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Tillie Olsen

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"Everything [Olsen] has written has become almost immediately a classic."—Robert Coles

"[*Tell Me a Riddle* is] enough to make [Olsen's] name a truly important one in writing. . . . She can spend no word that is not the right one."—Dorothy Parker

For presentation of the Robert Kirsch Lifetime Achievement Award in 2000, literary critic Julian Moynihan wrote: "[Olsen] explores the deep pain and real promise of fundamental American experience in a style of incomparable verbal richness and beauty. As a great work of literary art [*Tell Me a Riddle*] will be read as long as the American language lasts."

In presenting Olsen with an award for her distinguished contribution to American literature, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters cited her writing as "very nearly constituting a new form of fiction."

In citing Olsen's work for the 1994 REA Award, the jurors Charles Baxter, Susan Cheever, and Mary Gordon said, "With her collection, *Tell Me a Riddle*, Tillie Olsen radically widened the possibilities for American writers of fiction. These stories have the lyric intensity of an Emily Dickinson poem and scope of a Balzac novel. She has forced open the language of the short story, insisting that it include the domestic life of women, the passions and anguishes of maternity, the deep, gnarled roots of a long marriage, the hopes and frustrations of immigration, the shining charge of political commitment.

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Her voice has both challenged and cleared the way for all those who come after her."

"[Tillie] had invented a literary tradition of her own. . . . Every line is measured, compressed, resonant, stripped bare, so that paragraph after paragraph achieves the shocking brevity and power of the best poems. . . . By now I have read *Tell Me a Riddle* so often that it is essentially memorized."—Scott Turow, on National Public Radio's *You Must Read This*

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TELL ME A RIDDLE, REQUA I, AND OTHER WORKS

TILLIE OLSEN

Foreword by Laurie Olsen

Introduction by Rebekah Edwards

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS : LINCOLN

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FOREWORD

Laurie Olsen

It is now over a century since Tillie's birth and nearly a decade since her death at age ninety-four, but, dear reader, I know that this meeting—this act of you picking up her book—would mean the world to her. By reading her stories now, in this twenty-first century that is so vastly different from the 1912 Nebraska farm world into which she was born, you give new life to her words. You are participating in a human chain that was core to Tillie's being—the relationship between writers and readers, those who write and those who read their stories.

Tillie's desk, workspace, and kitchen were crowded with photos of the faces of writers whose lives and writing touched her deeply. Passages from their books, letters, and journals were typed by Tillie onto blue scraps of paper and taped on bulletin boards, the edges of bookshelves, the refrigerator door, and the bases of lamps. Their faces and their words were her companions across generations, continents, and life circumstances: Olive Schreiner, Walt Whitman, Agnes Smedley, Herman Melville, Anton Chekov, Richard Wright, Franz Kafka, Emily Dickinson, William Blake, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin, Catherine Mansfield, W. E. B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lord, Adrienne Rich, and many dozens more spanning hundreds of years of writing and experience (some famous, some long-forgotten, some new unknown writers).

For Tillie, the writers who moved her soul were those whose lives

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and words bore witness to the drive to create—breaking through barriers of class, gender, mental illness, anti-Semitism, racism. The faces and words of her beloved writers were her life companions as fully as the downstairs neighbors, her family, and friends. She posted photos of their homes, their desks, the moor outside the Brontës' home, and Keats's chair. Tillie tucked their photos into envelopes to carry with her when she traveled and carried their quotes on slips of paper wherever she went, quoting them in conversations and in formal lectures, and even in delirium as she lay dying, intoned bubbles and fragments from her beloved writers.

Many of these inspirers were little-known or forgotten out-of-print writers, discovered by Tillie over years of exploring public library stacks and browsing in used bookstores. Tillie worked to bring their literature back to life. For Tillie, out-of-print literature was a loss for readers, and a kind of death for a writer. That's why, for our family, this centennial collection making her writing available anew means so much.

As a reader, Tillie felt great affinity for other readers. She was first and always a reader—hungry to talk about books, exchange books. She treasured her readers, and she thirsted for the company of other writers. It was the power of the written word that she experienced as a reader that inspired (Tillie once said "incited") her to become a writer. After readings, Tillie spent hours talking to people who came to ask her questions or request an autograph. The stories of their lives, their struggles, and their dreams poured out. Tillie evoked that kind of response from people and was deeply moved and honored by it. After Tillie's death, we poured through boxes and boxes of letters from readers all over the world bearing testimony to how Tillie's writing, Tillie's characters, Tillie's own life connected to their own life circumstances. She had developed correspondence with hundreds of readers and writers—building close friendships through letters with people she never had an opportunity to meet in person, friendships forged out of a shared love of literature.

