

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION
Women's History Month 2006

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2005 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2005 or Spring 2006 to be eligible. (Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor: Patti See

Dept. Educational Support Services and WMNS

Course Number and Name: n/a

Semester completed: Fall, 2005

Title of Nominated Work: Prospect Park

Pick one-

CATEGORY:

Sampson:

- Undergraduate Research Paper
- Undergraduate Project
- Graduate

~~See~~

Olsen

~~Kessler~~

Turell

Belter

(The judges retain the right to reassign categories for all nominated works.)

STUDENT INFORMATION:

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****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT?** (Attach a separate sheet.)

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach.....
to your nomination form.

Submission deadline is February 13, 2006.



University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

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January 18, 2006

Patti See
To: Women's History Month Awards Committee

From: Patti See

RE: Nomination of Jess Young's "Prospect Park" for the Tillie Olsen Award.

I am pleased to nominate Jess Young's "Prospect Park," a short fiction piece that portrays the complexities of married life with children. In this poignant story, Jess captures the difficulties of intimate relationships, parenthood, and the death of a child without sentimentalizing them.

She tells a suburbanite couple's story through the point of view of the husband, a great feat for a writer as it is extremely difficult to tell a believable story from the perspective of the opposite sex. Her ability to capture the every-day struggles of a young husband and wife is commendable. Jess is a wonderful story teller whose work is progressive, compelling, and true to life.

Excellence. Our measure, our motto, our goal.

Academic Skills Center • phone: (715) 836-5844 • fax: (715) 836-3418
web: www.uwec.edu/asc

Tillie Olsen Award

Prospect Park: Short Fiction

Jessica M. Young / Senior, Creative Writing

Patti See, Faculty Mentor

Prospect Park

It was nine p.m., and Gus was late—later than usual. In the last six months he had started working late every night, and on Friday nights especially. He told his wife, Ella, that he did this in order to catch up before the weekends. She was washing dishes when he told her. Without looking up from the wine glass she was scrubbing, she smiled and said that sounded like a good idea.

Not only did Gus work late on Friday nights, he worked late every other night as well. He wrote legal briefs regarding property owners and neglectful student renters or disadvantaged students and crooked landlords, drew up insurance contracts, and read file after file on fender benders and misdemeanors. It was all the same, and all of it was boring. There was a time when he thought becoming a lawyer would be glamorous, that he would have a big house in the city, great suits, and an expensive sports car. That was the stuff of TV, not real life. He lived in a modest home in a suburb called Prospect Park, hardly ever wore a suit to work, and on most days, he drove a mini-van.

This Friday night, however, Gus did not work late. He went to the library instead. He had been going there often lately, after work and on the weekends. It seemed to put him at ease. He would bypass the busyness and bright colors of the children's section for the stacks on the upper floors, taking deep breaths along the way. He liked the scent of the books, like earth and fallen leaves, as though they'd been soaked in rain and warmed in sun. He would gently pull them from the shelves and turn them over in his hands, rubbing his thumb against the mended bindings, opening his palm against the pages. Rough and smooth, they were like skin, telling a tale by the marks. The books carried a

sensual, comforting feeling, like the arms of a lover after a long day. He liked how the stories in the books never changed.

Gus went to the library to think. He needed to tell Ella how he felt, but how? He thought about getting a hotel room for the night and just not going home at all. He imagined Ella putting their daughter to bed, taking a shower, and then catching up on the tasks she hadn't finished earlier in the day. It would get later and later, and she would keep watching the clock to see how much time had passed. She would bite her manicured nails and cry, worried about her husband. When Gus would come home the next morning, his wife would throw her arms around him, kiss him, and say, "I'm sorry," or "We should talk," or "I still really love you." And Amanda, their little daughter, would clap her hands and cheer, "Daddy home, Daddy home!"

But it would never happen that way.

He knew that Ella would be worried if he didn't come home all night, but she certainly wouldn't greet him with open arms the next morning if he did. There would be no tears and no *I love you's*. Gus didn't want her to be angry; he wanted her to listen to what he had to say, whatever that would be.

When Gus did come home from the library, he could hear the shower running upstairs. Ella had gotten in the habit of taking a shower at night, after she had put the baby to bed. It bothered him that their daughter was nearly two, and Ella was still calling her "the baby" instead of Amanda. Now, he was doing it too.

