humorous literary story - with the humor emanating from deep inside, wonderfully drawn, believable characters - something very hard to come by, and Karen Karbo succeeded on every level. Just as you're marveling at Karbo's ability to write as if she's truly a Russian ex-pat, and laughing your head off, just like that she breaks your heart a little. It's a very delicate balance that few writers can maintain with authority, and when you come upon a story written with a Russian 'accent' that makes you laugh and cry and marvel at the author's ability to sustain that balance, you know you've got a winner. This excerpt is from the beginning of the story when she writes to her best friend back in Russia from where she and her husband, Yuz, had emigrated four months earlier:

Greetings, Cookie! I have some horrible sad news. First, I could not find that black and white Norma Kamali T-shirt dress you asked me about in your last letter. Also, dear Yuz died three weeks ago Sunday.

Los Angeles is perfect except the air and it caused him to suffer a heart attack while shopping on Wilshire Boulevard. The man on the News that morning had said 'Beware. Third Stage smog alert. Breathe only when necessary.' But they always say that, and you have to live, right? I did not realize it was eight miles to walk to Bullock's Half-Year Sale, and who could have known the bad state of Yuz's heart? The emergency ward doctors felt that decades of vodka tormenting his system were to blame.

It is no secret that my love for Yuz expired long ago, but he was my husband, and the people at the University allowed me time away to heal. It was marvelous. Everyday I spent visiting my friend Cricket, darling salesgirl of Trendsetter Sportswear at fancy downtown department store. You would love her, Lidichka! She is Miss Au Courante, straight from Vogue. With her tiny waist and saucy hairstyle she reminds me of you, only she is dark-eyed like an Armenian. She admires greatly my style of dressing and often asks my opinion on how to put together A Look. She says I have natural gifts for fashion and should be in Retail instead of teaching Russian to college students.

I would appreciate if you kept the situation of Yuz to yourself, as all those nasty black market girls, Irina especially, who tries to pass her cheap Polish lipstick off for Revlon, will be delighted to hear of my misfortune. All my love, Bella

Bob (Mitchel Roberts McElya - know on the rejections as MRM) writes: Over the years, I've sent on no more than 10% of the stories that come to me, and, though I'd be glad to claim mentorship of any of the OV stories, I've looked over the offerings and can't definitely say "This one lives because of me." Sorry. I can, however, tell you some of the things that make me send a story to another editor:

1. It must have an arc - go from one point to another in a clear way. Usually this is a journey that the protagonist helps the reader make.
2. It must not be a predictable arc. Surprises are rare, and valuable.
3. It helps to take me to a different place. The ethos, the specific detail of a time, a culture, a place are all interesting to me.
4. It must make something happen. The action can be overt, or it can be a discovery of character that illuminates the story. An extension of this is that the story must not stop, but end.
5. It helps if I can like at least something about the character.

Those things the writer's workshops and magazines tell you about spelling and punctuation and honoring the magazine's requirements and cover letters and SASE's and proofreading and so on are things I notice - and they may set my jaw on edge as I go through if they're terrible, but they don't, after all, stop a fine story from getting through (though, honestly, I can't think of more than one or two that have worked in spite of those problems).

It has been a joy to be a small part of this! I hope to be doing it for another twenty years.

Barbara Shoup writes: I met Michelle Brooks recently, while teaching a writing workshop in Ann Arbor. "Ways of Pulling a Person Out of the Water" (OV 26) was the first of her stories she ever saw in print, she told me. She'd broken her toe that night, and she'd gone to a bookstore hoping it would make her forget about the pain... and there was Other Voices with her story in it! She limped over to look at it, she remembers. She even saw someone pick up the magazine and leaf through it. "I wanted to yell, 'I'm in that!'" she said.

I remember loving the story, which begins:

If you asked Elana, and you wouldn't because you don't know her yet, this is how she would describe herself: she's money before you spend it, all possibility and no commitment. She's working hard not to reveal anything. Right now, she's Pledging her table until it gleams. This activity has been predicated by a man, of course, one Greg Rivers, whom she met in the usual way, through a co-worker. She wants everything to be perfect, because that's how she is.

Cleaning her apartment in preparation for Greg's arrival, Elana takes care to hide "the special toothbrush that she uses to throw up with." That's as close as Brooks comes to telling you that she's bulimic, yet Elana's illness is present in every act of self-destructiveness and unhealthy control that carry her through to the end of the story when you realize she's nowhere near getting better. After unpleasant sex with Greg who finally appeared drunk, too late for dinner, she remakes the bed "... focusing all her concentration on getting the corners completely tucked in. When her hair spills over her face, the dark roots are visible in the dim light."

"Ways of Pulling a Person Out of the Water" is a lesson in the use of subtle detail, in trusting the reader to make meaning of jagged bits of objects, memories, conversations, and in proving the truth of Poe's dictum: "A short story should be written for the sake of the last sentence."

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The Summerset Review



It's An old Joke

Whatever happened to Daddy, I ask my mother one morning.

Getting two bowls out of the cabinet, she says nothing.

So I repeat the question. Your husband, my father - whatever happened to him?

He forgot the way home, she says. She sets the box of cereal before me.

What?

He went out for milk and never came back.

Oh, I reply. I understand. And satisfied, I chomp on a spoonful of dry corn flakes.

OFF DUTY

Entering the bar, the soldier makes note of the women in the place. Aware that he is in enemy territory, he proceeds with caution, hoping to avoid the blue-eyed landmines threatening to rip his pride from under him, scattering it like shrapnel, raining down from all sides.

YOUNG LOVE

She was cute and in his seventh grade math class. She wore white bobby socks and had dark pigtails with ribbons. Sometimes he gave her candy or did her homework.

Before school ended for the summer, there was a dance. He was there. She was there. They danced four times, but no slow ones.

At the end of the evening, he asked if she would let him kiss her.

Yech, she said. I don't think so.

ANGRY WOMAN TO LOVER

Yes! You're right! My period started today. But believe me, that has nothing to do with this!

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The Somerset Review

Doctors



by

Linda Boroff

"I think Dr. Ritter hates Berkeley," I said at last, to fill a silence.

"Then what is he even doing here?" Brigit twitched back her long brown hair with a little shrug of annoyance.

"I don't know," I said.

"Maybe he needs a change. Like I did." Brigit glanced sidelong at her boyfriend Tony, who winked. They had just moved into the flat across the hall in our gray Victorian, a block from campus. My roommate, Cherie, believed in getting to know one's neighbors, so she had invited them to dinner. Thus, I now knew that Tony had done time in Georgia for robbery, burglary, and car theft. And that Brigit had run away from her studies at Georgia State with this prize catch.