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As you read her stories now, try to imagine. If Tillie were alive, she would reach for your hand and hold it, touch your shoulder. Fixing her eyes on your face, she would want to know about you. And in careful listening, Tillie would urge you to write. To bring to literature what is not there now. To see the lapses and gaps in what makes it into literature and to add your own story and voice to written form. In her experience, it was those very gaps and invisible lives that convinced her she had something to contribute. "Visibility creates reality," she would say. It was her own struggle to be a writer against the odds and circumstances of poverty, her attention to human need, and motherhood that evoked a fierce determination to encourage others to find, believe in, and protect their impulses to write. With urgency, intensity, and belief she would say to you: "You, too, must write."

Reader, writer, or both—may you read and share this book with others. There is no greater gift to Tillie's legacy than the renewed life to her writing that you give by reading her stories and by carrying forward the compact between readers and writers into a new century. For that, thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

Rebekah Edwards

This collection brings together Tillie Lerner Olsen's reportage writings from and about the 1930s along with her short fiction—the stories of the collection *Tell Me a Riddle* and the first part of what was to be a novella, "Requa I." This sampling of Olsen's writing allows us imaginative entry into the lifeworlds she recorded so faithfully and with such careful craft; it also documents some of the social conditions that motivated her work. The breadth and scope of this collection offers us a glimpse of Olsen's development from a young activist to a mature fiction writer to a writer at the end of her life looking back on a time that shaped her. The people recorded, enlivened, and imagined in these writings astound and challenge and inspire; they may simultaneously break our hearts and offer us solace.

Olsen was uncompromising in her belief that we must make a world in which "full humanhood" is possible, a world in which human dignity and the full development of people's capacities are cherished and nurtured. She was fierce in her insistence that people working together for social justice would make this world possible. At age eighty-three, she wrote in "A Vision of Fear and Hope" (first published in *Newsweek* in 1994 and now reprinted in this collection) that she still had hope. It was "beleaguered, starved, battered," and tested, yes, but hope still prevailed. In fact, she had "more than hope: an exhaustless store of certainty, vision, belief." Her conviction that change was possible stemmed, she said, from the radical social

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movements of the early twentieth century and all they accomplished, particularly in the 1930s, and it was sustained by subsequent decades of witnessing people working together for change. This certainty is at the heart of her writing.

Olsen has been cited for bringing people—working people who hadn't often been the subject of fiction—into literature through experimental forms of narrative: stream-of-consciousness and points of view that swerved from character to character to authorial address to quotations of songs, poetry, and political rhetoric. Olsen used the page, the line, the word in ways that were more expected in poetry than prose, in ways that have been described as "very nearly constituting a new form of fiction."[1] The results of such experimentation may be demanding to read, requiring readers to engage fully, to work, to participate in making the text's meaning. Her stories move readers deeply; it is not uncommon to hear people say they reread Olsen's work again and again.

Olsen was a writer who listened to how people said things, jotting down idioms, phrases, and slang on whatever was at hand, over the years piling up hundreds of scraps of paper scribbled with vernacular. She was a writer for whom every word had to be exactly right in connotation, cadence, and placement. In 1961 Dorothy Parker said about the stories in *Tell Me a Riddle* that Olsen could "spend no word that was not the right one." It was this resolute commitment to craft that resulted in work that would be cited for having "the lyric intensity of an Emily Dickinson poem and the scope of a Balzac novel."[2]

Olsen's experiments with language, the lives she brought into literature, and her visionary certainty succeeded in changing a piece of the world. Her work brought to the forefront literature that spoke to what Olsen called the "lives of most of us," literature that intervened in and broadened the traditional canon of texts by and about the privileged few. Her critical/theoretical work, published in 1978 as the book *Silences*, offered foundational concepts to the fields of women's studies, feminist theory, and American studies—and in

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doing so helped to change not only what kind of literature is taught in schools but how it is taught, and how it is considered in critical discourse.

A biography of Olsen's life can be found at the end of this collection. What follows here is a brief introduction to the works gathered in this volume.

TELL ME A RIDDLE

The book *Tell Me a Riddle* (1961) is made up of the short stories "I Stand Here Ironing" (1956), "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" (1957), and "O Yes" (1957), as well as a novella, "Tell Me a Riddle" (1960). Both "I Stand Here Ironing" and "Tell Me a Riddle" were included in *Best American Short Stories* the year they were first published, and "Tell Me a Riddle" won the O. Henry Award in 1961. These stories have been translated in many languages, anthologized widely, and have been made into films, staged productions, and an opera.

