Sudden Fiction International: Sixty Short-short Stories Study Guide

Sudden Fiction International: Sixty Short-short Stories by Robert Shapard

BOOKRAGS

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The Falling Girl, Death of the Right Fielder, Blackberries, Don't You Blame Anyone

The Falling Girl, Death of the Right Fielder, Blackberries, Don't You Blame Anyone Summary

Sudden Fiction International is a collection of short-short stories, none longer than six pages, drawn from writers across the world. Because of their brevity, the running theme throughout the collection is the encapsulation of the infinite or universal in the single moment.

In The Falling Girl by Dino Buzzati, Marta leaps from the top of a skyscraper in the middle of the city. She is excited to arrive at the first floor where a party is being held. The upper floors wave hello to her on the way down, telling her not to move so quickly, to enjoy the passing time. As she falls still lower, fewer people call to her. With each lower floor, the tenants become older, sadder. Marta sees younger girls in better dresses falling. Just before she reaches the ground she is tired, and an old couple on a lower floor laments that the girls that fall by them are never young and pretty.

In Death of the Right Fielder by Stuart Dybek, a local baseball club notices that its right fielder has suddenly died on the field. He was never very good or well-liked, and they have no clue how he died. They think perhaps he was shot or tripped trying for a catch. They bury him in the field as the sun sets and try their best to cover the mound and prevent another mishap. They all pray over him and leave for the day. They consider how few players every have a chance at greatness.

A Welsh working-class boy gets his first haircut in Blackberries by Leslie Norris. His mother then takes him to buy his first cap. That night, the boy goes on a nature walk with his father, and they pick fresh blackberries. The father picks some for his wife, putting them in the boy's cap. They ruin the lining, which sparks a huge fight between the parents. The boy, for the first time, realizes his parents are fallible and human, and he cries.

In Julio Cortazar's Don't You Blame Anyone, the first person narrator needs to meet his wife to pick up a wedding gift, and it is cold out. He resolves to put on a blue sweater, but the process becomes difficult. He mixes up the neck and arms. He gets caught in the mass of blue. He collapses exhausted, tries again, and fails once more. Eventually he gives up and goes into the cold air outside.

The Falling Girl, Death of the Right Fielder, Blackberries, Don't You Blame Anyone Analysis

Because all of the stories of Sudden Fiction International are under six pages in length, the actual action of the narrative is almost always limited in length. Two of the five first stories involve brief moments in time that mirror an entirety of life experience. In The Falling Girl, Buzzati chronicles a life of heavenly youth sunk into middle age malaise in the narrative of Marta's fall from a skyscraper. In Don't You Blame Anyone, Cortazar illustrates the impotence of human defenses against nature in a man's inability to put on a sweater.

Blackberries, meanwhile, is a lovely and heartbreaking evocation of setting. Told in third person omniscient, the narrative exists in the eyes of a young boy on the cusp of realizing the frailty of human interconnectedness. Norris evokes this elegy of lost innocence by focusing on the details like sawdust on a barber's floor, distant bird calls, and blackberry skins on the lining of a hat. These would by the sensory memories of a wounded child, suffering his first disappointment in life.

Death of the Right Fielder is a lark of a story, discussing the link between aspiration and disappointment in an absurd scenario.

On Hope, Happy Endings, The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket, Girl, The Other Wife

On Hope, Happy Endings, The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket, Girl, The Other Wife Summary

On Hope by Spencer Holst tells the story of a gypsy in Gibraltar who trains monkeys to steal jewels for him. As the story begins, his most tenacious monkey has stolen the Hope diamond, the largest in the world, from the visiting English princess. The Hope is supposed to carry with it a curse of bad luck to whoever possesses it. Unable to sell it, the gypsy sends it back to the princess anonymously. The next day, the monkey returns with the diamond. The gypsy sends it back with an anonymous note telling them to put it in a cage to prevent the monkey stealing it again. The next day, the monkey returns with the Hope diamond, dying from a gunshot wound. The gypsy decided it is his job to destroy the diamond to prevent the curse. He swims out into the ocean and drops it below the water. It lands on a shark,s dorsal fin, and the shark rises to the surface to attack the gypsy. In the dark, the gypsy thinks the diamond is floating towards him. Holst ends the story by saying that though the gypsy seems doomed, he may not be: the shark now has the cursed diamond.

Happy Endings by Margaret Atwood is framed like a choose-your-own-adventure. In the first three scenarios, a couple called John and Mary meet. In the first, they fall in love and live happily ever after. In the second, only Mary falls in love, and John's indifference causes her to kill herself. In the second, only John is in love, Mary cheats, and John kills her, her lover, and himself. The last two scenarios feature John's wife Madge, who meets a nice man, Fred, after John's death. He eventually dies of a heart attack, showing that all endings are eventually the same.

Yasunari Kawabata's The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket tells the story of a group of Japanese children going out with lanterns to find crickets and grasshoppers at night. One boy finds what he thinks is a grasshopper and gives it to a girl. She is elated to find that it is a bell cricket, most rare, and the other children cheer and laugh. The reader, an adult among the children, thinks about the young boy, how when he grows older and wants a wife, he will reject many bell crickets he thinks and grasshoppers and end up with a grasshopper he thinks is a bell cricket.

Girl by Jamaica Kincaid is a monologue told by a mother to her girl. It begins with a series of directives meant to teach the girl to be meek and subservient, not a bold "slut" (p. 65). As the directives continue, they become more subversive until with mother is teaching the girl tricks of subtle empowerment.

In The Other Wife by Collette, Marc goes to a restaurant with his second wife Alice and is mortified to see his ex-wife there. As they eat, Alice asks Marc why he is so uncomfortable to be in the same room as her, and Marc eventually admits that his first wife was never content in their marriage. Alice remains supportive, but she keeps stealing glances of the older woman across the room. By the time she and Marc leave the restaurant, she envies the other woman's freedom.

On Hope, Happy Endings, The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket, Girl, The Other Wife Analysis

The running motif of these stories seems to be the folly of love, the discontent self-interest that lurks beneath the decision to take a mate. When a person takes a lover, one is really searching for a solution to a personal emptiness, and the lover never knows how to fill the emptiness perfectly.

Margaret Atwood, in Happy Endings, charts the many different paths a love affair can take, but even the happy ones - and she argues that those who do not kill themselves or each other will find happy endings - end with someone dying. Really, though, Atwood is sending up the conventions of grand romances. If all endings and most beginnings are the same, what happens in the middle is mere embellishment.

The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket, like Blackberries, is a fabulous evocation of time and place. The loving descriptions of night sounds and lantern light create a vivid image of a somewhat exotic setting. Indeed, the simple narrative illustrates the simple folly of choosing a mate: when we are young we want sex and stormy romance, but we have no sense of what has real value. Girl and The Other Wife observe the process of becoming a man's possession from a resolutely feminist perspective. Both the young Antiguan girl and the second wife Alice are destined to become caged birds. The girl's mother teaches her daughter about secret abortions and rebellions against her husband; Alice can only long to be like the ex-wife who freed herself from Marc.

The black sheep of this section - indeed of the collection as a whole - is On Hope, a shaggy dog story about a gypsy trying to get rid of the Hope diamond. The narrative seems like a fable, but Holst, like Atwood, take a postmodern narrative tack, dissecting the narrative and speaking directly to the reader about his reasons for writing the story. On Hope ends with a fantastic punch line.

La Volpaia, An Insolvable Problem of Genetics, House Opposite, Love Your Only Mother, The Laugher

La Volpaia, An Insolvable Problem of Genetics, House Opposite, Love Your Only Mother, The Laugher Summary

La Volpaia by Mark Helprin tells the story of university student Guiliano on a train departing Italy into the Alps en route to Germany. Into his train compartment comes a churlish priest who insists Guiliano open a bottle of wine for him and protests that he is wiser and more virtuous than the student. Guiliano protests that they are different people, and he is not foolish simply because he is not the priest. The priest explains how he can see the truth face of the world, singling out an old widow they just passed. He explains that everyone is wise and virtuous in their own way, but none are as brave as the dead.

