

Stanford Short Stories, 1960*

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THAT SENSE OF power arched and violent, yet suspended—in its image of equestrian magnificence Joanna Ostrow's "A Decision to Withdraw" provides a monument to the high art of fiction practiced at Stanford. Were the stories not arranged alphabetically, according to author, Miss Ostrow's own surely would be among the foremost. Her contempt for "the Money" and his wife, presumptuously preparing for an Olympic dressage beyond their comprehension as well as their prowess, finds justification in her narrative's properly fierce, rhythmical shape. Stanford fellows often are chosen for the promise of mutual provocation which their personal variety can provide. But here an authenticity of more than private detail and specialized lore emerges: that wise accuracy which proceeds only from whoever, while training a horse, trains himself and so trades pretension for durable self-estimation.

The same certainty of experience held accountable after long vigil shines through Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle." Cornered by death and its demands for assessment, a bickering old couple find in themselves sufficient human resource. During the agony of his wife's last day, Granddad is begged to "come back and help her poor body to die," on the promise that some more incorruptible self had already recovered, in memory, the day "when she first heard music." The narrative style is as cunningly incoherent as that passionate inarticulateness which so well defined Mrs. Olsen's earlier story, "Hey Sailor, What Ship?"

* Wallace Stegner and Richard Scowcraft., *Stanford Short Stories* 1960 (Stanford: 1960)

(*Best American Short Stories of 1957*). With the precision of a James Agee, she resorts to poetic utterance to express her characters' half-stifled outcry, their primitive truth. All living things inform against the turned down hearing aid: the grandchildren's attendance on Disaster Day, the "Rosita" cookie commemorating the Mexican newly-dead, the closeted child, fugitive recollections of prison camp, the tape-recorded inner monologue. The meaning of life is in its being lived. And the author's power comes from the respect she gives her character's truth of experience.

SEVERAL OTHER stories aspire to the magnitude and control of these two, and a few approach them. Olympia Karageorges' "Career" alternates between local appeal (the Greek family in Egypt) and sentimentality (the farmed-out servant's child) perhaps because the point of view is too autobiographical to be characterized objectively, until the last ironic moment. John Waterhouse's "The Small, Gentle House of Bertram Camm" (the bully sent to frighten Camm from his property is routed when spit defiles his boots) and Robin MacDonald's "A Red, Red Coat" (an idiot girl loses his ferrets on a tubercular who has dared to compare their needs) suffer from too little interim reserve of insight before the strong tolling of their endings. Yet their undeniable seriousness makes them superior to the tabloid unsubtleties of "Martin Fincher, Tripod Man" or the coy-comic inflation of "The Baseball Business" and "The Pride of Scotland," hand-me-down jokes.

Least understandable are the inclusion of two selections from student novels whose windy rambling not only contributes nothing instructively to the solution of short fiction's problems but is unforgivable in the company of Tillie Olsen's novelette, in which no word is wasted and every nuance of sound or image is an opportunity. It must be little consolation to such novelists-by-default and by-attenuation, if Mrs. Olsen's story is so incomparable that even she must sometimes despair of its duplication.

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