The stories of *Tell Me a Riddle* are linked by characters from different generations of the same extended family and by themes that "celebrate the endurance of human love and of the passion for justice, in spite of the pain inflicted and the capacities wasted by poverty, racism, and a patriarchal social order."[3] In these narratives, Olsen makes use of stream-of-consciousness, nonlinear chronology, an authorial voice that appears and disappears, a reliance on the cadence of vernacular speech, multiple points of view, and a poetic use of the word, the line break, and the page. Olsen's prose style in these works has been described as constituting "a literary tradition of her own . . . a narrative technique that [is] revolutionary . . . every line is measured, compressed, resonant, stripped bare, so that paragraph after paragraph achieves the shocking brevity and power of the best poems."[4]

Olsen's narrative structures in these stories are not, however, simply exercises in formal innovation. Rather, her form is intricately

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linked to the larger themes of the collection, and it is this relationship between the lives about which Olsen writes and the form she develops to do so that in 1961 caused the *London Times* to state in its review of the collection, "Out of poverty and hardship . . . [Olsen] reveals with compression, depth and a passionate economy of language a working class America that few writers have known or realized existed."

"I Stand Here Ironing," the first story of the collection, is a searing and nuanced take on motherhood and mother-daughter relationships and on the various influences that support or limit a child's full development of her capacities. Written as a mother's single, sustained monologue, it interrogates and makes vivid the difficulties faced by working-class women in the United States through the mother's consideration of how the economic poverty—the "want"—that her daughter Emily has grown up in has impacted both of their lives. The story ends with the mother's protective and fierce wish that Emily's sense of her value and agency somehow transcend the circumstances of her childhood: "Only help her to know—help make it so there is cause for her to know—that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron."

Set in the 1950s, "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" moves in and out of the consciousnesses of an aging merchant marine, Whitey, and the members of the family of Helen and Lennie. Their friendship was formed in the 1930s as they organized the San Francisco waterfront. Over the years Helen and Lennie's family had become a refuge for Whitey to come home to between shipping-outs. In his latest visit, Whitey arrives drunk and collapses from illness, his body worn down by harsh working conditions and by the progression of his alcoholism. In "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" the idioms and songs of the waterfront, the rhetoric and vision of that earlier time of political activism, the shifting points of view, and the spacing and line breaks on the page combine to produce a potent form of narrative elegy. It is a story of loss—not simply one man's loss and increasing

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alienation but the loss of an earlier time when the united struggle for better working conditions and for a better world brought these people together.

"O Yes" is largely told from the perspective of Helen, who mourns as she watches her white daughter grow increasingly estranged from her best friend, who is black. As the two girls approach adolescence, they are forced apart by the formal and informal tracking of the American public school system of the 1950s, and by the systematic racial segregation that it supports. Writing largely in stream-of-consciousness and relying on the phrasing and music of a church baptism, Olsen renders the complexities and urgencies of embodied feeling, the politics that imbricate them, and the necessity and fragility of friendship as both inescapable and redemptive. Helen observes, "*It is a long baptism into the seas of humankind, my daughter. Better immersion than to live untouched.*"

At the center of the novella "Tell Me a Riddle" are the passions and conflicts within the long marriage of David and Eva. Their marriage had been formed during a time of political upheaval, and they had shared a revolutionary vision that a more just and humane world could be brought into being, a vision now tested by a life of poverty and hardship. David and Eva have become estranged and furious with each other, their conflicting needs tearing them apart; a lifetime of caring for children and husband has left Eva craving solitude while David craves sociability and companionship. The concerns of the novella are many: the tenacity and complexity of familial and marital love, the tasks and costs of motherhood, the marginalization of women, the experience of immigration, the increasing difficulties of aging and illness, the process of dying, the passion for justice that remains even in the face of all that is harmed and wasted by poverty and oppression. Written from multiple perspectives and using the rhythms of a Yiddish-inflected English, the structure of the novella offers a representation that Scott Turow has described as "more tender and affirmative than . . . grim . . . of how life can slaughter love.

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It is about the dignity of values and the intense network of beliefs that ultimately connect humans to each other as they approach the end."[5]

The stories that make up *Tell Me a Riddle* testify to the urgent need to make a world in which these characters might be granted "full humanhood." When in the hospital, Eva insists that an identification form be changed: "Tell them to write: Race, human; Religion, none." It is a telling moment, sparsely written, one that illuminates Eva's revolutionary commitment to a future world that would not be structured by the inequalities and prejudices of racism, religion, class, and gender. One reads in the fierce, insistent cadence of Eva's demand the whole history of her belief—how it has been tested and battered but has sustained. It is a moment when we can see Olsen's commitment to conveying the full humanness of the people in her stories, to writing people into literature in ways that would make them recognizable to those who had never met them and recognizable to those close to them who had never seen them represented. These stories, and the passion, precision, and respect with which Olsen has written them, are a form of justice the lives of these characters insist we must call into being.