There was a note on the counter informing him that he had missed dinner again, and there was leftover pasta in the fridge if he wanted any. He opened a bottle of wine instead, grabbed two glasses, and walked upstairs. First, he checked on the baby, who

was sleeping soundly. Gus kissed his daughter—she smelled faintly of powder and sour milk—and patted her back, trying not to clank the bottle of wine and glasses he held in his other hand.

After he left the baby's room, he walked to his bedroom where his wife was dressing after her shower. He did not go in, but sat down on the floor across the hallway with his back against the wall. He poured himself a glass of wine, drank it fast, and poured himself another. He wondered what it would be like living away from his wife and daughter. He wondered if they would miss him at all.

Ella didn't like to leave the door to the bedroom closed all the way, because she was afraid she wouldn't hear the baby. Gus could see his wife through the partially closed door. She had just come out of the shower, one towel wrapped around her body, the other around her hair. She bent over at the waist and removed the towel from her head. Gus liked her hair better before. It used to be long, skimming the bottom of her shoulder blades, and darker than it was now. In the last year, she had cut it twice, once to her shoulders, and then to her chin. She had colored it too, blonde streaks here and there. Gus thought it would have looked good, on someone else.

He sipped his wine and looked on. Ella's slender shoulders shivered as she began to undo the towel that hung slightly open at her hips. She dropped it to the floor, and pulled out a pair of cotton underwear with faded yellow roses from the top dresser drawer. He longed for the days when she wore satin lingerie or nothing at all.

Gus watched her as she stood in front of the full-length mirror and stared at her almost naked body. She ran her hands over her belly and sucked in, frowning. As she exhaled, she pinched the skin on her stomach and sighed. Gus noticed the small butterfly

tattooed near her belly button and tried not to think about how it had stretched its wings and pulled them back in again more than once. It looked crumpled now. He wanted to kiss her there, but she would kill him if she knew he was watching her. It had been a long time since she had wanted Gus to look at her at all, clothed or not. He closed his eyes instead.

His mind raced. He saw a flashing slide show of their life together, like Viewfinder scenes. There was Ella reshelving books at the university library where they met, her long chestnut hair tied back in a loose ponytail. She was biting her nails. He saw her through the stacks, putting books away in the wrong place, and how she didn't seem to care. Then, their first apartment together, tiny and ancient, with a water-stained ceiling, and slanted floors. They laughed about putting old paper backs under the legs of the furniture to make it level. Ella in that same apartment, hanging up the phone, squealing about getting her first teaching job, jumping up and down and hugging him.

He saw them moving into their house in Prospect Park, on the last Friday in May, the day of the annual ice cream social. It was a huge neighborhood event in the park, with games, ice cream stands, a community thrift sale, fortunetellers, and magic shows for the kids. It was the only day of the year the observation deck on the Witch's Tower was open. The tower looked like a lighthouse wearing a witch's hat. It was just a water tower, it even said so on the plaque outside, but there was something enchanting about it, or ominous, depending on which angle you viewed it from, the way the small windows were aligned with the spiral staircase, and the thick vines that grew up and around its edges. It should have been in a storybook.

Now in his thoughts, they were on the observation deck of the tower. Like most of the other couples, they leaned against the guardrail holding hands, taking in the view. They could see the city, the interstate, and the river, all alive with movement. Gus was thinking of possibilities when Ella whispered, "I have something to tell you."

He turned toward her.

"We're having a baby," she said. Gus held his wife's hand a little tighter, interlocking his fingers with hers. He was happy.

His mind skipped forward to the pregnancy. Gus worried about things more than she had. He wanted her to have a doctor; she wanted a midwife. He tried to encourage her to read books on pregnancy and childbirth, but she preferred fiction, saying, "Baby books make me nervous."

When the due date became closer in the middle of winter, Gus pleaded with her to let him drive her to work or the grocery store when she had one of her junk food cravings. When he got nervous, she would kiss him on the forehead and say, "Everything will be fine."

And it was, for a while. The baby was a healthy eight-pound boy they named Will. Ella had chosen the name because of the way he kicked and twisted inside of her for so long. She said he wanted to be out in the world, moving around. Although he did not cry much, Will was an active baby, who slept little, and nursed often. Ella was exhausted, but lost in the rush of becoming a new parent. They both had been.

Gus closed his eyes tighter and braced himself for the memory that was always there. A few months after Will was born, Ella asked Gus if he would be all right to stay home with the baby overnight. The weekend was coming, and one of her friends had invited

her to a “girl’s night out.” She said she could use some adult company after being home with Will all day. Gus told her they would be fine, that she deserved a break. Before she left, she made up bottles of breast milk for Will and made a list with her friend’s number and the baby’s feeding schedule.