Brigit wore a short black skirt, scuffed loafers and no hose, revealing perfect legs, a grimy band-aid barely clinging to one knee. Though her ratty blue angora sweater looked as if it had

been plucked from a Salvation Army bin, it did not conceal the fact that God was paying plenty of attention when he put her together.

Tony was about thirty, a tall, lanky blond cracker with amused, larcenous blue eyes; an immaculate dresser and pathological liar who had also developed the bad habit of bigamy. For Tony, the law just kept breaking like a rotten shoelace. Neither Tony or Brigit had any source of income, but masterful shoplifting kept them well provisioned.



I was nearly seventeen and on my own for the first time. Two months ago, I had arrived in Berkeley on a busload of Vietnam antiwar protestors from Santa Monica. When I called home to announce that I was staying, my mother did not try to dissuade me. I had joined a crowd at school that drank, used drugs, and had sex. I was truant and had been caught forging attendance excuses. Time and again, I stayed out all night. My best friend, Erin, carried on with a married man. After school, Erin and I would get into her alcoholic mother's vodka and call up boys and men, even teachers. Like my absent, profligate father, I was dark-eyed, curly-haired, and argumentative. Infuriating.

From day one, Berkeley had burst upon me, overwhelmed and embraced me. This was not "another Berkeley," or "a little Berkeley." This was the real thing. Standing before Sproul Hall in a crowd of protestors, I looked up the stairs to its Greek colonnades with a euphoric premonition that my life was at last beginning.

A week later, I was broke, hungry, and disheveled from sleeping on the sofas and floors of chance acquaintances or in doorways. Hanging out on Telegraph Avenue, I met Cherie, who had an apartment to share. She had flunked out of nursing school and now worked part-time for a local doctor, using the skills that she had been able to master, such as presentation of the examining gown. When a similar job opened up with Drs. Ritter and Guyton next door, she recommended me.

Pale and doughy, with long, auburn hair, Cherie was obsessed with Iran, which she called Persia. Evenings, she would often

bring home some hesitant Farhad or Mohammed recently arrived in Berkeley to study engineering. The Mohammeds taught her the Farsi lovemaking vernacular - pet names for genitals and body sounds and positions. Bursts of giggles emanated from Cherie's bedroom all night long, sounds of spanking and sex. Koofts and koohts. Lying alone, I would plug my ears.

My new bosses had little in common besides the M.D. after their names. Dr. Guyton was in his early fifties, tall, with the regular features, graying temples, and deep blue eyes that I associated with aristocracy. By contrast, Dr. Ritter was lean, angular, and as flat as his native Nebraska plains. Though not short, he was delicately boned, with thin, translucent hair, as if to economize on essential minerals. Dr. Ritter called himself "an old-fashioned conservative." Whenever his skeptical, measuring gray gaze fixed on me, I would straighten my back and mentally examine myself for indolence, mendacity or other moral infections.

Dr. Guyton's father had been the discreet, trusted physician of Crockers and Stanfords. Now, Dr. Guyton the son was a prominent pacifist, who donated his services to antiwar rallies and the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic. His patients - booted, sandaled, and tie-dyed - sprawled wide in the waiting room, redolent of incense and pot, navels defiantly exposed, armpits subversively bushy.

Dr. Ritter's mostly elderly patients huddled suspiciously apart, fidgeting on straight-backed wooden chairs whose upholstery was a hard, flat pad of green leather. With each passing moment, they seem to intensify in Republicanism, bristling with Elk's Club and American Legion insignia. The wives clutched their handbags as if they contained atomic secrets.

Most days, the two sets of patients merely stared at each another, perhaps seeking some common denominator. That certainly wasn't their maladies: Dr. Guyton's patients suffered the ravages of excess: hangovers, pulled muscles, sex-induced rug burn. And of course venereal diseases of a dizzying variety. Dr. Ritter's patients endured all the ills of aging: heart disease, cancer, arthritis, diabetes. None of this helped their dispositions when they were forced to wait by the hour, a captive audience of those who were bringing the nation to the verge of chaos. Because the one thing the doctors did have in common was that they both ran late. By early afternoon the patients were hopelessly stacked up, scowling, sighing, and craning their necks to glare at me, and at Paula the nurse,

hunkered down beyond the reception window.

Tall and still childishly awkward, I admired Paula's lithe, sylphlike figure in her dazzling white uniform, her neat, dark hair tucked into a bun. A wingswept, snowy cap crowned her delicate features like the headdress of some classical goddess. And she did seem almost deific as she flicked the syringe deftly to purge the air bubbles, or drew blood with carmine precision. Or handled Robert Brand, Dr. Guyton's sickest heroin addict.

"Robert," Paula sought and held his eyes. "When was your last fix?"

Robert blinked, head bobbing, unshaven, lips twitching downward. I thought guiltily of Emmett Kelly the clown.

"Couple days ago."

"Okay." Paula patted his shoulder. "I can give you something to help you feel a little better." Robert had lost the ability to keep himself clean. His pants were stiff and creased with dirt, his bare feet blackened. Dull brown hair hung lankly down his shoulders. He stared out from deep sockets, dropping his eyes quickly if they met mine.

"His disease is extremely virulent," Dr. Guyton would say. Dr. Ritter's lemon-sucking expression betrayed his opinion of the disease theory of addiction.

"Dr. Ritter worries what Robert might do if he gets really desperate," Paula told me. "Plus, his patients are afraid."

"Oh, Robert isn't the only one Dr. Ritter's patients complain about," I said. "Did you see those two girls with their heads shaved?"

"They're in some cult. Anyone can get sick, Katie," she said at my shudder of distaste. "Dr. Guyton is sure the little one has leukemia, but he wants to run more tests. She thinks she has mono. Doctor says she won't live out the year."

I was becoming accustomed to the presence of death, which had once so awed and terrified me. Death was not only abroad in Vietnam, exploding in gouts of earth and blood; it was also a quiet, unobtrusive element of office routine, a pencilled notation in a chart. But here, people didn't exactly die; they "expired." Several patients had expired since I came, people I had greeted and chatted with.



"Katybird, I need you to help me out." Eyes teasing and bold, Tony accosted me in the dim entryway as I returned from work. Out of breath in the chilly twilight, I slung my backpack onto the floor.

"What's the matter?"

Tony hung his head in sham distress.

"I've gone and got me a case o' the clap."

"Well, you need to see a doctor," I said. Tony evaded my glance. "It's not fatal, for God's sake, Tony."

"Can you boost me a few pills then? Come on, they'll niver miss it."

I drew back.

"Tony, a few pills won't cure you. You need a whole supply and a shot too."

"Where am I supposed to get that?"

"The free clinic will treat you for nothing. They just don't want you infecting other people."

Tony's eyes narrowed, but he grinned quickly and followed me into our apartment. Cherie looked up.