An Insolvable Problem of Genetics by Josef Skvorecky is told from the point-of-view of a third grade boy in Russia. His brother Adolf becomes engaged to Freddie, the illegitimate daughter of a party leader. She comes to dinner and sings American civil rights songs with a guitar, explaining that her biological father is black. This disturbs Adolf's father, who worries that when Freddie, who is white, has a child, it may be black and therefore suspect. In the coming weeks, both Adolf and his father research dominant and recessive genes and begin explaining the scientific likelihood of Adolf and Freddie's having a black child to everyone they meet. In time, they are branded racists and kooks by the whole town. Freddie leaves Adolf. She later marries another man and has a healthy white son.

In House Opposite by RK Narayan, an Indian ascetic, obsessed with physical and spiritual cleanliness, becomes fixated on the woman in the house opposite his. She is clearly a prostitute, receiving men at all hour. The ascetic cannot stand the thought of her sullying his cleanliness, and one day he resolves to go to her house, tell her off, and cast her out of the neighborhood. She meets him halfway and presents him an offering, requesting a blessing. He gives her one and returns home.

In David Michael Kaplan's Love, Your Only Mother, a young woman has never known her mother, who left home when she was very young and has traveled the country since. Every month or so, her mother sends a postcard with a brief message and an indistinct return address. The young woman is now married, and from time to time she wakes in the middle of the night, terrified her mother has returned.

The Laugher by Heinrich Boll is told from the point of view of a man whose sole profession is that of a laugh. He goes wherever spare laughter is needed, on television or in comedy clubs. The laugher states that because he spends his whole professional life laughing, when he comes home, he prefers simply so sit quietly with his wife. The most he does is smile.

La Volpaia, An Insolvable Problem of Genetics, House Opposite, Love Your Only Mother, The Laugher Analysis

Another central theme of this collection is place in society. Since the stories are taken from all over the world, the society is forever shifting. Still, the stories - in their narrative and their characters - endeavor to explain the precarious sense of duty within the society. Nowhere is this more ironically presented than in An Insolvable Problem of Genetics. The Kratky family is thoroughly progressive, good Soviet citizens. They are overjoyed by their son's choice of wife; indeed they would be happier if she were herself black, but since she is white with a black father, the family has a problem. The problem is thoroughly pragmatic: they fear their son and daughter-in-law will be unfairly branded a cuckold and adulteress when she has a child, but their attempts to mitigate this issue turn them into public racists and eccentrics, ruining their reputation in society.

La Volpaia and House Opposite present two images of societal piety, one western and one eastern. The priest of La Volpaia is earthy and pious simultaneously. He has limitless compassion, and limitless contempt. The ascetic of House Opposite strives to be a good man and succeeds in being a scold. Only when he blesses the prostitute does he begin to understand the realities of holiness in a fallible world.

Love, Your Only Mother follows in the reactionary traditions of Tom Wolfe and John Updike in dramatizing the plight of those left behind in the wake of American sixties-era self-realization. It speaks the sad truth that loved ones suffer when people choose to abandon their lives in search of some humanistic ideal.

The Laugher, meanwhile, dramatizes a charming paradox: a man who provides mirth to the world can only find happiness in his private life in still and content silence.

August 25, 1983, The Elephant, Homage to Isaac Babel, One of These Days

August 25, 1983, The Elephant, Homage to Isaac Babel, One of These Days Summary

In August 25, 1983, Jorge Luis Borges meets himself in twenty-three years in a hotel room. The older Borges is committing suicide, having realized that death is not to be fought while giving a lecture on the Aeneid. The younger Borges initially refuses to believe his older self, but after a time he begins to ask the dying man what will happen in the intervening years. The older Borges tells the younger that he has already seen his best years and done his best work. The older Borges finally passes away, and the younger leaves the hotel room dejected.

In The Elephant by Slawomir Mrozek, an ambitious zoo director wishes to ingratiate himself to party leaders and pocket a little money allocated to the zoo. The petty zoo has been offered an elephant, and the director suggest it would be more cost effective if he built an inflatable false elephant, which will cost less and not require maintaining. It is built, but the workers cannot inflate it by human breath alone, so they fill it with gas from a pipe. The day of the elephant's debut, it is picked up by the wind and floats away. The disillusioned children who witness this go on to lives of cynical maladjustment.

Doris Lessing's Homage to Isaac Babel involves the author's visiting an intellectual friend Phillip with her teenage cousin Catherine. Catherine, wanting to impress the pedantic Phillip, makes an effort of reading Isaac Babel's short stories, though she does not understand them. That afternoon, the three of them see a movie melodrama about capital punishment. Catherine is reduced to tears by the sad story. A week later, Catherine sends the author a letter saying she had a lovely afternoon and now appreciates Isaac Babel. She hopes Phillip will come to her birthday party.

In One of These Days by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a dentist played by Aurelio Escovar is compelled to remove an infected tooth from the mouth of a hated strongman mayor. Escovar tries to refuse, but under threat of summary execution, he agrees. He uses the occasion to take revenge on the mayor for a recent spat of purges, pulling the tooth slowly and without anesthetic. The mayor trudges off, angry.

August 25, 1983, The Elephant, Homage to Isaac Babel, One of These Days Analysis

This section of reading contains stories by some of the better known authors in the collection, including two Nobel laureates. Doris Lessing, the world-traveled British author, provides a lovingly bittersweet portrait of young infatuation in Homage to Isaac

Babel. The story is told both in the style of Babel and with him as an ostensible subject. She speaks of yearning, disappointment, and the intellect's resilience in a hostile society. All of these themes will reappear in the Babel story that appears later in the collection.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, known best for his magical realist work, provides in One of These Days an example of his earlier, more journalistic work. The work is clearly a fantasy for a Colombian citizen disgusted the militant middle managers of the country. Marquez's colleague in the Latin Literature movement of the 1950s, Jorge Luis Borges, provides a rumination on mortality in August 25, 1983. Its theme of disappointment with aging appears throughout the collection, most notably in Lost Keys and The Model.

The Elephant, meanwhile, is a comical farce on the socialist state, in which bureaucrats pinch pennies in search of advancement and enrichment, all at the cost of the populace they ostensibly serve. The final lines about the children growing up to become malcontents is a hilarious absurdity on the Soviet notion of governmental responsibility.

Welcoming the Board of Directors, The Boy, The Weather in San Francisco, Blue, The Grass-Eaters, Preparations

Welcoming the Board of Directors, The Boy, The Weather in San Francisco, Blue, The Grass-Eaters, Preparations Summary

Welcoming the Board of Directors by Peter Handke is presented in the first person as a sort of monologue, a speech given by a presenter at a failing company's board meeting. The entire welcome is overwhelmed by explanations of horrible mishaps: the porter's son's death, the windows of the building being broken and the roof about to collapse, directors wandering through the deep snow. In the midst of these rambling and confused explanations, the president attempts to thank everyone in the room and assure them the company is not about to collapse. Eventually he becomes trapped in a verbal loop thanks and welcomes.

Joyce Carol Oates' The Boy deals with a school teacher whose fourteen-year-old student hits on her constantly. Eventually, she agrees and the two of them go to a hotel together. Once they go to bed together, the boy becomes scared and cannot get aroused. The teacher is annoyed, disappointed, and all she can do is cackle and wrestle with him.

Weather in San Francisco by Richard Brautigan begins with an old woman entering an Italian butcher's and ordering a pound of meat. The butcher wonders what the woman could want with a pound of meat, amusing himself imagining she feeds it to a hive of bees in her house. He suggests she get hamburger, but she says she wants liver. Upon return, she unwraps the meat for the thousands of bees in her house.

Blue by David Brooks speaks of a summer in Australia where plane crashes, strange blue mold, and a persistent dry spell perturb citizens. Eventually, though a plague of dreams inspires people to strip their houses of walls and roofs. Soon thereafter, the rain begins to fall.

The Grass-Eaters by Krishnan Varma tells the story of Ajit, a teacher in Calcutta, who lives in a large pipe with his pregnant wife Swapna. When they arrived in Calcutta, Ajit and Swapna slept in railroad cars but often discover they have moved during the night. Swapna wants to have her baby in a stationary place; so, Ajit searches until settling on the large pipe. His father thinks this is unacceptable for a schoolteacher and arranges a room for the couple in a block of flats. Because they cannot afford clothes, Ajit and Swapna remain naked around the house, and they try subsisting on grass for a time.

Swapna gives birth to a son, Prodeep. At the end, Ajit reasons that life is not so awful: he and Swapna have survived their hardships.

