

# The Summerset Review

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Fall 2005

# The Somerset Review

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## Table of Contents

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[Editors' Notes](#)

[City of Refuge](#) - an essay by **Lisa Ohlen Harris**

[I Might Not Miss You](#) - a story by **Michael Hartford**

[Chelsea Girl](#) - an essay by **Jillian Schedneck**

[Searching for the Writing Life](#) - an essay by **Sandi Sonnenfeld**

[Cold](#) - a short short by **Tammy R. Kitchen**

[Contributors' Notes](#)

[Guidelines for Submissions](#)

[Previous Issues](#)

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Despite some rather strange and sudden developments in our personal income sources this past quarter, we're happy to announce that starting in December we will be compensating writers appearing in *The Summerset Review*. We're thinking of calling the payment our Pizza-and-Wine Stipend, because that's about all you can do with twenty-five dollars, and we're sorry to say that if you can't be without the pepperoni and garlic knots, or the reserve stash the vintner hides in the back cellar, you'll have to fork up the difference.

We once won a seventy-five dollar gift certificate to a local restaurant. The bill came to \$123.89 before tip. The drive home was spent wondering if we would have been better off not winning. Why are we telling you this? Just a friendly forewarning. And we're sure you'll agree that it's the thought that counts.

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Last time, our Lit Pick of the Quarter highlighted two stories by the same author in the same issue of a literary magazine. This time, we've stumbled on two stories by the same author in different magazines. Christopher Coake is the author, and the pieces we enjoyed reading very much were in *Five Points*, Volume IX, No. 1, entitled "Solos," and in the Winter 2005 issue of *Southern Review*, entitled "A Single Awe." The author has recently released his debut collection, published by Harcourt under the title *We're in Trouble*. This short excerpt is from "Solos," the story of a mountain climber told from the perspective of his wife -

"I have always tried to tell myself that Jozef is an artist, that what he does makes the world bigger, the way a painting does."

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We give you three essays written by women this time, coming off an issue several quarters ago where all the pieces were from male authors. Perhaps retribution has visited. Two of these essays are in the relocation theme, and so our cover graphic entitled "Baggage."

The country in "City of Refuge," an essay by Lisa Ohlen Harris, is Jordan, and in it we meet an Iraqi woman, a victim of circumstance now a refugee. Jillian Schedneck takes us to the U.K. in her essay, "Chelsea Girl," where we experience a bit of life in council flats—the quick fix to the housing problem after the Blitz. Sandi Sonnenfeld says, "You do it because you must, and therefore, you will, despite yourself... make your mark." She's "Searching for the Writing Life," an honest piece about what it is like out there. Tammy R. Kitchen's short short is over before you know it, leaving both you and the protagonist out in the "Cold." Last but not least is Michael Hartford's "I Might Not Miss You," a story of parallel lives and parallel perspectives, even in the way it is told.

It's been three full years now for *The Summerset Review*, and our hope is that thus far it's been as enjoyable for you—the reader—as it has been for us in putting it all together, quarter after quarter. Our thanks goes out to you and all those who submitted. We look forward to many more years of this, our great love.

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*The Summerset Review*

Joseph Levens – Editor  
Amy Leigh Owen – Assistant Editor  
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A literary journal released quarterly on the 15th of March, June, September, and December. Founded in 2002, the journal is a nonprofit Internet magazine devoted to the review and publication of unsolicited short stories and essays. Member of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP). All correspondence and submissions should be emailed to [editor@summersetreview.org](mailto:editor@summersetreview.org). Postal mailing address: 25 Summerset Drive, Smithtown, New York 11787, USA.

Theme graphics: "Baggage" Copyright © The Summerset Review 2005.



## City of Refuge

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by

Lisa Ohlen Harris

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The woman had no face. Her skin looked melted, too smooth, like the rubber masks found back in the U.S. on clearance racks the week after Halloween. Putty stretched tight across her bones in the earth tones of clay, becoming purplish below what had once been her ears. She was living evidence of chemical warfare—proof of the taxicab rumors that Saddam gassed his own people. *Don't believe everything you hear*, I always said to myself when I was exposed to some dramatic tale or another. *Consider the source*. I could have reached out and touched her scars.

She was an Iraqi woman, I could tell by the *abaya* she had wrapped like a big, black tablecloth covering everything but her scarred face. It was winter in Amman, Jordan, but she sat on a blanket spread over the frozen sidewalk and salted with a few coins. Her baby was asleep on the blanket next to a half-empty milk bottle. I thought that even the poor should take responsibility for keeping their children clean and warm. At least that's what I thought before I noticed her face.



So there we were, Iraqi and American, living together in a city not our own, the downtown bordered by a Roman amphitheater on one side and Corinthian columns of a Byzantine church on the adjacent hill. Amman belongs to her Arab children now, with reminders everywhere of other ancient cultures, ancient conquerors. She is a city of refuge for many: nearly half of Jordan's citizens are Palestinian. The Iraqi population exploded after 1990. Of the 5.3 million living in Jordan, a conservative estimate is that well over 200,000 are Iraqi refugees. It used to be the Palestinians who were the poorest in Jordan—now it is the Iraqis.