"What y'all lookin' at Shay-ree? You better watch out, I git with you they'll have to tape your eyeballs in." Tony lit a cigarette, and I noticed that his hands were trembling. "I'm ashamed of myself," he said suddenly, and began to cry in dry, racking hiccups.

"What have you done?" Cherie did not wait for an answer, but dashed across the hall, leaving me alone with Tony.

"Katie, I always did like you," Tony said. "You got half a brain. Now that Shay-ree is the dumbest thing God ever slung guts in." He pointed at me with his shaking cigarette. "Y'all think just once in your life you find something that won't let you down. But love's a sucker's game. Only time trouble comes is when you forget that one thing." He rose and took one last,

deep drag, then stepped on his cigarette, backed out of the door and vanished.

Moments later, Cherie reappeared with Brigit, wiping her swollen face with a bloody towel. He had knocked out half a tooth, broken her nose and blacked both of her eyes. Brigit suddenly seemed as fragile and helpless as one of Dr. Ritter's old ladies.

That night, Brigit moved in with us, and we took turns nursing her. Cherie called Brigit's parents in Georgia the next morning and explained their daughter's situation in terms vague and reassuring enough to do credit to a team of diplomats. I made several follow-up appointments for her with the doctors, and her injuries soon healed, leaving her with a slight lisp through the broken tooth that was not unappealing. Tony hung around town just long enough to intercept and cash the check Brigit's parents sent to cover her medical expenses.

Brigit adapted quickly to life on her own. Minus Tony's vigilant oversight and censorship, she chattered freely; spinning tales by the hour while Cherie and I listened, rapt. Her lovers had ranged in age from eleven to eighty and included rock stars, politicians and CEOs, though she relished the casual pickup as she would an olive or a pepper - which Tony had been, a spicy felon. Embarrassed to confess that my entire sexual experience consisted of a few inept, drunken copulations, I would nod knowingly at Brigit's stories, as if I too understood the deepest ways and desires of men.

The doctors alternated Saturdays, and I arrived early to open the office, tidy the waiting room, and make coffee. This being lenient Dr. Guyton's weekend, I had slept a little later. As I walked down the building's dim, empty hallway, Robert Brand suddenly loomed up, a tormented soul who seemed to have wandered in from Torquemada's dungeon or the cellar of the Doges' Palace. My heart hit my ribcage like a bird hitting a windshield. He must have slipped into the building behind me

"Dr. Guyton left me a prescription." Robert's reddened, watery eyes wandered in their sockets and his sour breath came in pants. I didn't believe him for a minute. Everyone knew that the office maintained a supply of painkillers, along with the prized triplicate prescription forms required for Percodan and morphine. Only I stood between Robert and all the dope in the world.

Dizzy with panic, I opened the waiting room door, and Robert

pushed in ahead of me. Together, we searched Dr. Guyton's dim, mahogany-paneled office, the air quiet, cold and stale, the desk littered with papers and medical journals. Hands shaking, I dialed Dr. Guyton's number.

"Robert is here. He says you left him a prescription."

"Oh damn," I heard stretching and yawning. "I'm sorry, I forgot. I'll be right down." It was then that I heard noise coming from one of the examining rooms.

"Stay back," Robert said, sheltering me with his body. He must have seen his chance to make up for the scare he had given me. Flattening himself against the wall, he stole down the hallway. After a moment's hesitation, I followed.

"Robert, we should call the police," I hissed. But it was too late. He grabbed the knob and threw open the door.

Brigit's feet were in the stirrups of the examining table. Before her was Dr. Ritter, wearing his lab coat and stethoscope, his pants deflated around his ankles. The coat, displaced by what must have been vigorous motion, had ridden up to reveal surprisingly muscular buttocks of the purest white. I noted, before pulling Robert out and slamming the door shut, that an examining table is perfectly configured for sex with a standing man of about six feet in height. Racing to get out of the office, Robert and I collided in the doorway, and it was either that impact or the laughter I was unable to stop that gave me a nosebleed.

For the next few days, I walked about in a mild state of shock that was not unpleasant. Only the week before, Dr. Ritter had called me in to ask if I were using drugs. I seemed lax, preoccupied. "You're in a fog," he accused. Indignantly protesting, I had burst into tears that continued even after Dr. Ritter became flustered and waved me out of his office. I did not know how to convey to him my sense of abandonment, my growing realization that neither of my parents seemed to miss me, or care to see me anytime soon, if ever.

Now, perhaps concluding - quite rationally - that he had little to hide from me, Dr. Ritter began to call me into his office frequently, close the door and interrogate me about Brigit. At that age, I could not have comprehended the cruel power that erotic love can wield over people who have disciplined and denied themselves throughout a lifetime. All I knew was that Dr. Ritter was held pitilessly fast in the toils of obsession. And I did sense that his love had less to do with its object than with

his own elemental nature. He thirsted to know every detail, what foods and music Brigit liked, what clothes she needed. He passed me a couple of discreet packages which turned out to contain costly lace underthings and a delicate gold bracelet. When I mentioned Tony, Dr. Ritter waved the name aside as he would an insect.

"He isn't fit to be in her presence," said Dr. Ritter. He growled and clenched his fist. "He'd better stay away." At other times, his affect was dreamy - the very behavior he had found so troubling in me. But Dr. Ritter was indeed drugged, with eros. He wondered aloud that I was so casual about sharing a home with Brigit, his fondest desire. Her power over him was total.

Dr. Ritter also began to take an interest in Robert Brand, the heroin addict. This too was unsettling, as if he had bounced to the opposite extreme out of misplaced principle or loss of control. Perhaps he now understood, even identified with Robert's addiction, his disease. Dr. Ritter grew sideburns, always a troubling sign in a middle-aged man. And beneath his lab coat, I spotted one day a paisley turtleneck. Dr. Guyton saw it too, and shared with me a tiny indulgent smirk. But more often, Dr. Guyton observed his partner now with a faintly worried, quizzical look.



When I arrived at the office on Dr. Ritter's Saturday, he leaped from behind his desk with a shout of greeting. At the sight of me, his face fell. Brigit had stood him up. He sank back into his chair and put his head in his hands.

"Forgive me, Katherine," he said. "Brigit has been through so much. You and I both know she desperately needs a protector. And she's still in danger. She's very self-destructive, you know." He rose and paced. "It's only a matter of time..."

I stood dumbly staring, a silver roll of EKG tape unwinding from my hand.

"Dr. Ritter," I said at last, with an odd, conspiratorial thrill, "maybe Brigit doesn't need a new ... relationship right now. After all, she just broke up with Tony."

Dr. Ritter gazed at me in disbelief.

"How can you say that? A new relationship is exactly what she needs. A healthy one. Some stability in her life."