Kenneth Bernard's Preparations concerns a story the author has heard about the death an acquaintance. The man fell, stricken, while having a gathering at his house, while his overweight wife changed in the next room. Hearing him fall, the wife ran into the room, naked save her underwear, and held him while he said his last words. The author wonders whether he would stop to put on a robe and be too late. He wonders whether others would run naked to be by his side when he dies. He has become fixated on this woman.

Welcoming the Board of Directors, The Boy, The Weather in San Francisco, Blue, The Grass-Eaters, Preparations Analysis

This section begins with the strange, absurd monologue Welcoming the Board of Directors, which begins with an odd explanation of the cold room and a story about the porter's son. From there it devolves. Handke's story is the literary equivalent of entropy, with metaphors getting confused and stories shifting. Eventually, the proceedings completely break down.

Equally strange - though more traditionally structured - is The Weather in San Francisco. Presented as a simple interchange between an old woman and a butcher, the narrative has a dramatic twist at the end as the most wild conjecture one character can imagine proves to be true. The interchange in the shop is paralyzing in its mundanity; the conclusion is vibrant and absurd.

The Boy and The Grass-Eaters, while different in tone, setting, and themes, are among the more traditionally structured of the stories. The first is about the impossibility of control in a fallible world, with the teacher unable even to coax a teenage boy to sleep with her. The latter is a quiet presentation of two lives together. It is the most clear-eyed and unadorned portrait of poverty one can imagine.

Preparations makes use of the list - as Holst did in On Hope and Peter Carey will later - to examine an incident - the death of an acquaintance - from every conceivable angle. This is an adept way for illustrating obsession in a narrator.

At the River, The Blue Jar, Gregory, Iguana Hunting

At the River, The Blue Jar, Gregory, Iguana Hunting Summary

At the River by Patricia Grace concerns two older Maori tribesmen preparing to catch eels for their food. The narrator feels the younger men could catch for the older, but his friend says an eel always tastes better when you catch it yourself. Preparing to fish, the old friend tells the younger men they would do better fishing with spears than hooks, and they mock him for his old ways. The narrator is angered by this, but his friend tells him to let it pass. That night, the younger men return to camp, crying. The narrator knows then that his friend has died, and the young men confirm that he fell dead while fishing. They feel awful for mocking him, and the narrator tells them not to: it was his time to depart life. After the young men go, the narrator weeps.

In The Blue Jar by Isak Dinesan, an English lord and his daughter Helena are traveling on a merchant vessel, when the ship begins to go down. The two are separated, and Helena is saved by a young sailor. They are eventually picked up in their raft by a Dutch vessel and return to England, where her father pays the sailor not to tell anyone of their time together. When Helena recovers from her exhaustion she insists on going out to sea again, for she has become obsessed with finding a perfect shade of blue. The search consumes her entire life, which she spends on ship after ship. She knows she will die at sea. One day in China, when she is very old, Helena at last finds the blue jar she has searched for. She dies that night, and her heart is placed in the jar.

Panos Ioannides' Gregory takes pace during the execution of a war prisoner in Cyprus. The executioner is having difficulty firing because he never expected to kill Gregory, who is a servant that the soldiers have come to like. Gregory talks a lot. He is not especially bright, but he cooks well and mends the soldiers' socks. The soldiers are shocked to learn he will be shot and decline to tell him. They give him opportunities to escape, but he is too dull to take them. Now, as he faces death, Gregory asks the narrator if it is a joke. The narrator fires but does not kill Gregory, who rushes at him and clutches his leg. The narrator empties his gun into the man. Days later, leadership does not even confirm that Gregory was executed.

In Iguana Hunting by Hernan Lara Zavala, a boy goes to the country to visit his cousins Chidra and Crispin. Crispin is short and tough; Chidra is an adept storyteller. One day, they go iguana hunting, and Chidra says that he has seen the goddess Xtabay bathing in a pond. Crispin says he is lying, and the three of them trek off to find the pond. They arrive there to find a white couple living there. Suddenly, the three boys discover they are covered in ticks. That night, the narrator's grandmother is removing ticks from him. She asks him how he got covered in them. He says he was meeting Xtabay.

At the River, The Blue Jar, Gregory, Iguana Hunting Analysis

At the River continues the running theme of disappointment in aging, as the two Maori men discover they are growing obsolete. One of them, the narrator, responds proudly, declaring the youth must show respect to age. His friend responds in the opposite way, declaring that youth is always foolhardy and always mocks the elders. This interchange is a reflection of the duel inclinations regarding age: one wants to face it gracefully but cannot help mourning the loss associated with it.

Most stories of this collection encompass a brief moment or at most a couple of days; The Blue Jar encompasses a lifetime. Beginning with Helena's near-death at sea, the narrative chronicles the obsession - a search for the perfect blue - that comes to define her existence. This type of obsession exists in Preparations as well, and it will reappear in Disappearing by Monica Wood.

Another prime example of a plurality of experiences contained in one experience is in Gregory, in which a man's life flashes before his executioner's eyes. This story is particularly haunting as Ioannides manages to combine the humanism of the Gregory character and the Brechtian misanthropy of the military reality. These soldiers must commit this atrocity for fear that they will become victims of the same system if they resist. We pity not only Gregory but also his executioner; they are victims of the same system.

A unifying element of the abovementioned stories is their obsession with mortality. The boundless youth and optimism of Hunting Iguanas is therefore a wonderful relief. The children of this story, through their collective imagination, create a vision of sexuality and divinity combined.

Disappearing, A Lover's Ear, By the Creek, The Book, Facing the Light, Lost Keys

Disappearing, A Lover's Ear, By the Creek, The Book, Facing the Light, Lost Keys Summary

Disappearing by Monica Wood concerns an overweight woman who takes swimming lessons in order to get away from her boorish and insulting husband and unsupportive friend. She learns to swim and begins to swim laps every day. Little by little, she begins to lose weight and other men begin to notice her. Her friends comment on how good she looks, but she does not care. She is not doing it to look better; she merely wants to disappear. Eventually, she loses so much weight that people stop recognizing her. She is getting closer to disappearing completely.

The protagonist of A Lover's Ear by Yuan Ch'iung-Ch'iung always carries an ear pick with her, which she only uses on herself, but as she gets closer to a particular man she considers picking his ears. At a restaurant one day, the man lays his head on the table, and the woman picks his ear. As she does, she hears a neighboring table discussing a failed relationship. The woman accidentally cuts the man's ear. Soon thereafter they break up.

By the Creek by Barry Yourgrau tells the story of a young boy that borrows his father's head while the father naps. His mother is horrified, but the boy goes down to the creek wearing the head. He is joined by a dozen other boys with their fathers' heads.

In The Book, Rey Rosa describes a book he is reading. In it, a man is taking a bath when he receives a letter. He heads down to Osman to look at the port. There he is met by a boy who calls him by name and leads him down an alleyway. There, an old man offers him a drink and takes him to down a corridor to a girl. The light begins to fade, and the book ends.

In Facing the Light by Talat Abasi, a wealthy Persian woman is sorting through her saris with her servant when her husband abruptly comes in. The woman knows her husband has been having an affair and intends to leaver her; so, she sends the servant away. More than anything, she does not want hear her husband ramble on about fairness. She knows the marriage cannot be salvaged.

In Lost Keys by Paul Milenski, the narrator and his buddy Ron go fishing regularly. Ron is a serious fisherman who does not like to converse while waiting. As time goes on, though, Ron's memory begins to deteriorate. One day the narrator finds Ron dejectedly sitting by his truck; he has lost his keys. He cannot find them and doesn't know what to

do. When Ron stalks off to the woods in despair, the narrator finds the keys where Ron was just sitting. It is the last time they go fishing.

Disappearing, A Lover's Ear, By the Creek, The Book, Facing the Light, Lost Keys Analysis

Lost Keys is yet another of the stories in this collection that deals with disappointment in aging. Ron, a sharp man of great ability, is terrified of the approaching darkness as he comes to terms with one of the losses everyone faces with age, the loss of memory. The author never explicitly states whether Ron has a degenerative memory disorder, but regardless, the portrait is heartbreaking. It taps into the fear of personal loss, that one day you will look at a flight of stairs and know you'll never run up them again. That one day you'll look at a loved one and not recognize her.

Three stories from three different cultures - Disappearing, A Lover's Ear, and Facing the Light - deal with lost love. More specifically, they deal with the relationship between independence and lost love, and all three have woman protagonists. They face obstacles from their supposed lovers: emotional abuse, infidelity, insensitivity. All of them choose to end the affair to some extent, and the prospect of being alone is not as terrifying as being with someone like the current mate.