"REQUA I"

"Requa I," the opening of what was to be a novella, was published in the *Iowa Review* in 1970 and was included in *Best American Short Stories* in 1971. It is Olsen's most complex work, one in which the narrative style and what Elaine Orr has called the "redemptive hope" of the earlier fiction are brought to a new level of nuance and interrelation.[6] Olsen materializes the loss, disorientation, and fragmentation that are central concerns of the piece through the use of line breaks, words scattered across the page and justified to different margins, and a refusal of punctuation and closure. (The final word of the piece is not followed by any mark.) Olsen utilizes the vernacular of

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a poor and rural Northern California in the 1930s, while she also turns to poetic devices of alteration, assonance, and consonance to render the sounds not only of a people and of a time but of a place.

Requa is the name of a small, unincorporated town on the Klamath River in Northern California. It is an Anglicization of "Rekwoi," the Yurok name for the place. Olsen heard in its sound invocations of the words "requiem" and "reclamation," both of which are thematic concerns of this piece.[7] "Requa I" can be a hard piece to grasp because its characters and vernacular are unfamiliar to most readers, because of the difficulty of its narrative structure, and also because, as the first part of a longer work, it does not follow a traditional story arc—it does not resolve. The manuscript of the second part of "Requa" has been lost, and there is no record of how Olsen intended to develop and conclude this story. However, the piece itself, so formally and thematically concerned with the fragment, and with the reclamation of wholeness from brokenness, argues that wholeness exists not despite of or outside of the fragment, the broken, the unfinished but rather within the act of rendering something whole. It is the story's emphasis on the tenacity of human endurance, regeneration, and creativity that underscores Elaine Orr's suggestion that in "Requa I" "Olsen . . . insists . . . that brokenness is the condition that elicits human bondedness" and that "the story may await not so much Olsen's finishing of it as readers' response."[8]

"Requa I" is the story of Stevie, a thirteen-year-old boy emotionally shattered by the death of his mother and taken by his uncle Wes from San Francisco, the city he has grown up in, to Requa, an unfamiliar, rugged, small town in the Northern California redwoods. It is the story, also, of his uncle's commitment to care for Stevie, a care he understands to be not only material but psychic: "I'll help you to catch hold . . . I promise I'll help." This is a promise tremendously difficult to keep because Stevie has so completely withdrawn from human interaction—"(*No smile. Skinny little shrimp. Clutching at the door knob, knuckles white, nostrils flaring. Funny animal noises in his*

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throat.)"—and because of the struggle for daily livelihood they face in a time when "half the grown men in the county's not working." "Requa I" touches on many of the conditions and contradictions of the 1930s, not the least of these being the racism of the period. Olsen juxtaposes Stevie's thought "But they weren't ladies, they were Indians" to the racially mixed boarding house in which he lives, where whites, "Indians," and Chinese share the dinner table, a table that might be read as a prophetic metaphor, a vision of a future time when racism will no longer be tenable.

Written in a limited omniscient perspective, the text swerves between the consciousnesses of Stevie and Wes, often in the same paragraph, occasionally in the same sentence, leaving it to readers to identify who it is they are reading. There are times when this shift occurs with a description of the landscape, and then it is as if we are within the consciousness of Requa itself. Largely, however, the narrative is structured by Stevie's grief and the physical disorientation he experiences from his loss of parent and place. Stevie negotiates his loss defensively: "*Keep away you rememorings slippings slidings having to hold up my head Keep away you trying to get me's.*"

Stevie's grief begs healing, a healing that will come as a suturing of his fracturedness, as a wholeness forged through connection to place, to family, to community. It is a healing that takes place slowly, through a deepening connection to his uncle and to the land around him. It is a healing that comes from working in a junkyard, sorting the things that have been destroyed, cast off, abandoned. As he works, Stevie's own brokenness is inseparable from that of the junk, and along with the junk it is sorted through to see what is salvageable, what can be repurposed and put to use.

"Requa I" is the only one of the stories collected here that is set in the 1930s, a period that was so formative for Olsen as an activist and as a writer. As such, and as her final piece of fiction, it offers a powerful continuity between the stories of *Tell Me a Riddle* and her 1930s reportage work. We can see in "Requa I" a maturation of the

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experimental narrative techniques explored in the reportage and later developed in the fiction. "Requa I" also offers a sustained and nuanced account of the impact of the conditions of the 1930s, both the crushing economic and political climate and the vision of hope and certainty forged through human care for each other.