Underneath her contracted skin, before the scars, had she been pretty? Did her face burn before this baby was conceived, or after? Or maybe this wasn't about Saddam at all, and there wasn't an evil man to blame for the burning. Every winter the Jordanian newspapers carried reports of someone getting too close to a butane space heater on a cold day—or being electrocuted when they forgot to unplug a washing machine before reaching in for the wet clothes. I refused to buy a butane heater the winter Todd and I moved to Amman with our fifteen-month-old daughter. We bundled our baby in sweaters and blankets that first year, until we were able to move to the wealthier side of town—into a home with central heat. When we moved, we also bought freedom from fear in the form of an expensive, Italian washer with the proper grounding wires.

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When I first traveled the Middle East as a single woman on a student tour in Syria, I was intrepid. I ran the gauntlet daily, crossing busy Damascus streets, stepping car width by car width across the road as vehicles zipped past me before and behind. I was reading Isak Dineson in the evenings, as the call to prayer rang out over our home in the Old City, and in my journal I copied this passage from *Out of Africa*, on killing a pair of threatening lions:

"And who is going to shoot them?" asked Nichols, "I am no coward, but I am a married man and I have no wish to risk my life unnecessarily." It was true that he was no coward; he was a plucky little man. "There would be no sense in it," he said. No, I said, I did not mean to make him shoot the lions.

I then went in to find Denys. "Come now," I said to him, "and let us go and risk our lives unnecessarily. For if they have got any value at all, it is this: that they have got none." (Isak Dineson, *Out of Africa* [New York: Random House, 1985], 242)

I was so struck by this passage that when I got back to the U.S., I read it out loud to a good friend. She gave me a look, that friend. Her look said I had it all wrong to think that my life had no value. Every life has value, her look said to me. I closed my journal. Who can argue with reason?

But that night, when I was alone, I wrote again in my journal that *I suspect there are times when the value of a life may not be only in the preservation of it.*

Though single when I first lived in Damascus—in my intrepid days—Todd was there in the study group with me. I wish I could say something romantic about how Todd was watching me, wondering, waiting. All of that happened later, back in the States. Damascus itself was enough for us in those days.

After we married, when we were still newlyweds, we spent all our savings to return to the Middle East the summer after Todd's first year of grad school. It was in that newlywed summer, crossing a downtown street in Damascus, that the blur of adventure around us stopped for a moment. My pace was off and a passing car skimmed my left hand, bruising my knuckles and scraping the skin off the middle one. For the first time, I felt my own mortality, the delicacy of life and marriage and future.

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Staring at the Iraqi woman on the ground there in Amman so many years later, I wondered, did the cold wind make her scars hurt, or could she even feel the cold through damaged nerve ends? What if this had happened to me? Because it hadn't, I could go on blithely saying that God was good. But what did this woman think of God, the God who melts faces?



My friend Ben was downtown that day, drinking tea just one storefront away from where I stood watching the Iraqi woman. He leaned against the counter of a tea stand, dressed like a modern Arab in trousers and dress shoes, shirt tucked in and buttoned over a modest undershirt—but above the collar he was still a pale, blonde, round-faced American college kid. While I was watching the Iraqi woman and her baby, Ben was watching me.

He'd been like a kid brother in college, with a great heart—slow to speak and clumsy with his words when he did. I watched out for him back in those days, but as it goes with kid brothers, so it went with Ben. He arrived in Jordan a semester ahead of me, studied Arabic at the same school my husband and I would attend. As adventure gave way to culture shock, Ben turned up here and there in arched doorways and on crowded downtown streets. A face from my old home. In fact, it seemed that the entire world, past and present, was all right there in Amman with me in one form or another, in architecture and ethnicity, in ruins and in flesh.

Running into Ben off campus a few years earlier might have meant grabbing some coffee together at The Beanery or sitting down on the grass to chat if it was a warm day. But here? It wouldn't be proper, and there was no place for us to go in this culture of men's teashops and women's curtained salons.

"Come on," Ben said to me, "I have something to show you."

I followed him away from the tea stand and around the corner. He stopped in front of a store overflowing with all sorts of brass items; huge decorative trays and plaques leaned up against the storefront windows. Ben held the door open and I went in ahead of him. The shop owner knew Ben and spoke a clear Jordanian dialect that was easy to follow.

"Ah, she is your sister?"

Now I understood why I could come here with an unmarried man and not put my honor at stake.

The shop owner knew what Ben wanted to see, and he moved a stack of trays to reveal piles of canvas underneath. They were paintings, scenes from a traditional town with robed figures walking under arched labyrinths through an ancient city. I knew these streets, these people. If I could think like a child again, I would imagine myself stepping right into the painting and back to my life in Damascus before I feared cars or washing machines or evil men in high places. Through one open door in these Arabic scenes, I thought I could make out a fountain, an inner garden. A place to rest.