Arrest Me, Orion, The Verb To Kill, All at One Point, Bigfoot Stole My Wife

Arrest Me, Orion, The Verb To Kill, All at One Point, Bigfoot Stole My Wife Summary

Arrest Me by Denis Hirson is told from the point-of-view of a man whose family has all been arrested. He says he is tired of the strife in his country. He wants to go to prison and read the entire Bible.

Jeanette Winterson's Orion provides a humanistic retelling of the Orion and Artemis and the origin of his constellation. Orion is portrayed as a gruff and uncivilized hunter. Artemis, the daughter of Zeus, asks her father to allow her to forsake company and go hunt in the wild. He consents, and she goes to the woods. One night, by the fire, she sees herself in the past and the future and wonders if she has made the right choice. She continues to wander until the day she meets Orion, who wanders into her camp and eats her goat. She tells him of her life, and when she falls asleep, Orion rapes her. In vengeance, she kills him with a scorpion. He dies slowly. When he is gone, Artemis puts out the fire. The world now looks different to her, not as fresh. Orion goes to the underworld for a time, but in the end the gods send him to the stars. There he dominates the sky, except when Scorpio is in ascension.

In The Verb To Kill by Luisa Valenzuela, two Argentinean children fear a disgusting man who always passes them as they are returning from clam digging. They suspect he murders animals and other people as a sort of sick pleasure, and though they tell their parents they do nothing. One day, one of the children convinces their father to lend them a rifle to hunt rabbits. They imply that they have since killed the strange man.

In Italo Calvino' All at One Point, the narrator can recall the time before the big bang when everyone and everything was contained at one point. He mentions that there was a loud immigrant family always bugging him and sweet old Mrs. Ph(i)Nk0, whom everyone loves and misses. It is she that caused the big bang, when she announced if she had more space she would make a lovely sauce for everyone. One day, the narrator runs into misanthropic, racist Mr. Pbert Pberd. He discusses the possibility of the universe beginning to retract, and the wonderful reunion with Mrs. Ph(i)Nk0.

The narrator of Ron Carlson's Bigfoot Stole My Wife does not expect anyone to believe him. One day he just came home from losing money at the track, and his wife was gone. The trailer smelled like bigfoot, and there was no note. It has been years since she was kidnapped, and the narrator hopes bigfoot is taking care of her. He tells the story of the time he and his friend Nuggy were carried 31 miles in a trailer by floodwaters. It only shows that anything is possible, he says.

Arrest Me, Orion, The Verb To Kill, All at One Point, Bigfoot Stole My Wife Analysis

Arrest Me, perhaps the most politically charged of the stories in the collection, is an enraged and elegiac portrait of one person's impotence in a country torn in two. More than anything, the narrator of the story longs for quiet, and the only way he knows to get it is in prison.

Several of the pieces in this section are fantasias of sorts.

Orion reimagines the story of Artemis and Orion as a gender parable in which Artemis's wanderlust and desire not to be tied to one person is forever shattered when Orion forces himself upon her. Like Sarah Ruhl's Euridice, it ties classical narratives to modern sensibilities. Bigfoot Stole My Wife, likewise, uses an American folk myth to cloak the realities of a man's failure in adulthood. Unable to support his wife, he decides that her disappearance is not his fault but Bigfoot's. In All At One Point, Italico Calvino frames racial strife in the logic of physics. If everyone were forced to one point and then allowed to wander, would we feel any sort of kinship to each other?

The Verb To Kill, meanwhile, is a haunting story of imagination run amok. The children in Hunting Iguanas created a divine myth from their imagination; these children only create death, and the invented murder becomes real at the end.

Mr. and Mrs. Martins, Di Grasso, The Street-Sweeping Show, Courtly Vision, The Model

Mr. and Mrs. Martins, Di Grasso, The Street-Sweeping Show, Courtly Vision, The Model Summary

In Mr. and Mrs. Martins by Edna Van Steen, an elderly couple with no children has decided to take precautions in preparation for their deaths. They have begun living apart as though the other has died. In the story, they meet at the grave as Mrs. Martins brings flowers to her husband (he is bringing her flowers next week). She lives in the house they shared and is thinking of moving somewhere smaller. They agree to begin looking tomorrow and part with a kiss.

Isaac Babel's Di Grasso is told from the point-of-view of an actor in an opera troupe run by a scoundrel named Schwarz. The only reason for the troupe's success is the performance of the lead actor, Di Grasso. He is beloved by the people of Odessa, particularly in his portrayal of Giovanni, a murdered city-dweller. The narrator eventually resolves to leave Odessa since he has pawned his severe father's beloved watch to Schwarz, but before he goes he takes in a Di Grasso performance. The performance moves him to tears. Schwarz's wife sees him crying and orders her husband to give him back his watch.

In The Street Sweeping Show by Feng Jicai, a Communist party leader in Beijing is organizing a street cleaning by the local leadership of his district. His underlings organize it for him, and on the day of the cleaning, he gathers up the press for the photo ops. The leadership poses with their brooms, but they do hardly any sweeping. After the event, the leader returns to his extravagant household, where the news is covering the event. He tells his family it's not worth watching.

Bharati Mukherjee's Courtly Vision is a description of a robust painting that portrays all sorts of court intrigue. The narrator begins discussing the Countess Begum in her boudoir and the Count in his arbor. In the boudoir, Begum is attended by a serving girl who may be planning to kill her. Below her are two Portuguese priests who are conspiring to have the Count baptized. Meanwhile, the Count is preparing to lead his army. The narrator thinks the Count commissioned the painting, telling the artist to present all the plots against him in the most lovely way possible.

The protagonist of The Model by Bernard Malamud is the elderly widower Ephraim Elihu. Ephraim is lonely, and he decides to take up painting again. He calls an art school and talks the operator into sending a woman in her thirties to model for him. Ms. Perry, a severe woman, arrives and poses for him. After a moment, though, she deduces that he is not a working artist. She accuses him of bringing her over to leer. He apologizes,

but Ms. Perry forces him to strip for her so she can draw him. He does, and she blots out her drawing after she is done. After she has left, Ephraim decides his life is over.

Mr. and Mrs. Martins, Di Grasso, The Street-Sweeping Show, Courtly Vision, The Model Analysis

Of all the narratives dealing with age, The Model is the most brutal and unsparing. Malamud presents the reader with a sympathetic and brave widower in Ephraim and then creates the most crushing situation possible. One cannot become too angry with Ms. Perry despite her vicious humiliation of Ephraim. Despite his best attempts, the old man has humiliated her, turning her into a stripper of sorts with his stare. Her revenge is perhaps out of proportion to the offense, certainly in relation to the fact that it destroys Ephraim's will to continue with life. One knows by the end of the story that Ephraim is a dead man.

More oddly charming is the depiction of age in Mr. and Mrs. Martins, where two people have effectively decided to die early without dying. The husband and wife have accepted the loss that accompanies again and built a complete life around it. The story is bittersweet, but the clear-eyed realism of the Martins couple makes it bearable.

This section also features two depictions of corrupt, graft-ridden systems. Babel's Di Grasso involves an opera company ruled by a money-hungry charlatan. It is clearly intended to represent the degenerating Soviet hierarchy. A story like this illustrates that its author was murdered by Stalin's secret police. A more overt satire of a corrupt socialist government is The Street-Sweeping Show. The very title contains the root of the story's satire. Street-sweeping should be a basic government service, but in this society, it is nothing more than a show for venal politicians.

Terminal, Emilie Plead Choose One Egg, There's a Man in the Habit of Hitting Me on the Head with an Umbrella, Family Album, The Last Days of a Famous Mime

Terminal, Emilie Plead Choose One Egg, There's a Man in the Habit of Hitting Me on the Head with an Umbrella, Family Album, The Last Days of a Famous Mime Summary

Terminal by Nadine Gordimer is concerned with an unnamed woman who has a significant gastrointestinal problem, significant to the point that her stomach has been removed and replaced with a device to process food. She has an opening in her abdomen, and doctors cannot give her a straight answer as to when they can close it. She makes her husband promise to help her die if things become unbearable. One day, she takes a handful of pills and leaves a note instructing him not to resuscitate her. She drifts into darkness. She emerges in the hospital holding her husband's hand.