I turned away and began to load the machine, wondering in what solar system an adulterous affair with a man more than twice her age could be construed as healthy or stable. But in fact, stability seemed to be in short supply wherever I looked. Berkeley's zaniness had lately turned down a darkening path; even the numbers 1969 looked ominous. Later that week, I awoke to the radio blaring. One of Cherie's Mohammeds had turned it up loud: "...with the Alameda and San Francisco County Tactical Squads standing by, but not to intervene unless an emergency situation develops."

"What the hell?" I stood swaying at the door of my bedroom.

"A rally," said Mohammed, eyes flashing, "to defend the park of the people." I stared incredulously, recalling a lot of runty trees, raw dirt and splintery wooden trellises near Dwight and Bowditch. "I feel the issue to be a great one," he said. "Freedom against oppression."

"But doesn't the university own the land?" I yawned.

"No," said Cherie from under the covers. "The people own the land."

Mohammed shook his radio at me. "You are coming to the rally?"

"No," I said. "This isn't a game, Mohammed. They'll bust your head."

"I know police is no game. I come from Iran."



Just before noon, I left the doctors' office to walk home for lunch. The air was warm and moist, the bosomy hills above the university deep green. Along Telegraph Avenue, shop windows were boarded with plywood. Traffic was being rerouted to accommodate the police, staging up and down Bancroft. I noted Alameda County Sheriffs, Berkeley, Oakland, Walnut Creek and Concord police, and California Highway Patrol.

When I opened our apartment door, the first thing I saw was

Tony's profile, sharply defined against a tortuously lettered psychedelic poster on the wall. Beside him stood Brigit, looking extremely uncomfortable. Dr. Ritter, abject and ill at ease in his lab coat, was facing them both, his hands hanging awkwardly at his sides.

"Oh, Katie," Brigit lisped over her shoulder, "Kyle stopped by." I had never heard Dr. Ritter referred to by his first name.

"Brigit, you have to come away from this," Dr. Ritter said. "You deserve a decent life."

"She don't want no decent life," said Tony. "Don't waste your time, Kyle."

"You have to understand," said Brigit. "Tony and I are practically married."

"But he's a criminal. He beat you."

"She done gimme the clap," said Tony. "What in hell was I supposed to do?"

"I did," said Brigit. "But Tony forgave me. We forgave each other."

"I can't allow this," said Dr. Ritter.

"Look, Kyle," said Tony. "You seem to be a good guy. I don't want to beat the shit out of you, because I know what she's like. But I will beat the shit out of you if I have to. Brigit wants you to leave her alone."

"I love you, Kyle, I really do," said Brigit, "but I'm back with Tony now." Dr. Ritter sank to his knees with a groan.

"Dr. Ritter," I said in desperation, "please, come away from this." I reached out. "Justwalk away." Dr. Ritter groped for my hand and seized it fiercely, nearly pulling me over as he stumbled to his feet. Wordlessly, he straightened his shoulders and shrugged to adjust his lab coat. I opened the apartment door and he limped through after me, still holding my hand.

Outside in the hallway, he stopped. "Katherine," he said, "I have lost myself." He searched my eyes.

"Not at all," I said, using the same tone of voice that he used with anxious patients. I nudged him through the outside door.

"I've tried to lead an ethical, educated life. And this Tony is no

more than a vicious outlaw.”

“Some people,” I said, “prefer outlaws.”

“Then I’ll be an outlaw too,” said Dr. Ritter. He hoisted two imaginary pistols from his belt loops and shot them into the air. “Bang bang,” he shouted. I snickered involuntarily. Dr. Ritter looked sadly at me, his hands still guns. He glanced down at them and his shoulders sagged.

“Dr. Ritter,” I said, “you can’t even imagine what goes on in Brigit’s head.”

“I guess not,” he said. We had reached the campus, and Dr. Ritter looked around as if he had just awakened on another planet. “What’s going on here?”

In Sproul Plaza, the crowd was already packed shoulder to shoulder, gaudy and half naked in the noon sun, heads and raised fists a blur. Unintelligible words resounded from the microphone on the Sproul steps, bouncing off the student union. Suddenly, a deafening shout arose, and the crowd boiled over, surging toward the park like a tsunami, overtaking and jostling us. From the vanguard came a series of sharp pops and brief, puffing explosions, accompanied by high-pitched screams and hoarse yells of outrage. Seconds later, my eyes begin to sting. The tears welled swiftly, rolling down my face and I gathered them with my tongue, the way I had as a child. The noise increased, an irregular staccato of explosions and ululating falsetto shouts.

Between Durant and Channing, Dr. Ritter and I encountered a full and panicky rout, a phalanx of helmeted, goggled tac squad in hot pursuit, nightsticks flailing. Fearful of being trampled, we turned and ran with the crowd, jarred by fleeing bodies. I heard more volleys, and gas canisters writhed at our feet. People picked up the hot canisters and hurled them back toward the police.

Ahead, the tac squad surrounded Sproul Plaza, and I saw that we were trapped. I wondered vaguely why the police had left the crowd no escape, when they desired nothing more than to be shut of us. The crowd ran straight at the encirclement, its momentum carrying Dr. Ritter and me along, lurching helplessly against one another. After a brief, confused moment of contact, the mob flew apart in twenty directions. The police were at our heels, moving faster under all that equipment than I would have believed possible. If they caught somebody, they beat him. People would advance, shouting and throwing rocks.

When the police charged, the people would scatter, and so it went.

Two policemen at the base of the Sproul Hall steps were kicking a man so hard that one lost his balance and grabbed for the other's shoulder to steady himself. Peeking through the crowd, I saw that the victim, curled up and writhing, was Robert Brand, our addict. Trying to shout, I must have hyperventilated, because I suddenly became dizzy and staggered backwards into a sapling.

When my vision cleared, I saw the police hauling Robert up the Sproul Hall stairs. Slightly below them charged Dr. Ritter, taking the stairs two by two. When the police reached the top, the doors opened and they dragged their prisoner inside, Dr. Ritter following. There seemed to be a nimbus of light encircling his head, but perhaps that was only the sun reflecting against the smoke and gas.

Robert Brand survived his beating only to expire weeks later of an overdose. Dr. Guyton, Paula and I wept openly at the news and, after a moment, Dr. Ritter joined in. Brigit and Tony soon returned to Georgia, and I never heard from them again. But the fact that they might still be out there, coupled with the fact that Cherie eventually obtained a medical degree, ought to make everyone a little more cautious.

In time, I qualified and enrolled at the University, venturing back into the good graces of my family with the trepidation of an early polar explorer. I was declared "cured" of my immaturity, as if it had been a transient infection. But residual traces persist to this day, just as the unrequited love of Dr. Ritter must have left its own elemental ache throughout the remainder of his life. Sometimes, walking down Telegraph Avenue, I seem to hear somebody calling my name in a mocking southern accent. Turning, I see nothing.