REPORTAGE FROM AND ABOUT THE 1930S

Olsen published "The Strike," "Thousand-Dollar Vagrant," and "I Want You Women up North to Know" in 1934 (her name then was Tillie Lerner). These pieces of experimental journalism are the work of a young writer whose subject matter and formal concerns were deeply intertwined with and influenced by the alchemical political and aesthetic movements of her time.[9] In her piece "A Vision of Fear and Hope" Olsen describes the sense of urgency and accomplishment of that period, the struggle for and aspiration to "not only 'the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' but the establishment of the means—the social, economic, cultural, educational means to give pulsing, enabling life to those rights." Olsen meant to "give pulsing, enabling life" to the events she recorded, writing in a way that would educate her readers and move them to action. Joseph Entin suggests that Olsen's writing during the thirties belongs to the genre of proletarian reportage; he describes this genre as a form of "engaged journalism" or a type of "modernist documentary," one in which literary experiment, journalistic account, and didactic call for action are inextricably joined.[10] At the National Writers Conference of 1935 (which Olsen attended), Joseph North described proletarian reportage as "three-dimensional reporting . . . both an analysis and an experience, culminating in a course of action."[11] As such, the form itself called into question the "objectivity" of mainstream journalism, throwing into relief the unacknowledged biases of those accounts and highlighting the ways in which political and social power is based in the ability to control how (and what) "reality" is

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represented. Yet, access to the means to control that representation is often reliant on political and social status.

Published in the *Partisan Review*, "The Strike" is an account of the 1934 West Coast Waterfront Longshoremen's Strike, specifically the events of "Bloody Thursday," when police fired into a crowd of strikers, wounding many and murdering two. The San Francisco longshoremen's strike lasted eighty-three days and eventually led to the unionization of all of the West Coast ports of the United States. "The Strike" utilizes collage and quotation, parataxis, surrealist imagery, and a passionate authorial voice that clearly states Olsen's positionality. Olsen's account works against the "objective," highly sensational attempts to frame the strike from a mainstream press owned by corporate and political "bosses." Olsen does this by placing her own impassioned experience at the center of her report, by juxtaposing inflammatory and antiorganizing headlines from the newspapers with her own bitter commentary, and by stating clearly that her goal is to move her readers, to write the piece "so that the beauty and heroism, the terror and significance of those days, would enter your heart and sear it forever." Olsen asserts that this is a piece written hastily, urgently: "Forgive me that the words are feverish and blurred. . . . But I write this on a battlefield"; it is a piece she insists is incommensurate to the importance of the events that have taken place, a piece left incomplete, to be considered and "written some other time" because "there is so much happening now."

"Thousand-Dollar Vagrant," published in the *New Republic*, is the account of Olsen's arrest during the longshoreman's strike when police raided an apartment that she was working in with other organizers. The charge of "vagrancy" was frequently used by the police when they wanted to arrest activists and could carry a fine of a thousand dollars. Anyone could be charged as a vagrant if they didn't have an address, a family who would take them in, or a job. The police would ask for that information, but the consequences for revealing

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it were so severe that most activists would not do so. According to Olsen, "If you give any names of members of your family they see that they lose their jobs; if you give your address they raid the place and wreck the furniture in the process of 'searching.' And even if you do show your 'visible means of support'—you're still a vagrant." The narrative is written as a direct, first-person account, and it is stylistically marked as reportage by its use of direct address to the reader, character sketches, dialogue and scene, and its didactic deployment of sarcasm and humor.

The poem "I Want You Women up North to Know" fits within the larger generic category of proletarian reportage in that it engages literary experiment, journalistic account, and didactic call to action. Constance Coiner suggests that "I Want You Women up North to Know" is an example of "worker correspondence poems," in which writers would take inspiration from letters written by workers and sent to newspapers and journals such as the *Daily Worker* or the *New Masses*.[12] This poem is based on a letter written by Felipe Ibarro (*New Masses*, 1934) condemning the owners of the Juvenile Manufacturing Corporation in San Antonio, Texas, for their exploitation of their workers. The poem uses many of the specific names and details included in the letter while Olsen "parodies a long bourgeois tradition of 'romanticizing' the worker."[13]

In Olsen's final piece of reportage, "A Vision of Fear and Hope," published more than fifty years later, we see a maturation of the techniques she used in her earlier work. This too is a piece of "three-dimensional reporting," in which experience and analysis are part of a larger imperative to educate and move the reader to action. The thirties Olsen remembers in this piece have much in common with our current times. Olsen writes, "One of every four farms was foreclosed, and half a million farm families lived at starvation levels." She cites Roosevelt's warning that "private enterprise is ceasing to be free enterprise" and his point that "1 percent of the nation's corporations were taking 50 percent of the profits." The similarities

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between that time and this are also invoked when Olsen describes the actions people took in response to those circumstances, actions both spontaneous and planned, actions that grew into movements: "stopping the evictions, putting the furniture back, on the picket lines, on the road, the pondering, questioning faces; the anguish not beaten." Olsen's reportage maintains the vision of a time when "the country was transformed by the hopes, dreams, actions of numerous, nameless human beings, hungry for more than food." These pieces urge us toward a certainty in hope, just as they encourage us to join with others to bring about a world in which "full humanhood" is possible.

NOTES

1. The American Academy and Institute of American Arts and Letters, Distinguished Contributions to American Literature Award statement, 1975.

2. Rea Award for Distinguished Contribution to the Short Story statement, 1994.

3. Deborah Silverton Rosenfelt, "From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition," in *Tell Me a Riddle: Tillie Olsen* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 13.