Emilie Plead Choose One Egg by Paule Barton involves a poor, debt-ridden mother and son. The mother makes breakfast and debates whether she should take it to her debt-holder and exchange it for credit. She asks her son to decide, but he cannot.

There's a Man in the Habit of Hitting Me on the Head with an Umbrella by Fernando Sorrentino tells a story largely as indicated by its title. The narrator walks down the street one day, and a frail man starts rapping him lightly on the head with an umbrella. The narrator, taken aback, strikes the man, who recomposes and strikes him again. The narrator walks away, but the man continues hitting him. Days pass, and the man doesn't stop. The narrator now doubts he could go to sleep without the raps on his head.

Family Album by Siv Cedering tells the story of the narrator's family as depicted through pictures in his mother's album. The family is from Lapland, and they have traditionally been poor. The narrator discusses how many of his father's siblings died. He talks about his uncle, who went to America and returned with an American bride, who soon left him. He describes every one of his relatives and says that they are his inheritance. He carries them within himself.

In Peter Carey's The Last Days of a Famous Mime, the title character arrives for a series of shows in Australia. The famous Mime is known for his reactions of terror that inspire fear in the audience. In his last tour, the Mime decides to switch into other styles, but he cannot inspire an audience with them. He begins carrying a box of blue string around, an act that confuses those around him. His lover leaves him, and the Mime

announces he will no longer perform for an audience, only individual command performances for whoever asks. He goes to great lengths to perform one word interpretations, culminating in his downing himself when a person asks him to perform 'sea.'

Terminal, Emilie Plead Choose One Egg, There's a Man in the Habit of Hitting Me on the Head with an Umbrella, Family Album, The Last Days of a Famous Mime Analysis

Throughout the collection, authors have explored the nature of artifice. Some examples from earlier include Courtly Vision, Happy Endings and The Book. The Last Days of a Famous Mime, numbered in list from like Happy Endings, concerns a protagonist for whom performance and enacting the fiction have forever skewed his life. The Mime is haunted by the false emotions he creates, and his determination to create a true reaction to a true action compels him to drown himself.

Emilie Plead Choose One Egg could well be a companion piece to The Grass-Eaters. A quick sketch detailing one conversation between poor folk who must choose between eating and paying a debt, the story is also notable for its employing of French Haitian dialect.

Terminal is an elegiac portrait of terminal illness. The reader is invited to appraise the woman's request to her husband. One's own feelings regarding assisted suicide will likely inform her attitude toward the ending and whether the husband did the right thing.

The Shoe Breaker, Katya, Looking for a Rain God, The School, The Fifth Story

The Shoe Breaker, Katya, Looking for a Rain God, The School, The Fifth Story Summary

Daniel Boulanger's The Shoe Breaker begins with the owner of a cobbler's shop awaiting the arrival of a pompous Baron, whose shoes are being broken in by Pinceloup. Pinceloup, a poor man, has the gift of being able to work out the stiffness of a customer's new shoes so that they fit like a well-worn pair. Pineloup is running late when the impatient baron arrives. The Owner entertains the Baron for a time until Pinceloup arrives with the shoes. They are transferred to the Baron's feet. Pinceloup is dejected; breaking in the Baron's shoes took all day, and the breaker's feet are calloused and bleeding. He thinks he is losing his touch. The Owner cheers him and tells him to come back tomorrow.

Katya by Dovlatov concerns a poor woman who lives with her lover Egorov, a Soviet officer, and one of his men, Pavel. She wakes them up for the morning and is desperately depressed. Little aggravations like ice in their wash tub and a barking dog are driving her crazy. Egorov does his best to comfort her as she makes breakfast. Eventually, he orders his man to shoot the dog.

Looking for the Rain God by Bessie Head takes place in Botswana during a relentless drought that is starving everyone. A slight rain begins and green shoots sprout, but the drought returns as the inhabitants get their hope up. The house of Mokgobja becomes desperate. The patriarch looks at the two young daughters and becomes convinced that sacrificing them will bring rain. He does so, but the rain does not come. The two men of the family are caught and executed. Eventually rain comes.

In The School by Donald Barthelme, the teacher of a third grade class is trying to understand all the death that has infiltrated the class projects. They lose, in the space of a couple months, a set of orange trees, an herb garden, snakes, fish, and a puppy. Meanwhile, two of his students are killed in an accident and several parents die in various ways. The teacher talks to the class about death, and he is forced to answer some unusually philosophical questions. The children ask him to make love to his teaching assistant for them. He is about to when a new gerbil arrives.

The Fifth Story by Clarice Linspector begins with the first of five stories: the narrator takes a coworker's advice on how to kill roaches with plaster. The second story is the first in greater detail, in which the narrator feels like a vile death-god. The third story is the same, but the narrator surveys the Pompeii-like carnage the next morning. The fourth story is the same, but the narrator - after much philosophical carping - decides he will not repeat the carnage nightly. The story ends as the narrator begins his fifth story.

The Shoe Breaker, Katya, Looking for a Rain God, The School, The Fifth Story Analysis

All the rumination on the meaning and effects of death on life from the collection thus far is travestied brilliantly in The School. Heretofore, the reality of death as a deeply scarring entity has affected the old and terminally ill. The third-graders of Barthelme's story are turned into stoic philosophers by an escalation of deaths ranging from herbs to classmates. This culminates in their demand for copulation as an antidote for the vacuity of nonexistence.

Looking for a Rain God is the dark counterpoint to the earlier story of a drought, Blue. It is also the horrific flip-side to the resilience in poverty seen in The Grass-Eaters. The lack of sustenance here leads to madness and the death of innocents. The final comment by the narrator that any family in the drought would have killed for rain resonates terribly. This desperation is the only product of want.

Katya is yet another illustration of the ennui and brutality inherent in the Soviet system of militant governance. It is a culture that both destroys hope and lashes out violently to reassert control.

Like Happy Endings and The Last Days of a Famous Mime, The Fifth Story breaks down its narrative to reveal the building-blocks that are storytelling. Every story, it indicates, contain within it countless others. Lispector never even tells the fifth story of the title.

Tancredi, Las Papas, The Black Dog, Snow, The Explosion in the Parlor

Tancredi, Las Papas, The Black Dog, Snow, The Explosion in the Parlor Summary

Tancredi by Barbara Alberti begins with a religiously devout woman losing her first two children at birth before giving birth to Tancredi, a child with two heads. She initially tries to murder the freakish child, but it insists on surviving. When Tancredi grows up, the two heads develop two personalities. The right head is devout and quiet; the left is vile and dark. The left Tancredi goes to prostitutes, and the right Tancredi whips himself in repentance. One day, the right Tancredi stabs himself with a hat pin. The left Tancredi is enraged and strangles his other head. When the left Tancredi realizes he has killed his right head, he weeps and dies.

In Las Papas by Julio Otega, a father makes Chicken Cacciatore for his son. As he cuts up the potatoes, he realizes they are American. He never eats his native Peru's potatoes, and he recalls his mother saying they bloom like flowers in water. After dinner, he buries a potato in soil and explains to his son how potatoes grow.

The Black Dog by J. Bernlef begins with a father playing an April Fool's joke on his young son; the son wishes his father was dead. Days later, the father and son are taking a walk, and the father is attacked by a rabid dog. He tells the son to run home. The son tells a car to help his father, but when he gets home he tells his mother that dad is dead. The boy retrieves a picture of his father in the parlor and is crying, looking at when his father arrives with his arm in a sling.

In Snow by Ann Beattie, a woman recalls an affair at a house in the country, focusing on an image of her lover shoveling snow in their driveway. He could not find his hat; so, she wrapped his head in a towel. Now they are separated. Still the memory remains.

In The Explosion in the Parlor, a family is having tea with friends when a thermos breaks. The father apologizes for knocking it over. His son asks him later why he admitted to a mistake he did not make. The father explains it did not matter: everyone though he broke the thermos.

Tancredi, Las Papas, The Black Dog, Snow, The Explosion in the Parlor Analysis

Tancredi plays like a sort of modern myth on the superego and id. The protagonist is constantly divided against itself. Not only does he vie with himself over the actions he will take in life, he also feels the effects of them. The right Tancredi experiences the orgasm when the left visits a prostitute; the left feels the pain of the right's self-

flagellation. In the end, both die when one tries to stifle the other, clearly a moral concerning balance between pleasure and reverence in life.