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The Summerset Review



Jogging in place, rubber thumping and pumping on tar, a woman waits for the groaning, straining security gate to spring, to swing open. She tucks the magnetic key card back into her performance nylon ripstop pocket, marsupial style, but with Velcro.

Controlled breathing: in and out, repeat as necessary. Huff, puff. With a swoosh and a whoosh, she's through, a blur of bright royal blue jacket with day-glo green safety stripes over black tights, a uniform of sorts. The headband is optional but the ponytail is not. Streaky blondy, maybe dyed. Highlights.

A new Mercedes wagon - Herr SilverDiesel - sneaks in behind her and zooms by before the gate swings back and clangs shut; somebody's visitor, snaking her cycle. It also splashes her slightly, tearing through a puddle. Her compressed mouth tightens even more, neck sinews straining like suspension cables, which they are. This wouldn't happen if the Homeowner's

Association had kept the gatehouse guards, the security personnel, who were cut to save money. (Plus, it was hard to even find anyone at that rate who could pass the urine test.) Downsized, as they say. More accurately, outsized. (Stripped of badges and guns, fired, replaced by infrared clickers and plastic cards. No more guard leaning back in the rolling chair, and they've put reflective plastic over the guardhouse windows - to fool the intruders? One wonders. The mirrored surface, the same smoky tone as her angular sunglasses, her extreme sports eye-shield, has begun to bubble and peel unattractively.) The offending wagon picks up speed and squeals around a bend, much too fast. The speed limit is 10, and there are still private police, "rent-a-cops," to ticket offenders, which she wishes they would do right now.

This is her complex: many matching houses, single-family homes, if you like, and more condominiums sitting at just slightly odd angles, akilter, on not insubstantial untrod lawns, situated amid winding paths to numerous swimming pools, Jacuzzis, tennis courts, and two championship golf courses. The pools are being skimmed by jumpsuited, straw-hatted workers with billowing, gauzy nets, which are not primarily, but often enough, entomological equipment. Along the road there are narrow suggestions of sidewalk, painted beige to match the buildings, the general scheme being stucco with brick-red tile roofs. Call it "Southwest Ubiquitous." Haut Hokey Haciendas. And they may be inviting, these Pueblos, these Nuevos Rancheros, but beware the stucco, more dangerous than cactus, as scrapingly skin-rending as a coral reef!



There is plenty of activity at this early hour in the American Desert, before everything begins to bake into antimatter, to borrow a mot most apropos from a noted Californian essayist. Platoons of maintenance workers in straw cowboy hats and plaid-print shirts and blue jeans mow and weed-whack, clip and rake and bag, los caballeros herbos. A few specialists wield roaring leaf-blowers, herding billows of dust and debris. There are other, less specific, maintenance workers - make that maintenance people - looking more important, relatively, who are whiter, and pith-helmeted, in carts, or logo-capped in regular trucks.

Pounding down the matte black private street 'twixt flat white curbs she nods her head, as if in assent or executing some order, and twitches her pulse/lap timer wristwatch wrist as the

sprinklers gurgle, then whistle and spray, rising up from the grass like periscopes, also on a schedule. She passes a young child on one of the lawns, leaning forward at an angle, on a leash - not a leash, a harness - reaching for the rainbow-making spray of a sprinkler. His grandfather (presumably) jerks him back. Obedience training, perhaps. A wizened old woman wearing many diamonds, much makeup, and a leopard-print bodysuit whizzes by in a golf cart shaped like a Ford Mustang, laughing theatrically into a cellular phone.

Here and there, at decent intervals, there are other spandex people, like a casual army in stretchy motley, jogging slowly or speed-walking or helmet-biking, many with headphones and intent expressions that suggest that they are receiving orders, perhaps from extraterrestrial intelligences in not dissimilar garb. (Indeed, in stranger-than-fiction truth, the Nike sweatpants comet cult, featuring quarter rolls, castration, and group suicide, was headquartered not so far away from here, in San Diego on the shore of the great Southwest. They thought a space-bus was coming for them, and maybe it did. "Heaven's Gate." That suggests San Pedro, but that's a different city, a different cult, a different space-ship.)

A woman in non-athletic pink stretch pants and a billowy blouse walks a cat, a heavily liver-spotted old man in a cardigan stands over a tiny dog on a leash, waiting, plastic bag in hand.

This burst of stylized, ritual activity is like the parched life in some African lakes which thrives for just a few rainy weeks, sprouting and blossoming and reproducing in a flash, before drying back to a barren, cracked bed of crusted and flaking dirt. It also resembles, closer to hand, the indigenous fauna: a few scraggly ground-squirrels, burrowing owls, lean jackrabbits and the stray malnourished coyote, which move mainly by night, excepting the concrete-colored iguanas and various lizards and skinks, cold-blooded, sucking up the heat, and the ubiquitous ants, whose kingdom this is. There are also the roadrunners, which are so tough that they just don't care. Noble creatures, truly, able to run twenty miles per hour all day. Avian carnivores; an odd mix, like people. Kind of cuckoo. Difficult not to admire a bird that positively prefers venomous prey, scorpions and snakes, the way some people like lots of jalapeno peppers and hot-sauce. Lizard caliente!



All will be quiet long before mid-day, still and orderly in the stifling heat. This is that storied Southern California where it really really never rains. Of course that's not completely true, but it is true that it rains grasshoppers here about as often as water. It's already hot, even at this hour. Hot enough to fry an egg, as they say. Hot enough to burn an egg, and also hot enough to make toast, if you like. There is a whisper of wind, a slight breeze as refreshing as a blow dryer in a sauna. Sunny side up?

Rounding a curve, our girl crosses the path of one of the courses, and passes a bunker wherein stands a man wiping his well-fed, balded brown head with a handkerchief, scowling over a ball in the sand. Ovoid. She is also scowling, but not in sympathy - just habit. Two others in this party stand scowling on the green above, guts protruding like pregnancies, but the fourth, thin and pale, with a largely unsuccessful back-to-front comb-over, sits in a cart, half-slumped over the steering wheel, following her progress with a face as blank as sand. After she passes she hears one scream "God damn it!" If they were younger, it would have been "Mother Fuck!" This is natural, and normal, like the quacks of the ducks, squabbling in the various water hazards, and, occasionally, the swimming pools. Ill-tempered beasts.

She sees the Mercedes returning, bouncing over the speed bumps, and notices that it's somebody delivering newspapers, which are stacked on the front seat. A strange delivery vehicle. Her place is well inside the development, and the value of the three dozen or so vehicles she has already passed, not including the ones for maintenance, the background boys, would mount easily over a million dollars. The lowest common denominator here is quite high. Perhaps the owner of that Land Rover delivers newspapers, too, but to an entire city. Distribution is the key.