4. Scott Turow, "Tillie Olsen's Tender Portrait of a Marriage," *All Things Considered*, NPR, November 7, 2006, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6407142.

5. Turow, "Tillie Olsen's Tender Portrait."

6. Elaine Orr, *Tillie Olsen and a Feminist Spiritual Vision* (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1987), 121.

7. Orr, *Tillie Olsen*, 136n2.

8. Orr, *Tillie Olsen*, 121.

9. For discussions of Olsen's work in the context of the political and aesthetic movements in the United States in the 1930s, see: Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Joseph B. Entin, *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and the Photography in Thir-*

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ties America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Rosenfelt, "From the Thirties."

10. Entin, *Sensational Modernism*, 151.

11. North as cited in Entin, *Sensational Modernism*, 151.

12. Coiner, *Better Red*, 161.

13. Coiner, *Better Red*, 162.

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Short Fiction

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TELL ME A RIDDLE

For my mother
1885–1956

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I STAND HERE IRONING

I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.

"I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me about your daughter. I'm sure you can help me understand her. She's a youngster who needs help and whom I'm deeply interested in helping."

"Who needs help." Even if I came, what good would it do? You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me.

And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total? I will start and there will be an interruption and I will have to gather it all together again. Or I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped.

She was a beautiful baby. The first and only one of our five that was beautiful at birth. You do not guess how new and uneasy her tenancy in her now-loveliness. You did not know her all those years

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she was thought homely, or see her poring over her baby pictures, making me tell her over and over how beautiful she had been—and would be, I would tell her—and was now, to the seeing eye. But the seeing eyes were few or non-existent. Including mine.

I nursed her. They feel that's important nowadays. I nursed all the children, but with her, with all the fierce rigidity of first motherhood, I did like the books then said. Though her cries battered me to trembling and my breasts ached with swollenness, I waited till the clock decreed.

Why do I put that first? I do not even know if it matters, or if it explains anything.

She was a beautiful baby. She blew shining bubbles of sound. She loved motion, loved light, loved color and music and textures. She would lie on the floor in her blue overalls patting the surface so hard in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur. She was a miracle to me, but when she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all, for I worked or looked for work and for Emily's father, who "could no longer endure" (he wrote in his good-bye note) "sharing want with us."

I was nineteen. It was the pre-relief, pre-WPA world of the depression. I would start running as soon as I got off the streetcar, running up the stairs, the place smelling sour, and awake or asleep to startle awake, when she saw me she would break into a clogged weeping that could not be comforted, a weeping I can hear yet.

After a while I found a job hashing at night so I could be with her days, and it was better. But it came to where I had to bring her to his family and leave her.

It took a long time to raise the money for her fare back. Then she got chicken pox and I had to wait longer. When she finally came, I hardly knew her, walking quick and nervous like her father, looking like her father, thin, and dressed in a shoddy red that yellowed her skin and glared at the pockmarks. All the baby loveliness gone.

She was two. Old enough for nursery school they said, and I did

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not know then what I know now—the fatigue of the long day, and the lacerations of group life in the kinds of nurseries that are only parking places for children.

Except that it would have made no difference if I had known. It was the only place there was. It was the only way we could be together, the only way I could hold a job.

And even without knowing, I knew. I knew the teacher that was evil because all these years it has curdled into my memory, the little boy hunched in the corner, her rasp, "why aren't you outside, because Alvin hits you? that's no reason, go out, scaredy." I knew Emily hated it even if she did not clutch and implore "don't go Mommy" like the other children, mornings.

She always had a reason why we should stay home. Momma, you look sick. Momma, I feel sick. Momma, the teachers aren't there today, they're sick. Momma, we can't go, there was a fire there last night. Momma, it's a holiday today, no school, they told me.

But never a direct protest, never rebellion. I think of our others in their three-, four-year-oldness—the explosions, the tempers, the denunciations, the demands—and I feel suddenly ill. I put the iron down. What in me demanded that goodness in her? And what was the cost, the cost to her of such goodness?

The old man living in the back once said in his gentle way: "You should smile at Emily more when you look at her." What *was* in my face when I looked at her? I loved her. There were all the acts of love.

It was only with the others I remembered what he said, and it was the face of joy, and not of care or tightness or worry I turned to them—too late for Emily. She does not smile easily, let alone almost always as her brothers and sisters do. Her face is closed and sombre, but when she wants, how fluid. You must have seen it in her pantomimes, you spoke of her rare gift for comedy on the stage that rouses a laughter out of the audience so dear they applaud and applaud and do not want to let her go.

Where does it come from, that comedy? There was none of it in

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her when she came back to me that second time, after I had had to send her away again. She had a new daddy now to learn to love, and I think perhaps it was a better time.