The Black Dog could be a companion piece to Blackberries. In the earlier story, a naïve child becomes painfully aware of the limits of love; in this story, a child of approximate age is leveled by the realization of the power of his love for his father.

The collection ends with two ruminations on a moment lastingn no longer than a minute. In Snow, a memory of seeing a lover shoveling snow comes to represent the entire relationship: tender and fleeting. In The Explosion in the Parlor, the author illustrates the precariousness of fact in a single shattered tea piece. These two stories typify the reason for the collection as described in the introduction: they show the universal in the fleeting moment.

Characters

Martaappears in The Falling Girl

Marta begins The Falling Girl by looking over the side of a skyscraper and leaping. She is a young, lively girl, and there is a party on the first floor. As she falls past the upper windows, young men beg her to stay, but she politely declines. As she falls farther, she passes hard-working people who pay no attention. As the sun sets and Marta nears the ground, she grows tired and feels older. She notices younger, prettier girls falling faster to the part below. By the time Marta reaches the lowest floors, an old couple is commenting how tired and old she looks.

Boyappears in Blackberries

The Boy in Blackberries is about five years old and growing up in Wales. When the story begins he is getting his hair cut for the first time so that his mother can buy him a cap. After the haircut, they buy the smallest cap in the clothiers, though it is still slightly large on him. That night, the boy goes on a walk with his father, and they pick blackberries for themselves and the mother. When the boy and his father get home, they discover the lining of his cap is ruined from the blackberries they carried in it. The mother is furious, and the boy witnesses the first fight he has ever seen. He realizes that he, his father, and his mother are all different people, and he cries.

Gypsyappears in On Hope

The Gypsy in On Hope lives on Gibraltar and trains moneys to steal for him. One day, his most effective monkey returns to him with the Hope diamond, the largest diamond in the world, a part of the British crown jewels, and a cursed stone. The Gypsy sends it back to the visiting princess, but the monkey steals it again. He sends it back once more, and the monkey returns with it before dying, having been shot by a British guard. The gypsy swims out in the Mediterranean to dispose of the diamond, but it lands on a shark, who rises to the surface with the jewel on its dorsal fin. The story ends with the Gypsy, thinking a miracle has occurred, swimming towards the shark in earnest.

Hermitappears in House Opposite

The Hermit in House Opposite is an ascetic living in India. He is focused on meditation, cleanliness and purity; so he is deeply dismayed by the presence of a prostitute in the dwelling opposite his. At first he is merely annoyed by her loud gatherings, but after a time he becomes obsessed with her sinful ways. He can think of nothing but her, and eventually he resolves to tell her to leave for shame. On the hermit's way across the road to her house though, he is intercepted by the prostitute. She has a tray of offerings and asks his blessing. He obliges.

Borgesappears in August 25, 1983

Borges is both the author and two of the central characters of August 25, 1983. At the beginning of the story, Borges meets himself in twenty-three years in a hotel room. The older Borges is committing suicide, having realized that death is not to be fought while giving a lecture on the Aeneid. The younger Borges initially refuses to believe his older self, but after a time he begins to ask the dying man what will happen in the intervening years. The older Borges tells the younger that he has already seen his best years and done his best work. The older Borges finally passes away, and the younger leaves the hotel room dejected.

Helenaappears in The Blue Jar

Helena is the daughter of a wealthy and influential British merchant in The Blue Jar. One day the vessel they are on begins to sink, and Helena and her father become separated. She survives on a life raft with a young sailor. When she and the sailor make it back to England, her father is overjoyed, but concerned for her reputation, he pays the sailor never to see her again. Soon thereafter, Helena takes to the sees again, obsessed with finding a particular shad of blue. This search consumes her life, and she never settles in one place. She knows she will eventually die on the sea. In China, she finds a jar with the perfect shade of blue. She dies that night.

Gregoryappears in Gregory

Gregory is a prisoner of Cyprian nationalists in the story bearing his name. He is a dull but affable underling, and he was captured along with his superior. For the time of his imprisonment, Gregory is liked by his captors. He tells them about his wife and regularly cooks and does their mending. Eventually, both Gregory and his superior are sentenced to death, and Gregory's body is to be strung up on a pole. When he faces his executioner, a man he has come to like, he think he is the butt of a joke. Gregory dies after several shots, clinging to his executioner's leg. He is buried instead of hung up.

Wifeappears in Disappearing

The unnamed wife of Disappearing is significantly overweight at the beginning of the story. Her husband emotionally abuses her and browbeats her into sex. She takes swimming lessons and begins swimming laps daily to escape her life. After a time she loses weight, and everyone compliments her. She does not care, though; she is not swimming to lose weight. She wants to disappear from the world. She loses more weight, to the point that no one recognizes or even notices her anymore.

Ronappears in Lost Keys

Ron is a man who loves to fish, and in Lost Keys he goes regularly with his friend, the narrator of the story. Ron does not make small talk or fish haphazardly. He always catches his limit. As time goes one, either through a degenerative disorder or through simple age, Ron begins to lose hold on information. One day during a fishing expedition, he loses his keys for over an hour when he is just sitting on them. He is distraught and hates himself. It is the last time he goes fishing.

Artemisappears in Orion

Artemis is presented in modern terms in Orion. She is Zeus's daughter and asks him permission to wander the forest as a huntress rather than getting married. He agrees, and Artemis spends years in the wood trying to escape herself. One day she meets Orion, who has happened upon her camp and eaten her goat. Artemis thinks he is dumb, but she tells him all about her life. When she falls asleep, Orion rapes her. Artemis then kills Orion with a scorpion. She buries him and departs her camp, but the world now seems different.

Orionappears in Orion

Orion is the product of the urine of three gods in the story bearing his name. He is a boorish and dull hunter who one day happens upon Artemis's camp and eats her goat. That night, when Artemis falls asleep, Orion rapes her. She then proceeds to kill him with a scorpion, and he dies slowly. He passes in the morning, and Artemis buries his body. Orion spends some time in the underworld fighting and crying, but eventually the gods let him go to the stars with his dog.

Nickappears in Di Grasso

Nick of Di Grasso is a member of an opera company in Soviet era Odessa. He is indebted to the conniving manager of the company, Schwartz. Nick pawns his severe father's prized watch to Di Grasso, who refuses to buy it back. As such, Nick resolves to leave for Constantinople. The night before his flight, Nick sees a performance by the company's prime attraction, Di Grasso. Nick is moved to tears by the performance, and Schwartz's wife sees it. She forces her husband to give Nick his watch back.

Ephraimappears in The Model

Ephraim is an aged widower in The Model. When he was younger, he took art classes, and now that he has resolved to try to paint again. He calls an art school and talks the operator into sending a woman in her thirties to model for him. Ms. Perry, a severe woman, arrives and poses for him. After a moment, though, she deduces that he is not

a working artist. She accuses him of bringing her over to leer. He apologizes, but Ms. Perry forces him to strip for her so she can draw him. He does, and she blots out her drawing after she is done. After she has left, Ephraim decides his life is over.

Mimeappears in The Last Days of a Famous Mime

The famous Mime in this story is known for his reactions of terror that inspire fear in the audience. In his last tour, the Mime decides to switch into other styles, but he cannot inspire an audience with them. He begins carrying a box of blue string around, an act that confuses those around him. His lover leaves him, and the Mime announces he will no longer perform for an audience, only individual command performances for whoever asks. He goes to great lengths to perform one word interpretations, culminating in his downing himself when a person asks him to perform 'sea'.

Edgarappears in The School

Edgar is the teacher of a third grade class that is trying to understand all the death that has infiltrated the class projects. They lose, in the space of a couple months, a set of orange trees, an herb garden, snakes, fish, and a puppy. Meanwhile, two of his students are killed in an accident and several parents die in various ways. The teacher talks to the class about death, and he is forced to answer some unusually philosophical questions. The children ask him to make love to his teaching assistant for them. He is about to when a new gerbil arrives.

Tancrediappears in Tancredi

Tancredi is the two-headed child of a deeply religious woman. She initially tries to murder the freakish child, but it insists on surviving. When Tancredi grows up, the two heads develop two personalities. The right head is devout and quiet; the left is vile and dark. The left Tancredi goes to prostitutes, and the right Tancredi whips himself in repentance. One day, the right Tancredi stabs himself with a hat pin. The left Tancredi is enraged and strangles his other head. When the left Tancredi realizes he has killed his right head, he weeps and dies.

