

SOUTH DAKOTA REVIEW

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Eileen Sullivan	Literary or Not (Mystery and Other Acts of Nature)	5
Joseph M. Ditta	Autumn, All Afternoon (story)	9
A. Waller Hastings	Dakota Sky (A Fragment) (poem)	20
David Allan Evans	Chicks (poem)	21
Amy Fleury	Covenant (poem)	22
Kim R. Alarie	Sarah's Tears (poem)	23
Jane Varley	Rides (poem)	25
	The Steps to the Hilltop Cemetery in Oskaloosa (poem)	27
J. Annie MacLeod	A Very Short Story Begins on a Farm (story)	28
James Wagner	She's Flat (story)	32
Peter Ivan Hoffman	Maris (poem)	35
	The Shift (poem)	37
Anne Wilson	Bulldozers (poem)	38
Mary Pinard	Willfulness and Wild Space: A Geography of Motherlessness (essay)	40
Debra Marquart	Come to North Dakota! (essay)	54
	My Husband, A City Boy, Decides to Buy a Truck (poem)	62
Robert King	Driving Toward Home, Wherever That Is (poem)	64
Driving By on the Highway (poem)		66
	Grass Land Water (story)	67
	The Same Fog Along the River (poem)	80
Linda M. Hasselstrom	At the History Conference (poem)	81
	Ballooning (poem)	83
	One Afternoon in a Reservation Classroom (poem)	84
Glenna Luschei	I'd Trade My Horse & Dog (poem)	86

J. ANNIE MACLEOD

A VERY SHORT STORY BEGINS ON A FARM

A very short story begins on a farm; a combine whirs; chaff carried by the humid summer wind clouds the first sentence, making the words slow and thick and hard to read. Only after the eyes pass this sentence, stinging a little, does the smell match the heat and dust from the field—the smell of sweat, a damp neck, sour pits, the trickle of hot salt down a breastbone. A woman shades the sun with one hand, wipes her eyes. It is sunset in the Midwest. The woman cannot see the boy steering the combine, the man barking directions; they are a shadow among shadows against the orange fire of the sky. Light like dust clings to her eyelids, hands, neck—this light and the clog of too many words across the page seem to choke her; the story opens too stuffy and still for its genre. She crosses the yard to the kitchen; heat from the oven presses against her arms and cheeks. An overhead fan whirs, turning steam from a pot on the stove, and the language suggests a motif, symbols in temperature or blades, but a very short story doesn't have time for motifs—it must follow the woman to find her trouble, the immediate problem that will redeem the vagrancies of this paragraph.

Her secret: tonight she will leave. Brief, vivid details affirm this secret—fourteen fifty dollar bills sewn into her bra, an out-of-state phone number at the bottom of her purse, a fan of paid-off credit cards spread on his desk like trump. She'd learned about the bra from an old World War II movie, Nazis rolling tanks past a window, a dark-haired woman biting off thread with her teeth. There are sentimental details too, her boy's favorite soup on the stove, his favorite cobbler cooling in the fridge, one of his dirty t-shirts tucked in her suitcase. The details must work triple-time in very short fiction, must show a modern setting, a conventional family, a character marked by a string of inferences (precise-careful-clever-tender-determined-meticulous).

In some way all farm stories are alike—an unhappy woman in a catalog dress, a stoic man, a bottle of whiskey under the sink—and even her secret is

known by heart, the life at the other end of that number a big-city cousin, a waitressing job, a lover. But she is leaving, walking out on twenty years of hotdish, muffled sex, and endless weather, so it is right to suspect a secret within the secret. Maybe a murdered daughter from last summer found white and glistening in a ditch, a pale scar against the miles and miles of threshed fields and dark ponds. Or bruises like ink stains on the back of the woman's arms, hard pinches her husband takes where no one can see. Or a distant memory, the smell of smoke and summer sweat, a forbidden boy in a black car, his body crushing the bird's bones of the woman's ribs and hips.

Now the words are dark like a ditch; twilight rests on the sentences. The husband and boy will be heading back, chaff in their hair and down their shirts, marks on their arms like paper cuts. Light from the kitchen will draw them, the eye of the house—a beacon—the one place that exists in this story beyond which there is nothing but heat and dust and an out-of-state phone number that will ring and ring in an unknown city in an unknown room.

The woman is already driving to the bus station—she will leave the old Ford in the lot; she will take nothing that's his—and beneath her skirt her thighs stick; her upper lip glistens in the dashboard light. Damp and slippery in the folds of her body, the woman thinks that hot weather makes for any horror. Three days dead, her daughter had gone taut and shiny, an egg on a sidewalk in the hundred-degree sun. *She's full of fluid*, someone had said, a man with a tie and clean nails. *We'll have to drain her*. Such a memory, so placed, cannot help but sound like the beginning of truth, the one true thing this very short story will offer.

But weather slips beyond this moment, gathering force and edge, and it is not her daughter's bloated skin but the ripe air of an evening thunderstorm, air that's heavy and wet, the sky a blue-black bruise. And even though the genre resists extended imagery, the woman makes random associations: her windshield wipers like slaps, perched ravens like fists, the sound of far-off thunder like the threat of her husband's footsteps down the hall. Once, in the many unwritten pages before the first sentence, a summer lightning bolt had riven their hundred-year oak tree, and over the years the charred cleft has become her secret shelter—yet another image, a hollow like a turkey wishbone, cradling her broken body.

The woman wipes the taste of metal from her mouth; a story that talks so much about cruelty and death cannot help but taste like blood. For six paragraphs, this story has resisted expectation, and now would be the time to bring

it around, take on the fast, understated voice of very short fiction with its single effect and quick insight. But the sentences continue to move in slow motion, in a kind of plotless, intense feeling that seems impossible in a story of only so many words. This feeling comes from another, older memory, the boy and the car, the one who used to skim his lips across the woman's belly like a raft down a river.

Just last night she thought of this boy. A dog day, the night was so hot she slept without her gown, stretched herself on the bed, a hog on cool mud. Her husband was downstairs with the news and the whiskey carefully placed in paragraph three, and she touched herself the way the migrant's son had touched her, fingers on corn silk. Young, their very bodies had been stories, pages and pages to be turned and glossed and sometimes read with deep care. She'd known the measure of her body, then, its grammar of sighs and sweat and taste and touch; its unbroken code. But then a black night in the back of the boy's black car, her father had found them. Her father had raped the air with his fists.

The woman wonders how she will measure herself in a world beyond the farm and sky and weather, how she will know herself against the narrow, double nouns of cities: fire hydrants and potted plants, collared dogs and window-boxes. It's too late for the story to follow her there, though; the slow details of this night have eaten away her allotment of words. Her secrets within the final secret of her departure are the only clues to how she will fare, to the life she will live when she steps off the bus and dials the hidden phone number.

Perhaps a very short story cannot begin on a farm. The subject expects languor; weather is character; days are measured in snow and sun and rain and wind, not two martini lunches or trashcan fires at dusk. But any subject can invite the language of poetry or the grit of terse prose. The farm is tractors and aprons and throat-catching sunsets, but it's also money and torture and sex of all kinds. The very short story of the city, the slum, or the crowd has as much comfort as the sky through this woman's windshield, wide and blank as the end of this page. For all that matters in any story is a character in fierce or quiet pain, and this place is perfect for violence and need and anger and loss. This is farmland, after all, the country's heart—a thin topsoil over stones and raw clay.