“If you need anything, *anything at all*,” she said, “call me.” She held Will in her arms for a long time, cooing and whispering to him, “I’ll be back soon.”

“I don’t know if I should leave him, Gus. I don’t want to miss any of these first smiles.”

“You go out, have a good time. You deserve a break. There’s a lifetime of smiles ahead of us. We’ll be fine.”

Gus fed Will that night and put him to bed around eight o’clock, the same time as usual, the time on Ella’s list. She called about an hour later.

“I just wanted to see how Will is, how you are.”

“We’re great,” Gus told her, as he walked upstairs to his and Ella’s room where the bassinet was. “I’m checking on him right now. He’s completely out.”

“Okay, good. I’ll be home late tomorrow morning some time.”

“Are you having a good night?” Gus asked.

“It’s nice to get out of the house, but I really miss you guys.”

Gus was surprised when he looked at the clock the next morning—6 a.m. It was strange that Will had slept through the night. He usually woke up two or three times, sometimes more. Gus would have heard him if he had cried—the bassinet was right at the foot of the bed. He was excited, thinking that his son had already reached that milestone of sleeping through the night.

Gus scooted his way to the end of the bed, over to the baby. He was stunned. Will's baby soft pinkness had turned to blue. He was not breathing and his small tongue was stuck to the top of his mouth. Gus reached into the bassinet to pick up his son, but stopped short and doubled over. His gut ached and nausea overwhelmed him. He stumbled to the bathroom and threw up.

The doctors said it was crib death, SIDS, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. It was nothing that Gus did or didn't do. No one could have prevented it. At the wake, family members and friends gathered around the tiny white casket lined with pale blue satin and a small white pillow and blanket.

Gus remembered the whispers. "Oh he looks so peaceful," and "He looks just like he's sleeping." Gus thought he looked like one of those dolls that close their eyes when you lay them down. He looked plastic and cold as Gus tucked the blanket around him, kissing him for the last time.

Gus noticed Ella earlier, trying to greet guests through tears, nodding as they told her how sorry they were, and thanking them for being there. Then, she had just disappeared. When Gus finally found her, she was in the bathroom, standing in front of the mirror, staring at her blouse. There were dark, wet stains spreading across the front of it. Without turning away from her reflection, she told Gus there was too much milk. There was no baby to give it to anymore, and the more she cried, the more it flowed.

Ella said she didn't blame him for Will's death, and they never really talked about it much. They packed up all of his things and donated them to the community thrift sale at the ice cream social at the end of May. They didn't go up to the observatory deck that time, or the year after. Gus thought things were going okay between them, and they were

getting better. They had started going to the Signe Café down the street on Friday evenings to drink wine and talk. They did that for about a year, and Gus felt they were really beginning to open up to one another, and he hoped that eventually, they would be able to talk about what happened with Will. It was something they had not done yet. Instead, they held each other in bed at night and tried to not wake each other with muffled sobs.

Gus saw another scene at the Signe Café--the morning that Ella told him that she wanted another child. She asked him to meet her for breakfast instead of dinner that day, telling him that they needed to talk. As they went over their breakfast menus, Ella leaned over and took his hand. "I want another baby, Gus."

She hadn't mentioned anything about another child since Will died over a year before. Gus thought that maybe she was just getting restless. She had never gone back to her teaching job after the baby died. She kept herself busy by cleaning, organizing, and reorganizing. He thought she had become obsessive.

"Maybe you should go back to work," he said. Ella pulled her hand away from his and let it drop into her lap. She looked at the menu.

"I want another baby. I think you owe me that much."

Gus was silent for a moment. "Okay, if that's what you want." He tried to smile as the waiter approached the table. He ordered hibiscus tea with his breakfast instead of his usual coffee. He thought he had read somewhere that the tea had anticonception properties.

It didn't work. When Ella became pregnant with their second child, they didn't go out much anymore. They stopped at the cafe a few times, but it had new owners, and

Gus didn't feel comfortable there anymore. Dull, flowered wallpaper covered the bright colored paint that he and Ella both liked before. The food was almost the same, but they had stopped serving wine. The menu advertised a "homey atmosphere," and after awhile, he and Ella stopped going there altogether.