Objects/Places

Skyscraperappears in Falling Girl

The skyscraper is the setting of The Falling Girl, which takes place as the title character leaps from the top of the structure. Tenants pay extravagantly for rooms in the skyscraper because they get to watch girls fall by their windows. Young lively people live in the top floors, watching bright-eyed girls drop, but on the lower floors, sad-eyed people watch tired girls reach the ground.

Capappears in Blackberries

The Cap is a gift for the young boy after he gets his hair cut at the beginning of Blackberries. He has wanted a cap, and his head is so small that he can only fit the smallest cap in the clothiers. The night he gets it, he and his father pick blackberries for the mother. The skins of the blackberries ruin the lining of the cap, causing a massive fight between the boy's parents and reducing him to tears.

Hope Diamondappears in On Hope

The Hope Diamond is the largest gem in the world, and the necklace that it is a part of is one of the English crown jewels. Lore states that anyone that possesses it will be cursed with bad fortune. As the story begins, a gypsy's monkey has stolen the Hope diamond for his master. Unable to sell it, the gypsy sends it back to the princess anonymously. The next day, the monkey returns with the diamond. The gypsy sends it back with an anonymous note telling them to put it in a cage to prevent the monkey stealing it again. The next day, the monkey returns with the Hope diamond, the monkey dying from a gunshot wound. The gypsy decides it is his job to destroy the diamond to prevent the curse. He swims out into the ocean and drops it below the water. It lands on a shark's dorsal fin, and the shark rises to the surface to attack the gypsy. In the dark, the gypsy thinks the diamond is floating towards him.

Mendel's Studiesappears in An Insolvable Problem of Genetics

Mendel's Studies have to do with dominant and recessive genes, and they become an obsession Adolph and his father after Adolph becomes engaged to a white woman who has a black father. Adolf's father worries that when she has a child it may be black and therefore suspect. In the coming weeks, both Adolf and his father research dominant and recessive genes and begin explaining the scientific likelihood of Adolf and the girl's having a black child to everyone they meet. In time, they are branded racists and kooks by the whole town. The girl leaves Adolf.

Postcardsappears in Love, Your Only Mother

Postcards are the only form of communication between the protagonist of Lover, Your Only Mother and her long-estranged mother. The postcards come from all over the country with brief messages and indistinct return addresses.

Inflatable Elephantappears in Elephant

The Inflatable Elephant is a sycophantic zoo director's solution to his zoo's inability to afford a real elephant. He has it built to trick visitors into thinking the zoo has such an animal. The workers cannot inflate the elephant with their breath, so they use gas. As a result, the second a brisk wind picks up, the elephant floats away, breaking the hearts of the schoolchildren looking at it.

Moreporkappears in At the River

The morepork is a native bird of New Zealand. It has a strange call, that sounds like the words "more pork." In the story, a morepork visits the old protagonist while his compatriot is fishing with their younger Maori cousins. He knows that the bird is a harbinger of death, and indeed, his friend dies while he is fishing.

Paintingappears in Courtly Vision

The Painting is the entire subject of the story Courtly Vision. As described by the author, the Countess Begum is in her boudoir and the Count in his arbor. In the boudoir, Begum is attended by a serving girl, who may be planning to kill her. Below her are two Portuguese priests who are conspiring to have the Count baptized. Meanwhile, the Count is preparing to lead his army. The author thinks the Count commissioned the painting, telling the artist to present all the plots against him in the most lovely way possible.

Potatoesappears in Las Papas

Potatoes - specifically those native to Peru - are the topic of the story Las Papas. The protagonist cuts American potatoes for his son's Chicken Cacciatore, and he recalls how his mother told him that Peruvian potatoes bloomed like flowers in water. After dinner, the protagonist plants a potato in the ground and explains to his son how potatoes grow.

Dogappears in The Black Dog

The rabid dog of the story attacks the father and terrifies the young son. The son runs for help, but he thinks the mad dog has killed his father. In reality, the farther is treated for an injured arm and the rabid dog is put down.

Themes

The Universal Contained In the Moment

Because of the extremely short length of the stories contained in Sudden Fiction International, the subjects of the narratives tend toward the momentary. Many concern events that take place within only a few minutes, but within these fleeting instances is the root of some great universality.

The very first story of the collection is The Falling Girl. It begins with the protagonist Marta leaping from the top of the skyscraper and ends with her hitting the ground. In between, she converses with each floor, the upper floors populated by the young and beautiful, the lower ones with the old and tired. She believes she is on her way to a great party below, but as she descends, she realizes that more pretty girls are falling with her. The author has created a scenario in which a few seconds encompass an entire life.

The story Gregory also encompasses a grand theme in a brief moment: the execution of a prisoner of war. This story out of Cyprus illustrates the universal humanity of individuals on either side of a conflict. The author illustrates this in the torrent of thoughts going through the mind of a man about to kill another man, one he has grown to like. The events of the story take only a few minutes; the themes span ages of brutal conflict.

The final story of the collection is called The Explosion in the Parlor. It concerns a simple event in which a part of a tea set breaks during a gathering and a man takes responsibility for it, though it is not his fault. This is one of the shortest stories in the collection, but in the man's decision not to defend himself when he knows he will not be believed, the author has created an affecting treatise on fact.

The Disappointment of Aging

A recurring theme throughout Sudden Fiction International is the disappointment that accompanies aging. This is a theme that transcends nationality. All people grow old, and as they grow old they discover that they have also grown obsolete. This is most pointedly presented in the story At the River, in which two Maori fisherman must come to terms with their lack of utility. One determines proudly that the young should fish for him; the other doggedly joins the younger men and dies trying to catch eels. It is worth noting that another story, an American piece called Lost Keys, also uses fishing as a means for revealing a character's deterioration with age. Perhaps as fishing is an innately human activity - one we have engaged in for centuries - it is a classical driver of themes and action.

The most brutal depiction of aging is the Malamud story The Model, in which an aged widower hires an artist's model to paint. He is only an amateur, and the model

recognizes this. She declares him a pervert and proceeds to humiliate him, forcing him to strip for her. Malamud is brutal both in the unblinking nature of his protagonist's destruction and also in his protagonist's complicity with it. The old man wants some artistic output, but he also wants to see a young naked woman. His motives are sad and understandable, but they are not pure.

A lighter exploration of aging's inevitable effects is Mr. and Mrs. Martins. In this strange story, the titular couple has accepted their demise and decides to live like widow and widower in order to prepare for it. The topic is grim, but Edla Van Steen has a light touch. The small-talk and the obvious affection between man and wife buoy the proceedings. We should all be so clear-eyed about our own mortality.

The Folly of Leaders

Because the stories of Sudden Fiction International fall across a multitude of countries and eras, several have to do with dictatorship and corruption. Some are elegies, others satires and still others are cries of anger against the folly of leaders.

Such a cry is Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One of These Days, in which a Colombian dentist is granted an opportunity for revenge on a military strongman who has been executing dissidents. In the story, the strongman has a swollen tooth, and the dentist gets to pull it without anesthetic. It is a brutal and satisfying revenge fantasy. A more overt howl against repression is Arrest Me, Denis Herson's screed against apartheid in South Africa.

In the realm of satire is the poignantly cynical story of local government in Maoist China, The Street-Sweeping Show. In this travesty, a local official and various civic representatives sweep a street for the press, declaiming platitudes about the importance of civic involvement in keeping the city clean. This public face is juxtaposed with the callousness the wealthy official has toward his staff and the entire empty enterprise.

Most affecting, perhaps, is Isaac Babel's elegiac and allegorical Di Grasso. It tells the story of a beloved opera company run by a shyster who cares nothing for art and swindles venues, customers, and his artists. The story is clearly an allegory for the Stalinist Soviet Union that Babel lived in. Earlier in the collection, Doris Lessing has a story that references the fate Isaac Babel faced as a result of his writing: arrest, torture, and execution.

Style

Point of View

Since Sudden Fiction International is a collection of short stories, each individual story has a separate point-of-view. That being said, about half of the stories in the collection are told in a third person omniscient point of view. In these stories, the reader is given the impression of a quick pseudo-scientific appraisal of a moment in time. This is true, for example, in A Lover's Ear and The Model, two stories about heartbreak and loss that contain clinical narration, uncolored by vicarious character emotion. Moreover, some stories contain narration that borders on wonky. These stories, like Happy Endings, dissect the very notion of storytelling. In Happy Endings, Atwood uses this technique to critique the idea of an original narrative. In On Hope, this self-awareness is employed as a punch line at the end of a fairly straightforward narrative.

