Valerie Vogrin
© 2010 Segue online literary journal
ISSN 1939-263X

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Issue 9 Fall 2010

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Managing Editor: Michelle Lawrence

Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round via email. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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CONTENTS

this is the story 4
Author Notes 6
this is the story

Melody is drooling, her left cheek pressed against the bus window. She sleeps. She is sleepy all the time. She knows but does not want to know that she is pregnant again. The bus rumbles down Montlake. She awakens with a jolt: her baby boy is drowning.

*She knows.* She left Andy at home with Max and Max is drunk and he’s forgotten Andy in the tub and Andy is drowning.

Daycare had been out of the question—Andy woke that morning with a fever—and Madeline had made it clear that taking another day off work was not acceptable, and Max has been doing better since she let him move back in, *only temporarily,* until he gets his feet on the ground—at least Max certainly wanted to prove himself. He dutifully marked the want ads in the paper with checks, check-plusses, and poignant exclamation points. He changed the oil in her worthless car, and did laundry at the good Laundromat, not the crappy close-by one, but nevertheless, Andy is drowning.

She yanks the bus cord. Her stop is still three stops ahead but she can run faster than the bus can cover the distance in this traffic. She’s across the white line and down the steps before the driver can scold her.

She wills herself into sheer movement. She hurtles toward the ugly blue house, the hideous paint color and shoddy paint job—the landlord painted around the bushes pressing against the house rather than trimming them—that shouts poor people live here!

She doesn’t feel sorry for herself, not even in this terror.

She’s already reached her regular bus stop. She runs past Pete, the blind banjo player, not hearing his *humph* at her not acknowledging him with a hello and fifty cents or a dollar dropped in the banjo case. She ducks into the Honda lot, zigzagging through the aisles of cars. She whacks her elbow, hard, on a silver Accord’s side mirror.

She’s almost there. Her baby is drowning.

You want this story to be the story in which Melody is a guilt-ridden, fear-filled woman who shouldn’t have trusted Max with a load of whites much less her child, a disastrously fertile woman with an affinity for men who resist being saved even as they believe that being saved is their destiny, a woman whose imagination has run away with her, as impetuous as the dish and the spoon.

She takes the four stairs two at a time. For some reason the mailbox is sitting in front of the door and the door is ajar and Max is snoring on the couch and her baby is in the tub and the bubbles are gone and he is blue. His dark eyes look up at her through four inches of unfathomable water.

She screams at Max to call 9-1-1.

She lifts Andy from the cool water and sets him on the nubby yellow bathmat. She tilts his head back with one hand and tips his chin slightly with the other. His body is so still.

She presses her mouth over his nose and mouth and exhales one tiny breath. His chest raises. His chest lowers, but he is not breathing. She gives him another very small breath.

*This could work,* she thinks. It feels right to have her lips pressed to her baby’s skin.
“What is it?” Max hollers. Then he’s standing in the bathroom doorway holding the phone. His brown plaid shirt is mis-buttoned by one. She can tell he can’t make sense of what he sees exactly, but he stumbles down the hall and she hears him talking into the phone. Baby. Drowned.

Next, thirty chest compressions. She counts. Help is on its way.

Thirty is a magic number now. Not like when she took the class at the Red Cross and wanted to ask the instructor why not twenty-nine or thirty-one?

Max is sobbing. “What have I done?” he says.

This is the story in which she will never have an answer for that question.

She wants her baby to breathe, she wants his body to get warmer. She thinks, this isn’t working. She gives him two more small breaths and begins the compressions again. There’s hard knocking on the front door, Max’s frantic voice, heavy footsteps.

It makes no sense to her when the paramedics take his body away. Take me instead, she wants to say, though of course this makes no sense either. His body is a splendid vessel.

This is the story in which the new baby will hold her in this world against her will.

Andy is drowned. As long as Max is crying she can’t cry.

She needs to pull out the plug and follow the paramedics outside, but the water in the tub won’t stop moving. Andy’s red and yellow plastic boat bobs in the water, sloshing this way and that.
**Author Notes**

Valerie Vogrin is the author of the novel *Shebang* (*University Press of Mississippi, 2004*). Her short stories have appeared in *Ploughshares, AGNI, Zone 3, The Florida Review, Natural Bridge, Black Warrior Review, and elsewhere*.* She was recently awarded a Pushcart Prize, and the winning story will appear in Pushcart Prize XXXIV: Best of the Small Presses. She is an associate professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville where she also serves as prose editor of *Sou’wester*.

**About the Work**

This story was the result of an assignment in my Spring 2009 graduate workshop. The challenge I gave them was: “O inventor of fictions, now is the time for you to invent a fictional form, the short story equivalent of the sestina, the tango, the triple lutz, the still life with trout.”

Throughout the semester we examined the question of why dancers, figure skaters, visual artists, and, of course, poets, commonly work in forms (and continue to create new ones), questions of form for fiction writers boil down to questions of length—the difference between micro-fictions and flash fictions, etc.

I hoped that my students would come up with something that was more than an exercise—forms that would stand up to repetition, if not be revered in perpetuity. “Your goal,” I wrote, “is to invent a reproducible form that will nevertheless result in unique works of fiction. That is, if different writers undertake your form, the underpinnings of the form should be evident in each resulting story, but the stories should also be various.”

Once the students had completed their inventions, we exchanged forms. I followed the guidelines for one of my student’s forms, “Belazza e afflizione”—that is, beauty and affliction. She instructed that “unlike the classic story structure, the story will open at the point of climax and then descend into a darker downward spiral, at which point a moment of epiphany will occur. Then the rising action will take place, which will be the moment of transcendence.” It sounded to me like what she was asking me to do – and which I surely would be unable to do—was write *The English Patient* in 1,000 words.

I’m not actually sure I even did a very good job of following the instructions, but I was glad to have tried; this was a story I don’t think I would have otherwise written. I started with the worst thing I could think of and then had to figure out how to make this awful accident beautiful in any sense of the word—and in a way that wouldn’t diminish the awfulness. I worry that it’s a cruel story. But then, the world seems cruel in this way—the way it insists on forgiveness, on going on—with or without transcendence.

I must report that we didn’t really crack the case regarding form in fiction. At least a handful of the students’ inventions were worthy of further attention and served as valuable starting points, but as far as I can tell no one created the fictional equivalent of the sonnet.
Valerie Vogrin on the Web

www.siue.edu/ENGLISH/SW/

www.summersetreview.org/09fall/sisters.htm

www.nighttrainmagazine.com/contents/vogrin_fb.php

www.monkeybicycle.net/archive/Vogrin/coco.html

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