These paintings piled oil-to-fabric over stacks of brass trays were the work of Iraqi artists who fled Baghdad at the end of 1990. Each painting grabbed a moment and froze it in oil, telling stories about life in Baghdad before the exile—when life was good. When God was good.

I picked one up and flicked at the dust chunks clinging to the bottom edge. Most of the artwork I saw that day was in bright colors—red and cobalt and green, the vignettes filling the interior of the field but fading toward the edges, so there was a wide band of canvas, primed but colorless, framing each scene. This one that I picked up was different, all in terra cotta and purple shades of a sunset at Petra, scene and color extending nearly to the edge of the canvas. The extra brush strokes gave it a sense of wholeness, as if this painting were complete in a way the others were not.

The paint stood out from the canvas, thick and dimensional. It seemed that some of the oils had been laid on with a knife instead of a brush, smooth to the point where the knife was lifted, and on those edges there was a ridge, a scar.



After Ben and I left the shop, I went straight to a framer's studio and selected a frame with brass detailing—my own tip of the hat to the brass shop owner who helped some Iraqi artist. This scene has kept me company in four different homes, in two countries. Exotic, ancient, it is part of our North American household now. Sometimes I stand in front of it—trying to get back, just for a moment, to remember the scent of cardamom-spiced coffee, and the sound of Arabic music swirling through those Old City corridors, and those peaceful garden courtyards. If anyone walks in the room, I quickly move to finish folding laundry.

Most of the figures in this painting are walking away, scarves thrown over shoulders, robes swaying. But one figure in the foreground faces me, my piles of laundry, my life. A woman, featureless, with just a scrape of clay-colored paint where she should have a face.

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Parallel lives were the trope of their friendship. Sometimes she would launch into the middle of a conversation, expecting him to follow along, and then stop at his confused stare.

Sorry, she'd say. We must have been having this talk in a parallel life.

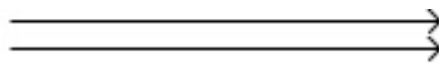
And it was about...? he'd ask.

You're very witty in that life.

I'd like to meet me.

Oh, you'd like you.

And they would continue the conversation, he trying to be as clever as his parallel self, she laughing as though he were.



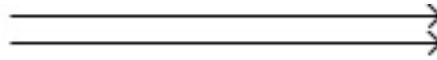
He actually knew very few details about these parallel lives; she maintained most of them, though she assured him that he existed in each.

In one life, he worked as a reporter for a big city newspaper, and she was a

girl copy editor trying to break into the big time. In this city, men wore hats and women wore straight skirts with sensible shoes. Like Lois Lane and Clark Kent, she explained, without Superman. He was relieved to have only a secret identity.

In another, they lived in a fishbowl. She was a goldfish who swam in tight, fast circles around the plastic castle. He was the diver who stood over an open chest of doubloons and emitted bubbles.

Some of their parallel lives were fraught with danger and intrigue, like their life smuggling guns over the Pyrenees to embattled anarchists in Valencia. Those lives reminded them that even their life in the glow of the office lights was contingent and precarious.



When not keeping track of parallel lives, they chronicled the many daily indignities, real and imagined, that they suffered. They made light of them, laughed at the wounds, and accepted their lot. But on hearing these travails, they both became white-hot with righteous rage in the other's defense.

She was often upset that her boyfriend never went inside the coffee shop with her. He waited in the car, sulkily, while she went in to fetch coffee to-go. The chairs and couches arranged around the gas fireplace beckoned cozily, but she dared not sit down. Sometimes she went to the shop alone to read and imagine having subtle conversations with someone across the table.

He counted the times his wife failed to kiss him goodbye in her rush to work. Often he was in the kitchen packing lunches, or in the children's room folding clothes, when he heard the front door slam shut. Sometimes this happened two or three times a week.

So, is he afraid of coffee? he asked.

No. He just doesn't drink coffee.

They sell other things at coffee shops. Soda, juice ...

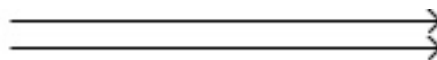
We're usually going someplace. He doesn't like to take detours.

Ah, my life is a detour—I lost the map years ago.

She thought that a kiss before work would be better than coffee. On the weekends, she stayed at her boyfriend's house and usually slept late, waking to his impatient clattering downstairs. During the week, she rushed out of her own house, locking the door against its empty rooms, and came home to fold her own laundry.

And though he frequently felt invisible to his wife, and wondered if she would notice if one day he left and didn't come back to load the dishwasher or roll the socks, he loved her completely. His favorite hours came late at night, with the children and his wife sound asleep, the dishes and clothes put away, the coffee maker set up for the next morning, nothing left to do. He would stand in the hallway and listen to the deep breaths coming from behind closed doors and feel proud that they could all sleep so profoundly.

They never expressed these thoughts to each other.



He was certain that he loved her more than she loved him. She was younger, after all, and her heart had been broken and divided fewer times than his







































