Story Problems

Gailmarie Pahmeier

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Story Problems

Abstract
Every Sunday the same story, supper
of pot roast and potatoes, sweaty pitchers
of sweet tea, fruit pies or pudding or ice cream.
After she cleared the food away, our mother
worked at the kitchen sink in her lovely
apron, the one with cherry blossoms
and ruffles, her heavy rubber gloves
a squeak as she sponged the tile counters.

Keywords
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My sister and I would've gladly helped,
our own little aprons drawn snugly
around our waists, would loved to have worked
alongside her, so sure we were of becoming
her, of being beautiful and necessary.
But on Sundays after supper my father
helped with homework or taught us how to change
a tire or how to shimmy our bodies
out of basement windows during fire drills.

We dreaded Sundays after supper,
thought everything he meant to teach
unlovely, unnecessary: how many
girls did we see slithering out of windows?
Isn’t there always someone to call
when a tire goes flat, some sweet boy?
And who cares if a train leaves one depot
at a certain time and another’s coming
from the opposite direction at a certain speed,
who cares when they’ll meet, when they’ll
pass each other on some double tracks
in some never named small town? Who cares?

You got a cow on those tracks, you care,
our father said, and that became the mantra
my sister and I’ve shared for years: unplanned
pregnancies, failing grades or job searches,
failing marriages, bad investments, blood
tests, our country gone completely crazy,
so many cows on the tracks and no way
to save them, no skills to calculate
the coming trains. The moral here is pay
attention, listen up. Try this one:

If the California Zephyr, eastbound
at 38 miles per hour, goes through Verdi,
Nevada at 11:51 in the morning
and a Union Pacific freight, westbound
at 16 miles per hour, goes through Sparks,
Nevada at the same time, where will they pass?
The answer is that they’ll pass right in front
of the house I now live in, where I’m cooking
pot roast and boiling potatoes this Sunday
afternoon, waiting for my lover to come,
there’s a tire to be changed and a window’s
broken, and I’ve got a story to tell
and I really need to tell it now.

Gailmarie Pahmeier teaches creative writing and contemporary literature courses at the University of Nevada.
Her work has been widely published and anthologized (most recently in *Passager* and *The Pedestal Magazine*
and in the anthology *Literary Nevada* (University of Nevada Press, 2008). She is the author of the poetry
collection *The House on Breakaheart Road* (University of Nevada Press, 1998) and two chapbooks from Black
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new book of her poetry, *West of Snowball, Arkansas, and Home*, is forthcoming from Red Hen Press. Her
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