This time, Ella read everything she could find on pregnancy. She ate all the right foods, did all the right exercises, and rarely drove anywhere. She did everything by the book. When she was pregnant with Will, she always shared the changes she was going through and encouraged Gus to feel the life inside of her, taking his large, soft hands and moving them across her belly. They had made love often.

This time, she didn't want him touch her. She kept her feelings to herself or put them into dusting, sweeping, or whatever she happened to be straightening up next. Their daughter was two years old now, and Ella was still cleaning instead of talking.

Gus opened his eyes. Ella was tapping him on the shoulder. "Gus? What are you doing out here sitting on the floor? Are you waiting for me or something?"

"I thought maybe we could talk."

"What do you want to talk about?" She had finished getting dressed and was wearing a pair of his old pajamas. She had the sleeves rolled up and the top button was missing. She was still nursing the baby. Gus thought their daughter was far too old for this, but he didn't want to interfere with their bond.

Ella was rubbing lotion into her hands and cuticles, something she did often throughout the day. She had become meticulous about her appearance in some ways, and completely disregarded it in others.

“I don’t know, I thought we could just talk.”

Ella looked at the bottle of wine in his hand and asked him if there was any left.

“There’s at least one more glass.”

“We can talk later,” she said. Right now, I’m going to finish putting the dishes away and picking up the toys downstairs.”

Gus decided he would go for a walk; if he didn’t he was sure he would burst. He couldn’t wait much longer to tell his wife what he had wanted to tell her months ago. Gus wanted to leave. He walked down the hill to Tower Grocery. It was beginning to rain, but it was warm out, and he didn’t mind. He could hear the raindrops pelting against the old, faded, metal RC Cola sign on top of the store. Gus read the bold lettering in the store window: COLD BEER, CIGARETTES, FOOD. Everything was so straightforward.

He bought a pack of cigarettes. He was sure his wife knew he had started smoking again. He quit before the first baby, and again after the second. As he left the store, he saw his reflection in the window, and paused for a moment. His hair had gone gray around the ears, and he looked shorter somehow. He was six feet, two inches, but he slouched. Ella used to encourage him to stand up straight, but she hadn’t said anything in a long time.

Gus walked back up the hill and over to the park where the Witch’s Tower stood. He sat on the bench in front of it, gazing at the view. It wasn’t as clear from the bottom of the tower, but he could still see a long way. When he and Ella moved to Prospect Park, they’d been intrigued by its sense of place. It had distinctive geographic boundaries, with the university to the West, the Mississippi to the South, the Railroad

tracks to the North, and the line between Minneapolis and St. Paul to the East. This used to make him feel safe; now, he just felt trapped. He got up and walked home.

When he got there, Ella was asleep on the sofa. He sat down on the coffee table next to her. If she would have been awake, she would have been annoyed by this, and told him to sit on the chair like a “normal person.” She was rubbing her feet back and forth, something she did only when she slept. He looked at her toes. She never completely removed the polish before painting over it with another color. It had started to fade and chip away in layers.

Gus stood up and bent over his wife; he brushed the hair out of her eyes and kissed her forehead. He whispered that he had something to tell her. It was not the right time, but no time would be right; besides, he wasn't even sure if she could hear him. He was surprised when she responded in a sleepy voice. “I have something to tell you too.”

He wasn't sure if anything she had to say could make him permanently change his mind. He had been thinking about leaving for so long. Ella opened her eyes. “I forgot to tell you,” she said between yawns, “that my mother said she would watch Amanda overnight so we can go to the ice cream social tomorrow and spend some time alone. What were you going to tell me?”

He couldn't tell her now. She called the baby by her name. She was getting an overnight sitter. This only happened once before. Ella's mother took Amanda overnight so they could go out, but Ella called her every hour, “just wanting to see how things were going.” They picked their daughter up in the middle of the night because Ella could not sleep without her in the house.

“I can't remember. Are you sure you want to do this?”

She said yes, closed her eyes, and drifted back to sleep, or at least pretended to. Gus went upstairs to the bedroom. He and Ella had not slept in the same bed for months. Once in awhile they would cross paths in the nighttime when they checked on Amanda. They had genuinely smiled at one another, relieved to see that the new baby was still breathing. Gus slipped under the covers of his bed and turned out the light.

When he woke up and went downstairs the next morning, Ella had already given Amanda her breakfast, and his mother-in-law, Kate, was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. She stood up and hugged Gus when he walked into the room.

