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The Folklore Muse

Frank de Caro

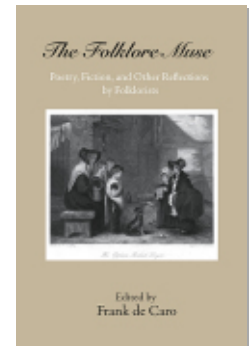
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The Powers of Narrative

Although folklore is hardly the only field intensely interested in narrative, folklorists do concern themselves with particularly fundamental forms of storytelling: the oral, the traditional, the stories that have persisted over time and space for long, long periods of time. They are particularly well situated to observe the power that narrative has to shape social meanings and convey cultural agendas, to see how very important stories are to human communication. Some folklorists have been great oral storytellers themselves, and it is appropriate that some of the contributors to this volume have chosen to turn to written narrative forms like the short story and memoir as means of expression. In other sections, John Burrison uses the novel to convey a sense of an important American experience, that of the summer camp; Jeff Todd Titon uses the short story to look at life on a rural island and at traditional and non-traditional crafts; Elaine Lawless, Libby Tucker, and Joanne Mulcahy tell us the true stories of their passages through the world.

In this section, Kirin Narayan's memoir focuses on a family friend, a noted photographer and surrealist painter, and is very much a memoir of family. One of its important insights, however, is how folklorists become folklorists; for Narayan, stories were a key part of that process. The Kirin of the memoir is very young, but she is aware of the power of stories and of how she needs to know stories to understand certain things. One cannot but connect that realization to her having become a student of oral narrative, and her piece is very suggestive about the centrality of stories in our lives. In my own poem "Ballad Girls," I lay out some of the characteristics of a narrative folk subgenre, the "murdered girl ballad," in which a young woman is slain by her lover. I hope to pose a few questions about the meaning of this type of narrative song, including why this story type has had a centrality in American tradition, and why it exercises the power that it must. Of course, a poem poses questions differently than an analytical essay, and whether the poem provides any answers is itself an open question.

In several poems, Steve Zeitlin looks at more specific storytelling events or stories. "Once Upon a Time" not only references the time-honored formulaic opening for a fairytale but comments on how a father-narrator interweaves everyday reality and fictive tale. "Mirror" comes out of having heard Holocaust survivor Boris Blum tell the stories of his experiences in a narrative session sponsored by the New York Folklore Society, while "Tickling the Corpse" also looks to a Holocaust story of horrors but strangely brings the powers of laughter to the fore against

the chilling backdrop of horrific death. (Zeitlin's "The Storytelling Wake," the title taken from an essay by Kelly S. Taylor in *Southern Folklore* but drawing also on comments made by noted folklorist Kenneth Goldstein about the mourning rituals for his own father, is in another section and looks at how the stories told about the dead "reconstruct" them.)

In other sections, writers, of course, demonstrate the power and appeal of folk narrative in many other ways. Folktale motifs are an important component to Neil Grobman's fiction. Echoes of legend come to the characters in Teresa Bergen's short story "Haints." Jens Lund has said that things he encounters as a folklorist often spur him on and become stories he tells orally in informal situations; some he then writes down. In the section that follows, called "Legend and Myth," several writers work with the materials from those genres, dipping into the great pool of stories.

Ballad Girls

Those murdered girls:
Laura Forster, Pretty Polly,
Pearl Bryant, others unnamed.
They die, reminding us
Each time the ballad's sung,
That men will try to run,
That love is hard to know,
That careless passion comes on back
To stab us in the breast
Or drown us in some river
Far from home.

The lover sings their
Willow garden death song.
And when she has been immobilized
By the Burgundy wine, he stabs her,
Throws her in to sink,
And (for good measure) announces
The wine was poisoned anyway.
Overkill, a thrice-told story
That chills us to our singing bones,
Making sure we understand
Death behind the banjo's frolic.