Except when we left her alone nights, telling ourselves she was old enough.

"Can't you go some other time, Mommy, like tomorrow?" she would ask. "Will it be just a little while you'll be gone? Do you promise?"

The time we came back, the front door open, the clock on the floor in the hall. She rigid awake. "It wasn't just a little while. I didn't cry. Three times I called you, just three times, and then I ran downstairs to open the door so you could come faster. The clock talked loud. I threw it away, it scared me what it talked."

She said the clock talked loud again that night I went to the hospital to have Susan. She was delirious with the fever that comes before red measles, but she was fully conscious all the week I was gone and the week after we were home when she could not come near the new baby or me.

She did not get well. She stayed skeleton thin, not wanting to eat, and night after night she had nightmares. She would call for me, and I would rouse from exhaustion to sleepily call back: "You're all right, darling, go to sleep, it's just a dream," and if she still called, in a sterner voice, "now go to sleep, Emily, there's nothing to hurt you." Twice, only twice, when I had to get up for Susan anyhow, I went in to sit with her.

Now when it is too late (as if she would let me hold and comfort her like I do the others) I get up and go to her at once at her moan or restless stirring. "Are you awake, Emily? Can I get you something?" And the answer is always the same: "No, I'm all right, go back to sleep, Mother."

They persuaded me at the clinic to send her away to a convalescent home in the country where "she can have the kind of food and care you can't manage for her, and you'll be free to concentrate on the new baby." They still send children to that place. I see pictures

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on the society page of sleek young women planning affairs to raise money for it, or dancing at the affairs, or decorating Easter eggs or filling Christmas stockings for the children.

They never have a picture of the children so I do not know if the girls still wear those gigantic red bows and the ravaged looks on the every other Sunday when parents can come to visit "unless otherwise notified"—as we were notified the first six weeks.

Oh it is a handsome place, green lawns and tall trees and fluted flower beds. High up on the balconies of each cottage the children stand, the girls in their red bows and white dresses, the boys in white suits and giant red ties. The parents stand below shrieking up to be heard and the children shriek down to be heard, and between them the invisible wall "Not To Be Contaminated by Parental Germs or Physical Affection."

There was a tiny girl who always stood hand in hand with Emily. Her parents never came. One visit she was gone. "They moved her to Rose Cottage" Emily shouted in explanation. "They don't like you to love anybody here."

She wrote once a week, the labored writing of a seven-year-old. "I am fine. How is the baby. If I write my leter nicly I will have a star. Love." There never was a star. We wrote every other day, letters she could never hold or keep but only hear read—once. "We simply do not have room for children to keep any personal possessions," they patiently explained when we pieced one Sunday's shrieking together to plead how much it would mean to Emily, who loved so to keep things, to be allowed to keep her letters and cards.

Each visit she looked frailer. "She isn't eating," they told us.

(They had runny eggs for breakfast or mush with lumps, Emily said later, I'd hold it in my mouth and not swallow. Nothing ever tasted good, just when they had chicken.)

It took us eight months to get her released home, and only the fact that she gained back so little of her seven lost pounds convinced the social worker.

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I used to try to hold and love her after she came back, but her body would stay stiff, and after a while she'd push away. She ate little. Food sickened her, and I think much of life too. Oh she had physical lightness and brightness, twinkling by on skates, bouncing like a ball up and down up and down over the jump rope, skimming over the hill; but these were momentary.

She fretted about her appearance, thin and dark and foreign-looking at a time when every little girl was supposed to look or thought she should look a chubby blonde replica of Shirley Temple. The doorbell sometimes rang for her, but no one seemed to come and play in the house or be a best friend. Maybe because we moved so much.

There was a boy she loved painfully through two school semesters. Months later she told me how she had taken pennies from my purse to buy him candy. "Licorice was his favorite and I brought him some every day, but he still liked Jennifer better'n me. Why, Mommy?" The kind of question for which there is no answer.

School was a worry to her. She was not glib or quick in a world where glibness and quickness were easily confused with ability to learn. To her overworked and exasperated teachers she was an overconscientious "slow learner" who kept trying to catch up and was absent entirely too often.

I let her be absent, though sometimes the illness was imaginary. How different from my now-strictness about attendance with the others. I wasn't working. We had a new baby, I was home anyhow. Sometimes, after Susan grew old enough, I would keep her home from school, too, to have them all together.

Mostly Emily had asthma, and her breathing, harsh and labored, would fill the house with a curiously tranquil sound. I would bring the two old dresser mirrors and her boxes of collections to her bed. She would select beads and single earrings, bottle tops and shells, dried flowers and pebbles, old postcards and scraps, all sorts of oddments; then she and Susan would play Kingdom, setting up landscapes and furniture, peopling them with action.

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Those were the only times of peaceful companionship between her and Susan. I have edged away from it, that poisonous feeling between them, that terrible balancing of hurts and needs I had to do between the two, and did so badly, those earlier years.