The first person point-of-view stories are a bit more straightforward. Most are simple first-person narratives, but a few - Welcoming the Board of Directors, Girl, The School - take on the structure of dramatic monologues. These fully immerse themselves in a human psyche and allow the reader to watch as this psyche unravels, towing the line between disturbing and hilarious. Indeed, as Girl is comprised of a long list of imperative statements, one might say it is a story told in the second person. On the other and of the spectrum, a story like All At One point brings a centered, mundane viewpoint to a fantastical premise: that the narrator has existed back before the big bag happened. Italo Calvino, in this story, makes this quirky and impossible notion seem very simply like an everyday reality.

Setting

As with the point of view, the setting shifts from story to story. Indeed, Sudden Fiction International is intentionally a grab-bag of different cultures. Still, the setting is used for several purposes throughout, and the easiest way to understand this is to divide the stories into three camps: the domestic, the political, and the fantastical.

The majority of the stories fall into the domestic. These are stories that take place in peacetime, in the present or the very recent past, and they are concerned with human interaction. On occasion these stories will definitely draw from their cultural surroundings: Bigfoot Stole My Wife is distinctly American, and House Opposite and The Grass-Eaters are distinctly Indian. Still, the author is not trying to make a statement about the time and place. Any one of these stories could be easily translated into another setting.

Several of the stories in Sudden Fiction International are political in nature. That is, they take as their subject the corrupt time and place of their setting. Di Grasso is a comment on Soviet-era Russia; The Street-Sweeping Show, Mao's China; Arrest Me, South Africa

during apartheid; and Gregory, Civil War-era Cyprus. These stories generally have to do with a personal experience, but this experience - the killing of a prisoner, a party's photo-op - reflects the political reality of the setting.

The last category of stories is the fantastical. These are stories whose setting is entirely fictional, like the universe as urban neighborhood in All At One Point, or the pseudo-modern myth landscape of Orion. This category can also include a real-world setting that is permeated by the fantastical. An example of this might be Maori New Zealand in At the River, where old tribesmen see harbingers of death.

Language and Meaning

Almost universally, the language used in the stories of Sudden Fiction is florid and evocative. This may seem an obvious statement, but the brevity of the stories necessitates it. Because the stories are all six pages or shorter, they generally deal with an incident lasting no longer than a couple of hours. The author's intent in such cases becomes to show how such a brief incident can encompass a more universal truth. The quintessential example of this is the first story, The Falling Girl. In this, Dino Buzzato dramatizes an entire life in the experience of one girl's suicide. By using romantic, elegant language to describe it, Buzzati turns the fall into a dance of sorts. In Courtly Vision, Mukherjee creates a lifetime's worth of palace intrigue in his description of a painting.

Conversely, authors tend to speak in more dry analytical terms when the stories deal with longer topics. For example, Spencer Holst tell the story of a gypsy thief's many attempts to get rid of the Hope diamond in On Hope. This longer story becomes a treatise on intention and misfortune that Holst makes particularly humorous with his unaffected language. The same could be said of The Blue Jar, a story of lifelong obsession told without the slightest sense of the dramatic. In choosing this tone, Dinesen turns what could have been a precious fairy tale into a simple elegy of lost love.

In general, stories told in the first person are written more conversationally as they reflect a specific person's cadence. An exception is The School, in which a teacher tells the story of numerous deaths without the slightest sense of emotion, even when he describes his children trying to convince him to have sex with his teaching assistant. This choice of words gives the story the aura of a deposition.

Structure

Sudden Fiction International is a collection of short stories, none of which are longer than six pages in length. There are sixty short stories in the collection, each by a different author, and the total collection represents about forty different countries.

As explained in the introduction by Charles Baxter, the logic behind creating such a collection is to allow the reader to experience a literary catharsis in a short period of

time. It is an experience that is different from reading a novel. Baxter explains that in the West, in particular, length and profundity have become erroneously linked. The stories of Sudden Fiction International deal largely with the moment in life. They are concerned not with sweeping vision, but rather with the sweeping reality that underpins minute visions. As such, the structure of the collection is at the service of its principle theme: the universal contained within the minute. The international flavor of the stories is also served by the length, giving the reader a constantly shifting cultural perspective.

The shortest of the stories are two pages in length. These are often first-person passages that take the tone of monologues, as in Girl and Arrest Me. In these stories, the psychological state of the narrator is just as important as - and perhaps more than - the events related in the piece. Longer pieces often take on broader topics, but just as often they remain focused on the moment, viewing it from different points of view. Indeed, several present heir information in the form of a lost: Happy Endings, Preparations, The Last Days of a Famous Mime. By breaking the story down into outlined points, the author systematically analyzes the event.

Quotes

"'It's always like that,' the man muttered. 'At these low floors only falling old women pass by. You can see beautiful girls from the hundred-and-fiftieth floor up.'"
The Falling Girl, pp. 33-34

"[t]wo seconds, he allows himself to live in a cold and beautiful time, the time of outside the sweater."
Don't You Blame Anyone, p. 49

"Nothing! In that instant in which you saw nothing, I saw enough to speak about for a month ... In that blink of an eye were a hundred thousand things."
La Volpaia, p. 73

"The Mayor seized the arms of the chair, braced his feet with all his strength, and felt the icy cold in his kidneys, but didn't make a sound. The dentist moved only his wrist. Without rancor, rather with bitter tenderness, he said: 'Now you'll pay for our twenty dead men.'"
One of These Days, p. 109

"[o]ur life has been very eventful. The events, of course, were not always pleasant. But, does it matter? We have survived them."
The Grass-Eaters, p. 128

"The right thing is to save your skin. That's only logical. It's either your skin or his."
Gregory, p. 145

"And some things you simply cannot keep polishing and repolishing no matter how precious they are. Too fragile, the the fabric. It will have to be discarded, thrown away on that heap of old clothes."
Facing the Light, p. 171

"So, in a way it was my fault. But what could I have done? Bigfoot steals your wife. I mean: even if you're home, it's going to be a mess. He's big and not well trained."
Bigfoot Stole My Wife, p. 193

"The square was so huge that no one knew where to sweep. The concrete pavement was clean to begin with; they pushed what little grit there was back and forth with their big brooms."
The Street-Sweeping Show, p. 213

"'Is there nothing more to my life than it is now? Is that all that is left to me?'
The answer seemed to be yes, and he wept at how old he had so quickly become."
The Model, p. 225

"[a]ll the people that lived off crops knew in their hearts that only a hair's breadth had saved them from sharing a fate similar to that of the Mokgobja family. They could have

killed something to make the rain fall."
Looking for a Rain God, p. 259

"This culinary act could be an adventure, a hunting foray. And the pleasure of creating a transformation must be shared."
Las Papas, p. 278

"One night, giving me a lesson in storytelling, you said, 'Any life will seem dramatic if you omit mention of most of it.'"
Snow, p. 287

Topics for Discussion

Discuss brevity in the short story collection. How do various authors use short experiences to illustrate a larger truth? What are some of these truths, and how are the moments that authors choose as their narrative points concentrated examples of these truths?

How does the government of a particular country affect the fiction that emerges from it? As a class, discuss the way authors address their governments through short fiction. What issues do they take up in their stories?

Does aging necessarily involve deterioration? Using the stories concerning age in the collection, discuss the disappointments that come with maturity. What does a person lose with advance age? Does wisdom and experience make up for these losses?

Discuss the notion of innocence as it pertains to youth. What factors contribute to the loss of innocence with the advance of time? Is the loss of innocence to be mourned, or is it an important, vital component to making a life for oneself?

Many of the stories in the collection are translated from other languages. Discuss whether one feels they are losing something by not reading the story in its original language. What can get lost in the translation? Does the cultural divide make these stories more remote?

Discuss death as a definite end or a transition to another plane of existence. Looking over all of the stories that deal with life and death, determine what cultures believe what regarding the end of life. Which stories are most nihilistic? Which the most spiritual?

Discuss the combination of myth and modernity as it is done in the short stories of this collection. Which myths do some of the stories draw from? What aspects of them do these authors weave into modern stories, and what type of statement about both the antique and the modern are they making?