So then the lover hangs:
Tom Dula, Jonathan Lewis,
Pretty Polly's man.
There's no getting away:
Only the gallows
Of foolish desire.
We're strung up to a lonesome tree
Once we set foot on that forbidden road.

Sally Gooden, Buffalo gals,
Cindy, Saro Jane:
Fiddle-tune women.
They make us jump up,
Dance around the hall,
And do a carefree buck and wing.

But those ballad girls,
They're something else,
Another, darker story:
A tale of shadow selves
That hide beyond
The Camptown Races of the heart.

Stella Stories

“I always pref-uhed to be a mistress than to be a wife,” Stella liked to pronounce, nose airily turned upward. She used this line through most of her life. If her amazed listeners burst into laughter, she would hunch slightly, green eyes alight, allowing herself a throaty, slightly snorting laugh.

I first heard this pronouncement not from Stella, but from my mother. Quoting Stella, Maw took on a deep, breathy British voice, though her own bubbling amusement diluted Stella’s blunt imperiousness. Most people who encountered Stella could not resist trying to reproduce her voice, as though performing the timbre and emphasis might grant momentary freedom from binding roles.

Stella Snead was a surrealist painter turned photographer, twenty years older than Maw and fifteen years younger than my American grandmother, Nani. During the 1960s, Stella lived beside us in the same stretch of fenced property under the coconut trees in a beachside Bombay suburb. Stella was then in her fifties: tall, lean, and stylish. Her perpetual tan offset the white curls rising above her unusually high, curved forehead. Her face showed off the slopes of beautiful bones: rounded cheekbones that dipped inward, wide jaws. She often wore mossy greens the shade of her eyes, or else iridescent block colors: shocking pink, stunning purple, parrot lime green. She favored tailored pants, blouses that showed off her figure, and heavy silver rings, belts, and necklaces (never earrings, as though these might be too feminine). When smoking, she occasionally used a cigarette holder.

Just as Stella didn’t want to ever be a wife, she also definitively *“didn’t like children.”* We children rarely entered her house unless specifically invited over and chaperoned by our mother and grandmother. We did spy on her, though, peering through the bright fuchsia bougainvillea hedge as she came and went in her Ambassador car, or called for her cook “Za-cha-RI-ah!” or greeted smartly dressed visitors at the wide, folding porch door for cocktails and long dinner parties. Flamboyant, irreverent, outspoken, Stella trailed bright plumes of stories. As a little girl I was already gathering up the feathers.

I was the youngest child. Early on, I decided that collecting stories was a good way to compensate for being born so late. If I knew the stories from the long family prehistory before I was me, I wouldn’t always be tagging after, pleading “Tell me” or exclaiming “Really?” I listened, all ears, trying to memorize phrases and images

whenever my older sister and brothers recalled any events from the mysterious time before my memories joined theirs. I soaked up the stories that Maw told us or our changing circles of guests: stories about interesting places, quirky people, and amazing twists of fate that established her as more than a mother and wife bound to Bombay. I reveled in Paw's droll tales that no one was ever quite sure were invented or real. I begged Nani for stories about when she was a little girl in exotic Michigan sledding through snow, pulling golden strands of taffy, and eating cinnamon-scented baked apples. Since stories about Stella's adventures and sayings were so closely entwined with our family history, I attended closely to the stories about her.

Maw had first met Stella in Taos, New Mexico, in the mid-1940s. In those days, Maw was still Didi Kinzinger, a lively teenager with two thick braids who wore fiesta skirts with off-the-shoulder blouses and quoted Baudelaire. Maw's father, Edmund Kinzinger, was a German Expressionist painter who had opposed the Nazi regime and had sought emigration to his wife, Alice's country in the 1930s. He had founded a department of art for Baylor University (discovering that unlike the Wild West he imagined, this Baptist institution in Waco, Texas, did not allow drinking, dancing, smoking, or nude models). By the early 1940s, Edmund and Alice sought out cosmopolitan company in Taos, where he also taught a summer art school. Years later when new visitors at our house in Bombay had glimpsed regal, aloof Stella and wanted to know just who she was, Maw brought out the story of Stella's arrival in Taos.

