

A Just Recompense

I'm Writing and I Can't Shut Up

BASS 2018: Amy Silverberg, "Suburbia!" from *The Southern Review*, Spring 2017

Posted by [Karen Carlson](#) on [November 27, 2018](#)



The way I enter stories is almost always through voice; I rarely have a character or premise in mind. I just ha that first line in my head for a while – the line of a character saying she made a bet with her father – so I wrote one paragraph and set it aside for months and months.

...I'd just read the short story "The Paperhanger" by William Gay and admired the mystery of it, how it seemed to go confidently into an unknown world, a world that felt a little surreal and a little absurd.... I was also in a workshop taught by Aimee Bender, and while I hadn't set out to write anything with a magical realism element, I'm sure her stories (which I've read many, many times) rubbed off on me – or if not the stories, then at least the courage or freedom to go confidently into that so-called unknown world.

~ ~ Amy Silverberg, Contributor Note

For the first ten pages of this eleven page story, so much seemed wrong. The bet. The departure. The absence of the mother. The rather uninteresting, overly optimistic evolution of a young woman in LA. I figured there had to be a payoff, and I had a couple of vague ideas what it might be, but as the pages dwindled down (I always dog-ear the pages in a story so I know where I am as I read) I felt like maybe the payoff was going to be no payoff, in which case I was going to be very unhappy.

But there was, indeed, a payoff, and it was so good, I forgave everything. Except maybe there was nothing to forgive: if I'd read the tone correctly from the start, I would've realized what I was reading, below the words, below the events. My inability to perceive subtle whimsy was helpful, actually; the eventual surprise knocked me on my reading ass, so to speak, and I fell in love.

The story starts with a bet between fifteen-year-old Maria and her father:

"Let's make a bet," my father said, on my fifteenth birthday. I remember very clearly being fifteen; or, rather, I remember what fifteen feels like to a fifteen-year-old. The age is a diving board, a box half-opened.

...

"I bet you'll leave here at eighteen and you'll never come back," he said. "Not once."

"What happens if I do come back?" I asked.

"You'll lose," he said. "You'll automatically forfeit the bet."

I hated to lose, and my father knew it.

...

My mother appeared on the porch with my brother, his finger slung into the back pocket of her jeans.

"Dinnertime," she said, and I kissed my father's cheek as though I were standing on a train platform.

I spent all of dinner feeling that way too, staring at him from across the table, mouthing goodbye.

Now, I still have a problem with the bet itself. It's backwards. You can't say, "I bet you'll do A, and if you don't, you lose." Yes, you can call it whimsy, you can call it a signal, an indicator of what kind of story this is, but even in whimsy and magical realism, there has to be some kind of internal consistency. But the big problem is, I was so befuddled by this reverse bet, I missed the sweet poignancy of the dinnertime scene that followed.

It's possible I had such a deaf ear because of my own history. I moved out when I was eighteen, knowing right then that my family home was way too small for me to grow at all, that I'd be kept in a cage of projected incompetence and infantilization until I was old and grey if I stayed. I did go back to visit, several times over the years, but I never for a second considered moving back. I've made some horrible decisions in my life, but this one was one of the best.

Even so, my departure was nothing like Maria's, which is, like the bet, kind of bizarre:

A week after my [18th] birthday, my father woke me up, quieter than usual. He seemed solemn.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

"Where are you taking me?" I wanted to know.

"To the train station," he said. "It's time for you to go."

...

"Don't cry," Dad said then, smoothing my pillowcase, still warm with sleep. He had a pained look on his face. "Don't cry," he said again. I hadn't noticed it had started.

...

From the train, I watched him through the window until I couldn't see him anymore, and the hand he'd been waving became – like the minute hand of a clock – tiny – and then nothing at all.

The abruptness of the sendoff – another signal, I think – doesn't fit with the emotionality, the genuine mutual tenderness and affection between father and daughter. Dad tells her not to say goodbye to her mother, who we already know is more bonded with her younger brother, but still, it seems weird. Moving out generally involves a planning stage of some significant length, tips on practical matters, maybe more serious thought as to a destination; to find out you're leaving home an hour before you leave is... not normal.