Oh there are conflicts between the others too, each one human, needing, demanding, hurting, taking—but only between Emily and Susan, no, Emily toward Susan that corroding resentment. It seems so obvious on the surface, yet it is not obvious. Susan, the second child, Susan, golden- and curly-haired and chubby, quick and articulate and assured, everything in appearance and manner Emily was not; Susan, not able to resist Emily's precious things, losing or sometimes clumsily breaking them; Susan telling jokes and riddles to company for applause while Emily sat silent (to say to me later: that was *my* riddle, Mother, I told it to Susan); Susan, who for all the five years' difference in age was just a year behind Emily in developing physically.

I am glad for that slow physical development that widened the difference between her and her contemporaries, though she suffered over it. She was too vulnerable for that terrible world of youthful competition, of preening and parading, of constant measuring of yourself against every other, of envy, "If I had that copper hair," "If I had that skin. . . ." She tormented herself enough about not looking like the others, there was enough of the unsureness, the having to be conscious of words before you speak, the constant caring—what are they thinking of me? without having it all magnified by the merciless physical drives.

Ronnie is calling. He is wet and I change him. It is rare there is such a cry now. That time of motherhood is almost behind me when the ear is not one's own but must always be racked and listening for the child cry, the child call. We sit for a while and I hold him, looking out over the city spread in charcoal with its soft aisles of light. "*Shoogily*," he breathes and curls closer. I carry him back to bed, asleep. *Shoogily*. A funny word, a family word, inherited from Emily, invented by her to say: *comfort*.

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In this and other ways she leaves her seal, I say aloud. And startle at my saying it. What do I mean? What did I start to gather together, to try and make coherent? I was at the terrible, growing years. War years. I do not remember them well. I was working, there were four smaller ones now, there was not time for her. She had to help be a mother, and housekeeper, and shopper. She had to set her seal. Mornings of crisis and near hysteria trying to get lunches packed, hair combed, coats and shoes found, everyone to school or Child Care on time, the baby ready for transportation. And always the paper scribbled on by a smaller one, the book looked at by Susan then mislaid, the homework not done. Running out to that huge school where she was one, she was lost, she was a drop; suffering over her unpreparedness, stammering and unsure in her classes.

There was so little time left at night after the kids were bedded down. She would struggle over books, always eating (it was in those years she developed her enormous appetite that is legendary in our family) and I would be ironing, or preparing food for the next day, or writing V-mail to Bill, or tending the baby. Sometimes, to make me laugh, or out of her despair, she would imitate happenings or types at school.

I think I said once: "Why don't you do something like this in the school amateur show?" One morning she phoned me at work, hardly understandable through the weeping: "Mother, I did it. I won, I won; they gave me first prize; they clapped and clapped and wouldn't let me go."

Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in her anonymity.

She began to be asked to perform at other high schools, even in colleges, then at city and statewide affairs. The first one we went to, I only recognized her that first moment when thin, shy, she almost drowned herself into the curtains. Then: Was this Emily? The control, the command, the convulsing and deadly clowning, the spell,

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then the roaring, stamping audience, unwilling to let this rare and precious laughter out of their lives.

Afterwards: You ought to do something about her with a gift like that—but without money or knowing how, what does one do? We have left it all to her, and the gift has as often eddied inside, clogged and clotted, as been used and growing.

She is coming. She runs up the stairs two at a time with her light graceful step, and I know she is happy tonight. Whatever it was that occasioned your call did not happen today.

"Aren't you ever going to finish the ironing, Mother? Whistler painted his mother in a rocker. I'd have to paint mine standing over an ironing board." This is one of her communicative nights and she tells me everything and nothing as she fixes herself a plate of food out of the icebox.

She is so lovely. Why did you want me to come in at all? Why were you concerned? She will find her way.

She starts up the stairs to bed. "Don't get *me* up with the rest in the morning." "But I thought you were having midterms." "Oh, those," she comes back in, kisses me, and says quite lightly, "in a couple of years when we'll all be atom-dead they won't matter a bit."

She has said it before. She *believes* it. But because I have been dredging the past, and all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me, I cannot endure it tonight.

I will never total it all. I will never come in to say: She was a child seldom smiled at. Her father left me before she was a year old. I had to work her first six years when there was work, or I sent her home and to his relatives. There were years she had care she hated. She was dark and thin and foreign-looking in a world where the prestige went to blondeness and curly hair and dimples, she was slow where glibness was prized. She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother. There were the other children pushing up, demanding. Her younger sister seemed

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all that she was not. There were years she did not let me touch her. She kept too much in herself, her life was such she had to keep too much in herself. My wisdom came too late. She has much to her and probably little will come of it. She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear.

Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom—but in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know—help make it so there is cause for her to know—that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.

1953–1954

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