***The British Mistress:** During the war, a Dutch herpetologist called Adrian, and his practical British wife, Yvonne, moved to Taos. Adrian kept rattlesnakes in a cage by their front door: instead of a bell, the snakes raised the alarm on visitors. Adrian played Spanish guitar and experimented with counterfeiting ancient Greek coins through the lost wax method. Yvonne was some kind of minor British nobility, but she worked as a secretary in the welfare office and kept the bills paid. In the fall of 1944, Adrian started announcing at parties that "his British mistress" was joining them. Yvonne looked blandly on. I was fourteen, and I couldn't wait to meet a real Mistress. And then she arrived, and she was Stella.*

Stella was in her mid-thirties, though her hair was prematurely white. She'd studied painting in Paris with Ozenfant and then had followed him to New York. She rented Edmund's studio for the winter. She and Yvonne actually got on very well together. At one point when Stella wasn't around, I heard Adrian talk admiringly about some other woman, saying, "What she really needs is a man." And Yvonne looked up from her knitting and said to him, "Darling, you can't take on ano-thuh!"

Adrian thought that he could mess around, but he didn't want Stella to have other lovers. Stella told Adrian he was 'too macho and too possessive,' and she dumped him. But she always stayed friends with Yvonne.

If the listeners showed rapt, admiring interest, Maw also sometimes told them about Stella traveling to Monument Valley. "Traveling is a love affair with the globe," Stella liked to say. (Even when she lived in Bombay, she would set off on expeditions around India, or to distant places like London, Mexico, Egypt, or Arizona,

bringing back black-and-white prints and color slides. Sometimes, after her travels, Stella summoned us all over for an evening slide show. Through Stella's lens, before I had ever heard of cultural anthropology, I saw distant places, art, and ways of life.) In the 1940s, though Stella couldn't travel very far, this didn't stop her from having adventures.

***The Piece of Ass:** During the war, gas was rationed and it was hard to get anywhere. Stella started hitching rides with mail trucks so that she could explore the Southwest. She got a ride out to Monument Valley with a mail-truck driver. It was getting to be evening, and he asked if she'd like to get a can of beans and go out and watch the sunset. So she went with him.*

"Mighty purdee sunset, Ma'am," the mail truck driver said to Stella as they sat out in the desert watching the sun go down.

"Rather," said Stella.

"Would you care for a piece of ass, Ma'am?" asked the mail truck driver.

Stella stared at him. "I haven't the faintest idea what you mean," she said.

"You're old enough to know what I mean," he said.

"Oh that," said Stella. "Oh, no thank you."

At this point, Maw always started to laugh, bringing along the laughter of all her grown-up listeners. I sniffed a tantalizing whiff of adult complicity in their amusement, but mostly thought this was funny because of the man's strange taste for donkey meat.

Stella never really got to know my grandfather, Edmund, whom she referred to as "the Bavarian." She did befriend my grandmother, Alice, or Nani, whom she labeled "the Puritan." Even in my hearing, if Nani was expressing an opinion that Stella took to be too confining, Stella chided, *"Oh Alice, don't be such a Puritan. There are altogether too many Puritans in America already. I daresay that Britain was better off after the lot of you took off on those ships for America!"*

Nani seemed mostly amused by Stella, whose colorful opinions and narratives probably were a fine diversion. Through the 1940s, Nani's own marriage was disintegrating as Edmund struggled with manic depression; Stella's disdain for marriage was perhaps a comfort, even as she provided occasional comradery. When Nani was driving Didi north to college at the University of Colorado in 1949, Stella was as usual up for an adventure and came along too. In Boulder, Didi met a handsome Indian-from-India studying engineering: Narayan, who was not yet Paw. Our future Maw took our future Paw home to Taos to visit her parents and at some point, he must have met Stella too, for Taos was the first backdrop for one of the rare stories that Paw told about our neighbor. When Paw was home, beer bottles staining circles into the table beside him, he told funny stories about anything at all, including Stella. (Maw often disputed these stories; for this one about Stella, she later countered that since he had visited Taos only in the winters, he was actually unlikely to have been an eyewitness to a scene well known to other Taos hikers.)