“How are you?” she asked.

“I’m fine, how are you?” He poured himself a cup of coffee, but didn’t drink it. Amanda came running to him, and he scooped her into his lap.

“Fine, dear, just fine,” Kate said, as she smiled at her granddaughter. Gus got the feeling that Kate felt sorry for him, or maybe she was just concerned. He wished he could tell her how he felt; they had been so close at one time. Gus kissed Amanda’s head and inhaled the scent of her tangled hair. He thought about what his mother-in-law said to him at Will’s funeral.

He walked outside of the funeral parlor that day to catch his breath, and she had followed him out. She put her arm around him and spoke in a hushed tone.

“We all love you,” she had said. “We’re going to get through this—you and Ella are going to get through this. She’ll forgive you in time.”

At that moment, he turned to her, a stone look on his face. “She blames me?” He felt his face begin to crumble and hot tears searing his skin. She embraced him like a mother would her own son, and tried to reassure him again, but Gus sensed the fragility of her

words... the same words he said to Ella the night Will died, "Everything's going to be fine."

While Ella and her mother went over Amanda's sleeping and eating schedule in the kitchen, Gus played with his daughter in the living room. She kept pulling dolls out of the toy box and handing them to Gus. She had three or four of them. She would hand them over carefully, saying the word "baby" each time. Gus wondered if Ella would let him see his daughter if left. Maybe they could work things out, at least with Amanda.

It was late afternoon by the time Ella and Gus finally said goodbye to Amanda, waving to her from the front steps of the house as Kate backed out of the driveway. They stood there like that for a few minutes looking at the road before they turned and stepped back inside the house together.

The day was very much like the day they went to the ice cream social for the first time, warm and brimming with sun. Summer would be there soon. There were children with half melted ice cream cones, licking their hands and chasing each other around poles holding up a banner that read: Welcome to Prospect Park's Annual Ice Cream Social. In smaller letters, just underneath, it said that the observatory deck on the Witch's Tower would be open until 10 p.m. Gus pointed to the sign.

"Do you want to go up now?" he asked.

"No, let's wait a little longer. We can see the sun set."

They walked through the crowd of people, waving to neighbors here and there, stopping every so often to chat with a familiar face that would ask how the baby was. Gus and Ella said she was well, and they hoped she was. Gus was surprised that his wife had not stopped to call her mother yet to check up on Amanda. She only mentioned their

daughter a few times, cheerfully describing to Gus some of Amanda's new accomplishments when they noticed toddlers around the same age. Instead, they talked about Gus's job and new projects Ella wanted to start around the house. Only a short time passed before they ran out of things to say, but they held hands, and walked around the park, enjoying their time together.

The day was turning out better than Gus expected. The sun was beginning to hang low in the sky, and he and Ella decided they would go to the top of the tower. When they reached the observatory deck, they held hands and leaned against the guardrail. Ella was looking at the view, and Gus was looking at her. The sky turned from blue to purple to a dusty pink. It would be dark soon.

"Ella," Gus said, squeezing her hand, "there really is something I wanted to tell you."

She turned to face him. He'd almost forgotten that her eyes were hazel and not blue. He planned on telling her gently, revealing it slowly, that it was nothing she did, it was no one's fault, that she was just unhappy, and maybe it would be best for them to separate for a little while. When he opened his mouth, it did not spill out—it crashed.

"I think I want to leave you."

He had been preparing himself for tears, anger, and questions. He thought she would ask him why. She just let go of his hands and took a deep breath. Gus didn't know if it was relief or sadness, or something else all together. She stared at him and squinted her eyes like she did when she was concentrating on something, or before her voice heightened in an argument. She only did this for a moment before her face relaxed. She

looked down at her feet and said, "Let's just sleep on it, okay? You can tell me how you feel in the morning."

When they got home, Ella called her mother to make sure Amanda was all right. When she hung up the phone, she told Gus that their daughter was fine and they went upstairs together. Gus sat down on the bed and pulled his wife to him. As Ella reached over to switch off the light, Gus put his hands under her soft t-shirt. She put her own hands over his, guiding them over her stomach and ribs, across her breasts. She then brought them up to her face and kissed his palms. He could feel her tears. They made love in the dark, awkward and tender, and fell asleep.

Ella tossed and turned, rubbing her feet together, and kicked Gus. He decided to go downstairs and sleep on the sofa. They had grown used to sleeping alone, and he would tell her again, in the morning.