There is the pocking rhythm of tennis balls, merging with the similar beat of her faster steps, from the hidden courts, sunk behind shrubbery, and she hears a gate creak, and laughter - a deeply tanned, gray-haired man in tennis togs and his daughter, coming from the court, rackets in hand. Not his daughter - fathers don't typically stick their hands that far up their daughters' tennis skirts. Coy giggles, a daughter would not be so demure. Just ahead are some big trucks, someone moving in or out apparently, not that she cares or is even marginally curious. She knows no one here, and doesn't care to.

She continues, toward one of the trucks, which is open, dark and empty, with the long, ribbed aluminum ramp extended. There's a small, dark guy in forest-green "work" clothes bouncing on this,

smoking a cigarette - menthol, she notes to herself, with nose-wrinkled distaste, her old kind. Avoiding him, she almost collides with another guy, coming around the front of the truck. This one is in brown polyester slacks and a ribbed white singlet, an undershirt, and around his dark neck hangs a gold horn on a chain, which matches his two gleaming upper incisors. His hair is long and jet-black under a little fedora, and he seems to be wearing ballet shoes. He bows slightly, apologetically, extending an arm to let her pass. She spins away, eyes averted, and as she pads off, he shrugs and laughs, leaning back and grabbing his crotch, shaking the pucker after her. They snicker in Spanish - she senses this. If French is the language of love, Spanish is just the tongue.

Her mouth is working, and she's chewing the inside of her cheek, wondering who to call about this, who to notify, in addition to the Association. There was no company name, but she could find out. She passes another, similar truck, giving it a wide berth, and finally, after much ado, she's streaking through the home stretch.

Slowing down as she comes to her own garage, she forgets to sidestep at the right moment and the spray begins, soaking her ankles and feet. Irritated, she moves away from the water and digs through her pouch for the remote, pushes the button, and runs in place as the groan starts and the chain clanks and grinds, dragging the door up.



The cooler, confined air hits her with a familiar splash - the smell of home, eucalyptus and violet sachets, and any number of specific air-freshening and dedicated cleaning products, many of which line a shelf here, an antibacterial arsenal. She takes a clean towel from a white enamel cabinet and wipes her face even though it's dry, (an old habit dying hard, sweat here being instantly sublimated.) She also wipes her ankles and shoes. The rubber strip squeaks on the clean, painted concrete as the door seals her into the garage's twilight.

Relaxing for a moment, her eyes adjusting to the dark, she tenses, eyes growing even wider, when she sees that the van needs washing. Besides a fine layer of dust, to be accepted if not entirely acceptable, the tires are filthy, with dried mud ringing the sidewalls. She physically shrinks from it, and looks over to her Jeep, which, of course, is still spotless. Who had the van, her husband or her daughters, and why is it so hard to take care of

anything? She's glad she can't see her daughter's car, the little red convertible truck thing with cow-print seatcovers, because she knows it's a mess, inside and out. She's seething, seeing red, as she punches the entry code into the security console (red light, no...green light: go!) and passes into the house through the laundry room, unfinished drywall and plywood and lathe, which is also an irritation somehow, in such an expensive place. Cans rattle as she bumps one of the recycling containers, for which there is just not quite enough space, and about which something must also be done. (Even though the cans have been rinsed, there is still this lingering smell, and the suggestion of bacteria collection.) Her older daughter has become fanatic about recycling, among other things.

From this girl's room she hears some kind of country and western psychedelia, not loud, but her hand moves automatically to her temple and her expression is pained, which is by now her stock response to most music, and many sounds. She goes down the short hall to her bedroom and shuts the door with both hands, and, after a moment holding the door closed in that way, as if holding it up, she turns and begins to strip for a shower, which we will not want to see.



Emerging after ablutions and a skin-cleansing salt-scrub, now in another set of work-out clothes, (looser and more cottony, low-tech,) she hears, as well as feels, some old-school pre-school rap music, this quite loud, thumping from her other, younger, daughter's room. Public Enemy. It stops just as she raises her fist to pound on the door, which opens then to reveal a girl who has done her best to emulate the appearance of a corpse, in current "Gothic" fashion, black on white, and who looks up at her without any apparent recognition and slides down the hall toward the kitchen, dragging a German Army rucksack book-bag along the tiled floor. She quite resembles a movie vampire.

Our heroine carries her running garb to the laundry room, starts the cycle, and again rattles the cans in the recycling bin. She is greeted in the kitchen by the girls bickering about the actual mechanics of alien abductions, whether they are effected by some energy beam or ropes.

Toast pops up from the toaster, four slices, which the older girl snatches up. This one, in denim bellbottoms, a lacy "peasant" top, and Birkenstock sandals, takes after her father in that she is

somewhat hefty, husky, chunky: not small-boned. They are in agreement: there are abductions, it could go without saying, this settled as the girl scrapes peanut butter from a jar. Mom vaguely recalls some similar argument about crop-circles, which also somehow hinged on livestock, or maybe dolphins. Maybe that was tuna. She pours a glass of water from the filter pitcher, and they're already onto another argument, something about this particular natural peanut butter not being natural enough somehow. Organic, but still tinged in some way with cruelty, connected somehow with the torture of innocents. She looks at the piece of dried fruit she's nibbling on, and she's not quite sure what it is, this mummified something, like flavored leather with seeds. It's not unfamiliar, but also not immediately recognizable. Apricot, or maybe strawberry. Really, it could be horned toad, with the horns removed.

The younger daughter, thin to the point of inviting questions about bulimia or anorexia, is having only cranberry juice for breakfast, which has stained her lips and tongue. She is dressed mainly in black and "industrial" jewelry - bike chain bracelet and a wide leather belt with an automobile seat-belt buckle buckle, GM. She has a pierced eyebrow and nose, which had been a fierce controversies resolved only by the vote of the psychiatrist they took her to - but what were they paying him for if he couldn't make her listen to reason? This after she finally stopped gnawing her nails to bloody nibs. The subject of tattoos shall not be broached; both have clamored.

The Goth girl, is sharp, and sharp-tongued, and spits out at her sister "Why don't you just shut up? I eat normal food and I'm an animal murderer? You're just a stupid vegetarian because you're so fat!"

This is her cue, something similar happens every single school morning, and these are the first words she has spoken, to them or anyone: "Girls. Now. Girls." And this is enough. They glare at each other, but soon they are on their way, off to school, hippie chick and vampire girl. They zip off in the little truck, which will, incidentally, put a greater weight by far of carbon into the atmosphere in the course of a year than the weight of the cans and boxes she recycles. Out of mind, out of sight. They are still young and not so bitter, comrades, and sisters after all, agreeing on many things, most particularly the marijuana they are smoking from a flowery ceramic pipe as they exit the compound. Mother carefully picks up a few crumbs that have fallen on the table, throws them into the sink, and turns on the garbage disposal.