***Stella's Tan:** We went for a hike in the mountains around Taos, and I was walking behind Stella. Without any warning, Stella began unbuttoning her shirt. She took it*

off, and then she climbed out of her pants too. We kept climbing and one by one, her clothes all came off. I didn't know where to look! She stripped right down to the nude. She must have been about forty, but she had a great body. "Well now, isn't this a **perfect** day for a tan?" she said.

Stella had always loved sunbathing in the nude. In the 1930s, she had belonged to a Nudist club in Britain. Maw sometimes quoted what she said was "the beginning of a Stella story." She told only the first few lines before trailing off into laughter. "I once had a lov-uh from the House of Lords. I met him in the nudist club . . . I met my most **boring** lovuh's at the nudist club. . . ."

After breaking up with Adrian, Stella met a woman sculptor in Taos and they began a relationship. But then they parted ways, and Stella began suffering from what would turn out to be a prolonged depression. Barred from inspiration for her surrealist paintings, she was at loose ends. A year after Maw and Paw had moved to India, Nani decided to fetch her only daughter home, and Stella seized this chance to travel. Maw repeated a story about this journey with relish.

The Cradle Snatcher: *When Alice came to try and take me home in 1952, she brought two friends with her: Inez and Stella. They traveled by ship. On the ship, Stella took up with a British social anthropologist from Cambridge. Stella was forty-two and he was twenty-four. She called him her "Pink Blimp" because he got so sunburned talking to her as she tanned on the ship decks.*

Alice was scandalized. "You're cradle snatching!" Alice told Stella.

"You're just jealous!" said Stella.

Maw loved ending the story with her nose in the air to recreate Stella having the last word, while Nani was silenced. Maw often chafed at Nani's disapproval and was clearly delighted by Stella waving Nani's opinion away. Hearing about these adventures on the ship, I was mystified: how could someone who *didn't like children* be called a cradle snatcher?

Arriving in India, Stella started sunbathing as usual, though she made the concession of wearing a bikini. Since my other grandmother, Ba, bathed even in her own locked bathroom with her sari on, wringing it out for the wash afterward, Stella's casual shedding of clothes down to what appeared to be underwear made for a local drama. Both Paw and Maw recalled the events in the extended family home.

The Crowd Around Stella: *Even in Nasik, Stella was always taking off her clothes to tan in the garden, which created a sensation in the neighborhood. Boys were lining up and climbing the wall and bringing binoculars to the balconies. "Let them look if they have nothing better to do," she said. We had to beg her to stop.*

Though Nani returned to Taos, empty-handed, Stella stayed on. After 1952, Stella freely came and went to the Nasik house, sometimes visiting the Pink Blimp in what was then Ceylon. She gradually began working on art again, although through photographs rather than painting. When my eldest brother Rahoul was born at home in July 1953, Stella was sitting in the next room. To celebrate her presence, she officially became his godmother. (Later, Rahoul, who shared Stella's irreverent humor, called her his "Good God! Mother")

Paw and Maw planned a move to their own Bombay home in the late 1950s. Nani and Edmund were divorced, and she was retiring from teaching art in Taos. Nani decided to build a house beside theirs. At first, Stella asked Maw to add on a darkroom for her to develop prints between travels, but Maw convinced her to build a house of her own. Stella's wealthy mother had recently died, and Stella could afford to try out settling down. The three houses took longer to complete than expected because Maw, the self-trained architect, was pregnant yet again—with me. “*Not anoth-uh!*” Stella objected. “*Didi, how **could** you?*” On the rare occasions that Stella talked to me while I was a child, she chided, “*You held up my house being finished!*”