Dad mentions New York, but Maria isn't ready for that yet, so she goes to LA, where she's been before, a place not terribly far away. I have to say I found the next phase – meeting Charlie on the train, getting settled in LA, her work and a series of promotions, successful acclimation to adulthood – kind of boring, mostly because it seemed, as I mentioned before, overly optimistic. Like a romance novel's idea of a young girl finding her way in the world. The one thing that resonated was her comment about her

deepening relationship with Charlie: “Being with him felt similar to being alone, only better, heightened.” I know exactly what that means, and how rare it is. Maybe I’m just envious that Maria found it with so little effort, without the multitudes of failed attempts so many of us go through.

When she decides she must go back and visit her family, bringing Charlie along, they, and the reader, get a surprise. For me, it was completely unexpected. I’d imagined Dad didn’t want her returning because he and Mom were going to get a divorce, or were having money troubles and wanted to rent out her room, something typically grim. And again, I have problems here, since the scenario wasn’t dealt with at all in the pre-departure sections. Just how did life work for this family, when they went to school, work, to LA to see *Wicked* on her 15th birthday? And her friends: in what perspective did they exist? But that isn’t part of the story.

Nevertheless, it works on an emotional, if not logical, level. The goofiness isn’t arbitrary; it means something, something anyone whose kid has left home, or who left home as a kid, recognizes.

I thought this was a funny thing, the way the past and the future could both shrink down to a manageable size, like a pill to be swallowed, or the head of a match.

The changing of sizes with perspective, with distance, was mentioned several times during the story, and sharpened to a beautiful point in this last paragraph. Who hasn’t said that their childhood home or school seemed smaller than they remembered, when they went back to visit as an adult? Every Christmas, a new crop of college freshmen go home to their parents and declare everything they were ever taught was wrong, and now they know the real score. This usually generates indulgent smiles, perhaps some friction, but mostly it’s recognized as the way things should be, how growing up means growing away, the putting away of childish things, the parents letting go of the opportunity to substantially shape their child.

I happen to have read the next story before writing this post, which is unusual, but gives me an interesting sense that the two stories are in a way opposites. I’m not sure this is a “good” story – I still think it has flaws – but once I got to that payoff, I loved it, so it worked emotionally. The next one is the opposite: it’s a story I can appreciate, but don’t really react to emotionally. And I started wondering about all those people bemoaning the “sameness” of contemporary literary fiction. Are the flaws I see – is it ok that the story completely depends on what could be considered a trick? – are just the product of having read that sameness too much? Would smoothing what I consider rough edges – blending the magical with the realism more effectively – ruin the story?

Silverberg’s author [interview](http://thesouthernreview.org/blog/a-writers-insight-amy-silverberg/) (<http://thesouthernreview.org/blog/a-writers-insight-amy-silverberg/>) with Kathleen Boland at *TSR* addresses some additional issues with the story, including the exclamation point, which has far more significance than I’d recognized. Zin would be delighted. And Jake Weber, as usual, has a great [post](http://workshopheretic.blogspot.com/2018/10/not-as-easy-at-it-looks-amy-silverburgs.html) (<http://workshopheretic.blogspot.com/2018/10/not-as-easy-at-it-looks-amy-silverburgs.html>) examining the surprise element from a more writerly, technical perspective.

This entry was posted in [BASS 2018](#), [What I've been Reading](#), [Writing/Reading](#) and tagged [Amy Silverberg](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

2 responses to “BASS 2018: Amy Silverberg, “Suburbia!” from *The Southern Review*, Spring 2017”

TammyB says:

April 18, 2019 at 8:20 am

I felt the same way about this story...it was meandering around and I was wondering where it was going and I did not expect the ending. It has stayed with me though. I now have been obsessed with writing my own story about a bet of some kind...

Reply

Karen Carlson says:

April 18, 2019 at 10:11 am

Oh, that'll be fun. Nice to find inspiration in what you read!

Reply

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)