She glazes out the window over the grinding roar, at the chemical-green lawn and turquoise-blue ponds and sand daubs and bowers of flowers, showers of shocks of blooming color framed by tan stucco planes topped with terra cotta tessarae. To say the sky was always blue would be an exaggeration, but the sky for days, weeks, months, seasons on end was unchanging, grim blue, with far more 747s and commuter planes and helicopters than birds or clouds. A figure raised in the basket of the arm of a "cherry picker" truck trims the shaggy "beards" of the palms, (that's what they're called) leaving them looking exactly like (pale green) badminton birdies.

She can see just a corner, and a cornice, of the "colonial" pseudo-Georgian clubhouse, across the sculpted fairways and roughs and greens, where, sometimes, maybe strangest of all, there is bagpipe music. Piping. Not piped, but live, singly or in groups, a line of Celtophiles in kilts, invariably bearded men in tartan, droning out that highland lonesome sound, the haunted semitones of wild fen and firth, in this strange, imported environment, this hothouse of forced exotics. (Even most of the cactuses, cacti, here are imports, and would die without irrigation.) But we remember that golf originated in Scotland. Not golf, but the hole - that's a fact, and really a fine innovation, a great trick, to create something by adding a void. (And the 18 holes, also Scotian, are the time it takes to finish a bottle of whiskey, neat.)

Beyond, all around, are the dirt and rock mountains that are the very definition of earthtone, this being the landscape that inspired the popular "Sand Art" movement of the 1970s. Sand Art killed the Lava Lamp. She turns off the growling appliance, and gets ready to do a little cleaning before the maid arrives. She takes a few pills - the daily requirements from the regimen, and also an elective treat, washed down with sport-water. Mind those electrolytes!

As she is vacuuming, her husband comes in from golf a little tipsy, fresh off a little morning tippie at the tee, a few drinks on the links. Not the Scotch, just a few breakfasty Bloody Marys, but you know there's trouble anytime it's "just" anything. He is red of face with a little bit of a slur on, mumbling something about something, perched on the edge of the loveseat. Waiting for coffee to brew, she apprehends, and also that there were cigars involved. He is, at this point, just about as important to her as

the furniture, also a little shabby, perhaps needing replacement. She'd like to suck him up the hose. He's checking the weather on television, absolutely idiotic, and not just here in the endless summer. He blows his gin-blossom moistly into a plaid handkerchief, which he stores in his pocket.

For all his time in the sun he never really tanned, just baked a deeper red, and for all his golf and tennis and stationary biking and stationary stair-climbing at the gym he remained flaccid and even doughy. Could be metabolism, could be ranch dressing, and ever-drier drinks for dinner. The garage also houses a large selection of television-advertised exercise machine systems, (suggestive of nothing more in the dim light than medieval torture devices.) It's not like he never tried! The new stationary bike and digital treadmill in his bedroom will bear witness, Velcro ankle and wrist weights speak for themselves. He has in point of actual fact expended a great deal of (economic) energy in his quest for fitness, although lately he has been more concerned about the condition of his scalp and the nutrition of his ever-decreasing roots, which require not insubstantial investments, and considerable attention as to placement. Intimate landscaping, if a scalp may be considered private.

She hears him finish showering and head out, off to work. He, the paunchy, has "worked," has had in fact what is looked upon generally as a career, even a successful one, providing various types of insurance, but he has never really actually personally been able to generate any income, and it's a good thing he hired the couple of guys he did, when he did, a damned good thing, as he has on occasion confided to boozy compatriots; that, and, recently, that things are not so great, may be drying up - but such big bellies, so to speak, rarely go completely belly up. Larger sums have ways of protecting themselves, defense mechanisms. Assets may be hidden, rumps covered.



Be that as it may, our lady of the lane finishes her chores, and leaves the house for a little shopping, has the Jeep washed or goes to the gym, but by midday, post meridian, she's returned, tucked back into spandex, shorts now, with a white nylon top, and she's back in her element, back out on the road. While the general activity has subsided, the hubbub ebbed, there are a few people about. She breezes past a man in Hawaiian rayon and khaki cargoes who is obviously a tourist, not obvious just because of his shiny sportswear but because of his look of hurt

bewilderment when she ignores his beaming, friendly, "Afternoon!" It's the So.Cal. headsnap: You say "Hi," I look away. Nothing personal, pal. That's not an apology, it's an order. Renting a time-share, no doubt. Welcome to "Whatever." Enjoy the weather. Wish you were there.

Pounding on she passes a team of workers (logohat, logopolo) shoveling peat from a mound in a pickup and wheelbarrowing it across the yards to spread under the bushes. Peat keeps the moisture in, around the roots. An interesting substance, it is semi-decomposed, long-compressed vegetable matter which, by virtue of its special chemical properties, preserves almost intact the bodies - animal and human - that are sometimes found in its bogs, just a bit leathery, and dark, from the tannins. These also impart distinct and interesting flavor notes to celebrated Scotch whiskies.



She blows by a few other runners, slow and ungainly, more like mall-walkers, beneath contempt, and she is out of the gate, out of the enclave, the autoclave, moving along the high enclosing wall, along curved, wide sidewalks designed for golf carts. She passes a skinny old man dressed completely in pink, including his cap, who holds three miniature pinschers on one special leash. He smiles at her with yellow teeth, but she isn't looking, and soon she's at the edge of the development.

Near these places there are always rundown trailers, hard against the wall, where the almost original inhabitants, the pioneers, dwell, often with collections of cars and trucks and major appliances that read like a history, seem like sad museums. People are smart, like rats and cockroaches. Like them, we eat garbage and live anywhere, and are generally, though not necessarily individually, repulsive.

Nearing this heritage area, she passes a similarly-skinned unfortunate pushing a shopping cart full of aluminum cans. This old woman has a dish-towel and a brush on the handle of her cart, and she is gnawing a Slim-Jim with her remaining teeth. (Jerky is an Indian word, by way of Spanish, meaning, originally, exactly the same thing. There are still Indians, Natives, in these parts, but they don't live native, they operate casinos, which some see as a positive development, some kind of poetic economic justice, but only in the same way that it is, for example, if a prostitute becomes a pimp. Still not pretty. In this,

respect the Navajo, who do not exploit vice.)

She crosses a wide street, to the new symbiotic shopping center, like a strip mall palazzo, enclosing a parking piazza, with a grocery store, cellphone shop, pizza chain, video rental chain, drycleaner, upscale casual dining chain restaurant, and a chain nightspot, "Niteclubz," or something like that. Always something like that. In the parking lot, a woman in neon spandex is rollerblading, sweeping around in big, leg-spread circles, a human compass swirling over the freshly painted lines. Two nondescript workers are rolling out turf onto the dividing strips between the lanes and parking slots.