Even as a little girl, I understood that the fun in all the stories told about Stella, and her quotable quotes too, emerged from her being a beautiful woman who enjoyed disregarding all the ways that people expected a woman to behave. She was undeterred by solemn condolences when strangers on her Indian travels cross-examined her to find that she had never married and didn't have children either. She had never been accountable to anyone but her mother and vehemently didn't believe in blandly deferring to men. Listening from Nani's porch as flamenco music strummed at her parties and glasses clinked, I sometimes heard her voice rising forcefully above the others:

—*Oh dear, not flowers. I do **hate** cut flowers!*

—*Don't be so **boring**. Go on, have a drink. It's ever so boring to be abstemious.*

—*Do talk about something else, won't you? I'm absolutely **not into** gurus.*

As Stella's godson, Rahoul was the only one of us with the special privilege of sometimes wandering over to her house. One of these occasions became the source of a special family saying which Maw explained through another story.

Polishing a Snakeskin: *Once Rahoul went over to Stella's house. She hadn't the faintest idea of how to entertain a nine-year-old boy, and so she brought out a snake-skin she owned and started to polish it. It seemed like Rahoul was over there for hours, so I went to get him. Rahoul later told me that he felt sorry for Stella doing this boring thing alone, and so he stayed on and on to keep her company. And Stella later told me that since he was hanging around, she had kept polishing and polishing, not knowing how else to keep him entertained.*

For us, “polishing a snakeskin” referred to times when people end up doing something because they are humoring someone else, and that other person in turn isn't interested either but plays along to be nice. That Stella could polish a snake-skin just for Rahoul was my first glimpse of her softer side.

Stella and Nani were early fans of the Beatles. In 1963, Nani traveled to Europe and came back with a record and a button declaring “I Love the Beatles” that she sometimes pinned onto her sleeveless cotton dresses. For the next few years, we lived in anticipation of more Beatles songs. Stella, who traveled more often, acquired new records first. We knew that Stella was home when we first heard the strains of the Beatles' latest hit through the bougainvillea hedge. Within a day or two, she formally invited us over to listen to the songs and to admire the cover,

while drinking tea and eating cucumber sandwiches followed by cake. Nani and Maw—and my eldest sister, Maya, too—kept close watch on the behavior of us younger children as we handled Stella's mother's golden-lipped china with its patterns of brown and black roses.

Between Beatles' songs, the china sometimes inspired Stella to recall her mother and what she had told Stella about Stella's own birth. Stella was shy and brusque with us children, and so she usually spoke to Nani and Maw as though we weren't really present. This was how I first learned Stella had also, unbelievably, once been a small child.

Running Away: My poor mother. I don't know why she married my father, really, it was such a mistake. My father married her for her money. I suppose she thought she needed to be married. I wish someone had advised her not to. He was a neurotic, you see. A depressive.

My mother liked to hint to me that I was an immaculate conception. My father was very possessive, you see. He couldn't bear that my mother gave me more attention than she gave him. When I was five my father tried to kill me. He'd gotten violent, he was dangerous to be around, and I'm told that one day he picked up a poker and was ready to strike me with it. The family doctor advised my mother that it was better for my safety that we left. My mother took me and Hetty the cook, and we went into hiding in the country. This was during the First World War. My mother was terribly afraid that he'd come after us. Luckily, the money was hers, you see. But then he was committed to an asylum and we never saw him again.

I was familiar with the heartache around depressed fathers and grandfathers too, but even in this league, Stella had the most unsettling and dramatic story. Hearing Stella's almost offhand words, as though this was a story she had often told in the past, I also sensed something more tender hidden within jump out, like the walnut-brains that jumped from the hard shells that Nani smashed in doorjamb. It was astonishing to think of Stella, so grand and forbidding, as another little girl baffled by the dark moods of her father.

Stella sometimes spoke more about her mother, who, thanks in part to her own money, had also lived by her own standards. When Stella was a little girl, her mother had dressed her in white and had taken many photographs of this beautiful child with dark hair and a rosebud mouth. She also made Stella walk barefoot in the morning dew, declaring this was good for Stella's aura.

Stella's Mother, the Vegetarian: My mother was sort of a theosophist, you could say. She was a vegetarian, which was unheard of at the time. When she sent me to school, she had to find a vegetarian school and you can imagine how hard that was. So I was raised a vegetarian and didn't even taste meat until I was nineteen. Vegetarianism, nudism, it all sort of went together in Britain in those days. It was really because I was a vegetarian, you see, that I joined the nudist club . . .

In 1970, Stella declared herself to have "done India" and relocated to a studio apartment behind Lincoln Center in New York. I next met her when I was sixteen and had received a scholarship to Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville.

Manhattan was not so far away. Now that I had grown out of being a child, I was starting to be more acceptable to Stella, but I remained tongue-tied and dazzled in her presence. During my last two years of college, I sometimes visited her for the day and we cycled down the old Westside highway to Little Italy, where she treated me to a gelato before we cycled uptown again. She would then have been almost seventy, but I had difficulty keeping up with her as she sailed ahead of me, slender ankles flashing between her tennis shoes and capri pants.

My brother Rahoul, Stella's godson, had always been the family member she most adored; they loved egging each other on, complicit in irreverence. She enjoyed his becoming a fellow photographer. I recall a Christmas Eve—1979? 1980?—that Rahoul, Stella, and I spent together, the holly she had adorned her white topknot with, the flaming British pudding lighting up the striking slopes of her face as she emerged from the kitchen. As the evening went on and more liquor was shared and hand-rolled cigarettes smoked, she unexpectedly brought out old photographs from her childhood, and from our childhood too. She had already developed the habit of unexpectedly falling asleep, mid-conversation, neck sinking toward her chest. Rahoul and I looked through the photographs together until, as usual, Stella suddenly stirred and suavely continued talking as though there had been no gap.

Stella opened her studio apartment to Rahoul when he first fell ill in the spring of 1985. A few years after he died, Stella proposed: "Well then, would you like to inherit me from Rahoul?" and so from being his godmother, she passed forward to becoming mine. By then, my mid-twenties, I was acceptably grownup; I was even starting to be possibly interesting. I visited her for long holidays and occasional weekends, enjoying the chance to hear Stella's stories in her own words. Sitting at her round table over meals she had prepared, she balanced long More cigarettes with her silver-ringed fingers, talking about past and present events and sometimes offering alternate endings from the versions of classic Stella stories I'd earlier learned. For example, it turned out there was more after the mail-truck driver suggested a piece of ass.

***The Beautiful Moon:** And so we watched the sun go down and we ate our dinner. He was rather a quiet type. Then we drove back to the hotel, and a full moon was rising. He said, "No hard feelings, Ma'am?"*

"Oh no," I said.

"I just didn't want you to think I was no flat-horse," he said. Whatever that means. But then he looked up at the big moon. "It's such a beautiful moon," he said, "Are you sure you won't reconsider?"

"Well, no," I said. And he didn't say anything else. He was quite sweet really, so polite and taken by the moon. I suppose he was sort of a romantic.

The "I once had a lover from the House of Lords" also had more episodes beyond the Nudist Club. The House of Lords was once invited to visit a ship that had just been inaugurated. The Lord Lover took Stella along. They found their way to a state bedroom, locked the door, and enjoyed the afternoon. "Though

we hadn't anticipated that there wouldn't be any running water," said Stella. "And then we just slipped back into the group of boring Lords and went back into London."