There is also a chain gym, with people huffing and pumping on stationary bicycles, displayed in a big picture window, in which she is reflected and framed. It may be interesting, in this light, surveying this pavement, to consider the phenomenon of penitents in the Middle Ages, flagellants, parades of people who marched into towns and whipped themselves bloody in public, for various reasons including, but certainly not limited to, donations. No pain, no gain. As the saying goes.

She soldiers on, in any event, to where the sidewalk continues through as-yet undeveloped desert, (but slated For Sale, Available To Build) then on to where it ends, and she moves to the road. Far ahead there is another solitary figure, walking, a long-bearded, bronzed man in a bush hat, jeans, and an Army field jacket - this is the walking guy, which sounds like an urban legend but is true all the same, the guy walking slowly between desert towns, often with a plastic grocery bag of who knows what. A pathetic pedestrian plying roads designed for machines.

She turns off, onto a smaller, tarred road, softer, and sticky in gleaming, iridescent spots, which she avoids. There is a desiccated skeleton, of something, crushed and embedded, another unfortunate creature gone from 3-D to 2, which she also skips over. A remnant tuft of fur or feather ruffles slightly in her wake. The road dips after a while into a wide, boulder-strewn wash, where, a few times every few centuries, water rushes with such celerity that it carries boulders the size of cars, of houses, for unbelievable distances, miles and miles. There is a touch of vegetation here, irrigated, maybe, by this memory of water. From the shade beneath a lone, gnarled mesquite tree, a roadrunner watches her progress with one blue-rimmed eye, perhaps approvingly. He sneezes out some salt, not in derision, just elimination, then raises his crest, opening like a paper fan, not in alarm, not as a signal, but simply for purposes of cooling. The naked blue skin around his eye trails to a red point on the

side of his cocked head.



She runs and runs, into the waves of heat which float like pools above the road, and there may be some appeal in continuing to follow, seeing her return to the nest, to some nasty climax, an ugly domestic scene; or we might well enjoy a sudden downpour, a catastrophic storm, with bolting lightning and pounding rain, hail, and flash-flooding sweeping away everything in its wrath; we might also like a low, gravelly rumble, growing louder as the earth itself heaves, tearing itself open at one of the many nearby faultlines, growling and gaping underfoot, opening wide and swallowing the whole mess... This is how we think, there is no fault in that, but better we should simply leave her where we found her, on the road, pounding the pavement toward a perspective-line vanishing point, into a stereotypical southwestern sunset, complete with cactus and cow skull.



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Contributors' Notes

Linda Boroff

grew up in Minneapolis and was transplanted to Los Angeles as a teenager. This transformed her from a timid, earnest and studious nerd to an outgoing, rebellious, and venturesome nerd. She graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in English Literature and has been published in Epoch, Prism International, Cimarron Review, Artisan, and other print magazines. Online, her work has appeared in The Pedestal Magazine, In Posse Review, Eyeshot, Stirring, Zacatecas Review, Cyber Oasis, Starry Night Review, Fiction Warehouse, Pulse, and is upcoming in several others. An excerpt of her comic novel was a Chesterfield Film Writers Project 2001 semifinalist.

Thomas Brennan

has recent fiction appearing in Prima Materia (a journal for Hudson Valley writers), Berkeley Fiction Review, The Griffin, Agrippina, and The Armchair Aesthete. His reference book, Writings on Writing, published by McFarland has been reprinted by Barnes and Noble. Like many writers, he is working on a novel. He thanks his fellow writers for encouragement and wisdom. He can be reached at thomasbrennan@sprintmail.com.

Sue Dormanen

lives in Santa Cruz, California, and recently completed a first novel, Old Sins, set during the deadly Loma Prieta earthquake. She works as the editor of an online news service and, like many of her characters, is wrestling with middle age. Of "Finishing First" she says, "This story came as a relief to me as it was one for the first things I wrote not based on my own life. Except that the opening scene is my recurring nightmare. And my older sister did teach me to read before I started school, for which I am still grateful." You may write to her at sdormanen@handsnet.org.

James Francis

grew up in Warren, Ohio, but is a native Californian and lives in Palm Springs. He has published fiction and poetry in Zyzzyva and elsewhere, and is currently editing a poetry collection, "Coachella

Valley Poetry," to be published this September. He is also a songwriter and musician whose songs have been heard on KXLU and KCRW in Los Angeles, and he was recently featured in the documentary film "Rock That Uke." His ukulele band recently performed in Palm Springs for the grand opening of the Modern Gallery, supporting a show of the work of Shag, the famous Tiki artist. You can find his music at www.mp3.com under the name The Haoles, and you can write to him at haoles@mp3.com.

Gina Frangello

is the Executive Editor of the literary magazine [Other Voices](#). Her short fiction has been published in more than a dozen literary venues including Chicago Reader, Prairie Schooner, two girls review, Fish Stories, American Literary Review, 13th Moon, and Hawaii Review. She was a 2002 recipient of an Illinois Arts Council Individual Fellowship for Prose, is a freelance book reviewer for the Chicago Tribune and has written several cover stories for the Chicago Reader. She has taught literature and creative writing at the University of IL-Chicago and Columbia College Chicago.

Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz

is a fiction writer and poet. Her work has appeared in various print and online journals; most recently in Poor Mojo's Almanac, Insolent Rudder, Outsider Ink, Fiction Warehouse, the-phone-book, Poetry Midwest, and Word Riot. She has work forthcoming in several other journals, as well as in two anthologies, "One Paycheck Away" from Main Street Rag Press and "Sudden Stories: A Mammoth Anthology of Minuscule Fiction. Mintz is currently a fiction assistant editor for Small Spiral Notebook. She raises turtles for fun and dreams of hearing B.B. King perform live. She can be reached at gwendolynjoycemintz@yahoo.com.

The **Summerset Review**

The Somerset Review

Guidelines for Submissions

Writers are invited to submit contemporary short stories and essays of up to 8,000 words. No sci-fi, horror, graphic erotica, poetry, or subject matter with emphasis on death or loss are likely to be accepted. Fantasy and romance will be considered, as long as the story transcends the genre into literary fiction. Lighter stories will be given more serious consideration. We would like to see more essays that enlighten us in subtle ways.

All submitted work is assumed to be original. Reprints, novel excerpts, and simultaneous submissions are accepted. We read year-round.

Submissions should be emailed to editor@somersetreview.org. Please be sure to state whether your piece is fiction or an essay. It is preferable that the submission be an attachment in standard manuscript MS Word format. If you are sending a piece in plain text, please be sure to clearly designate paragraphs, alignment, and italics. Please do not simply give a link on the web where the story appears. Allow six weeks for a reply.

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