With age, Stella grew more stooped. She remained strikingly beautiful, always dressing in bright colors and unusual designs, silver combs adorning her top-knot. In the streets of New York, she was frequently mistaken for Katherine Hepburn. She also softened, more visibly showing affection. By her eighties, she was calling me "ducky" and "darling" whenever I visited from what she called "the wilds of Wisconsin."

Stella rediscovered painting in her eighties, but finding that she didn't have the same surrealist inspiration as before, she patiently forged some of her older misplaced canvases that had been recorded in black-and-white photographs. I realized how she was reinventing the colors when I visited and recognized a painting she had once given my mother, with creatures dancing on mesas: all the colors, though, were different from what I had grown up with. At the same time, women surrealist painters were being rediscovered. Stella enjoyed giving interviews, and also talking of her friend Leonora (Carrington). A great moment of triumph for Stella was when, at ninety, she had solo exhibitions of her paintings in Paris and New York, amid great celebrations by all her many friends and admirers.

When I started writing a family memoir, I brought my manuscript to New York, where Stella lived with round-the-clock attendants. After lunch, I read aloud portions that featured Stella to her. "That's exactly it!" Stella called out, jabbing her finger in the air as I read lines like, "*I always pref-uhed to be a mistress than be a wife,*" or "*Alice, don't be such a Puritan.*"

"Well, I daresay this book will make me famous," Stella said with unbridled satisfaction. "More and more people will be wanting to come see me." (As the book evolved though to its published form as *My Family and Other Saints*, many Stella stories dropped away).

A year or two later, Stella's memory was scattering along with her strength. "I've become so boring," Stella pronounced over the phone. "I know I've had an interesting life, ducky, but I don't remember any of it. I don't have any stories anymore, and so I've become dreadfully boring."

"But Stella," I said, shouting into the receiver so she wouldn't chide me for mumbling. "But Stella, other people remember your stories for you." I impulsively started retelling the story of Monument Valley and the mail-truck driver.

Stella began to laugh even before we reached any punch lines. "Oh, what a mahvellous story," she said. "Yes, he was such a romantic, a sensitive soul, really. So polite. He was so affected by the moon . . ."

The very last time I saw Stella when she was alive, her attendant let me in the door and helped her sit up at the edge of her hospital bed. Stella was specially dressed that day in a silk shirt I had once bought for her in what I thought of as a "Stella green," accenting her eyes. She peered at me, head stooped down between

her shoulders, white hair curling around her face, green eyes ablaze with affection. Even at ninety-five, she didn't wear glasses.

"Remind me," Stella said, eyes following me upward after I'd embraced her. "So am I your mother or is Didi your mother?"

"Stella, you never liked children," I said, enunciating my words loudly. "Didi's my mother and you're my godmother."

"Oh *that's* how it is, is it?" asked Stella, breaking into a laugh.

Once Upon a Time

My father, plum out of fairy tales,
fashioned a tale about a boy named Steve
who wolfed down his Cheerios and waited for the school bus
came home to Kraft macaroni and cheese

and it took me a moment to comprehend—
that child was me

But it became my favorite bedtime story
the woof and warp of days
braided each night before my Dad and I would part
wound by a childhood charmer
who spun life into art

Tickling the Corpse

To laugh is to imagine a world
In which the Holocaust never happened.

The Nazis killed the children first
but amidst the carnage of the Warsaw ghetto
Jewish children were seen
playing among the limbs of the dead
leaping over dead bodies

playfully
tickling a corpse.

Fifty years later,
though we're tickling our Jewish souls,
laughter remains an act of faith

Mirror

Packed into the parlor of a German mansion
following the liberation
Blum saw a mirror on the wall
but of all the straggling skeletons
could not recognize his own—

so he stuck out his tongue
made funny faces

And, years later, recognized traces of himself
in the story,
mirror of memory,

pieced together from shards

of shattered silence

—for *Boris Blum*